

Dr. John Napier MacASKILL



The late John MacAskill

Alex MacIver's original music of his composition of the reel Dr. John N. MacASKILL is dated 29th June 1967.

There are two differing examples of this tune one of which is published in Robert Wallace's "The Glasgow Collection". Robert shows the music in a round style and the other version (original of which is shown at the end of these notes) is cut and pointed. Both versions are included in Alex's collection for your edification and amusement.

As a boy John MacAskill was taken to visit a 214 BB band practice at Gordon Park by his father Alexander who was a friend of Alex MacIver. John was one of the pipers of The Lewis and Harris Association who played at the major events usually under MacIver's direction. His father's intention was for John to join the 214 band. However, as is well understood, the non-negotiable requirement was always that any boy aspiring to become a player with the 214 had to be, or to become, a member of the Boys Brigade and had to assume all relevant obligations in that connection. Unfortunately other commitments meant that this was not possible for John.

John was Glasgow born but his father was from Bernera in the sound of Harris and his mother from North Uist. John's patronymic name was Seonaidh Alasdair Dhomhnaill Thormoid. He was a pupil of The College of Piping and even as a boy he was highly successful in solo competition. It was not often when we competed against him that he would be beaten but there were some notable exceptions.

He continued his solo career with significant albeit spasmodic success. He became a highly respected judge not least in Ceol Mor. He was highly sought after as a tutor especially abroad at the summer schools. His composition *Lexie MacAskill*, named after his mother Alexandrina, would probably be his best known tune.

John spent most of his working life as a medical practitioner in Fort William. He was also a keen football fan involved as the team doctor with Inverness Caledonian Thistle, and the Scotland international teams, travelling throughout Europe. He would often regale his charges with a piping rendition no doubt seeking to stir their passion.



Dr. John MacAskill photographed here at the College of Piping Summer School at Lake Sequoia in California in the 1973. This image shows his distinctive posture.

FAMOUS PIPERS.

John MacAskill

The great thing about the piping scene is the number of colourful characters that go to make it up. In addition, however, to the average run-of-the-mill brilliant types, there occasionally appears—once or twice in every decade—one who is larger than life, destined to become a legend in an early part of his lifetime.

Such is this year's Northern Meeting gold medallist—Dr. John N. MacAskill. When the winner was announced, men of discernment looked for ways of escape, men of experience prepared to batten down the hatches, and men of neither are still wondering what happened. But everybody was delighted that to the roll of the immortals was added a name which will shine and sparkle with the best.

It was sixteen years ago that young John started on his eventful piping career. Before that, at the age of ten, he had been taken along by his father to the competitions in Glasgow, but so far as learning to play was concerned, the boy did not fancy it. Eventually, however, the music got to him and he decided to have a shot at being a piper. So, on the 8th January, 1957, at the age of thirteen and a half, John presented himself at the College of Piping and asked to be taken on.

Those who consider that this is a bit late for a boy to start learning—especially in Glasgow, with all the opportunities available—should consider this. John knew absolutely nothing when he arrived, but twelve days later he won third prize in a chanter competition! The tune was (naturally) "Scots wha hae". The judge was Hector MacFadyen.

John's progress was phenomenal. With two lessons per week he got through Tutor 1 in three months—completely and perfectly. By the time he went to the College summer school at Dunvegan in July he was playing competition tunes. He rapidly overhauled everybody of his age group, although some of them had been playing for four or five years before he started.

The policy in the College of course has always been to "hasten slowly", taking the view that when God made time he made plenty of it, and that it is more important to get all the basic work correct than to rush ahead learning lots of new things. This made John's progress all the more surprising. He, in fact, caused the College to take a fresh policy on what is the best age for beginners.

John MacAskill had, of course, tremendous encouragement at home. His father and his two uncles were pipers. Although living in Glasgow he had been brought up in Bernera, Harris, and is a native Gaelic speaker. All his holidays were spent on this remote Hebridean

island, where the music of the Gael sings from every blade of grass. Small wonder that the song and the great feeling are in his playing today.

His competition career followed the usual pattern of a boy of talent in Glasgow. He played in the S.P.A. amateur contests, winning the Chisholm Cup, the Farquhar Macrae trophy, the Cameron Cup—and, on one famous occasion, all the College of Piping trophies in the same evening. At North Uist one summer he took a first prize, and this encouraged him to turn professional. At Glenfinnan in 1962 he was placed in the march event, against stiff opposition. The following year he won again at Glenfinnan, and also played at South Uist where, against some of the best players in the country, he won four prizes—first in the jig, second in the John Steele march strathspey and reel, fourth in piobaireachd, fifth in strathspey and reel. All this when barely twenty, six and a half years after first touching a practice chanter.

But to the making of a piper go seven years. The following year, at the Northern Meeting in Inverness, he reached the short list of the march competition. The hall was crowded to capacity as he tuned the bagpipe carefully. Then, head well back and the concentration full on, he went twice through "Pipe-Major John Stewart" to tremendous applause and the first prize.

By this time young MacAskill was a medical student at Glasgow University (demonstrating that progress in piping and in academic study are not incompatible). His studies did restrict him a bit, however, but they also allowed him a fair amount of free time in the summer. He had always enjoyed summer schools and had attended all the College ones—the one at Staffin in Skye in 1963 as one of the two junior instructors (Dugald Murdoch was the other one). In 1965 he decided on something more ambitious, and off he went to New York to help at the Invermark school. When it finished, he and Donald Lindsay set out, with a small car and a tent, to see America, coast to coast. This is a saga which needs a long night and a peat fire for the proper telling.

The following year he was too busy for competition, but in 1967 he showed again what a great march player he was by winning the Oban event. Then, in 1970, he took the strathspey and reel at Inverness. Now, not having competed anywhere in the interim, he wins the Inverness gold medal.

As John says of himself, "I just compete every two years—and then I'm lethal".

Already he has the three qualities of the complete piper—he can play, he can teach, he can compose. As a composer he is looked on by everyone in Scotland as the best of his generation and one of the best in the country. His reel "Lexie MacAskill" (composed for

his mother) has been a hit tune for two years, and has obviously joined the ranks of the classics. The jig he composed for his father, Alexander MacAskill, has won many good prizes. One lasting regret is that Alex. did not survive to see his son's greatest achievement.

But it may well be as a teacher that John MacAskill will make his biggest impact on piping. In 1970, when Seumas MacNeill needed assistance for his growing classes at the Thousand Islands, Ontario, and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, his first choice was John MacAskill, and the success of this team is now a household word. In 1971 they repeated these courses. This past summer when they decided to open their own school in California, their reputation ensured its immediate and lasting success.

What does the future hold for Dr. John MacAskill? Certainly we will have a continuing flow of new tunes from him, because he just cannot help composing. So far as teaching is concerned, his medical work is so demanding that, unfortunately, Scotland will get little benefit of his tremendous talent, although he has agreed to continue to teach summer schools in the United States. And it is certainly to be hoped that he will continue to compete, even if it's only every two years. Captain D. R. MacLennan sums up his playing quite simply—"The best fingers in Scotland". It would be a great pity if they were not heard in action regularly.

Dr John below is held aloft by Iain MacFadyen left and Hugh MacCallum having won the Gold Medal at Inverness, with the famous Angus MacPherson of Invershin.



DR. JOHN N. MACASKILL.

REEL.



ALEX. M. MACIVER.

29TH JUNE 1967.

214TH GLASGOW COMPANY - THE BOYS' BRIGADE.

Shown here is a scan of the original “cut and pointed” version of Dr John’s reel composed by Alex MacIver, dated 29th of June 1967. Below is the tune re-typeset as it is available on www.214bb.com together with the complete collection of Alex’s compositions.

Dr John N MacAskill

Reel

Alex M MacIver

The musical score for the reel 'Dr John N MacAskill' is written in treble clef and 2/4 time. It consists of ten staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The second staff ends with a repeat sign. The third staff begins with a repeat sign. The fourth staff has a first ending bracket. The fifth staff has a second ending bracket. The sixth staff begins with a repeat sign. The seventh staff ends with a repeat sign. The eighth staff begins with a repeat sign. The ninth staff ends with a repeat sign. The tenth staff has a second ending bracket.

There were few solo piping competitions which were not won by “Doctor John”. However he was never to win The MacDougall Gillies Trophy for Ceol Mor, a much sought after award. The winner of this event received The MacDougall Gillies Trophy, The John MacDougall Gillies Medal and The Peter Henderson Silver Medal. The competition was part of the annual spring event for amateurs, including adults, which took place under the auspices of The Scottish Pipers Association and was first competed for in 1931, won by J MacKinnon.

The trophy was presented to the winner but because of its fragility it was immediately handed back into the care of the S.P.A. All past winners are inscribed on the trophy and on the MacDougall Gillies medal.

In the 1961 S.P.A. spring competition the results of the the MacDougall Gillies trophy for Ceol Mor were:-

- 1st. Hector Russell of The 214 BB age 16.**
- 2nd. John MacAskill of the College of Piping.**
- 3rd. Alan Hamilton who is the man who directs and produces The Pipers Persuasion video library.**

Importantly, this event was also won in 1965 by Douglas Elmslie of The 214 BB at the age of 18. On the day Douglas, a pupil of Peter Bain and Donald McLeod played The Little Spree (An daorach bheag**). Douglas enjoyed significant piping success throughout his teenage years in S.P.A competitions and in many other important solo events.**



Hector Russell sourced the trophy in 1990 from the vaults of Peter Henderson's shop which by that time been taken over by R.G. Hardie & son.

The tune he played in winning as a 16 year old was *Grain in Hides and Corn in Sacks* (Gran a Seicheanan 'S Sial am Pocanan). His piping mentor was John Finlay who also coached Alistair Ross and a young Ian McLellan B.E.M. Hector also received guidance on the tune from Bob Hardie who had notable success playing *Grain in Hides* in major professional events. Bob Hardie had been taught *Grain in Hides* by his tutor P.M. Robert Reid. P.M. Reid was in the audience on the occasion of Hector's win in 1961 and we are reliably informed he marked the judge's card!



Douglas and Hector in the museum of The College of Piping, sporting their 214 BB ties, are re-acquainted with the trophy.

Many notable pipers have won this trophy. Their number includes Seumas McNeill in 1936, Robert Hardie 1938, Donald McPherson 1939 1941 and 1942, Hector MacFadyen 1943, John MacFadyen 1944, John Burgess 1946 1948 and 1949, and Ian McFadyen 1951 1952 and 1953.

The full list of winners is available on request with our grateful thanks to Jeannie Campbell M.B.E. luminary of all things piping.

Dr. John MacASKILL died in Fort William, on April 26, 2003, after a lengthy illness. His passing was reported in the Piping Times and included most of the relevant information shown in these notes.