

A Piobaireachd for a President

by Alan Armstrong, Ph. D.

On March 20, 1948, an article appeared in the Oban Times entitled "Fifty-two Years Piping Record."¹ The photograph attached to the article shows a 72-year old bespectacled man standing at a desk or lectern with two tall stacks of bound volumes on either side of him and a book in front of him entitled *The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd*. The man was Mr. John Grant, an amateur piper, teacher, critic, and composer, whose apparent sole passion his entire adult life was the Great Highland Bagpipe, and most especially, its classical music, piobaireachd or Ceol Mor. In his unpublished *The Royal Collection of Highland Bagpipe Music*, completed May 24, 1946, Grant provided the following particulars about himself:

"I, John Grant, was born in the Shire of Moray, near Craigellachie, the home of the Clan Grant, on the eleventh day of August 1876. I received my tuition from Pipe Major Ronald MacKenzie, at Gordon Castle, Lochaber, and after memorizing a few Marches, I then began to play piobaireachd, because Ceol Mor came first in bagpipe music with my instructor. I became so much carried away with piobaireachd that it haunted me like a passion, and throughout my long period of instruction I memorized one tune after another until I had a considerable number to my credit.

I had over seven years private tuition, together with a good training in Pipe Band work in the 3rd V.B. Seaforth Highlanders, and received the Championship gold medal of that band of 32 pipers.

In the year 1899, I was appointed family piper to Captain Home Drummond Moray of Abercairny, where I remained for a period of about five years, at the expiry of which time I returned to Edinburgh, where for the past forty-five years I have devoted my entire spare time to the tuition of young pipers,



John Grant, photographed with Ronald MacKenzie. Photo reprinted courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University MS Mus 120 (6).

the revival of the Art of piobaireachd composition, having been the Author of two Editions of original compositions entitled *The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd*, *Piobaireachd: Its Origin and Construction*: and was joint Author of *The Pipes of War*.

In 1917 I was appointed an instructor of piping for the army and received pupils from the Highland Regiments through Knellar Hall.

I received the Highland Society of London's Medal as an award of merit for my services to piping during the 1914-18 war, and my interests in piobaireachd."²

Throughout most of his adult life Grant was an assistant tax collector for the Inland Revenue Service by day and an avid writer on all things dealing with bagpiping by night. Public records reveal he married Mary Jane Harper in Auchterloss, Aberdeen on June 12, 1903, and their eldest, possibly only, child George, was born in Edinburgh on August 15, 1911. John suffered a stroke in 1951, but lived until April 25, 1961, four months after a second stroke paralyzed him completely on one side. Sometime soon after, all of Grant's work, which included dozens of bound manuscripts and compositions, was

sold at auction at Christies for 450 pounds, and on August 16, 1965, Harvard University purchased the entire collection from a Mr. Frank Hammond.³

As a young man John Grant discovered an important truth. He wrote in his autobiography: "A person without a real hobby is like a ship without a rudder. It is not during the day when one is busy with its labours that one can go astray. It is in the evenings when temptations appear, and from them many would shrink if they could only find an attractive study.

I shall never regret the day that I made the pipes, piping, and pipe music my choice, as a hobby. I am happy to say that I have lived to reap the fruits of a labour that has been crowned with far more success than I ever hoped for."⁴

Just a cursory look at Grant's output reveals a man obsessed with his hobby. Among his works, besides the publications mentioned above, are manuscripts for books entitled *The Great Highland bagpipe and its Music*, in four volumes (1930), *A choice collection of Piobaireachd or Highland Bagpipe Music* (1946), *The Music of the MacCrimmons* (1947), a second, third, and fourth volume of *The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd*, (1923, revised 1942) and *The Highland Bagpipe Instructor*, in two volumes (n.d.).

But Grant's passion went further. He was not satisfied to learn and play other people's piobaireachd compositions. He was a firm believer that the art of piobaireachd composition needed reviving. In 1947, at the age of 71, Grant inventoried the titles and composition dates of his entire musical output.⁵ He was to pen a few more works up until 1953. All told, he composed nineteen marches, three strathspey-reel combinations, and sixty-six piobaireachd. Twenty-one of them he published at his own expense in the two editions of his *The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd*: six in the

first edition and an additional fifteen added to the six in the second edition.⁶ Two others were published in *The Pipes of War*, but perhaps he thought little of them as he did not include them in his inventory and no manuscripts survive. Nineteen of the remainder were prepared for future editions of *The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd* but were never published. Of the remaining twenty-four, nine are not to be found in the Grant files, but fifteen do appear, in the form of presentation folios. There are thirty-eight such folios among the Grant papers: twenty-one piobaireachd⁷ and seventeen marches, strathspeys, and reels. What is a presentation folio? Grant explained at the end of his 1947 Inventory:

"The foregoing tunes have been composed in accordance with an 'Ancient Scottish Custom.' They have all been prepared in Duplicate, in Folio form, artistically illuminated, and illustrated. One copy has been retained by the Author for preservation, and the other copy has been sent to the person to whom it has been dedicated.

Many of them have also been artistically prepared on Whatman's sheets⁸ measuring 31" x 22", and presented along with the folio Brochure which entailed an enormous amount of work that has been carried out for a period of over forty years without counting the cost."

Each of these folios is a work of art. They all have somewhat the same pagination plan:⁹ There is a title page in beautifully calligraphed Gaelic, surrounded by geometric designs and filigree; a photo or water-color of the dedicatee; a second title page, equally exquisite, in English; a second cover page in Gaelic and English, in a boxed border; several more pages of photographs of the dedicatee or locations identified with the person; a third title page in Gaelic only, in a boxed design; additional photographs; a fourth title page identical in design to the one in Gaelic, but in English; more photos; the piobaireachd itself; a small seal at the end by Grant's name and the date of composition; another photograph; the transcription of a letter he sent with the folio as a way of introduction to the recipient; the transcription of a letter of

acknowledgment from the dedicatee or the person's secretary; a final page stating "The End" and a final photo. Grant says in several places among his manuscripts that he alone penned these works, save the pictures, which were prepared for him by H.T. Wise.¹⁰ The highly skilled calligraphic titling, geometric figures, page bordering, and detailed staff notation reveal an artist of outstanding merit. Indeed, the letter in each folio thanking him for his gift never comment on the tune contained therein per se, but many of these letters remark on the lavishness and craftsmanship of the presentation folio.

A study of the events that prompted Grant to pen his compositions is a study of English history for the entire first half of the twentieth century. He wrote salutes, laments, and marches for all the Kings and Queens of England from Victoria to Elizabeth II, in addition to nobility and military commanders whose names rank among the best known of the period. Since his only published music spans the years from 1906 to 1923, those who know these works generally consider him a World War I figure.

However, Grant wrote some interesting music in honor of events and personages associated with World War II. Among these are "The D-Day March," "Field Montgomery's March to Berlin," "The British Army's Victory March Through Berlin," and two unique piobaireachd, "Salute to the Right Honorable Winston Spencer Churchill" and "Salute to Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America."¹¹ The latter is probably the first, and perhaps the only, piece of bagpipe music composed by a Scot for a United States President. It was composed on May 8, 1945, V-E Day "... as a tribute to the peerless leadership with which he guided us during the war of 1939-1945, and led us through dangers and sorrow to a triumphant victory."¹² The letter he wrote to accompany the composition reads:

"Honoured Sir, As a humble British citizen of the Highlands of Scotland, may I be allowed to offer for your acceptance, a pibroch (sic) or tune to be played on the Highland Warpipe, to express in

some slight measure, the unfeigned admiration of all Scottish Highlanders as of all true Britons, for the magnificent manner in which you have spoken so fearlessly, and acted so nobly, in defence and vindication of human freedom."¹³

One can not help but notice Grant's choice of words to introduce his composition. He suspected, probably quite rightly, that Roosevelt had never heard of piobaireachd, so he spells it in the easier-to-read version, "p-i-b-r-o-c-h," and speaks of it for an instrument he thought would catch Roosevelt's attention: a "Warpipes."

On June 21 of the same year a reply was penned from Val Kill Cottages in Hyde Park, New York, which reads:

"My Dear Mr. Grant: thank you so much for the Brochure which you sent me in memory of my husband. It is lovely, and I shall put it in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Library. Very sincerely yours, Eleanor Roosevelt."¹⁴

One imagines Grant was rather embarrassed to discover his "Salute" should have been a "Lament." FDR passed away April 12, less than a month before he composed the piobaireachd.

Analysis

Grant's Salute to FDR is in 6/8 time, 4+4+4 construction with the first line repeated. Typical of Grant's later works, the Urlar itself takes on the persona of a variation, with a single rhythmic motive as the unifying element.

Example #1

The themals are given place of prominence in each measure: a dotted eighth on beat two. A thumb variation follows in which not only the "f" but also the "e" themals are given the high "a." For the first variation, the opening three notes of each measure are rearranged with a long-short-long rhythmic pattern.

Example #2

The same rhythm as the singling is employed for the first variation doubling, but with a more flowing treatment of the melody surrounding the themals.

Example #3

From this point on the piece is rather standard: the second variation and its doubling are in typical dithis

construction, and the taorluath, its doubling, and the crunluath and its doubling are written as one would expect, with two significant exceptions. Although it is clear from his prose writings that he knew of the "b" note in taorluaths and crunluaths starting on "d," Grant does not write them any differently than the others. In addition, he writes out all of the taorluaths and crunluaths in the "redundant a" manner, e.g., "f eighth note, g-d-g grace notes, low a-e sixteenth notes, a-f-a grace notes, e."

Example #4

Grant was one of the key figures in the "Redundant A" controversy of 1925-1930. William Donaldson, in his book *The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society 1750-1950*¹⁵ speaks very ill of Grant in relation to this controversy, but Grant was proud of his association with Ronald MacKenzie, who Grant said taught him to play with the Redundant A, and Grant

apparently felt obligated to "raise the standard" on behalf of his deceased mentor.

Was John Grant a great piobaireachd composer? The answer is a disappointing "no." His output can be called pedestrian at best; quite mechanical and formulaic. His strength lies in his variations, but most of his Urlars, especially ones written after those he published in his *The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd*, although musically viable, are plain and apparently hurriedly composed. However, having said that, there are several I find quite musical and as worthy to be played as those included in the Piobaireachd Society's *Collection of Ceol Mor / Composed during the Twentieth Century 1930-1980*.¹⁶

It seems, though, that Grant's recognition by the piping community of the future will lie more in his zeal than his product. He summed it up best in his

own words in his *The Royal Collection of Bagpipe Music*:

"As a lover of The Great Highland Bagpipe, and more especially its Classical Music Piobaireachd, I rejoice, in that, I have been spared to see a life's task finished. 'Something accomplished, something done,' so that those who follow me may have that which I was denied, i.e., 'Light upon a subject which has hitherto been, more or less, shrouded in mystery.'"

I have most certainly ploughed the lonely furrow, but, nevertheless, my labours have been rewarded ten-fold, when I behold the manuscript volumes which 'The Divine Creator has given me the skillful hands to prepare,' and the inspiration to use another gift of musical creative talent, however imperfect this work may be.

In conclusion, may I ask the gentle reader to pause, but for one single moment, and ask himself one question. "What have I done in this direction?"¹⁷

Example 1



Example 2



Example 3



Example 4



References

- 1 "Fifty-two Years Piping Record." *Oban Times*, March 20, 1948: 6.
- 2 John Grant. The Royal collection of highland bagpipe music. (Edinburgh: A.MS.s. [Signed autograph manuscript], 1946). Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Houghton Library [hereafter HL]. f [folio] MS Mus 120.5.
- 3 For Harvard's listing of materials in the collection, see The President and Fellows of Harvard University. "Grant, John, Pipe-major. Collection of bagpipe music: Guide." <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~hou00877> (accessed 18 May 2010).
- 4 John Grant. Under the Spell of the Pipes and Some reminiscences of a piper's life, with a complete Tutor for the Highland Bagpipe. (Edinburgh: A.MS.s., n.d.), 14. Glasgow, The College of Piping Museum.
- 5 John Grant. The Royal Collection of Bagpipe Music. (Edinburgh: A.MS.s., 1947). HL, fMS Mus 120.6 (3).
- 6 Both editions of The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd, Piobaireachd: Its Origin and Construction, and The Pipes of War are available on CD-ROM at www.scotpress.com. (Accessed May 29, 2010).
- 7 Six of the piobaireachd also exist in his two published editions of The Royal Collection of Piobaireachd, but the remaining fifteen exist in no other form.
- 8 James Whatman's hand-made watercolor paper was the highest quality paper available in the early 20th century. For details, see <http://www.handprint.com/HP/WCL/paper21.html>. (Accessed May 20, 2010)
- 9 The more important the dedicatee, the more portraits and water-colors are included.
- 10 See, for example, Grant's preface to his A choice collection of piobaireachd or highland bagpipe music. (Edinburgh: A.MS.s., 1946). HL, fMS Mus 120. "My whole life has been pregnant with one charm—the art of manuscript bagpipe music writing. This charming gift has haunted me like a passion for fifty years of my lifetime, and I have spent endless hours with an untiring patience copying
- volume after volume covering thousands of pages, and in order to adorn the leaves of the books every page has been provided with an artistic outline."
- 11 Both works are in HL fMS MUS 120.6 (2).
- 12 Ibid. Salute to Franklin D. Roosevelt, p. 6v. The recto side has the same dedication in Gaelic.
- 13 Ibid. p. 9r.
- 14 Ibid. p. 9v.
- 15 William Donaldson. The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society 1750-1950. (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press Ltd, 2000), 339-353.
- 16 The Piobaireachd Society. Comunn Na Piobaireachd, The Piobaireachd Society Present A Collection Of Ceol Mor Composed During The Twentieth Century, 1930-1980. (Glasgow: Holmes Mc Dougall Ltd. 1980).
- 17 John Grant. The Royal Collection of Bagpipe Music. (Edinburgh: A.MS.s, 1947) 57. HL fMS MUS 120.6 (3).