

Seumas MacNeill, classical physicist and piper; born September 12, 1917, died April 4, 1996

SEUMAS MacNEILL died peacefully at home after a long illness. Undoubtedly he was the greatest piping figure of the twentieth century. He was born in Glasgow in 1917. His father was of Gigha stock and his mother came from Fife. His uncle was Archie MacNeill, the blind piper who was one of the most influential piping teachers and a talented composer.

At Hyndland school he showed outstanding ability in all subjects and could have gone on to study any of the disciplines. He chose mathematics and natural philosophy at Glasgow University and in the final honours class he was awarded the Mackay Smith Prize for the most distinguished student.

He did a year at Jordanhill training college but in time he returned to Glasgow University as a lecturer in natural philosophy (physics). On several occasions as a senior lecturer he turned down moves to other universities that would have led to professorships, but he always accepted the need to stay in Glasgow and devote a large part of his time to piping.

The logic of a classical physicist with a flair for good and strictly grammatical English made him an excellent teacher whether it was physics to university students or piping to all age groups and nationalities.

He was taught piping by his uncle who had studied all the best pipers and had quite definite ideas on teaching and fingering techniques which later were to be the fundamentals of the College of Piping tutors, prepared by Seumas and Thomas Pearston.

As a teenager he won the MacDougall Gillies Trophy, playing that demanding tune The Bells of Perth. This established him as a player to be respected, a reputation which increased steadily throughout his playing career. He himself often said his 2/4 marches represented his best playing and certainly his strong, correct fingering and immaculate timing often gained him the top march prizes.

In 1962 he won the Argyllshire Gathering gold medal for piobaireachd, playing the Lament for Patrick Og, probably his favourite tune.

In retrospect it is obvious that he did not dedicate as much time to practising or competitions as many of his contemporaries did. He was always so busy in all his other activities, especially running the College of Piping, travelling abroad to summer schools etc, and he always had all the time in the world for his pupils.

The College of Piping began in 1944 in a basement in Pitt Street, Glasgow, with Thomas Pearston as joint principal. The name and many of the aims of the college were Tommy's with Seumas thinking it was perhaps a little grandiose. But it was very quickly established and was teaching on five evenings each week, with many of the famous professional pipers employed.

Dame Flora MacLeod of MacLeod became the president, recognising the good work being done. Summers schools in Canada began in the early fifties and soon spread to other parts of North America. The college had a set of detailed objects which could be summarised as raising the profile of piping and pipers in general and in particular to encourage the study and playing of piobaireachd.

Thomas Pearston retired in 1978 from active involvement in the college, leaving Seumas as the sole principal.

Perhaps what people in piping have appreciated most is the Piping Times, now in its 48th year. This monthly magazine about piping has been produced almost single-handedly by Seumas from its beginning. The back numbers now represent the best single source of piping knowledge available.

His monthly editorial was always erudite, topical, and frequently controversial and could lead to many a lively discussion among the piping fraternity. However, over time he will be best remembered for his various publications, notably his work with J.M.A. Lenihan, *An Acoustical Study of the Highland Bagpipe*, his two books *Piobaireachd* (BBC Publication), and *Piobaireachd and its Interpretation* in collaboration with Frank M Richardson and of course the various College of Piping tutors.

Seumas was a wonderful friend and companion with a huge fund of stories for every occasion. He had a great love of the Highlands and Islands and up till quite recently enjoyed forays into the hills with the "Inverscotia Nomads", a group of Glasgow boys mostly of his own age but very much like himself, young at heart, enjoying friendships which were first formed when Seumas was secretary of the Scottish Youth Hostels Association in 1945.

It was unfortunate that over the past year there was disagreement between the College of Piping and the Piping Trust over the management of the building which was to be the new home for the College of Piping.

Our sympathy and thoughts are with his wife Netta and son Rory and family.

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