



## A Piper from Western Canada

Saskatchewan's Iain MacDonald

By Scott Williams

I first met our next subject at the home of a mutual friend, Bob Worrall, in Burlington, Ontario. Iain and I were both in the province to attend the annual PPBSO's Judges' Symposium. Prior to that, his was just a name I saw on the Internet and in competition reports in piping magazines. It is always nice to meet the person bearing the name.

**I**AIN MACDONALD WAS BORN into a musical family in 1956 in Regina, Saskatchewan. His father, Raymond, was a lawyer and later a judge on the Queen's Bench and Court of Appeal for Saskatchewan. "Dad served in WW2, was awarded the MBE and held the rank of Major," says Iain. "He taught

himself to play chords on the piano during the war for sing-along purposes in the Officers' Mess. 'Little Brown Jug' was his party piece." Judge MacDonald died in 1991. Iain's mother, Helen M. Fraser, was born in Regina. "Mom desperately wanted to play pipes as a young girl but was not allowed to join the

local band because they had a 'no girls' rule," Iain explains. "She used historical romance and tall tales to get me to take lessons when a local kids' band was reformed in 1965. My eldest brother Alex is an excellent pianist and organist, my brother Rod played the violin as a youth, and my sister Susan plays the piano and also was a Highland dancer and later an accredited dance teacher.

All four of Iain's grandparents are from Prince Edward Island, and most of his relatives, living and dead, are there. "The MacDonalds came over on the ship Alexander in 1772," says Iain. "When I

started piping, one of my great uncles claimed that I was the first piper in the family since they left South Uist. From that heritage, my family was left with an appreciation and love of many forms of music, including the traditional music of Scotland and Ireland."

Iain's first piping instructor was Tom Ireland, a Scot who taught many chanter students in Regina. "Tom was a very good teacher of basics," says Iain. "After Tom, I had Andy McAnsh, who came from Scotland after his war service in the RAF, and also George Crawford and Angus Spence.

"I was very fortunate to have had lessons from Donald MacLeod at the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts at Fort San. That was a great experience. Donald was at the school for two weeks each summer from when I was about 10 to when I was 19 or 20. Partly as a result of his encouragement, and partly because the way had been paved by other pipers, I went over to Scotland in 1978 for a year of weekly lessons with Donald in his workshop at Grainger and Campbell. I returned in 1981 to do the same. By that time, Donald had sold G&C, and I went to his home for weekly lessons. I went through close to 150 piobaireachds with Donald in those years, and he sent me home with each tune as a taped lesson also. We also went through MSR's and jigs from time to time, although the focus was usually piobaireachd."

While in Scotland, Iain played with the Renfrew [1978] and later the Babcock-Renfrew Pipe Band [1981] under PM Iain McLeod. "As a five-time winner of the World Pipe Band Championships as pipe major of the Edinburgh Police, Iain had a huge impact on my playing, and he also worked with me to refine my solo tunes. The band itself was a fantastic experience. Imagine going from a Saskatchewan Grade 3 band to a Scottish Grade 1 band! It was a big challenge for me, and the learning curve was very steep, but I was playing every weekend by the season's end, and in 1978 I also played my first Grade 1 World's in the cow park at Lanark. The band also



**Above:** The City of Regina Pipe Band at George Square. The band did trips to Scotland in 2005 and 2006.

**Opposite:** This is me playing at the "Winter Storm" Gold Medal event in early 2006. The highlight of that trip was my son Ruaridh getting a prize in the tenor drumming event.

**Photo credit:** Midwest Highland Arts Fund and Steve Hebert Photography

flew to Toronto to perform at the CNE Tattoo that summer, so it was a great learning experience all round."

From 1985 to 1990, Iain lived in Vancouver, and went for regular lessons with PM James McMillan, who is well known as the teacher of Jack and Terry Lee among others. "Jim was a tremendous teacher," Iain continues, "and he taught me some great tunes and techniques. Some of the best playing I have done was under his influence as a solo teacher, and he opened my ears to other ways of playing tunes. He had a huge heart that he tried unsuccessfully to hide behind a gruff exterior. We became great friends, and I corresponded regularly and went back for lessons whenever I was in British Columbia."

Iain's first pipe band experiences, however, were with the Fraser Pipe Band of Regina. He played with them from 1965 to 1975 and served as pipe major of the band in 1975 when he led it to a

3rd place finish in Canadian Pipe Band Championships in Grade 3. The following year, he joined the Selkirk and District Pipe Band and competed with the band in Grade 2, including another trip to the Canadian Championships. In 1977 the Clan Scotia Pipe Band was formed in Regina. It competed in Grade 3, and Iain served as the band's pipe major for the year. In 1978, however, he was with the Grade 1 Renfrew Pipe Band under the direction of Pipe Major Iain McLeod, and played with the band at several of the major Scottish Championships and the Intercontinental Championships and Scottish World Festival Tattoo at the CNE. The band placed 6th in the Scottish Champion of Champions table.

From 1979 to 1980, Iain was back in Saskatchewan as pipe major of the Clan Scotia Pipe Band and competed in Grades 3 and 2, but in 1981 he returned to Scotland and Pipe Major McLeod's band, now called the Babcock-Renfrew

Pipe Band, with Lead Drummer Joe Noble. The band was often in the prizes at major Scottish Championships, and again placed sixth in the Scottish Champion of Champions table. Iain also competed at many solo piping contests including the Northern Meeting, Inverness.

When Iain returned home from Scotland this time, he went west to British Columbia where he joined the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band and played with them from 1985 to 1991. The band placed several times in the World Pipe Band Championships, including 1986 (4th Prize), 1987 (2nd prize), 1988 (2nd prize), 1990 (5th prize), and 1991 (5th prize).



This is the MacDonald family squished into a tent at Cowal to keep the rain off.

Moving back to Saskatchewan, he performed as pipe major of the Strathfleet Pipes & Drums, Saskatoon in 1991 and 1992, leading them to the Saskatchewan Grade 2 Championship in 1992. That fall, the City of Regina Grade 2 Pipe Band was formed and Iain has served as Pipe Major since the start. The band has won every Grade 2 provincial championship since 1992, was Alberta Grade 2 Champion from 1996 to 1999, and has been in the prize list at Maxville many years as well.

Iain competed frequently in professional solo piping competitions, and though he did not win the Gold Medal he hoped for, he did take many prestigious prizes at competitions from British Columbia to Cape Breton in Canada and in Scotland. "Well," he jokes, "I've always thought it would be great to win the Gold Medal... does that count?"

Iain was involved with the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association, from 2000 as a Board member, Chair of the Grading Committee, webmaster, Chair of the Music Board, Director of SPBA Summer School, President and Past President. He became involved in the Alliance of North American Pipe

Band Associations (ANAPBA) and attended various summits in the U.S. and Canada as the representative of the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association. He served as a member and later the Chair of the Distance Education Committee as well as the ANAPBA Webmaster and Music Advisor for several years. He was also a member of the Prairie Pipe Band Association from 1973 to 1985, acting as General Secretary, President of the Saskatchewan Branch, Council President covering Alberta, Saskatchewan, and

Manitoba. He was a member of the British Columbia Pipers Association from 1985-1989 serving on the B.C.P.A. Board of Directors (1988-1989) and editing the British Columbia Pipers Association Newsletter (1988-1989). He was a founding member of the Regina Piping Society and was a member from 1990-97. The aim of the society was to run a series of music recitals for amateur pipers as a way of encouraging young players in the Regina area. The Society ran mini gatherings for about seven years, plus workshops, a newsletter, and some knockout contests.

Iain was involved with running the Regina Highland Games from 1996 to 1999 and served as president of the Association for two years. He organized the piping and drumming competitions at the Games. As part of his work with the City of Regina Pipe Band, he helped organize Regina's Mid-Winter Celtic Festival from 1993 to the present and the City of Regina's annual Fall Workshop and Recital.

He completed the Institute of Piping's Senior Certificate in 2003, followed by the Graduate Certificate in 2004 and the Senior Teacher's Certificate in 2005. He also became a member of the Board of Examiners for the Institute in 2006. "I enjoy teaching bands and individual players," he says. "I have worked with many bands in this area, and have done workshops for bands in other parts of Canada and the U.S.A. I have been working with junior-aged bands in Saskatchewan for many years and, while living in BC and Scotland, I worked with bands there. Some of my solo students have gone on to play in Grade 1 bands and in the professional solo competitions."

Iain is currently teaching at the Conservatory of Performing Arts, at the University of Regina, which is part of the University's Centre for Continuing Education and provides a range of opportunities for people of all ages. Part of the CPA program is a junior pipe band. The teaching program is for children ages eight and up and the band has been Saskatchewan Provincial Champion in

Grade 4 three times in the four years it has been operating. "The City of Regina Pipe Band accepts players from Grade 4 bands in the area," explains Iain, "and develops their skills to the Grade 2 level. We try to augment new players with experienced performers from other areas. The CRPB has been Saskatchewan's best pipe band since 1992, and in 2005 and 2006 completed trips to Scotland."

Since 1999 Iain has taught at the Piping Hot Summer Drummer summer school offered by the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band in Vernon, BC. He was on the original organizing committee of SFU's Highland Arts Festivals and did a lot of the instructional design for the first couple of events. "More recently," he says, "I have been honoured to work with the band's excellent summer school at Silver Star Mountain."

Iain also organizes and teaches at the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association's annual summer school. "My earliest experiences with summer schools were attending several as a student at Fort San, SK. This school has been on the go for a few years now, and it was completely redesigned in 2004. It offers an excellent experience right here in Saskatchewan. In 2000, my first summer 'on the loose' from a regular job, I instructed at a summer school run by the Celtic Dragon Pipe Band in Montana. These guys know how to work and they know how to have fun, and I had a great week along with others helping them with their piping."

Iain is a member of the judging panel of the Saskatchewan Pipe Band Association and has judged at contests in Canada and the USA. "A highlight," he says, "was judging at the George Sherriff Memorial event with Major Gavin Stoddart and Ontario luminary Ed Neigh."

He has composed original bagpipe music over the years with tunes published in Ann Gray's two collections, and in Michael Grey's most recent collection. In addition to being a composer, Iain is also a writer. "I have always had an interest in writing and publishing, and have worked professionally as a writer and editor. This has spilled over into the piping

life, and I have had many articles over the years, starting with a *Piping Times* feature on a local band in 1974, through many *Piper and Drummer* articles, and now *Pipes|Drums*. I wrote the SFU publication *A High Cut Above* when I was a band member, and also assisted with the selection and arrangement of the music. I was very honoured to be asked to write the introductions to four of the CDs in the Donald MacLeod Piobaireachd CD series.

"When I was a boy," Iain says, "my band instructor Andy McAnsh advised me to ask for piping books for Christmas and birthdays, and to pick one up whenever I had spare change. I followed that advice



Tuning up before the Worlds. "Terry Lee and I both sporting the popular SFU moustache of the day. Now he's grey, and my hair isn't...there anymore!"

for many years, and have a large music collection that now serves me very well in terms of locating tunes and finding old gems for medleys and other uses."

Iain has performed on a few recordings. "In 1981, I was recorded playing with the Babcock-Renfrew Pipe Band. The recording, called *Power Piping*, was a promotional tape, produced for the Babcock-Wilcox Power Company, the band sponsors. I was with SFU when they were recorded at the World Pipe Band Championships each year from 1986 to 1991. In 1990 I played on *A High Cut Above*, which was an album of

piping for Highland dancing recorded with three other members of the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band, Terry Lee, Jack Lee and Bruce Woodley. Also that year, we recorded a 30-minute radio show for the BBC. In 1991, we recorded *The Silver Anniversary Album* as a tribute to SFU's 25th anniversary. In 1996 I did some bagpipe overdubs on a solo folk album called *Cooking at the Kettle*.

The following year, I played on a compilation album called *Live at the Cathedral Village Arts Festival* with the folk band, Iron Brew. This was followed in 1998 by their debut release, *Are You My Sister?*. In 2002 The City of Regina Pipe Band was recorded live at the

CRPB's "One Scottish Evening" concert in Saskatoon. The recording was released in February 2003.

"It's an exciting time for pipers and pipe bands," Iain says. "It would be great to be a young piper in these days — with various bodies working to offer piping as part of mainstream education, the opportunities are fantastic. I don't think the standard needs to be improved internationally. The best players and bands we have are brilliant, and really as good as any top artists in any field. There

Continued on page 44

are lots of places — like Saskatchewan — where the standard lags behind. What is needed is consistent and good teaching, and an active organization to provide more opportunities for learning, performance, and competition. In places like this, people need to put more effort into building opportunities and less into skewering other local musicians and bands!

“I am particularly concerned about the small numbers of children who are taking up the instrument, and I understand that this is also a concern in some other areas. Perhaps one of the goals should be to make piping and pipe bands more pure fun for kids. The early years of my piping, including two years living in Scotland, were the result of opportunities provided by my parents. Without their support, I couldn't have made all the trips, band practices, and various purchases that I needed to advance.

For the last 25 years, my piping life has been shared with my wife Barbara, who is an excellent player and teacher herself. Barbara and I played in the SFU Pipe Band together, and she has been key to the success of the City of Regina Pipe Band. As a result of our both being involved, we have hauled our children all over North America and Scotland with the bands. Our daughter Eilidh (14) is a competitive Highland dancer with success as a provincial champion, and with prizes at Games across North America and Scotland. She is also a Grade 3 level piper, with lots of success and stories to tell. Our son Ruaridh (12) has been playing in the Grade 2 band as a tenor drummer, and has also won many solo contests. Duncan (3) has a set of bagpipes that was presented to him in Scotland by the Patalia Pipe Band of Lahore, Pakistan (I helped them tune up for the 2005 World Championships) and although he doesn't play yet, his favourite bedtime lullaby is “MacDonald of Kinlochmoidart's Lament”.)