

Drum Major Alexander McCormick

Drummer, Tutor, Musician

Alex McCormick's contribution to pipe bands, with history of the formation of the SPBA College.

By Allan Chatto OAM



Alexander McCormick playing with the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band at the 1949 Cowal Gathering

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 August 2005, the RSPBA awarded Alexander McCormick an Honorary Lifetime Membership in recognition of his contribution to the development of pipe band drumming and his lifelong dedication to the education of pipe band percussionists worldwide.

THE CITY OF GLASGOW AND THE RIVER CLYDE, the villages on either side, all the way up the firth of Clyde, dotted with its many tenement buildings housing a major workforce and their families, was the heart of Scotland's industrial might during the first half of the twentieth century. This area, steeped in culture and in particular, music and song, provided much of the entertainment available for the folk of the region, presented by musicians, singers, choirs, bands and buskers, together with the artists appearing at the city's famous music halls.

The district of Clydebank, just northwest of Glasgow was, in 1913, the birthplace of Alexander McCormick. This area was the home of many famous musicians and musical groups and

the McCormick family were no exception - his dad played the accordion and his mother was a very capable singer.

From this environment, it was not surprising that young Alex developed a musical interest. At the age of eight, he became interested in drumming and in 1921, joined the Clydebank flute band. It was here, under bandmaster Jack Hill, an accomplished musician who had been through the Army School of Music, that Alex learned how to hold the sticks, play the 'mummy-daddy' and the other rudiments of the snare drum, in addition to (and perhaps most important) being taught how to read and write musical notation. This was ideal preparation for what was in store for Alex later in his life.

The bandmaster was ably assisted by the band's leading drummer, James Wright, who later was to become the Secretary of the Glasgow and District branch of the Scottish Pipe Band Association (SPBA). James was also a pipe band snare drummer and who eventually became the bass drummer of the Rutherglen Pipe Band in the 1950s.

In a flute band, "the snare drum roll" plays the most important part in the expression and dynamics of a drum score, together with accurate timing of beating and the ability to be a fast sight reader. Many scores tend to have broken phrases and repetition within the piece. The Clydebank flute band successfully competed in many band competitions over the next few years in both marching and concert performances. This experience gave young Alex an excellent foundation for percussion accompaniment and encouraged the young lad to take a deeper interest in music. He joined the Clydebank junior choir and also commenced to learn the piano.

At the end of 1926, Alex, now nearly 14 years old and encouraged by Jimmy Wright, got the urge to play in a pipe band. Early the next year, he joined the then famous and formidable band of the period, the Dalmuir Parish Pipe Band. The drum corps was led by leading drummer Alex Scott, who was later to become an SPBA drumming adjudicator. The drum tutor of the corps was none other than that great pipe band personality, Drum Major John Seton of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band, who was formally with the 93rd Regiment. Later, DM Seton was to be the Senior Drum Major of the SPBA, leading the parade at the Cowal Gathering.

NEW CHALLENGES, NEW APPROACHES

Young Alex was soon to discover that there was a vast difference between flute band drumming and pipe band drumming. Pipe band drum scores were written to suit a particular pipe tune together with using many new rudiments and embellishments - the accented roll for example - along with a more subtle use of dynamics to add rhythm and expression. There was also a new challenge - all scores now had to be memorised. The general arrangement of the pipe band drum score was far more complex than those of a flute band, but Alex coped well. He studied and practiced hard under the excellent tutors with many other drummers also now around him to give encouragement and direction.

During the late 1920s, there were not a great number of pipe band contests to enter, but Dalmuir Parish had their fair share of successes and particularly enjoyed the competition at the Cowal Games (then known as the World Championships) in late August each year. Here, you could always meet up with many top drummers and hear Scotland's finest pipe hands. The Dalmuir Parish Pipe Band unfortunately disbanded during the Great Depression in the early 1930s, so Alex, after ten years with this leading band, took on the position as drum tutor of the Dalmuir Cameron Pipe Band. These were hard times. Work was very difficult to find, and money needed for equipment and uniforms was not always available. It was quite difficult for a band or any other musical group relying on public donations for support, to hold together.

In 1936, Alex, now 23 years of age and encouraged by his old Dalmuir Parish drumming tutor Drum Major John Seton, decided to join the Glasgow Police. After police training, he became a member of

the Glasgow Police Pipe Band under Pipe Major John MacDonald and leading drummer Jack Seton (son of DM John Seton). Jack, a great musician, was also interested in all forms of drumming percussion, corresponding with many exponents in other parts of the world. Under Jack's guidance, Alex was again to extend his musical knowledge and direction - practicing hard with the Police corps and learning new competition scores. Alex's first parade with the band was in 1936 at the Cowal Gathering, Dunoon. The band was in good form that day and won the premier award in the Grade 1 event, with the drum corps also winning the "Douglas Trophy" (World Championship). The band was also successful in winning the Grade 1 Cowal championships in 1937, 1938, and 1939.

With continuing enthusiasm and interest, Alex, late in 1937, felt that he would like to pass on some of his musical and drumming knowledge by teaching the drummers in other bands, particularly in the area where he lived. This he did. To name just a few of the bands that benefited: Bonhill Parish (Grade 1); The Singer Pipe Band (Grade 1); Babcock and Wilcox (Grade 1); and the Dalmuir Cameron Pipe Band (Grade 3). In the mid-1930s, Alex formed strong friendship with Jimmy Catherwood, then leading drummer of the Dalziel Highlanders, whose corps had won the World Championship in 1931. They both had many similar ideas for improving the standard of drumming technique and developed many exercises and groupings to try and improve the drumming accompaniment and ensemble with the melodies of the bagpipe. They became great pals and pooled their knowledge and duly came up with something new and different in drum score presentation. Other drummers listened and these ideas caught on and spread. Jimmy was also interested in general percussion and the American and Swiss rudimentary style of drumming. He also exchanged scores with the famous Irish drummer Paddy Donovan. Alex and Jimmy would have many drumming sessions after the band competitions and also at Alex's home at 872 Tollcross Road, Glasgow. This was always an open house for drummers. Jimmy would often pop in for a run through some new scores or exercises, exploring all avenues for playing groupings, compounding rudiments, and the varied use of dynamics. There was always a challenge. Sometimes Jimmy, so enthusiastic and involved with a score, would often miss the last bus home to Edinburgh, and so had to stay at Alex's overnight continuing the drumming into the wee hours!

Together they developed many new ideas - particularly that of creating a score that would lift presentation and improve overall ensemble by the use of rhythm and dynamics. These techniques were taken up by many other corps of the time and so generally assisted in raising the standard of pipe band performance. However, many drummers were very set in their ways and did not always take easily to change and these new innovations.

A catchy score arrangement by Alex in 1937, "The Diddler", illustrates some of the rudiments and groupings that were played at this time.

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"The Dipper"

A.A. McCormick 1907

Handwritten musical score for "The Dipper" by A.A. McCormick, 1907. The score is written on ten staves. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together in groups. There are various musical notations including slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like 'p' (piano) and 'f' (forte). The piece concludes with a double bar line.

SPRING FENCIBLE

A.A. McCormick 1907

Handwritten musical score for "Spring Fencible" by A.A. McCormick, 1907. The score is written on ten staves. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together in groups. There are various musical notations including slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like 'p' (piano) and 'f' (forte). The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Alex, in his enthusiastic quest for more knowledge, was always a great correspondent, exchanging letters and scores with well-known percussion personalities of the time: Andy Darragh in Belfast; Paddy Donovan in Dublin; and William Ludwig, Jr. in the US. Bill Ludwig was the main force, together with the support of his drum manufacturing company, Ludwig Drum Co., behind the formation of the National Association of Rudimental Drummers in 1932 in Chicago.

872, Tolly. Rd.
Glenview E. 2
gh. box. 1932.

Dear Jimmy,

Hope you and Andy
arrived home safe on Sunday
night, and I hope you had
not long to wait for a train.
Will Jimmy & see Jack
as arranged and he will be
glad to see you a week on
Friday (17th). I gave him the
ticket but want away
without the examples. Get
off home about 1³⁰ so you
can adjust & your arrival
accordingly. Please find

enclosed the new drummer
to today for you to try. I am
going to write to Parry and
send him a copy I will
cland in Jack's company
a week or Tuesday
the best
Yours sincerely
A. W. Cornish

[illegible]

One of many letters from Alex McCormick to Jimmy Catherwood, 1939. In it Alex sketches out one of the many drummer's exercises he developed along with the initial settings of "Spring Sunshine" (full score shown above).

Another interesting drum score by Alex was "Spring Sunshine" which was written in answer to Bill Ludwig's 'Winter Carnival.' This score was later renamed "*The Drummer's Playground*", by DM John Seton and was played by the whole of the Glasgow Police drum corps. This was quite a challenge as the score had been composed as a drum solo. It is interesting to note that during this very busy period, Alex still found time to be an active member of the Clydebank Male Voice Choir.

NEW BANDS, NEW NEEDS

With the start of World War II in 1939, most civilian pipe band activities and contests were suspended, though a number of bands did join together to become "home guard" pipes and drums. The Glasgow Police Pipe Band still functioned with duties within Scotland and participating in a number of functions in aid of the war effort. Alex became drum tutor of the 12th Battalion Home Guard Pipe Band - quite a successful unit at the time competing at the few small contests that were still held during the war years.

In 1940, Alex made the acquaintance of Willie Paterson, who was later to become leading drummer of the Clan MacRae Society and Rutherglen Pipe Bands. They became great friends with a friendship that was to last a lifetime. As always, they exchanged many ideas on drum score development and with a view toward assisting other drummers. With this in mind in 1951, they combined their talents, writing all the drum scores for the first "modern" publication of pipe band drum scores, "*The Gaelic Collection*", published by John E Dallas & Sons, manufacturers of the Carlton Gaelic range of pipe band drums and accessories. This book became very popular and was in great demand. The book sold many copies worldwide.

With the cessation of wartime hostilities in 1945, most of the home guard pipe bands were disbanded. There were many pipers and drummers who were now returned to civilian life after serving with regular regimental pipes and drums during the war-who began to assist in the re-establishment of many famous pre-war bands. Of course, a great number of new pipe bands were also formed.

Progress was slow due to the shortage of materials, mainly instruments and uniforms. The Scottish Pipe Band Association, which carried on during the war years with Jack Seton as Secretary, was now reorganising and trying to encourage the promotion of major pipe band competitions. The Cowal Gathering was held in 1946, the first time since the start of the war, and the Glasgow Police Pipe Band, still under PM John MacDonald and lead drummer Jack Seton, again won the World Pipe Band Championship and the Douglas Trophy for drumming.

The SPBA had numerous meetings that year and discussions with the Cowal committee (who had titled their competitions "The World Championships" since 1906) with the view of conducting all pipe band contests in Scotland under the same SPBA contest rules, as were agreed by member bands. The association felt that it was now in a position to conduct its own "official" SPBA World Pipe Band Championships, but there was much disagreement between the Cowal committee and the SPBA. There was to be no compromise between the Cowal committee and the SPBA. Both organisations were determined to conduct the World Pipe Band Championships that year. So in 1947, the Cowal committee proceeded with their own World Championships and the SPBA conducted its own first official "SPBA World Pipe Band Championships" at Murrayfield Stadium in Edinburgh. The SPBA Grade 1 championship was won by the Bowhill Colliery Pipe Band from Fife under PM Chris Sutherland, while the notable Glasgow Police Pipe Band competed in and won the Cowal championships. In 1948, "the Police" were back competing at contests under the rules of the SPBA and won the World Pipe Band Championships in Grade 1 at Edinburgh in 1949. The Cowal committee also eventually agreed to conduct their pipe band contests under the auspices of the SPBA.

The enthusiasm within the pipe band movement was now progressing at a rapid rate. The national council of the SPBA, with Secretary, Bob Whitelaw, saw the need to establish a piping and drumming college to ensure that pipers and drummers could obtain sound instruction on the fundamentals of music theory and practical applications in the pipe band.

THE SPBA PIPE BAND COLLEGE

Though in the mid-1930s the SPBA tried very hard to establish a college, it would not happen until 1947. The association set up its first "dual" college under the wing of the advisory committee, with the college convener PM Willie Sloan and joint principals PM William M Taylor and PM Craigie Calder for piping together with DM John Seton and DM Alex D Hamilton for drumming. The appointment of separate piping and drumming colleges with dual principals did not work efficiently. There seemed to be continued friction with the advisory committee, particularly on the introduction of "ensemble adjudication" and certificate criteria. All the college principals eventually decided to tender their resignations. A new college piping principal, PM Robert Reid, was appointed in 1948 and DM Alex Hamilton agreed to return and continue on as drumming principal. Meetings held early in 1948 within the SPBA formed a central advisory committee. This committee was requested by the national council to prepare a syllabus and curriculum as a basis for teaching and examinations for three levels of certification in both piping and drumming: Elementary; Advanced; Post Graduate.

A board of examiners, with the power to examine candidates and issue certificates, was also appointed as follows: PM Chris Sutherland (Fifeshire); PM James Wilson (Stirlingshire); PM A Macintosh (Lothian and Borders); PM Tom McAllister (Lanarkshire); PM Craigie Calder (Glasgow and District); DM A D Hamilton DCM; Gordon Jelly (Lanarkshire); and Willie Paterson (Glasgow and District). The SPBA executive committee agreed to support the college by granting scholarships to those who showed keenness, enthusiasm, and an ability to make progress. While there appeared to be a lot of great support for the promotion of the college ideals, there was still a number of apparently insurmountable problems in arriving at agreement among the SPBA national council, the advisory committee and the college, particularly on the qualifications and musical knowledge of a number of the advisory committee and the appointment of adjudicators. The advisory committee had decided in 1948 to suspend ensemble adjudication as it felt that the SPBA adjudicators at the time were not qualified enough to adjudicate the combined performance of pipes and drums as a musical combination. The college, however, had already planned, and had approved by the executive committee, the introduction of a syllabus for ensemble education and certification levels to establish educational courses in all branches. In contrast today, the RSPBA music board has a good proportion of the current piping and drumming adjudicators now qualified to adjudicate ensemble and is working hard to continue education for adjudicators, member bands and affiliate associations worldwide.

At an executive committee meeting of the SPBA on Sunday, October 10, 1948, PM Robert Reid and DM Alex Hamilton presented recommendations that were endorsed at a further executive committee meeting that:

- A college syllabus be drawn up and a curriculum be issued.
- That centres be set up in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Dundee.
- Branch representatives on the advisory committee will pass students in the intermediate stages.
- The principals will examine and pass students in the final stages.

DM Alex Hamilton decided to resign as drumming principal later in 1948, particularly over the matter of ensemble and the fact that he was particularly busy in his profession as a full-time orchestral percussionist in Glasgow. Nominations were called by the SPBA for the position of his replacement

with three candidates coming forward: Jimmy Catherwood (Dalziel Highland); Willie Paterson (Clan MacRae Society); and Alex McCormick (Glasgow Police). Alex McCormick was elected and officially appointed SPBA drumming principal of the SPBA college at a meeting of the SPBA in January 1949.



The triumvirate of drumming masters circa 1948: Alex McCormick (left), John Kirkwood (centre) and Alex Duthart (right)

This was another great new challenge for Alex. After brief discussions with PM Reid, a new college syllabus was agreed to by the two principals, a syllabus quite similar to that which had previously been approved by the executive committee, namely:

- Three levels of certification for both piping and drumming: Elementary; Advanced; Post Graduate.
- Each level to cover both theory and practical applications.
- All certificate examinations having a minimum pass mark of 75 per cent.

A board of examiners was established and confirmed with each association branch appointing one piping and one drumming representative. These officials also then formed the SPBA advisory committee. The drumming members appointed to the board at this time were: Alex McCormick (principal); James Cairns (Glasgow and District); P. Lee (Ayrshire); David Millar (Dundee, Perth, and Angus); D. Birrell (Fifeshire); Gordon Jelly (Lanarkshire); Jimmy Catherwood (Lothian and Borders); Jimmy McBrearty (Dumfries and Galloway); and Jimmy Gray (Stirlingshire).

With this lineup of drumming talent, the college now got off to a great start.

TO BE CONTINUED: Alex McCormick begins developing the young drummers who carry the tradition into the present day. He then takes his experience and becomes instrumental in the formation of the pipe band scene in Ireland, and then Australia.