

# ACCOUNT OF THE HEREDITARY PIPERS

---

## THE MACCRUMMENS

### HEREDITARY PIPERS TO MACLEOD OF MACLEOD, OR OF DUNVEGAN

The most celebrated Pipers were the MacCrummens, who, under the liberal patronage of the Lairds of MacLeod, became famous all over the Highlands; and their abilities were so well appreciated, that students from all quarters resorted to them, or were placed by their respective chiefs under those famous masters, whose residence consequently became dignified with the name of College. Here was imparted a knowledge of that particular class of music which cannot be acquired except by the several years of assiduous study and practice; for the simple reels and strathspeys are far inferior in the estimation of a Piobaireachd player.

The first establishment of the MacCrummens as hereditary Pipers to MacLeod of MacLeod is beyond traditional record; but is probably coeval with the constitution of one of this profession as an important functionary in the following of a chief. Their *Oil-thigh* or College was at Boreraig, eight miles north of Dunvegan castle, and they held the farm rent-free in virtue of their office, on which at present eighteen families reside, playing upwards of £100. The house occupied by the MacCrummens still remains, displaying thick walls, massy *cabers* or rafters, and other characteristics of old Highland habitations. It was divided into two parts built at right angles – one forming the class-room, and the other the sleeping apartments; and MacDonald, the present tenant, points out to strangers the localities of many transactions handed down in oral tradition.

On the top of a brae or rising ground near the college, there is still to be seen a small hollow where the pupils used to retire to practice their respective lessons on the chanter, and where they occasionally played the full Pipes. From this place there is a beautiful view of Vaternish across the Loch Vegan, and in a clear day the islands of Harris and Uist can be distinctly seen. A little southwards of a rock called “the Lady”, there is a place known as *Uamh na’m Piobaireau*, i.e. the Piper’s cave, to which they also frequently resorted to play over their tunes. Close to this cave, on the south, is another, about a mile in length, called *Uamh na’n Calmain*, or the Pigeon’s Cave, and tradition informs us that MacCrummen’s daughters would steal out with the *òinseach*, a favorite set of their father’s pipes, in order to indulge themselves in performing on them. It appears rather an unfeminine instrument for ladies; but in the Highlands they certainly did play, especially after the harp went out of use, and they were sometimes proficient too, – MacCrummen’s daughters being able in his absence to superintend the instruction of the students.

A worth lady, Mrs. MacKinnon, the last who retained the family profession, is at the present day able to go through the intricacies of a Piobaireachd.

A Dunbhorreraig, *Leum an Doill*, or the Leap of the Blind, is pointed out, which received the appellation from a remarkable circumstance. John *dall* Mackay, one of the

pupils, having quarreled with his companions, endeavouring to escape from their pursuit, is said to have leapt from the top of the rock on which the dun is built, a height of 24 feet!

It is probable that the MacCrummens were established in the family of MacLeod long before we have any authentic notice of them, but the first of whom we have any account was *Eain Odhar*, or Dun-coloured John. He was succeeded by his son *Donull Mor*, i.e. big Donald, who, under his father's instructions, became eminent in Piobaireachd playing and while he was yet young, he acquired the especial favour of MacLeod, who resolved to give him all the instruction that could be had. He therefore sent Donald to Ireland, where a celebrated Piper, who had gone from Scotland, had established a college of celebrity; which fact shows, that at least among the Scots of Ulster the national instrument continued to be held in proper estimation. In this establishment there were twenty-four students, and the manner of teaching was thus: - Each pupil came into the schoolroom by himself, and, after receiving his lesson, retired; for the professor would not instruct one in presence of another. When MacCrummen, who had remained some days before he began to practise, understood the mode of teaching, he concealed himself in a place where he could hear the scholars while receiving and completing their lessons. It is said of him that his memory and taste for music were so extraordinary that could perfectly recollect whatever tune he once heard; consequently he was not long with his new master, before he acquired all the new pieces that could be given him. On his return to Skye, MacLeod as might have been expected, was very much pleased with the progress of his Piper while in Ireland, and ever since that time the MacCrummens have been allowed to be the best Pipers in Scotland; so much so that no one was esteemed a perfect player, unless he had been instructed or finished by them.

Donald *Mòr* had a brother, who lived in Glenelg, part of MacLeod's estate, who was known by the name of Patrk *Caog*, on account of a squint or defect in one of his eyes. This young man had a quarrel with his foster brother, a native of Kintail. Sometime after the dispute, while he was in the act of washing his face, in a burn or rivulet adjoining his dwelling, the Kintail man came behind him, and treacherously with his dirk gave him a mortal blow. This being made known to Donald *Mòr* at Dunvegan, he prepared to revenge the untimely death of this brother, and taking his Pipes up to MacLeod's room, he threw them on the bed. MacLeod surprised, demanded to know what had occurred. In few words he related to him the affair, when the laird pacified the enraged Piper, and promised him, on condition of his remaining at home, to see justice done before the expiration of twelve months. MacLeod thought that his wrathful Piper would forget the cruel murder by that time, and allow his ire to abate; but such was not the case, for on the termination of twelve months, he set out himself for Glenelg, without informing anyone of his intention; and finding on his arrival there, that the murderer of his brother had gone to Kintail, he pursued his journey thither.

The offender having been apprised of his arrival, concealed himself in the house of a friend; and the inhabitants of the village not choosing to deliver him up, MacCrummen was so enraged, that he resolved to set their houses on fire, - a resolution which he found an opportunity of carrying into effect that night, and burned eighteen of their houses, which caused the loss of several lives.\* Donald then made his escape to Lord Rea's country, where he remained for some time under the protection of Donald Duaghal

---

\* This is called Lasan Phadruig Chaog, or a flame of wrath for Squinting Peter.

Mackay, afterwards Lord Rea, with whom he had been formerly acquainted.

As soon as Lord Kintail was apprised of this affair, he offered a great reward for the apprehension of MacCrummen, and sent a party in pursuit of him; but they returned without being able to trace the fugitive. He, however thought it prudent to seek a place of concealment in a more remote district, and wandered among the hills for a considerable time, making occasional nocturnal visits to his friend MacKay, who, to avoid detection, recommended him to one of his shepherds, with whom, he was assured he might remain in safety, and for greater security, a bed was constructed, concealed in the wall of the house.

Soon afterwards, Lord Kintail, whose daughter had been married to Donald Duaghal, having learned where MacCrummen was lurking, dispatched his son and twelve men to seize him. It was a very wet day, and Donald *Mòr* happened to be at home, when the party approached the house; but while they were at a distance, the shepherd's wife espied them, and immediately gave the alarm to the unfortunate Piper, who betook himself to the bed already mentioned; and the good woman made a large fire, which was always in the middle of the house, for the entertainment of the pursuers. On their arrival they were welcomed, and asked to be seated, civilities of which they gladly availed themselves, being thoroughly soaked by the rain. The woman spread then their plaids on ropes, which had been placed along the house, for the purpose of forming a safe passage for MacCrummen's retreat, who she then apprized of the opportunity, and thus he effected his escape, unobserved by MacKenzie or any of the party. All this was the work of a moment; and MacKenzie was hardly seated, when he asked where the guest Donald *Mòr* was concealed. "I know nothing about him," replied the shepherd; "I have indeed heard that your father has offered a great reward for his apprehension; but he has not come my way, else I should certainly have given up." A lengthened conversation regarding MacCrummen then ensued, and MacKenzie finding he could gather nothing from the faithful couple, ordered his men to search the house and its vicinity, which they did, but to no purpose. The night continued extremely rainy and boisterous, so that the party was glad to remain in the shepherd's cot; after partaking of what refreshment it could afford, retired to rest.

The goodwife managed matters well. She made MacKenzie's bed in a corner of the house by itself, so that there might be an easy access to it. When all was fast asleep, MacCrummen having been informed of all that had passed, entered the house; and taking MacKenzie's arms and part of those of the men, laid them one across the other, over the place where MacKenzie lay, and took his departure, without disturbing any one, - the party after their fatigues sleeping soundly. When MacKenzie awoke in the morning, and found so many arms placed over him, he called to his men to get up, saying "I might have been a dead man, for ought you could have done for me. If Donald *Mòr* MacCrummen be alive, it was he that did this; and it was an easy matter for him to take my life, as to do so."

On going out, they saw MacCrummen walking on the other side of the river, with his claidheamh-more, or great sword, in his hand. Seeing the man they were in pursuit of, they prepared to ford the stream, with the intention of seizing him or dispatching him; but MacKenzie threatened to shoot the first man, who would dare to touch him. He then approached MacCrummen, and desired him to cross the river. "No," replied he, 'it is as easy for you to come to me, as it is for me to go to you.'" "If you will come over,"

rejoined MacKenzie, "I pledge my word of honour that you shall not be injured." "Not so," says the other, "swear all your men, and I will take your own word;" which was accordingly done, and MacCrummen crossed over the river. MacKenzie then asked him, if it was he who put the arms over the bed, during the night, when he answered in the affirmative. Then said MacKenzie, you might have easily taken my life, at that time; so I now promise to procure your pardon, if you will be at my father's house this day three weeks. This being agreed to, MacKenzie took his departure for the residence of Donald *Duaghal*, where he remained a few days, and then proceeded to Kintail, and told his father all that had happened. MacCrummen also went to Donald *Dughal*, who consented to accompany him to his father-in-law's, and arrived the evening of the appointed day, at the house of Lord Kintail's fiddler. They were shewn into an upper room, where MacKay left his companion, and went alone to Lord Kintail's. By some means the fiddler discovered that his guest was Donald *Mòr*; he therefore sent for a party of men, in order to secure and carry him before his Lordship, claiming the reward for his capture. So after everything had been arranged, the wary musician went upstairs, and said to MacCrummen, whose door was secure inside, that his wife had laid him a wager that he would not come down, and drink his share of a bottle with them. MacCrummen replied that he had no objections to do so, and opening the door, came out. There was along with the fiddler, a younger son of Lord Kintail, who had formerly seen MacCrummen, and who took an opportunity to whisper to him, "Will you go down stairs where a house full of people await to take you prisoner?" Donald *Mòr* immediately knocked the fiddler down stairs, and again fastened himself in the room. The youth went straight to inform Donald *Duaghal*, who he met on the way, and he on hearing what had taken place, made all possible haste, and arrived just in time to save the Piper, by producing a pardon for him, received from Lord Kintail. All then dispersed peaceably, and MacKay and MacCrummen proceeded to the castle of his Lordship, where they made merry all night, and next day the Piper returned to Skye, where he remained without much further adventures until his death

He was succeeded by his son Patrick *Mòr*, a diligent composer of *Piobaireachd*, of whom it is related that he was accompanied to church one Sunday by eight sons, who all, with one exception, died within twelve months, on which bereavement he composed a tune called *Cumha na Cloinne*, or Lament for the Children.

His only surviving son Patrick *Og* succeeded. He was a composer of scarcely less merit than his father, and his pupils were considered the best Pipers of those days. He was twice married, and had issue by his first wife, a son Malcolm, and a daughter; by the second he had no fewer than eighteen children, of whom only John, Donald Bane, and Farquhar came to the years of maturity

John was Piper to the Earl of Seaforth. Donald was killed in the skirmish which took place at Moy near Inverness in 1746. Farquhar lived in Harris, and Malcolm the eldest succeeded his father at Borreraig, and dying left issue John *Dubh*, and Donald *Ruadh*. The first of whom became of course Piper to Dunvegan. He was twice married, and had by his first wife, two sons and four daughters. His sons were Malcolm and Donald, the former of whom it is believed is still alive at Adrosson, but does not follow the profession of his forefathers. The latter went to the West Indies, and died on his homeward passage.

One of the daughters, Mrs. MacKinnon, is still alive; a worthy gentlewoman who now keeps a school for females at Dunvegan. John Dubh married the second time at the age of sixty, and had issue five children, some of whom yet survive, as does the widow.

About 1795 the last of this celebrated race of Pipers left his ancient patrimony, and John Dubh proceeded as far as Greenock with the intention of emigrating to America. He however altered his mind, and returned to his native isle, where he spent the remainder of his life in quiet retirement; and when the infirmities accompanying a protracted life, prevented his handling his favourite *Piob-mhòr* he would sit on the sunny braes, and run over the notes on the staff which assisted his feeble limbs in his lonely wanderings. He died in 1822, in the 91<sup>st</sup> year of his age, and was buried with his fathers in the churchyard of Durnish.

### **THE MACARTHURS, HEREDITARY PIPERS TO THE LORDS MACDONALD OF THE ISLES**

The MacArthurs who filled the important office of Pipers to the MacDonalds of the Isles, were esteemed next in excellence to the MacCrummens, and like them they kept a seminary for instruction in Pipe-music. Pennant, who visited the Hebrides in 1774 eulogises Sir Alexander MacDonald's Piper, in whose house or college he was very hospitably entertained, and was gratified by the performance of many Piobaireachds. He describes the building, as being divided into four apartments, the outer being for the shelter of cattle during winter; another formed the hall where the students appear to have practised; a third was set apart for the strangers; and the fourth was reserved for the family.\*

The most celebrated of this race was Charles, whose musical education was perfected by Partick òg MacCrummen; and respecting him the following anecdote is handed down: - Sir Alexander MacDonald being at Dunvegan, on a visit to the laird of MacLeod, he heard the performance of Patrick òg with great delight; and desirous if possible to have a Piper of equal merit, he said to MacCrummen one day, that there was a young man whom he was anxious to place under his tuition, and on condition that he should not be allowed to return, until such time as he could play equal to his master. "When this is the case" said MacDonald, "you will bring him home, and I will give you ample satisfaction for your trouble." "Sir Alexander," says Patrick, "if you will be pleased to send him to me, I will do all that I am able to do for him." Charles was accordingly sent to Borreraig, where he remained for eleven years, when MacCrummen, considering him as perfect as he could be made, proceeded to Mugstad, to deliver his charge to Sir Alexander, who was then residing there, and where *Eain Dall* Mackay, Gairloch's blind Piper, happened also to be. MacDonald hearing of their arrival thought it a good opportunity to determine the merit of his own Piper, by the judgement of the blind man, whose knowledge of Pipe-music was unexceptionable. He therefore enjoined Partick òg and MacArthur not to speak a word to betray who they were, and addressing MacKay, he told him he had a young man learning the Pipe for some years, and was glad that he was present to say whether he thought him worth the money which his instructions had cost? Mackay said, if he heard him play, he would give his opinion freely; but requested to be informed previously with whom the Piper had been studying. Sir Alexander told him he had been

with young Patrick MacCrummen. “Then,” exclaimed Mackay, “he could never have found a better master.” The young man was ordered to play, and when he had finished, Sir Alexander asked the other for his opinion. “I think a great deal of him;” replied *Eain* “he is a good Piper; he give the notes correctly, and if he takes care, he will excel in his profession.” Sir Alexander was pleased with so flattering an opinion, and observed that he had been at the trouble of sending two persons to the college, that he might retain the best, so he said the second one should also play, that an opinion on his merits might also be given. Mackay observed that he must be a very excellent performer that could surpass the first, or even compare with him. When Patrick òg, who acted as the second pupil, had finished playing, Sir Alexander asked the umpire what he thought of his performance. “Indeed, sir, no one need try me in that manner,” returned the blind man, “for though I have lost the eyes of my human body, I have not lost the eyes of my understanding; and if all the Pipers in Scotland were present, I would not find it a difficult task to distinguish the last player from them all.” You surprise me, MacKay! And who is he?” “Who but Patrick òg MacCrummen,” promptly rejoined MacKay; and turning to where Patrick was sitting, he observed, “it was quite needless, my good sir, to think you could deceive me in that way, for you could not but know that I should have recognised your performance among a thousand.” Sir Alexander then asked MacKay himself to play, and afterwards he called for a bottle of whisky – drank to their healths, and remarked that he had that night under his roof the three best Pipers in Britain.

MacKay’s opinion of Charles MacArthur was well founded, for he was so much admired for his musical taste, that a gentleman in MacLeod’s country prevailed on Malcolm MacCrummen to send his son Donald Roy, afterwards Captain, for six months to reside with MacArthur – not that he could learn more music, but would be improved by studying MacArthur’s particular graces.

Charles MacArthur had issue, two sons, Donald and Alexander, the former of whom was drowned in passing between Uist and Skye. The latter went to America. His brother Niel had a son John who was taught by his uncle Charles, and who, settling in Edinburgh, was appointed Piper to the Highland Society of Scotland, a situation which he held until his death. He was much admired for his fine style of performance, and he gave instructions to students in Bag-pipe music, from which he was usually styled “Professor MacArthur.”

John Bane MacArthur, another brother, had a son named Angus, who went with Lord MacDonald to London, where he remained till his death.

He left several MSS. of Piobaireachds, most of which were noted down when he lay on his deathbed, by John MacGregor, for the Highland Society of London. Some of them are his own composition, and they are very creditable to his musical genius. I believe he was the last of the MacArthurs hereditary Pipers to The MacDonald of the Isles.

## **THE MACKAYS HEREDITARY PIPERS TO THE MACKENZIES OF GAIRLOCH**

The MacKays were from an early period attached to the house of Gairloch. *Ruaridh Dall* or Blind Roderick, distinguished himself for the excellency of playing which was accounted second only to that of MacCrummen; yet, conscious as he was of his own abilities, he felt that his son *Eain*, better known as am *Piobaire Dall*, from being blind, could not be rendered perfect in his profession without the finishing instructions of Patrick òg MacCrummen, under whom he was placed by the Laird of Gairloch, and with whom he remained for a number of years. When he left the college in Skye, it was the opinion of the best judges that he had no equal except his teacher. He composed upwards of thirty excellent Piobaireachds, some of which are in the present work. He was also a good Gaelic poet, and is the author of many popular songs, among which is the celebrated one entitled 'Corriness,' adapted to a salute composed by his father; and a lament arranged by himself, both of which were much admired, but are now unfortunately lost. Being a superior singer, as well as a musician, he was often invited to the best families in the north. Captain Malcolm Macleod, (grandson of the noted John Garve) who so materially assisted Prince Charles in his distress, and who played with great skill on the Bag-pipes, used to say, that from the agreeable manners of *Eain Dall* he added more to the conviviality of a company than any man he knew.

He left issue two sons, Angus and John. The first succeeded his father as family Piper, and left his son John Roy in the same situation. However, submitting to the changes which took place in the Highlands on the abolition of ancient systems, he emigrated to America about the year 1800, whither his brother John had proceeded 60 years ago. He had two sons, who were also Pipers, and who accompanied their father across the Atlantic.

## **THE MACLEANS OR RANKINS HERIDITARY PIPERS TO MACLEAN OF COLL**

The Rankins, a branch of the clan, were Pipers to the MacLeans of Coll from time immemorial. The first of whom any particular notice is handed down, was Conn Dauly, who is said to have been a performer of first-rate abilities, but it is not ascertained that he was indebted for his proficiency to the conductors of either of the Skye colleges. Conn's two grandsons, Niel and Duncan, were however taught by them. The first became Piper to Coll, and the second to MacLean of the isle of Muck.

When Dr. Johnson visited Coll, at Breacadale castle, the Piper who played regularly when dinner was served, attracted his particular attention. He expresses admiration of his picturesque dress and martial air, and observes that "he brought no disgrace on the family of Rankin, which has long supplied the Laird of Coll with hereditary music."

The representative of those Pipers, Conn Dauly, went to Prince Edward's Island, and is major of a regiment of Highlanders raised for defence of the colony.

**THE CAMPBELLS**  
**HEREDITARY PIPERS TO THE CAMPBELLS OF MOCHASTER**

This family, who, there is reason to believe, were long known in the Highland musical world, before they are recognised as hereditary Pipers to the Campbells of Mochaster in Argyleshire, attained considerable eminence. The first of whom there is an authenticated account was Donald, who was sent by Colin Campbell of Corwhin to take lessons from Patrick òg MacCrummen in Skye. He remained with him a considerable time and was esteemed a performer of merit, as was his son *Caillan Mòr* or Great Colin, whose son John, later Piper to W.F. Campbell, Esq. of Shawfield and Isla, was also an excellent Piper. This man died at Woodhall in 1831. The following is the inscription on his tomb stone in the churchyard of Bellside in the county of Lanark.

THIS SMALL TRIBUTE OF RESPECT IS RAISED BY

WALTER FREDERICK CAMPBELL, ESQ.

OF ISLA AND SHAWFIELD, M.P.

TO THE MEMORY OF HIS FAITHFUL SERVANT AND PIPER

**JOHN CAMPBELL**

WHO DIED, 26<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST, AGED 56 YEARS

**THE MACINTYRES**  
**HEREDITARY PIPERS TO MENZIES OF MENZIES**

These Pipers lived in Rannach, but they were originally from the Isles. Donald *Mòr*, the first of whom we have any account, was Piper to Menzies of Menzies. His son John learned with Patrick òg at the college of Dunvegan, and is known as the author of the "Field of Sheriffmoor," a fine *Piobaireachd* composed on that battle, 1715. His son Donald Bane followed the same profession, and left two sons Robert and John. Robert became Piper to the late MacDonald of Clanranald, after whose death he went to America.

John died about three years ago in Rannach, leaving a son Donald, who has a farm called Allarich at the top of Loch Rannach.