



This is to certify that the music herein contained, comprising fifty-eight tunes, has been collected by me, and the volume has also been written by my hand.

John Grant. F.S.A. Scot.

Edinburgh,
25th January, 1942

Preface

The Family Piper, in the olden days, held a position in the retinue of his master, the Highland Chief, which was second to none as a musician, and he was a trait of Highland character who was admired by every person who beheld his glory.

Only those who have held the honoured position of the family piper really know the joyful charm which his duties afford him, for his stately form, and bejeweled ornaments together with the Great Music which he pipes with extraordinary skill cast a spell upon his audience that haunted them like a passion.

John Grant

Edinburgh,

1st March, 1945

The Family Piper

There is no more distinguished position can be held by any piper in the piping world than the “Family Piper.”

In the “days of other years” he was not a servant, but a respected member of the household, and to become qualified for such a post any such person had to undergo a long period of careful training by a Master of the Great Highland Bagpipe.

It takes years to make a piper in the real sense of the word, and there is much that he has to learn, not only in the art of piping alone, but also in refinement and etiquette.

There is also something required of a piper which training cannot altogether get him, i.e., his person must be as near a perfect form of manhood as it is possible to find. The piper must walk, or march, with a princely appearance, and do away with all the necessary movement of the body when piping to an audience. The performer must keep his head erect with his eyes fixed upon some object of their own height, neither look to the right or left no matter who is looking at him.

It is also necessary for the young piper, actually to rehearse the performance of his duties before hand, so that when he has been appointed as a “Family Piper” he will be capable of performing his duties with perfect ease and confidence.

There is only one palatial residence in the Highlands of Scotland, which was especially built for the convenience of a piper, and that is Abercairny House, near Crieff in Perthshire.

Many years ago the then proprietor, James Moray Esquire, of Abercairny had his Highland home constructed with a long spacious corridor, leading into the dining room where his piper played to members of the family and their guests, and to play upon the Highland Bagpipe there, was a real joy, and a perfect piper’s paradise.

Very few pipers nowadays know what the nature of the duties of the “Family Piper” are. It is one thing for a piper to play upon the bagpipe as a personal pleasure, but when he has to pipe in order to entertain others, the scene is changed, and the pleasure is transformed into a duty, which means that when a piper plays pipe music for his own amusement, he can make a mistake or mistakes and there is no more to be said about it, but when one holds the position of a “Family Piper” he must give a perfect performance at least twice a day for six days in the week without a single error, for it must not be forgotten that the members of a noble Highland family who have listened to well-played pipe music from early infancy know perfectly well when the piper makes mistakes, and he cannot cover them up.

When a young man takes up duties as a “Family Piper” he gets three suits: a full Highland evening dress, a morning dress, and a Walking out dress in which he goes to church—all in the kilt, and in many cases the piper is not permitted to appear outside or inside the house in any attire other than the kilt.

The piper’s first duties begin in the early morning, and every day except Sunday at 8:30 a.m. he plays three times around the Castle or residence of the family while they are dressing for breakfast. This is really “Reveille” or wakening the household, the members of which look forward to hearing the “Call of the pipes.”

The tunes played in this part of the programme for the day are Marches only. Generally speaking the first tune is “Johnny Cope” in accordance with ancient Highland custom, and two other marches, i.e., three tunes each morning. One for each round of the Castle.

Except for some other light duties, and keeping up practice in piping, the piper is free from any further performance until 8:30 p.m., when he attires himself in full Highland dress for the principal and most important part of the day’s performance.

The piper prepares a programme giving details of the tunes to be played, which is placed upon the dining room table in front of the host, who passes it around his interested guests.

While the family and their guests are finishing the last course of dinner, and during the serving of coffee; in a recess of the spacious gallery of about forty yards long by ten feet broad, which has already been described, the piper strikes up his pipes, which would appear to the audience that he is piping away in the far distance.

The piper then enters the gallery, and plays a March into the dining room, as the House Steward throws a large double swing door open for his entering a huge room, with ample space for him to march round the table without coming into contact with the chairs of the occupants. The piper plays the March three times round the dining room table, clockwise, and it must be three times round the table; not once more, or once less, or he would hear more about it before he went to rest that night, or early next morning.

After playing the March three times around the dining room table, the piper then leaves the room, the door which, the House Steward throws open again for the performer’s exit, and closes it again all but three or four inches.

The piper enters the long gallery again and plays a piobaireachd, which takes about a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes to perform. While the piper plays this species of Highland Bagpipe music, which is the Classical Music of the Piob Mhor, he does not March to it in regular time as to a Quickstep. He simply moves backwards and forwards with a stately step pacing very slowly, playing his Theme with great expression and earnestness. After the Ground the piper plays the First Variation, still pacing very slowly; then the Doubling of the First Variation, to which he stands erect, and when this is finished he plays the Toarluath, moving off again with the same stately pace; then he stands up again and plays the Doubling of the Toarluath, then the Crunluath, to which he moves off again slowly as he performs it with deliberate earnestness, and finally stands still and erect to finish the Doubling of the Crunluath, which is the crowning movement in the Classical Music of the Great Highland Bagpipe.

When the Doubling of the Crunluath comes to a close, the piper returns to the Groundwork or Theme of the piobaireachd, and plays the first four or six bars of it, and to finish the programme for the day, he strikes into the March with which he began. Finally the piper returns into the recess where he started his programme, which would seem to the audience as if the last notes died away over the surrounding hilltops.

To qualify for the post of a “Family Piper” the holder must be able to give a programme of March, piobaireachd, Strathspey, and Reel, which must be changed every day for a month or six weeks, or in other words, the piper must give a fresh programme for every day for that period without playing any of the same tunes two nights in succession, unless otherwise requested by his master or his guests.

The Highland Laird or Chief of the clan was well-versed both in the music of the Piob Mhor, is also in the construction of the Highland bagpipe itself, and for this reason the piper had to keep the “Family

Pipes” in perfect order.

The “Family Pipes” were usually of the best quality and production of the time in which they were made and used.

For a long period backwards from now, they were famous Highland Bagpipe makers, such as John Ban Mackenzie, who was Piper to Breadalbane. He made and played his own pipes, and he produced the finest pipe chanter of his time; a replica of which is more or less used to this day.

Then, there was MacPhee, of the Royal Arcade, Glasgow; MacDougall of Breadalbane, Aberfeldy, and also some eighty years ago, that famous pioneer in Highland Bagpipe making, Peter Henderson, 100 Renfrew St., Glasgow, who took over MacPhee’s business in the Royal Arcade.

The “Family Piper,” therefore, had to keep everything about the “Family Pipes” like “a new pin.” If they were silver mounted, the silver had to be spotless. All the windings of the parts had to be kept neat and tidy, and changed regularly when the hemp became dirty. The insides of the stocks had to be spotless, because sometimes the drones, chanter and blow pipe had to be taken apart in the presence of the piper’s master.

There is another thing of great importance in the piper’s requirements. He had to have his pipes in perfect going order at all times. He was not allowed to play rough or harsh sounding reeds at any time, because they not only jarred upon his own ear, but also on that of his master and his guests.

Never at any time was the “Family Piper” allowed to tune his pipes in presence, or within the hearing of his audience. They had to be tuned before hand, and ready to strike up in perfect harmony when required in order that they might be pleasing to the ear of those who listen to them.

In the olden days there were famous pipers who piped to their admiring masters. There was John Dall Mackay, who was piper to the Mackenzies of Gairloch. John Dall was taught in the MacCrimmon school in Skye, the one pupil who excelled his master by finishing a composition which MacCrimmon failed to complete.

Then, there was John Mackay, John Dall’s kinsman, who was piper to MacLeod of Raasay, who was taught by John Dall. John Mackay was also famous, not only as a piobaireachd player, but as being the father of four sons, who were in turn all famous pipers.

John’s son Angus was a master of the instrument, and he collected about two hundred and forty piobaireachd, which we now possess, and but for him would have been lost forever.

Angus was destined to fill the one and highest place in the piping world, after John Ban Mackenzie, piper to Lord Breadalbane refused the appointment, for Queen Victoria, at her own request offered John Ban the post of piper to the Royal Household.

On becoming piper to the Great Queen Victoria, Angus Mackay was the greatest man in the piping world, and he has never been excelled to this day. Had it not been for Angus Mackay in his great work of rescuing piobaireachd, the MacCrimmons might never have been much heard of, and certainly their compositions would have been forever lost.

Angus Mackay was a piper from the cradle to the grave. At the early age of fourteen to sixteen years he was a Highland Society of London’s prizewinner, and very soon he climbed the ladder of fame, for he reached the highest pinnacle of success in those famous old-time competitions. He was a

comparatively young man when he carried off the first prize. In his task of rescuing and recording piobaireachd the entire responsibility rested upon Angus Mackay's own shoulders, because there was no other men living who possessed the necessary knowledge in the theory of music to lighten his burden.

Angus made history as piper to the household of Queen Victoria, and we are much indebted to the good Queen for the interest which she always took in things Highland, which was to a great extent responsible for the high as well as dignified position which the Highland Bagpipe holds in the Highlands today.

The Queen rekindled the lamp of piping, because her love for the pipes, and the Highlands gave her one of the greatest joys of her whole life.

Angus Mackay's brother, Roderick, was about the same time piper to the Moray's of Abercairny, and I consider it an honor to have followed in Roderick MacKay's footsteps. I was for a period of about five years piper to Abercairny.

This Is to Certify that the thirty-six tunes in nine programme sets, written on this and the preceding pages to the number of thirty-eight, are prepared as a record, together with notes to preserve the Highland custom and to explain the duties of the "Family Piper": all written by me, and given under my hand and seal, this fifth day of March, one thousand nine hundred and forty-five years.

John Grant

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