

## **William James MacLeod**

It is a privilege and great honour to be able to stand here this afternoon to pay tribute to Bill. “Willie” as he was often referred to by friends, defined the word ‘gentleman’ and had a reputation for many acts of generosity and kindness.

I find it poignant to recall that many years ago as a young boy, I regularly walked past the front of the old United Church that was on this site, carrying my bagpipes to practices at the school gym.

Although I was not one of the original group of Bill’s students in the mid-1960’s, I was blessed to follow them shortly thereafter, becoming a very young playing member of Bill’s band in 1970 - when my bass drone was nearly as tall as I was.

What followed thereafter was a near 40-year association between Bill, his family, and my family that transcended a simple teacher-student relationship in a local pipe band. He was a fatherly figure in those early days of my life that transformed over time into a friendship that lasted until the present day.

Bill’s basement was a veritable assembly line for young pipers – his talent and dedication as a teacher churning out one good player after another, one generation to the next.

Bill’s teaching skill was based upon a deep understanding of the highland bagpipe and its music. This knowledge was attained from the lessons of his father and renown pipers of the day such as William Ross that he studied under while in the Army.

Bill was detailed and articulate and had fingers that could execute the most complex embellishments flawlessly. In those days, long before the invention of modern electronic tuners, Bill used his ear to set our chanters and tune our drones to perfection. When

teaching his students, Bill was gentle, understanding, and patient. I recall many a time when the tip of his practice chanter would gently touch my fingers to point out a false note or false fingering. He focused on having us master the rudiments as a foundation for our future successes.

Lessons from Bill were free – not a cent was charged and his only request was each student's commitment to try their best. From time to time when his own duties around the house would back up, Bill would hire some of those same students – too young to work at the mill – to help him with such tasks as mowing the lawn or raking up the leaves.

The list of students that I can recall is extensive with about two dozen quickly coming to mind. Knowing first-hand the effort involved in training a piper to be skilled enough to play the pipes in a competitive band; and how much work is involved in actually getting those individual students to play together as a group - I still wonder how he found the time to accomplish so much.

In re-reading an old newspaper article titled “Pine Falls Pipers Win” it was clear that Bill had been immensely successful. In this one report, the combined winnings of Maureen, Allister, Jim and Bill Rodger at three competitions over the course of two weekends was: 4 trophies, 11 gold medals, 20 silver medals, and 3 bronze medals. I was left wondering if there had been any trophies and medals left for any of the other competitors. Other pupils of Bill's achieved similar distinction and it was these kind of results that very quickly put the Stirling Pipe Band on the map.

Complimenting these, was the Band's record of awards, which was as distinct as any band in Canada at the time, and could not have happened without the expert tuition of Bill.

In addition to the pipe corps, an equally large number of young kids who were drummers were influenced by Bill's leadership.

Although taught by John Bulmer and Jim Barry in Winnipeg, Bill was not averse to helping out, including driving some of this group into Winnipeg for lessons on Saturday mornings. Jeff Berthelette recalled that Bill would always make sure to stop at MacDonald's for the kids – his kids in so many ways - to get a burger and hot apple pie before setting course back to Pine Falls. I experienced this myself several years later when Bill would regularly drive us into Winnipeg to participate in the Winnipeg Massed Pipes and Drums. And if setting up a young Band in Pine Falls was not enough, Bill was also the Pipe Major of the Massed Band and thus responsible for an even larger group. It was with the Massed Band, that we were able to perform at the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena twice – becoming the first band outside the USA to lead the parade on their second visit, and to perform in the Silver Broom ceremonies in Switzerland and Norway.

And getting back to apple pie for just a moment, if Bill had a weakness, it was 'apple pie'. He loved apple pie. There was a story passed along to me about Bill being on a diet at one point and indulging in a piece of apple pie at a café in Fort Qu'Appelle. Time precludes me from going into the details...but the upshot of the story was a little tune that was being composed at the time was cheekily titled, "Don't Tell Mary" by one of his fellow teachers – Jim McWilliams, I believe.

In a town whose population was less than one thousand, Bill had created a Band that became a worthwhile and rewarding activity for many of the kids and went on to bring recognition to Pine Falls across North America and Europe that continues to this day. Bill was proud of his band from the very first moment it stepped onto the field to compete regardless of the result. Originally outfitted in whatever kilts and uniforms that could be cobbled together he worked with the other parents on the Executive to raise the funds required to outfit the band in a standard uniform with MacLeod tartan kilts. He continually strived to have the band's dress and

department be top notch, much to our chagrin at times, because he firmly believed that to the average person unfamiliar with pipe bands, 75% of their impression was formed by what they saw and 25% on what they heard.

Bill's wartime friendship with the legendary Donald MacLeod of the Seaforth Highlanders dated back to their attendance at the Army School of Piping in Edinburgh Castle. Bill organized "Wee Donald's" participation as a Guest Instructor at Fort Qu'Appelle numerous times thereby exposing young pipers across the Prairies to "MacLeod and MacLeod" ... which without a doubt in my mind would have been the highest calibre piping tuition available anywhere in the world...then and now.

Bill continued to teach students in the Pine Falls area well past his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. He had reached a point where the physical playing of the pipes was too difficult, but his mind was sharp, his fingering clean, and he continued on with the practice chanter. Myles Wilcott, and most recently his younger brother Kale were two of his latest pupils. And, following in the steps of other students before them, they have been very successful in their endeavours. Myles recalled Bill's occasional tendency to fall asleep while he we would play Piobaireachd for him – if you can imagine the difficulty in falling asleep 7 or 8 feet away from a set of bagpipes you must know that Bill was enjoying yet another one of his students performances.

Today there are at least 10 of his former students who are still actively playing in pipe bands across Canada - perpetuating Bill's legacy each time they pick up their instrument. Many of the other students Bill taught each summer at piping schools at Fort Qu'Appelle and the International Peace Gardens continue to perform as well. And, incidentally, Bill organized and ran both of those summer schools for many years. As an example of Bill's influence beyond the borders of this town, both Lauchlan and

Colin McWilliams from Moose Jaw, the latter who plays with the world championship SFU band, took up piping after their father Jim took them on a trip to Pine Falls to visit Bill.

Maybe Bill's greatest virtue was patience...which is something he had in spades. Bill would never ever get angry when we invariably made our mistakes. If people were messing up, not a word was said. Even if a student would suggest that they perhaps should sit out of a competition, Bill would have nothing of such thoughts. The standard answer was 'No. We need you'. What wonders he could do for ones self-confidence.

There were many humorous times as well. Bill was always willing to tell a light-hearted story or joke, often at his own expense, and enjoyed a good laugh. Anytime a piping related cartoon or joke showed up, he would pull it out at the start of chanter practice and have a good chuckle.

Bill was a prolific writer of bagpipe music as well. In recent years I occasionally provided him with assistance in transposing his handwritten compositions using various computer programs so he could have some quality copies. I can attest that his compositions – all named for family, friends, and memorable events – are second to none. His talent in this area goes widely unrecognized even though Bill has had many tunes published in both Canada and Overseas. Notably, several of his tunes are in the Gordon Highlanders Book 2. Bill continued to compose tunes even after he had to move to Winnipeg for care - his most recent, and possibly his final composition, was a short 2/4 titled "Willies New Digs". In a time when he had every reason to feel 'down' he found within himself a silver lining and composed yet another tune.

In addition to his skills in composing and teaching written pipe music, Bill had been taught the Canntarieachd – the ancient Scottish system for the oral teaching of the classical music of

bagpipes – the Piobaireachd. He is the only individual I have ever met who was fluent in the Canntarieachd. Today, we light-heartedly refer to those vocalized instructions as the ‘heedrums hodrums’ but regardless of name, I have several recollections of Bill stopping a lesson and singing in this old Gaelic vernacular what we were supposed to be playing. I didn’t realize it at the time but I had been exposed to a piece of old Scottish culture that only a small number of people in our part of the world were fluent in.

My formal association with the Band ended when I moved to start my career. Since then I have met many pipers and drummers around the world and am continually amazed by Bill’s wide spread reputation. When discussing my piping background there have been numerous occasions when I have seen an immediate elevation in peoples assessment of my skills simply because I was taught by Bill...without ever hearing me play a note. Bill’s skills were immensely respected and anyone who had the good fortune to have received his tutelage was lucky indeed.

There were many other aspects of his life that I had small insights into. I know he helped form a Girl’s Drum and Bugle Band in Pine Falls in the 1950’s – yet another endeavour which contributed to the town’s children. I know that he was an avid fisherman and hunter and was instrumental in building the Trap Shoot range – yet again contributing to the community; I know that he was recently honoured for having been in the Mason’s for 60 years; and I know just a bit about his military service. He served the duration of the War enlisting in 1939 with the Queens Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada; was Pipe Major for a number of those years; was “Mentioned In Dispatches” for a commendable act; and as a member of the Regiment fought for the liberation of Holland.

In 1979, Bill was presented a Good Citizenship Award by the Honorable Bud Jobin, Lt. Governor of Manitoba for his remarkable work within the community. Family and friends were on-hand at

Government House to witness the award and to congratulate Bill. I can't think of anyone more deserving.

As I close, I am reminded of a saying from the Scottish author and poet Neil Munro:

*“...To the make of a piper go seven years of his own learning, and seven generations before... At the end of seven years, he will stand at the start of knowledge... and leaning a fond ear to the drone, he may have parley with old folks of old affairs...”*

Translated roughly this means that those pipers who put forth the effort will, poetically, be able to communicate with older generations as they attain a broader enlightenment of life through their pursuit of playing the bagpipes.

Although the seven years of learning was up to us as individuals, Bill took the time and effort to ensure we did attain that high level of knowledge and competence on the pipes and without doubt, he was our link to those past generations. His lessons extended far beyond piping. He taught us to be better individuals and to be better citizens in our community.

I would never dare to compare my piping skills as being anything close to Bill's but he imparted enough upon me that in latter years, when I became an adult, we talked as equals. That was his style ... and as the saying went...I was able to 'have parley with old folks of old affairs'.

When I last had a chance to meet with Bill this past April we talked about the real meaning of piping – having fun, enjoying it as a hobby – but never losing sight of other more important commitments – families, careers, and friendships. Referring to the Band and every individual member, he said “You know Hugh, we did something good with that Band” and then expressed how lucky

he felt to have met so many fine people and thanked me personally.

I found it ironic that the person that had touched so many people, had given such a large portion of his personal life to us, would be thanking us. The shoe most certainly belongs on the other foot – with people like myself and my family thanking him for his efforts. Today I do that one final time.

I was fortunate to have met Bill, to have received tuition from Bill, and to have had him as a friend. I will miss him but will strive in my life to maintain his legacy by emulating those qualities of his that I so admired.

May God bless Bill, and the family and friends he loved.