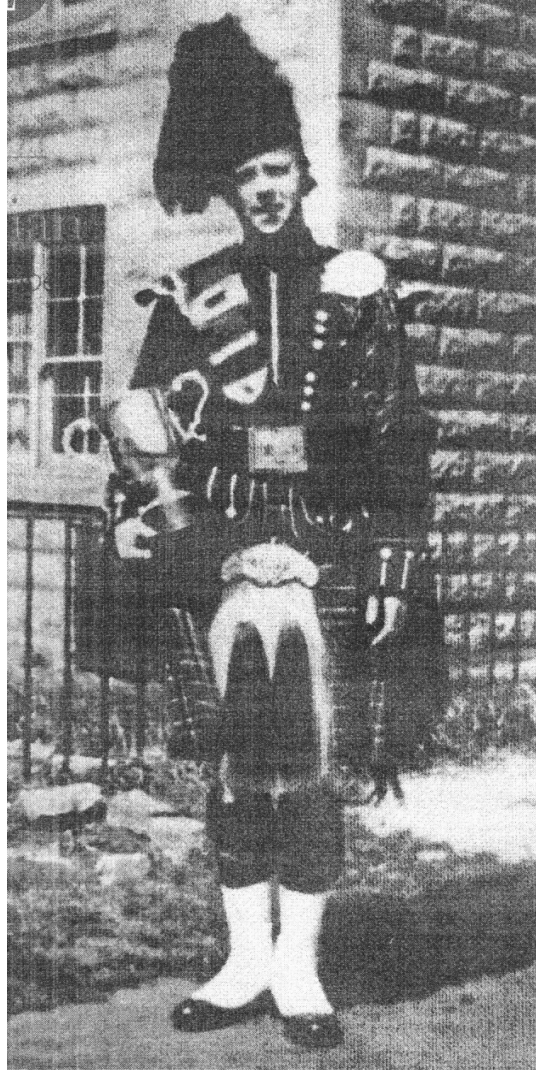


Drum Major Alexander McCormick

Drummer, Tutor, Musician

Part 2: Alex McCormick's contribution to pipe bands in Northern Ireland and Australia

By Allan Chatto OAM



Alexander McCormick with the drumming trophy at the 1952 World Pipe Band Championships, his final year leading the corps of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band

There are many names that come up when one thinks about influential pipe band drummers, and certainly the latter part of the twentieth century has many. But one must go back to the early days of pipe band competition and the dedication and passion of key folks who were as much responsible for the current thriving state of pipe band music as any modern figure. One such name, Alexander McCormick, has always appeared when one examines the history of pipe bands, pipe band music, and pipe band education. In Part 11 of this article on the life of Alexander McCormick we learn of his contributions to the early days of pipe bands in Northern Ireland and in Australia.

THE COLLEGE LAUNCHES

All members [of the SPBA Pipe Band College] appeared to be very enthusiastic to at last get things under way with the full support and encouragement of the Association. Soon, the branches were to commence running tutorial classes for all levels of the certificate courses. As both principals saw the need to establish a firm educational program with a set format, all members of the advisory panel agreed to be examined for the various college levels of certification so that they would then be well qualified to teach and then examine all candidates within their own branch areas.

The first candidate to successfully sit for the SPBA College Elementary Drumming Certificate was James Cairns, leading drummer of the Clan Fraser Pipe Band from Glasgow.

On June 25, 1949 in the League of Young Scots hall, 181 Pitt Street, Glasgow, fifteen Pipe Majors and pipers, together with seven drummers, attempted and were successful in gaining their respective elementary certificates. The drumming examiners were DM Gordon Jelly (Lanarkshire) and DM Jimmy Gray (Stirlingshire).

On October 16 of that same year, three drummers from the Glasgow and District Branch gained their advanced drumming certificates. They were Willie Patterson (Clan MacRae), Duncan Syme (Rutherglen) and Willie Cairns (ex-Clan Fraser). On the same day, three SPBA advisory committee members were also successful in gaining their advanced drumming certificates. They were LD Jimmy Gray (Muirhead & Sons), LD Gordon Jelly (Bucksburn & District) and LD David Millar (City of Dundee).

Things were now starting to move. A lot of interest was created, particularly guided by Alex's enthusiasm. During this time, Alex McCormick was actively contributing in various ways to the development of pipe band drummers. He was very active in Glasgow and the surrounding districts, teaching various youth bands and drum corps. He also contributed a number of articles to the SPBA magazine *The Pipe Band* to assist novice and experienced drummers alike. His articles on music theory and notation and how it was applied to the pipe band, and also on many practical applications such as score writing and technical aspects, further spread his teaching. Alex also introduced a "Juvenile" section to the magazine. The late great Alex Duthart once remarked to A D Hamilton that, "the man who taught me to read a drum score was Alex McCormick."

With the support of the SPBA, the establishment of the SPBA Pipe Band College was the beginning of what was to be a most successful venture in piping and drumming education. The college ran smoothly over subsequent years, with many drummers studying and successfully sitting for the various levels of certification. By 1952, six drummers had also passed the college's highest level of certification, the Post Graduate Certificate. Thankfully, the college became even stronger over the subsequent years and still serves the pipe band community today.

INTEREST EXPANDS

At this point in time, during the start of the college, there was quite a lot of interest within the pipe band movement in Northern Ireland. There was talk in the region of the possibility of forming their own pipe band association. Up until this time, the Ulster pipe bands were mostly members of a band association whose constituency came from brass, military, and flute bands.

By the end of April 1949, several meetings had been held between the executive of the SPBA and a number of officials and pipe bands in Belfast with a view toward establishing an SPBA branch in Northern Ireland. Before the close of 1949, this became a reality and a branch (the SPBA Northern Ireland Branch) was formed in Belfast with a membership of 26 pipe bands.

From September 19 to 29 1949, Alex McCormick took his experience and knowledge to Belfast, meeting many of the leading drummers there and giving lectures and instruction on the new college syllabus with the view toward establishing a branch of the SPBA College in Northern Ireland. Pipe Major Robert Reid also made a similar visit a few months later. At the conclusion of his stay, Alex held examinations for the SPBA Elementary Drumming Certificate. Sixteen drummers sat for certification and nine were successful, all passing with a very high standard.

Early in 1950, the SPBA College formally established its Belfast branch. So keen were the students, that classes were held on most weeknights with a 13-week piping course under the direction of Pipe

Major Donald MacLean and drumming classes conducted by W (Kit) Reynolds and Tom Graham. In September of that year, Alex again returned to Belfast, lecturing and preparing candidates for the advanced drumming certificate. Examinations were held on October 25 and lead drummer Kit Reynolds and drummer James Brown of the Ballycoan Pipe Band were successful in gaining their advanced certificates.

NEW ROLES

1950 was also the year Jack Seton retired from his role as leading drummer of the Glasgow Police Pipe Band. He was to migrate to New Zealand where he was offered a position teaching a band in the Hawkes Bay district of the North Island. That year was, in Alex's own words, "*the highlight of my career, I was appointed leading drummer of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band.*" To Alex, though he had played in the corps since 1936, this was a most responsible position to be given, as the band had a well-regarded reputation, winning the 1949 world pipe band championships as well as being consistently successful at a number of other major championships.

Alex, however, took this new challenge in stride and, in 1951, after putting in much hard work with the corps, he proved that he was most capable when his drum corps won the drumming prize at the 1951 SPBA World Pipe Band Championship. The corps, led by Alex, repeated this success again at the "Worlds" the following year.

In response to an advertisement in the SPBA magazine *The Pipe Band*, a number of Scottish pipers and drummers, including Alex McCormick, showed interest in migrating to Australia in order to join up with a newly formed pipe band in the town of Castlemaine, Victoria. Alex was successful in his application and ready to seek out another new challenge and venture. Regrettably, after twenty six years with the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band, he tendered his resignation with the Glasgow Police Department.

One of the last major memorable engagements that Alex recalled undertaking with the "police" was their most successful visit to France on June 5, 1952. The band gave many concerts and toured a number of areas before finally returning home to Scotland on the 15th of that month. In the Lorne Valley, at the town of Angers, the band, after a civic reception, gave a concert to well more than 20,000 spectators. The band was overwhelmed by the grand hospitality of the French people. In August of that same year, a contingent of two pipers (Alex McDiarmid and Charlie Cochrane) and two drummers (Alex McCormick and Gordon Jelly) and their families sailed from Scotland to seek a new life in Castlemaine, Australia.

Arriving in October, they made their way to Castlemaine, the home of their intended new pipe band. The project that drew them there, however, was doomed to failure. An apparent lack of organization among other things prevented the Castlemaine Pipe Band from seeing fruition, though certainly not through the lack of enthusiasm by this group of newly migrated and very dedicated bandsmen. The group of newly arrived Scottish pipers and drummers, not long after arriving in their newly adopted homeland, decided to split up, each family going their own separate ways to other parts of Australia.

Alex, his wife Peggy, and their young family, moved to settle in Melbourne in January 1953, where he joined with the Melbourne Highland Pipe Band as leading drummer. He soon had an enthusiastic corps, practicing hard with many of Alex's innovations and scores that were quite new to the band.

The Melbourne Highland competed quite successfully in the Grade 1 competitions throughout Victoria. Going further afield, the band travelled nearly 600 miles by train up to Sydney to compete in the New Year's Day Highland Gathering on January 1, 1954. Alex's corps was narrowly beaten for the Grade 1 drum corps prize at this contest by the corps of the Dulwich Hill Pipe Band (Sydney), led by leading drummer Alex MacGregor. Alex, together with his four brothers (two pipers and two drummers), formerly all with the Renfrew Pipe Band in Scotland, and winners of the drum corps

prize at the 1948 World Pipe Band Championships, had all also recently migrated from Scotland to settle in Sydney.

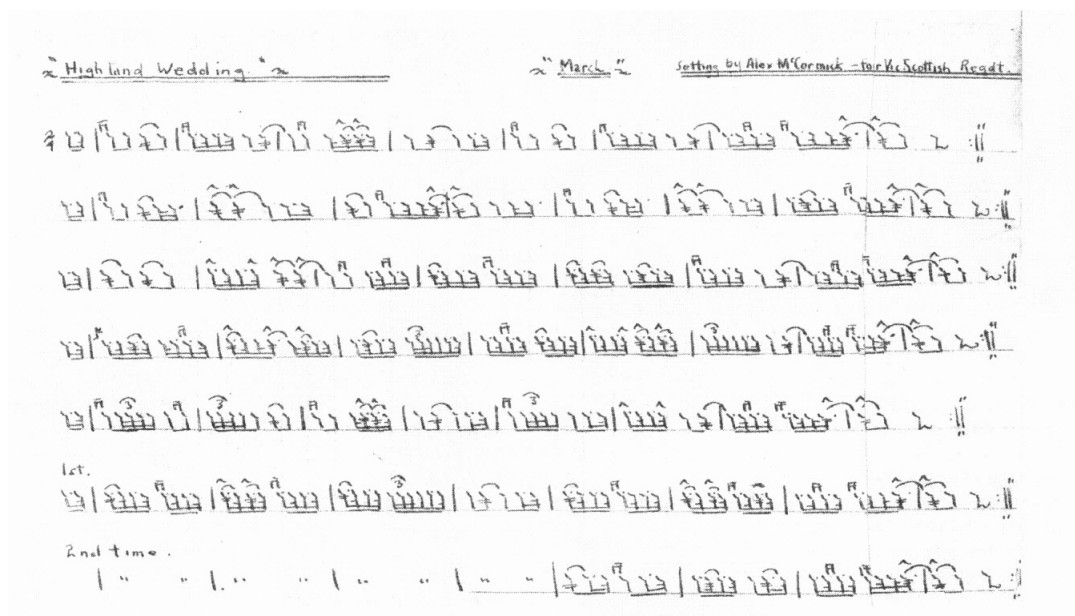
The Melbourne Highland Pipe Band was to be the first and only band that Alex played with in Australia. Due to the many demands for his drumming tuition in his adopted country, Alex resigned as leading drummer of the band later in 1954, though he remained on as tutor. From this time onward, he toured many country areas of Victoria in conjunction with the Victorian Highland Pipe Band Association (VHPBA; formed in 1926) and to other parts of Australia giving the drummers in these remote areas the benefit of his vast technical and musical knowledge and expertise.

AUSTRALIAN PIPE BANDS TAKE SHAPE

Alex saw a great interest developing in the pipe band movement in Australia, and realized the need to raise the standard of drumming. Alex saw the need particularly to establish a pipe band college with an educational and examination syllabus with certification, run along similar lines as the college that he had assisted establishing in Scotland.

After lengthy correspondence and discussions between Alex, the VHPBA (which had affiliated some years previously with the SPBA), and the national council of the SPBA in Glasgow, an agreement was reached to establish, under Alex's guidance and supervision, a branch of the SPBA college in Victoria.

After this was approved, Alex was appointed drumming examiner. Over the following few years, he ran classes in Melbourne and in country areas, with many drummers coming to visit Alex's "open houses" to study the college examination syllabus. He then conducted drumming examinations for the various certificate levels in many other parts of Australia on behalf of the SPBA. The next few years, saw successful Australian candidates, about 100 in all in due course, receive their certificates from the SPBA in Glasgow. Eventually, the VHPBA set up its own college administration based on Scotland's model at the time. Alex McCormick was appointed the first VHPBA college drumming principal.



By 1961, many Australian pipe band associations, the VHPBA included, had become affiliated independently with the SPBA. In that year, the newly formed Australian Federation of Pipe Band Associations (AFPBA) brought together all existing state associations under one administration, and all now agreeing to a uniform format and rules for pipe band competitions, solo events, and the appointment of adjudicators. In 1967, the AFPBA formed its own pipe band college (the Australian

Pipe Band College; APBC) and principals of piping, drumming, and drill. The Australian branches and officials, together with the vice-principals, were appointed at the Australian state level. Alex was nominated for the position as APBC drumming principal, which he accepted, holding this appointment until his retirement in 1979.

During his term as college drumming principal, Alex, now with the assistance of a number of local qualified drummers, was instrumental in establishing regular workshops and seminars throughout Australia, particularly in the country areas. He also visited interstate bands through their state associations. In liaison with the SPBA in Glasgow, the new Australian Pipe Band College structured its syllabus on the same criteria as the one Alex had a hand in creating in Scotland, and updating what was necessary. All certificates were issued by the AFPBA, through the Australian Pipe Band College.

First appointed to the adjudication panel of the VHPBA and then the AFPBA, Alex officiated at most major pipe band and solo drumming championships throughout Australia and also adjudicated at the New Zealand Pipe Band Championships. Alex retired from Australia's drumming adjudication panel in 1987.

PASSING ON THE TRADITION

During the 1960s, Alex secured a full time position at Scotch College, Melbourne, which in addition to working full time at the college, included the appointment as the drumming instructor of the college pipe band, giving him the opportunity once again to teach many young people the art of pipe band drumming. He held this position until his formal retirement at 65 years of age in 1978.

It was during his term as APBC drumming principal that Alex compiled among other things, a drumming tutorial booklet, combined with an audio cassette, specifically for the benefit of learner snare drummers. In 1983, in conjunction with the Legato Drum Company of Melbourne, Alex published *The Clan Book*, a collection of many of his own drum score compositions.

In more recent years, Alex has taken the time to study and be successful in passing the various grades in musicianship set by the Australian Music Examination Board, giving him now a much broader range of musical appreciation and expertise. Though now in "retirement" not far from Melbourne, Alex still receives requests for assistance from drummers, bands, and the Australian Pipe Band College, where he still acts as workshop tutor and examiner. At the end of the 1990s, Alex and his wife moved to the country town of Sebastopol to be nearer to their children and their families.

Alex has devoted his whole lifetime to drumming and to the pipe band movement, first in Scotland with the legendary Glasgow Police Pipe Band, assisting greatly in setting up the structure and administration of the SPBA drumming college in Scotland and Northern Ireland, then carrying on his good work in Australia, inspiring others with this dedication and his enthusiasm. Over the years, he has offered numerous younger drummers encouragement and assistance, and lent his expertise to the experienced drummer as well. His inexhaustible willingness and passion has been an inspiration to us all.

Alexander McCormick was honoured by the VHPBA with a lifetime membership in 1987. The executive of the AFPBA conferred on Alex the honour of lifetime membership of the Australian Pipe Band College in recognition of his dedication and services to the pipe band movement in Australia. The RSPBA in Glasgow bestowed on Alex the same, long overdue, honour of lifetime membership to the RSPBA in 2005.

The whole of pipe bands in several countries is indeed under considerable debt to Alex's efforts to promote the interest, knowledge, and growth of drumming and pipe bands for the coming generations of drummers and bands. The recent emergence and success of Australian bands on the

world stage are indeed a true sign of the solid foundation Alex set in the early days of Australian pipe bands. Here's to Alexander McCormick, truly a great friend and personality!

REFERENCES

Scottish Pipe Band Association (SPBA).

The Piping, Drumming, and Highland

Dancing Journal, several volumes, 1935-1950.

The Pipe Band, several volumes, 1948 to present.

Official proceedings from SPBA meetings, 1948 onward.

Correspondence, audio tapes, and drum scores from the late Jimmy Catherwood, and the late A D Hamilton.

John MacFadyen of Melfort

MARCH

Alexander McCormick, ca. 1940

I. 

II. 

III. 

IV. 

Piper's Bonnet

STRATHSPEY

Alexander McCormick, ca. 1949

The musical score for "Piper's Bonnet" is presented in four systems, each on a single staff. The notation is in a single key with a common time signature. The first system begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The second system is marked with a Roman numeral "II." below the staff. The third system is marked with a Roman numeral "III." below the staff. The fourth system is marked with a Roman numeral "IV." below the staff. The music features a variety of ornaments, including grace notes, slurs, and triplets, which are indicated by the number "3" above the notes. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some quarter notes. The overall style is characteristic of traditional Scottish Strathspey music.

The Brig of Perth

REEL

Willie Patterson, ca. 1949

I.

II.

III.

IV.

The musical score is written for a single melodic line in C major, 2/4 time. It consists of four systems, each with two staves. The notation includes various musical symbols such as treble clefs, key signatures, time signatures, and specific notes with stems and beams. Trills are indicated by a 'y' above a note. Triplets are marked with a '3' and a bracket. The piece concludes with a repeat sign at the end of the fourth system.