

The Bobs

jack taylor remembers his teachers: bob brown and bob nicol



Both Bob Brown and Bob Nicol have had a tremendous impact on the world of piping. As teachers and performers who maintained their competitive edge well beyond the point where many entertain thoughts of the pasture, they fostered a love for this instrument in the hearts of those they came in contact with. Jack Taylor was one of those people and it is his desire to pass on to others what was freely given to him.

PROFILE



Both Brown and Nicol taught at summer sessions of the Invermark College of Piping in Petersburg, New York. At far left, Bob Nicol keeps a watchful eye on one of his young charges, Jimmy Stack, at Invermark in 1974. At left, Bob Brown poses for the cover of his album, "The Pipes of Balmoral," which was released in New Zealand in 1972.

**“I’ll give you the bones,
you put on the flesh,”**

– NICOL –

EVERY PIPER HAS A TALE TO TELL ABOUT his or her early lessons, and usually the memories are fond ones. The teacher often seems to be a great player, and is frequently stoutly defended as such in future years, even if evidence points to the contrary.

I was fortunate to be at Aberdeen University at a time when Bob Brown and Bob Nicol were giving freely of their knowledge and skills, and I made visits to both, more to Nicol than to Brown.

My first experience of the pair was a lesson by Bob Brown. Three students in an old red mini-car went the 50 miles from Aberdeen up the Dee Valley. We stopped, in the dark of the early evening, at the white suspension footbridge over the Dee at the Ballochbuie Forest on the Balmoral Estate. That white bridge came to be known as Bob’s Bridge, and must be indelibly marked in the memory of any pupil of his.

Crossing the bridge marked the start of a journey into what seemed to be another world. A track from the other side led to Bob’s house, a grey granite lodge amidst the tall quiet pines. We knocked at the door to be met by the short, ruddy-faced man with the brightest blue eyes I had ever seen, and one of the most welcoming smiles. We were led into the piping room, and the lesson began. We sat on a settee at one end, and Bob sat at the other beside the fire. My piobaireachd knowledge at that time was limited to a few tunes, but I thought I was pretty good. Not for long, though, after the lesson got underway.

Suddenly, piobaireachd was *music*. It made sense, it fitted together, it had meaning. The talk was of song, of pulse, of scansion, of melody. He sang, we listened. The tune was “MacFarlanes’ Gathering.” He sang it over, and made it seem easy. He pointed out a few things here and there, and then one of us had the temerity to ask him if he would play it. Modestly, and with some reluctance and talk that the pipe was cold, he did. He warmed up with some

At right is a photo of Bob Nicol taken in Brittany in 1971 by one of his students, Jackie Pincet. Below is a rare shot of John MacDonald of Inverness and his two dapper students, circa 1930’s. From left to right: Bob Brown, John MacDonald, Bob Nicol. J.B. Robertson looks on from behind.



THANKS TO DONALD LINDSAY FOR PROVIDING A COPY OF THIS PHOTOGRAPH

variations (General Thomason's "Hail to my Country") then played the "MacFarlanes." And to me it seemed wonderful. The pipe was sweet, clear and so, so easy. There was no struggle, heave or unevenness. The melody spilled out, and he played *just* as he sang.

We went over several other tunes that night, and I remember leaving and walking back through the forest thinking I now knew *exactly* how the tunes should be played. They were there, right in my head, just as he had put them there. Easy. But as we went down the road in the car, and later when I tried things out at home, I realised that the ease was his, not mine, and my attempts to put into practice what he had portrayed were clumsy and inept.

The first lesson with Bob Nicol was a different kettle of fish. I got the bus out to Ballater on a Sunday and walked the four miles to Girnock on the South Deeside road where Bob stayed with his sister, Jean. Bob wasn't expecting me, and he clearly thought I was a bit out of order not letting him know I was coming. However, he welcomed me in, listened to a few of my efforts, then told me it was time to be tackling some of the bigger tunes and that I could come back and see him if I wanted.

Return I did, many times. He moved to a pensioner's cottage outside Ballater at Birkhall, and many a Sunday afternoon was spent there going over tunes. There was no time wasted, and little chat.

"What's your tune?" he would ask. If you knew it, he would hear it on the pipes and conduct. If you didn't, he would sing it over as you played on the practice chanter, emphasizing strong notes by a thump on the arm of his chair, with resulting cloud of dust. "I'll give you the bones, you put on the flesh," he would say, and he would give as many tunes as you wanted, hardly ever referring to the book. And all to the tick of the clock on his mantelpiece; preserved on many cassettes the world over!

Nicol and Brown were contrasting characters, and sparked off each other very well. Nicol tended to be gruff and almost monosyllabic at times, whereas Brown was more expansive. On one occasion when we were at Ballochbuie, Bob Nicol walked in during a lesson. He sat down while the pupil finished out the tune. There was a short silence. Then Nicol said, "Fit

wye (how) do you play _____." Brown sang the reply. "Thought as much," said Nicol. "That wisnae the tune at a' on the wireless last week." No niceties, no comments about the pupil or the weather, just on with the business.

Over the years, many pipers and enthusiasts got on with the business with Bob Nicol and Bob Brown, and I think all were given the same treatment. No matter though you weren't an advanced player, or if you asked the most inane of questions, a welcome, a helping hand and encouragement were given. Long may our art continue to be passed on in similar vein. ■

Jack Taylor is a medical doctor in Aboyne, Scotland, and carries on the traditions of Piobaireachd that he learned from Bob Brown and Bob Nicol.