

The Blind Piper from Rhu



A legendary figure in Scottish piping first learnt to play the pipes as a young man in the Helensburgh district. Known as the Blind Piper, Archie McNeill was born at 23 Lambhill Street, Govan, Glasgow, on February 23, 1879, the son of Donald McNeill, a merchant seaman, and his wife Jessie, nee Napier, who were married at Kippen on December 21 1877.

The family moved to Rhu when Archie was only a few months old, and when he was ten Archie had an accident while playing a game with friends which led to him becoming progressively more blind from the age of 18.

He lived in the village until he was 27, when he moved to Glasgow and obtained a post in a brush making factory where he worked for many years alongside many other blind people.

His first piping instructor from when he was 16 was Roderick Fraser, the piper at Ardencape Castle. Some three years later Oban gold medalist piper John Wallace moved to the village, became an officer on the training ship Empress moored in Rhu Bay, formed a very fine juvenile pipe band, and became Archie's instructor.

The Empress, the second of two charitable training ships for boys, was in the Gareloch from 1889 until the 1920s, with staff giving a tough and sometimes brutal training to the 300 boys on board at any time. But the ship also had its pipe band and a brass band.

In due course Archie became a piping teacher, and some of his pupils went on to become the best known pipers in the country. A prolific and highly regarded composer, he is regarded as the 'grandfather' of the College of Piping in Glasgow where many of his methods are used. He was also a regular at Scottish Piping Association meetings on Saturdays in Glasgow. His well known tunes include Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban, the Detroit Highlanders, David Ross of Rosehall, The Islay Ball, Verna Leith's Wedding March, and a waltz called Gareloch.

One of his pupils recalled later: "I had lessons from Archie in the early 1950's, at a College of Piping Summer School in Tiree. He and Tommy Pearston were the main tutors that year. Lessons from Archie were unusual to say the least — he was like the Guru from the 'Kung Fu' programs. His eyes were very white and eery looking, but there was nothing wrong with his ears. He would pull you up on the slightest error and he would explain exactly where you went wrong, and the best way to correct the fault."

After World War Two he worked at the Henderson Bagpipes Workshop where he tested the quality of drones and chanters. He also wrote for the Piping Times, and it was said that he could remember the sounds of various pre-World War One bands and pipers as if he had heard them recently. He also wrote a piece about his youthful holiday visits to the island of Gigha.

In his later years he continued to teach and to play, and he made several trips to Canada to visit his son Alex, who was one of the leading pipers of the day and who competed very successfully against the great John Wilson of Edinburgh and Toronto when he was in his prime.

Dale D.Brown, from Michigan in the United States, recalls: "I first met Archie in Montreal when he judged the piping competition there in 1957. I was 16 years-old and had heard much about Archie as my teacher Walter Rose had been a student of Archie in Scotland. The following year I went to the College of Piping Summer School which was held that year at Tobermory on Mull. Because of my association with Walter Rose I took lessons with Archie in the small room that he had at the school. While I was there I would take Archie on walks. Talk about an odd couple — a 78 year-old blind man and a tall skinny American kid. The one thing I remember from our conversations was the warm respect he had for G.S.McLennan. This was not just for the quality of his playing, but also for the qualities that G.S. possessed as a person. Archie back in his early years would make it a point to go to any games that G.S.McLennan would be competing at. There are many things that I wished I had asked him now. Being a little mischievous I wanted to know if there were any piobaireachds that Archie didn't know. Each day I would ask him about the most obscure piobaireachds I could find in the Piobaireachd Society books. He knew them all."

Son Alex, who was born in 1908, was also a very successful piping competitor and prolific composer. He immigrated to Montreal in 1927 and played with the Black Watch of Canada Association Pipes and Drums. He was the inventor of the plastic practice chanter reed, having learned reed making from A.C.MacDonald, the inventor of the first

synthetic practice chanter reed. When A.C.MacDonald died, Archie acquired his tools and shipped them to Alex in Canada. Vulcanite was unavailable, but he found something called vinglite, which worked. The original prototypes were transparent, but he discovered that it also came in white.

Archie, who married twice — to Agnes Russell and Janet Findlay — and twice became a widower, had a great interest in and studied ancient civilization.

He spent his final years at 17 Royston Road, Glasgow, and he died at the age of 83 in the Royal Infirmary on October 23 1962.