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REMEMBERING SEUMAS MACNEILL

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MACNEILL**

Seumas MacNeill was born 100 years ago today. Today's generation of pipers may not be fully aware of Seumas, pictured right. This may be perhaps inevitable but it is nevertheless regrettable because the present, healthy state of piping that they - we - are enjoying is down, to a huge extent, to Seumas. He co-founded the College of Piping in 1944 and edited the *Piping Times* from 1950 until his death (and was its main contributor since 1948 when it first appeared).

He was a controversial figure in his lifetime and aroused strong feelings from many. However, as Neil Fraser put it at the service of remembrance, "It is unlikely that the world of piping will again find an individual who gave so much of himself in the cause of the music that he loved for so little material return."



Seumas died on April 4, 1996 after a long illness and was buried the following day in Riddrie Cemetery with family and a few close friends in attendance. The following week, on 10th April, a large gathering attended a service of thanksgiving at St Luke's Church, Milngavie.

In this the centenary of his birth, we reproduce in full the eulogy delivered by Dugald MacNeill and the tribute given by Neil Fraser of BBC Scotland:

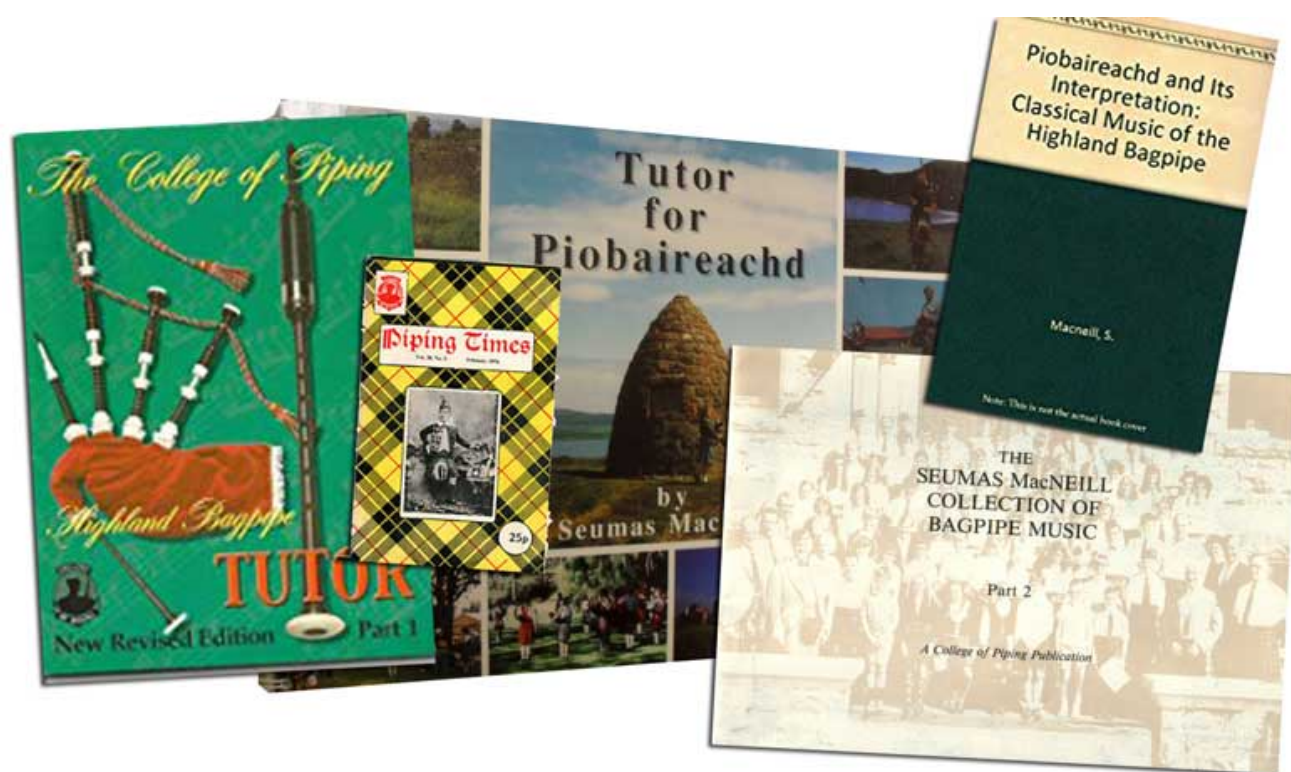
SEUMAS MACNEILL

Music is one of the most precious of God's gifts and — unlike many of the things we enjoy — it is harmless, no matter how much or how deeply we indulge in it. It is curious then, that although most of us would accept that it is a divine gift and that it is pleasurable and harmless, it is curious that our instrument, the bagpipe, in much of our folklore, is depicted as being the devil's musical instrument. If it has been the devil's instrument, and if it is true that good men go to heaven, then I can tell you that the angels by now will have abandoned their harps and are now having their first piping lesson.

How do you measure goodness? I believe that it is measured by how much lasting pleasure you afford others and if so Seumas MacNeill was indeed a good man. Through him, many many thousands of people throughout the world have had their lives enriched — they have come to know the thrill, the excitement and the beauty of the Highland bagpipe and the fellowship it engenders. His efforts are even more praiseworthy when we remember that he did it all for no material gain — quite the reverse. He and Tommy Pearston for all of their working lives, each holding down technically demanding jobs, spent virtually all of their leisure and other resources starting the College of Piping and running it. Tommy eventually retired and cut his involvement to teaching only — but Seumas increased his involvement.

He added very significantly to the literature of the bagpipe. He administered the Piobaireachd Society, the MacFadyen Trust, and many other organisations and events. He was for many years the anchor man of piping on the radio and of course he

produced the *Piping Times* (<http://online.collegeofpiping.org/piping-times/piping-times-subscriptions>) for well nigh 50 years. We ordinary folk can only wonder at such a prodigious work load. I well remember a van load of people, Rose Fletcher and her friends, driving up from Manchester each week for a specially arranged, very late evening teaching session with Seumas and then driving all the way back – and this long before the days of motorways. These Mancunians also attended the early summer schools in Skye, Tiree and Speyside.



(<http://online.collegeofpiping.org/tutor-books/college-of-piping-tutor-books/college-of-piping-tutor-book-1-new-edition>)The idea that you had to be of Highland stock with a knowledge of Gaelic culture to play piobaireachd was debunked by Seumas at an early stage. That small spark of interest shown by Professor Yamane in Tokyo was soon ignited and fanned to full flame and now there is a substantial and growing body of pipers in Japan — before there was none. Fifty years ago the convention was that girls did not play pipes — an odd one did – but they were considered odd. Soon there were many girls in the College beginning with the Currie sisters, now like myself at the grandparent stage.

Much of the early interests in the Highland bagpipe on the continent of Europe was triggered by his visits, his writings, and their attendance at the College. Perhaps his greatest success in terms of numbers was in Canada and North America where he pioneered the idea of summer schools, now happily multiplying steadily. The only other piping college is in Canada. There are now more pipers in North America than in Scotland and their numbers are still increasing. Muslims, Hindus, all colours and creeds throughout the world are enjoying the bagpipe; lots of them directly, others indirectly through his efforts. Even that remote (remote from Glasgow) place, the city of Edinburgh benefited from his personal teaching on Tuesday evenings for about 14 years.

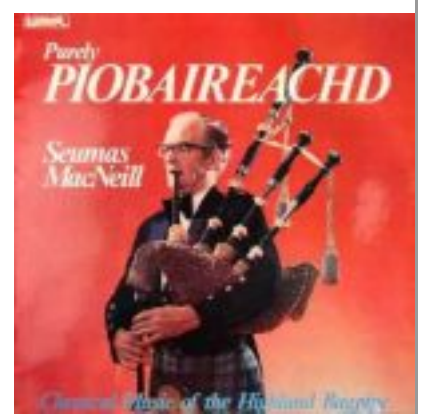
Undoubtedly he was a good man, an exceedingly good man, but not quite a saint. May he be forgiven for those few occasions when he was perhaps a little more caustic than those of us on the receiving end thought was necessary, and may those among us, who, through ignorance, jealousy. or whatever, sought to denigrate him, may they too be forgiven.

Today, while we mourn his death, we his pupils, his pupils' pupils, all those whom he introduced to the music of the bagpipe and those whose knowledge and appreciation were deepened and enhanced by him; we, all of us, join in thanking God for his wonderful teaching and the lasting pleasure he afforded us.

Thereafter Neil Fraser delivered his tribute to Seumas in the following manner:

I was greatly honoured when Netta asked me to say a few words in tribute to Seumas to you today. And in the brief time available on this occasion I can but touch on just some of the qualities of this rare and remarkable man.

I first met Seumas in 1968 when I was asked to produce the BBC's piping programmes. I was an enthusiast for the music of the pipes, reasonably musically literate, but in virtual total ignorance of the world of piping, its personalities and its politics, its factions and frictions. All were to be revealed within a short space of time. Seumas had just completed an outstanding six part series, produced by Fred MacAulay, called, 'Piobaireachd', later to become the subject of a book and a fine LP recording. I was presented with an immediate challenge — how to continue this high standard of work through into the programmes of the future. Discussion with a range of people on developing formats and ideas for new programmes took place and it quickly became clear that in Seumas I had someone who was not only a progressive and a proselytiser for piping. but also one who recognised the value of radio and how to exploit it. Seumas was a born communicator: you might on occasion disagree with his view — even strongly disagree — but who would question his ability to present his case with forethought and fluency, commodities which were in as short supply in piping as they were in all other walks of broadcasting life. Seumas and the late John MacFadyen, another progressive, were to make a monumental contribution to piping broadcasts which will surely stand the test of time. They were men with a mission — men of vision who gave selflessly of their time and energy for a greater cause.



But Seumas had an extra dimension as communicator. I was thumbing through some past editions of the *Piping Times* the other night, marvelling at the sheer tenacity which produced a monthly magazine uninterrupted over a period of nearly 50 years ("A proud record," he once claimed, "and apart from the very first edition, it has always come out late!"). At the same time I was chuckling at the well-aimed thrusts at unfortunate targets — myself among them on one or two occasions — but

Seumas, as sole editor throughout that time, sustained a degree of relevance, variety and humour that can only have come from an intense dedication and concern for his beloved instrument, its music — and the piping fraternity.



A young John MacLellan. Photo courtesy of Colin MacLellan.

His own writings and those of other luminaries of the piping world combined to make the late John MacLellan, who had himself for a period of three to four years run in opposition with *The International Piper*, declare graciously that, "There is more valuable material in the pages of the *Piping Times* than all the other books and magazines put together." The *Piping Times* ([http://online.collegeofpiping.org/piping-times/piping-](http://online.collegeofpiping.org/piping-times/piping-times-subscriptions)

times-subscriptions) is surely one of Seumas' most extraordinary achievements — a veritable archive of the changing face of piping over half a century, mirroring all its intrigue and complexity, containing the views of some of our most highly regarded adherents and read now throughout the world as witnessed by the geographical diversity of its letters page.

But Seumas had another side to him. I recall in my own early days of broadcasting the immense kindness and patience of which he was capable. Through the 'Chanter' programme and the wonderful 'Masters of Piping' series, I was introduced one after the other to the great characters of piping of the time — some of them very old, Angus Macpherson and his ilk, some of them from a later generation like the Bobs of Balmoral and Bessie Brown, and many of them, like Seumas, now gone. That was indeed a rare privilege. The civility, humour and mutual respect which characterised those meetings will always generate the happiest of memories. Seumas was at the heart of it

all, encouraging, gentle, understanding, immaculately prepared — the sure sign of the professional who had thought through his subject. I should add that the conversations over a drink in the BBC Club after some of the studio discussions were frequently of a more robust nature, but nevertheless decorum was always maintained. I recall once chancing my arm in such a robust exchange between Seumas and John MacFadyen on a journey north to Skye — I was told in no uncertain terms to be quiet. This was a matter for pipers not producers! Diplomatically, I now forget which one said it!

There are many tales to be told of our joint excursions in search of new material for broadcast: journeys to places as far apart as South Uist and Santa Cruz. Seumas was a consummate travelling companion — a walking, talking *Piping Times* — reminiscing, laughing, thoughtful, good-humoured. These tales will have to await another day.

It is unlikely that the world of piping will again find an individual who gave so much of himself in the cause of the music that he loved for so little material return. Most of what he achieved derived from a personal vision. He fought many campaigns and battles single-handedly. That was a measure of the man and his belief. If he had something to say you got it straight. Seumas was a piper and teacher first and foremost, a writer and broadcaster, a critic, friend, touchstone, strategist, visionary, and there has never been a more successful and effective ambassador for the noble instrument and its music in the new world. This summer sees the 25th Seumas MacNeill Summer School of Piping in California.



The California Summer School is still going. This is the Class of 2016.


Seumas was a good friend. I will miss him — we all will — and so too will all the many new friends of piping he created overseas.


Sadly, in the last months of his life, ill-advised criticism and mis-informed reporting came at a time when he was least capable of defending himself. I believe future generations will judge his life's work and surely decide that no one has made a more effective and lasting contribution to elevate and dignify the status of the bagpipe and its music than he has. This is a time for all of us to reflect with a touch of humility on how much poorer the world of piping and the world in general would have been, and will be, without his patriotic and perceptive presence.

Seumas MacNeill was devoted to his country, his music and his family. But our thoughts today are solely with the family, his wife Netta, his son Rory and his wife Simone with their daughter, Hayley.

Their loss is the greatest of all.


After the thanksgiving service Dr John MacAskill played the slow air, *The Fields of Hope* followed by the piobaireachd, *Lament for Patrick Òg MacCrimmon*. Angus J. MacLellan played *The Flowers of the Forest* at the graveside following the burial service.

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 September 12, 2017

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