

## PIPING: SUMMER 2015

The “Piping season” each year may be said to begin with the Skye Games piping competitions early in August. In these competitions the Society presents a prize for the piper who achieves the highest aggregate points in the premier competitions, both *ceòl mór* and *ceòl beag*. This year it was won by Cameron Drummond, who won the Dunvegan Medal competition, for piobaireachd, in which he played the *Lament for the Earl of Antrim*. He also won the Clasp competition, also for piobaireachd, playing *Rory MacLoude’s Lament*. He came third in each of the March and Strathspey and Reel competitions, thereby giving him an unassailable highest aggregate. Jamie Forrester, a Member of this Society, took fourth prize in the Dunvegan Medal competition, playing the *Lament for Patrick Og MacCrimmon*. Jamie also came fourth in the March competition.

Next in time, on the fourth Wednesday and Thursday in August, the Argyllshire Gathering, takes place in Oban, at which the first of the Society’s two Gold Medals is awarded. The Wednesday of the Gathering is devoted to the four *ceòl mór* competitions, the Gold Medal, the Senior Piobaireachd, the Silver Medal, and the Society’s MacGregor Memorial Piobaireachd competition. The Senior Piobaireachd is confined to pipers who have already won the Gold Medal either at Oban or Inverness, and the prizes include the Glenfiddich Single Malt Scotch Whisky Trophy and the Kilberry Cup, presented by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

This year the Gold Medal was won by John Angus Smith, who lives in London but comes from a South Uist family who have been pipers for several generations. He played the *Lament for Donald Duaghal MacKay*. This tune, by John MacKay, commemorates the death of the Chief of Clan MacKay, the first Lord Reay, who was a very able soldier and commander of mercenaries. He died in 17?? ?????. “Duaghal” is not a name; it was a nickname attached to this chief, but, according to a note in Angus MacKay’s book denotes someone who allowed himself to be put upon, sometimes to his own disadvantage. One of the judges of this event said that John Angus “had played the tune of his life”. Together with the Gold Medal goes the Brigadier Lorne Campbell of Airds V.C. Trophy. By long tradition, the winner of the Gold Medal acts as pipe major for the march of the pipers, Stewards, and Members of the Gathering through Oban to Mossfield Park, where the Games are held.

The other prize-winners in the Gold Medal competition were: in second place, James Troy, from British Columbia, who played the *Lament for the Laird of Anapool*. James MacHattie, from Prince Edward Island, came third, playing *MacNeil of Barra’s Mach*. Andrew Carlisle, from Pittsburgh, U.S.A. took fourth prize with the *Lament for the Earl of Antrim*. The only other Scottish piper among the prize-winners was Alasdair Henderson, from Dunoon, in fifth place, who played *The Big Spree*.

The MacGregor Memorial competition is for pipers who are under 22 years of age on the day of the competition. It came into being in the aftermath of the Society's Bicentenary competition at Falkirk in 1981. A significant contribution to the funding of the Bicentenary was offered by a Mrs. Audrey Jamieson, who was the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of John MacGregor, who had been piper to Prince Charles Edward throughout the 'Forty-five. The minimal amount of Gaelic that the Prince had is said to have included the exhortation "Seid suas do phiob, Iain!" (Blow up your pipe, John!) When the Bicentenary event was over there was found to be a surplus of funds, and a proportion was offered back to Mrs. Jamieson. She refused, and asked that any surplus be used to encourage young pipers. Her contribution formed the foundation of the MacGregor competition. The first competition was held in 1983. It is now still going strong, with a good number of entrants each year. It is played in two heats, and a final of the best four from each heat. Each competitor has to submit four tunes of his or her own choice, one of which will be played in the heats. Each of the eight finalists has to play a second tune.

The winner this year was Charles Macdonald, from Inverness. His first tune was *The End of the Great Bridge*, commemorating an early armed engagement between a very small Highland detachment and a substantial Hanoverian force, which took place near Spean Bridge. The Jacobite detachment routed the Government troops. Macdonald's tune in the final was *The Old Men of the Shells*. The Gaelic name of this tune is *Bodaich Dubha nan Slige*, and it is thought that it may refer to a battle between MacLeods and MacDonalDs at Sligeachan in Skye. It might also refer to an evening of heavy drinking, since the scallop shell (*slige*) was often used as a drinking vessel.

The Northern Meeting piping competitions take place in Inverness, at the Eden Court Theatre, which is an excellent building which is able to accommodate all the competitions. The first day is taken up with the Gold Medal and Silver Medal competitions. The Clasp to the Gold Medal, competed for by those who have already won the Gold Medal at either Oban or Inverness, occupies much of the second day.

The Gold Medal was won by Finlay Johnston, who played *Farewell to the Laird of Islay*. This is the only tune known to have been composed by Angus MacKay, who was piper to the Laird of Islay until 18?????. It was with this tune that Finlay Johnston won the Gold Medal at Oban three years ago. The other prize-winners were Ian K MacDonald, from Ontario, in second place, who played *The End of the Great Bridge*. Gordon McCready, from Renfrew, came third, with *Lady Margaret MacDonbald's Salute*. William Geddes, from Glasgow, took fourth prize with the *Lament for Donald Duaghal MacKay*, and James P. Troy, from British Columbia, came fifth playing the *Lament for MacLeod of Colbeck*.

There are two more piping competitions in which the Society is concerned, having presented prizes for them. They are the Glenfiddich Piping Championship, held at Blair Castle

on the last Saturday of October (though this year it will be on the penultimate Saturday), and the Scottish Piping Society of London's annual competitions, held at Kensington Town Hall and Conference Centre, this year on 31st October. The Society also presents two prizes at the Royal National Mod each year, for solo singing of a Gaelic song by boys and girls aged between 16 and 18 years. The winners of these competitions are likely to be among the Mod gold medallists of the future. The Mod this year will be in Oban, and these two competitions will take place on Tuesday 13th October.