

NEVILLE and IAN McKAY – PIONEERS of PIOBAIREACHD in NEW ZEALAND

By John Hanning

This is the story of how two brothers from the country town of Waipawa in Hawkes Bay New Zealand, together laid the foundations for organized instruction and development of the playing of piobaireachd (the ancient classical music of the bagpipe) in New Zealand. While many other former colonies such as South Africa, Canada and Australia are also home to talented players of Scotland's classical piping, it was here in New Zealand that, with the sponsorship of the Piobaireachd Society in Scotland, Ian and Neville McKay established a registered incorporated society, Comunn Na Piobaireachd (New Zealand) Incorporated, dedicated to teaching the music, running competitions, awarding medals and prizes, with a structure and membership base to ensure its continuity.

Ian and "my brother Neville" (as Neville was always referred to by Ian and came to be known to pipers in New Zealand) were the youngest of six children of Neville and Kathleen McKay. Neville snr was a solicitor and a qualified accountant who was proud of his Scottish heritage and encouraged his children to develop a love for the music and culture of Scotland. Neville jnr developed a passion for everything Scottish seeking tuition from a local piper William Harvey of Weber in Hawkes Bay. When Ian won a scholarship to St Patricks College Silverstream to begin his secondary schooling, it was decided that Neville should accompany him. Neville was enrolled in the 6th form while Ian was in the 3rd. Neville took his pipes to the college, promptly joined the Hutt Valley Pipe Band, made himself known to Alan Guild and Neil McPhee, leading pipers in Wellington, and commenced to teach the pipes to his younger brother Ian. Ian's enthusiasm and prodigious memory were soon evident and in his own words "I made rapid progress and got hooked on the pipes from Neville and that has been one of the most rewarding matters in my life from that time on". The brothers annexed the school woodwork shop for practice with encouragement from lay brother Andrew who had served in the HLI. An amusing example of Ian's intelligence was recounted by his son John at his funeral. Ian began a correspondence with a Professor of Astronomy at Victoria University asking numerous questions. The Professor urged him to enroll in one of his classes when he came to the university the following year; to which Ian's mother felt it necessary to respond "do you realise you have been in correspondence with an 11 year old boy!"

Neville finished his secondary schooling at St Pats, for a time considered a call to the priesthood and finally entered the Police Training School. Ian was compelled by family circumstances to return to Waipawa and complete his final two years secondary education at Waipawa District High School in 1944 and 1945, and in 1946 came to Wellington to study law. He joined the City of Wellington Pipe Band led by Alan Guild from whom he received support and some formal tuition. Neville graduated from the Police Training School and was posted to various stations in New Zealand. Neville began a

correspondence with Archibald Campbell of Kilberry author of the Kilberry book of ceol mor seeking guidance on various piobaireachd conventions such as the correct timing of cadences.

In 1949 Neville realized his dream by travelling to Scotland. On arrival in London he found the telephone number in the directory of Pipe Major JB Robertson of the Scots Guards, called JB and introduced himself. It was JB's suggestion that Neville go to Scotland and become a pupil of John Macdonald of Inverness who at that time was respected world wide as the pre-eminent player and exponent of piobaireachd. Neville proceeded initially to Inverness but later to Aberdeen, joined the Aberdeen Police force, and eventually became Pipe Major of the Aberdeen Police Pipe Band. John Macdonald was by then suffering from a chronic illness but continued teaching using a practice chanter and canntaireachd (singing) to pass on his great knowledge of ceol mor. Neville became his pupil for over two years until Macdonald's death in 1953, despite, in common with several of his other pupils, never having heard him play his pipes. Neville was for a time a lodger in Macdonald's household and was a pallbearer at his funeral. Neville's mana in Scotland as a pupil of the great man benefited greatly, and he was able to come to know other pupils of Macdonald specifically Donald MacLeod, the Bobs of Balmoral (Bob Brown and Bob Nicol), Mickey Mackay, John MacDonald of the Glasgow Police, Donald McGillivray and Angus Macaulay who later emigrated to New Zealand. Neville competed with some success in the medal competitions in Scotland, coming third at Oban in 1951 and second in 1952.

In August 1952 on completion of his law degree, Ian McKay arrived in Scotland to join Neville, having (like Neville) worked his passage in the galley of a merchant navy ship. In anticipation of Ian's arrival Neville approached Bob Brown to conduct piobaireachd classes in Aberdeen. He recruited as pupils, in addition to himself and Ian, other prominent pipers including Donald Morrison, Neil McKechnie and others also pleased to attend classes under Brown, who was Macdonald's pre-eminent pupil. Ian spent less than a year in Scotland, but with the help of Neville crammed an amazing amount of piping experience into that time, including the Brown classes, numerous Highland Games, piping ceilidhs and meeting the leading soloists, teachers, and administrators such as Sheriff Grant of Rothiemurchus president of the Piobaireachd Society of Scotland. Neville recounted that on one occasion he entered licensed premises in the highlands and ordered a whisky. When he asked for water one of a group of crofters at the bar commented, "This is not a time for cleanliness!"

Ian returned to New Zealand in 1953 and commenced his legal career. His address to the Wellington Pipers Club on 29 August 1953 is a fascinating account of his activities while in Scotland. Neville returned later and rejoined the NZ Police. Encouraged by Neil McPhee, Ian began piobaireachd classes during the winter months in the back room of McPhee's shop in Tory Street Wellington. When Neville returned from Scotland the classes were for a short period run by him, but, as his work entailed a large amount of travel, Ian recommenced as tutor. Pupils were recruited by Neil and there were usually

around 6 – 8 in each class. Piobaireachd techniques such as crunluaths, echo beats, the hiharin and other movements were taught with the aid of a practice chanter but, once mastered, pupils sang the tunes led and conducted by Ian's long fingers and later played them on the pipes (also conducted). Pupils soon developed their own individual canntaireachd or mouth music which best conveyed the subtleties of piobaireachd expression. These classes continued each winter from about 1954 until 1982 a period of 28 years, moving, on the shift of McPhees shop, to Ian's home in Karori.

In addition to the classes Neville and Ian were proactive in several other important areas. Neville obtained sponsorship from the Piobaireachd Society Scotland to the formation of a New Zealand Society, and such sponsorship included the use of the Scottish medal die for the casting of a New Zealand Gold Medal for presentation to the winner of the premier piobaireachd event at the annual Society competitions, and the magnificent solid silver piper statuette which is held by the winner until the next competition. Meantime Ian's legal skills were employed in drafting rules for the formation of a New Zealand society for the promotion of piobaireachd playing in New Zealand. These rules closely followed the Scottish constitution providing for dual governance by a Music Committee on all matters relating to appointment of judges and prescribing of set tunes for competitions, and a General Committee to control finance, election of officers and committees and all other administrative matters. The NZ Society required 14 signatories to its registration under the New Zealand Incorporated Societies Act 1908 and the 14 subscribers were a veritable who's who of Wellington solo piping. The application to register is dated 27 May 1957 and is signed by Neil and Allan McPhee, Louis and Frank Mackinnon, Bruce McCann and Neville Thyne, Alan Guild and Colin Addison, and Neville McKay, all signatures being witnessed by Ian McKay. Neville was the inaugural secretary/treasurer.

Ian and Neville also approached the organisers of almost all solo piping competitions in New Zealand to include piobaireachd in their competitions as the premier event, carrying the largest monetary prizes and Ian, Neville and Neil guaranteed sufficient entries to justify that status.

Another major contribution was Ian's book *Art of Piobaireachd* first published in 1966 and comprising an 88 page treatise on the nature of piobaireachd, its origins and history, the hereditary pipers and their successors, canntaireachd, piobaireachd structure and manner of playing. This was prepared for and given to each member of the Wellington class, and revised in 1996. In 1998 Neville wrote to Ian reviewing the book at length and suggesting possible edits, which unfortunately were too late to be incorporated in the revision.

Ian was knighted for his stellar legal career, which culminated with his appointment to the Privy Council and as a judge of the New Zealand Court of Appeal. In 2006 at the Glenfiddich Championships Sir Ian was awarded the Balvenie Medal in recognition of his outstanding service to piping.

Neville returned to Scotland around 1960 to take up a senior position as head of personnel with BOAC, residing in Torquay. He corresponded regularly with Ian and some of his letters have survived. In addition to the review mentioned above he writes in 2000 that the production of the Brown/Nicol CD's and the tape recorder have had a tremendous influence in Scotland in arresting what he describes as "the cult of individual styles and innovations".

Neville did not return to New Zealand before his death in 2001. He was survived by his wife Alice nee MacDonald, a native of Skye who is also now deceased. Ian died on 20 February 2014. His wife Ruth predeceased him. He is survived by his six children, Mary, Donald, Alan, Duncan, Clare and John.

The contribution of Neville and Ian McKay to the development of piobaireachd in New Zealand has been immense. The society they founded continues to promote and organize the perpetuation of a pre-eminent genre of piping which still has the ability to provide a lifetime of study and enjoyment to the connoisseur of the music of the great highland bagpipe. Their pupils have achieved high honours in solo competition throughout the world and especially in Scotland including Gold Medals at Oban, Inverness and Braemar and for many decades after the McKays' efforts have dominated the prizelists at most New Zealand competitions. The substantial strength of piobaireachd in New Zealand owes much to the McKay brothers.

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Principal Sources:

Phil Mair; recorded interview with Ian McKay 2010

Mary McKay; obituaries and family records of Ian

Wellington Pipers Club address 29/8/53.