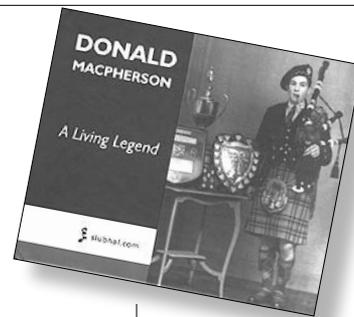


A Modern Landmark

Donald MacPherson: A Living Legend—Siubhal.com

Reviewed by Thom Moore



LET ME CUT TO THE chase: If a Martian came to Earth and wanted to know about piobaireachd, I would offer him or her (or it?) my CD player and a copy of *Donald MacPherson: A Living Legend*, so well presented and authoritative is this new book and CD package.

And that is no small statement in light of the history of the last few years, a particularly exciting time on the piobaireachd scene, with superbly educational recordings of the Bobs of Balmoral and Donald MacLeod appearing at a good clip, the publication of the MacArthur manuscript, the republication of *Binneas is Borerraig* in a handy, one-volume format, and other great releases. It seems especially appropriate, therefore, that *Donald MacPherson: A Living Legend*, should appear at this juncture—appropriate because this recording in many ways represents a kind of summary of, and gathering point for, where those who love play piobaireachd have been, where we are at this moment, and, perhaps, where we are headed.

Piobaireachd enthusiasts can be an idiosyncratic and inbred lot, willing to argue for hours on end about the virtues of gracenotes rather than cadences, a MacKay versus a MacDonald versus

a MacArthur setting of a tune, closed versus open fosgailte crunluaths, and so forth. It's not surprising, then, that this group has long had its own, often heroic, sentimentalizing customs, vocabulary, and even mythology surrounding the music. I would argue that all of this has helped to keep piobaireachd alive through many fallow years, small though the number of people was who were so devoted to it. Given this history, is it too easy, or too much, to allow Donald MacPherson to be referred to as a living legend?

No, it isn't.

Donald MacPherson's stellar competitive record, his deep piobaireachd erudition and meticulous preparation of both the music and his instrument, and the phenomenal consistency of his highly polished performances over many, many years, easily qualify him for legendary status. Donald MacPherson is a perfect representative of the Highland Bagpipe and of piobaireachd in particular, and yet Barnaby Brown—who co-produced the project with Donald on Barnaby's own Siubhal.com label—also recognized that Donald might be a perfect ambassador for this art form beyond the piping world, and indeed beyond the English-speaking piping world. Prospective listeners

unfamiliar with piobaireachd will be lured by the splendid package: no less than a full-length book, with terrific design, a really cool color scheme, interesting photos of Donald and his father Iain, and attractively and concisely written textual notes and press clippings from worthies such as Bridget MacKenzie, James Campbell of Kilberry, and David Murray, all in four different languages, plus a Gaelic introduction from Allan MacDonald. This package elevates piobaireachd and secures for it a place alongside other forms of serious music. It's basically meant to be kind of a love letter to the whole musical world, piping or not, from the bosom of piobaireachd, and Msrs. Brown and MacPherson can harbor the hope that the world will respond in kind.

The recording itself is that of a master player, in the autumn of his years, at the peak of his expressive musical powers, playing six complete piobaireachd and the *urlar* of a seventh, with serene confidence, as convincingly and confidently as you will ever hear piobaireachd played, on the drop-dead solid, lush instrument for which Donald has always been famous.

The first tune, “MacCrimmon's

Sweetheart,” is executed with a lovely, forward flow, the bagpipe actually improving in sound as the tune progresses. This proves to be true of Donald's instrument in most of the album's recordings, and may be a testament to Donald's assertion that he adjusts his blowing as he plays to suit the instrument, ever so slight may its changes be as he progresses through a tune. I especially enjoyed the really “live” pipe sound, and was surprised to read in the textual notes that an all-synthetic reed set-up was used. Popular opinion has been that only cane achieves that lively, bright sound one associates with a well-tuned bagpipe, but I think that the overall sound here has the comforting old ring of cane. Clearly, this has much to do with an absolute master's touch in setting the reeds, as well as the way in which those reeds are blown.

The second tune, “The Big Spree,” is also approached with a decisive forward momentum, and I particularly liked the brevity of most of the low A passing notes in the *urlar*, which serves to emphasize the Cs and Es in the opening phrases, giving the tune immediate lift and drive. Donald's recording of this tune from the 1970s, on a vinyl LP titled *Highland Bagpipes / Donald MacPherson*,

is almost identical, though slower and perhaps a little restrained overall. I like the modern performance better; it sounds freer now, more from the heart.

In “Ronald MacDonald of Morar’s Lament,” we are treated to a second “big” tune, this one also with a truly striking and compelling melodic line. I enjoy the way that Donald keeps the music moving nicely, but without any sense of hurry at all. It’s in this tune that you fully realize for the first time that Donald’s taorluath and crunluath movements are gorgeously clean, even, powerful, and rippling. (A little depressing for someone about half Donald’s age, whose compound doublings have fallen on hard times of late.)

The fourth tune, “Lord Lovat’s Lament,” is presented in the Kilberry Book setting, rather than the Piobaireachd Society setting, and therefore adheres more closely to the admittedly quite “irregular” setting of Angus MacKay. I am no one to argue with the Piobaireachd Society editor, but I must say that I prefer the setting that Donald plays here. Irregular though it may be, it makes sense to the ear.

In “The Blue Ribbon,” Donald once again establishes the tempo at an attractively fluid pace, his treatment of the passing Es in the *urlar* and thumb variation convey a pleasing sense of forward motion. Donald MacPherson is the son of a student of John MacDougall Gillies, and in this tune we perhaps find some of Donald’s “Cameron” influences at hand. The tune is itself an acknowledged Cameron family favorite, and is here presented in the Sandy Cameron setting, complete with opening G-E-D cadences in the singlings of Variation IV, the Taorluath, and the Crunluath. These cadences allow the tune to breathe a little, to take pause from, what up to those points in the tune, has been a relentless march to the fore.

The sixth tune, “Mary’s Praise,” places on fine display another Sandy Cameron setting of a classic tune with a beautiful, simple melody line. It is the lengthiest tune on the recording, and despite the simplicity of the melodic line, it becomes a haunting *tour de force* in the hands of this master, who wrests every drop of sentiment from the music to the last crunluath.

Interestingly, Donald and Barnaby choose to conclude the album with only the *urlar* of “Donald Gruamach’s March,” a massive tune that easily would have been the longest on the album had Donald presented it whole. On first listen, this didn’t seem to me an afterthought, or a bit of recording salvaged from the digital cutting-room floor, but it only occurred to me on my third or fourth listen to the album what this could possibly mean. For those who don’t know it, in longstanding modern piobaireachd performance practice, a tune is traditionally concluded by returning to the *urlar* and playing through the first line or so—in effect, what classical music folks would call a coda (“tail” in Italian). Donald’s playing the *urlar* of “Donald Gruamach” here serves this purpose for the entire album taken as one giant performance, but I think there is a gently humorous self-reference in this, as well. The Gaelic name for the tune literally translates to “Grim Donald’s Proud Walking,” and so we are left with the image of Donald MacPherson proudly walking into the sunset, having acquitted himself

bravely in these recordings, though we can hope that he didn’t actually feel too grim about it, and, certainly, that he doesn’t necessarily consider this album to be his final statement on his beloved music.

Donald MacPherson and Barnaby Brown have done the piping community and its tradition a great service: They have created a true modern landmark of the piobaireachd legacy, summarizing the nineteenth century and straddling the twentieth and twenty-first. This is a work of which we can all be very proud, and to which those familiar and unfamiliar with this music will be able to turn now and in future years for a ready, elegantly produced and packaged, and enormously comprehensible reference and guide. I think this wonderful book and CD package should be in every home where music matters.

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Thom Moore is an Amateur Grade 1 piper from southern New Jersey near Philadelphia. He recently re-joined the Oran Mor Pipe Band. He heard his first piobaireachd at age 12 (“Lament for the Children”) played live, by John MacFadyen, and has been a confirmed (piobaireachd) junkie ever since.