

# Drum Major Gordon Jelly

by Allan Chatto, 1994



*Gordon Jelly in 1929, his first year with the Dalzell Highland Pipe Band, age fourteen.*

In 1915, Alexander Gordon Hamilton Jelly was born in the town of Motherwell, Lanarkshire, Scotland. In his early years he developed a keen interest in music, and at the age of twelve, while attending the local 5th Company of *The Boys Brigade*, it was only natural that he was attracted to their pipe band, and in particular, to the snare drummers. Little did the pipe band world know that this was the start of a foundation that was to become part of the history and the development of pipe band drumming.

So it was in 1927 that Gordon decided he wanted to learn to play the snare drum. What better start could a keen young lad have? The Battalion pipe band drummers were being tutored by the famous Jimmy Catherwood, who at the time was the Drum Corporal of the Dalzell Highland Pipe Band. This band, under Pipe Major William Jack and Leading Drummer Willie Craig, was making a name for itself in Scottish Open Grade Competitions. Dalzell Highland was formed when a group of piping enthusiasts met in 1910 on the "Old Calder Brig" in the steel town of Motherwell. Each member agreed to contribute five shillings a week - a considerable sum in those days - towards the band for the purchase of uniforms and instruments.

The first practices were held outdoors on the banks of the River Calder. The band eventually gained the support of several generous "honorary members," one of whom was David Colville of the Dalzell Steel and Iron Works. He gave an initial donation of £50, provided that the band be named the "Dalzell Highland Pipe Band." In future years the band received further generous support from Mr Colville.

It is of interest to note the spelling of the name of the band. As I have indicated, the band was to be known as "Dalzell Highland," though nearby Motherwell is in the parish of "Dalziel." Over the years on many occasions this spelling has been used in association with the band, even by the members themselves, adding to confusion. Both names however have always been pronounced the same: "deyell."

The band was led by Pipe Major William Davidson, and with this initial liberal donation and several others together with moneys raised by the band's active Ladies Committee, was able to purchase full uniforms in the MacKenzie tartan. This uniform was to last the band for seventeen years. In 1928, after the band won the Harry Lauder Shield at the Cowal Championships, they were to outfitted with new black doublets and Red MacGregor kilts.

In due course the band was granted the use of the fine Motherwell Battalion Boys Brigade hall for practices, and the members of the Dalzell band greatly assisted in providing tuition for the Boys Brigade Pipe Band.

Over the years the band continued to receive financial support from the Colville family and others. They were very successful on the competition field and produced many champion players, particularly drummers, during the band's history until its demise in 1955.

After two years in the Boys Brigade corps, under tutor Jimmy Catherwood, Gordon Jelly made sufficient progress on the snare drum to teach the corps when Catherwood was absent. Eventually Gordon became the Leading Drummer of the Battalion Pipe Band.

In 1929 Gordon was asked if he would assist as tutor of the drummers of the Bellshill Boys Brigade Pipe Band. It was with this band that he won his first Cowal medal, and later that year Gordon joined Catherwood's Dalzell Highland. In his first year playing with Dalzell, Gordon enjoyed many successes. They won a number of open pipe band contests, including *The Lauder Shield* at Cowal, *The Daily Record Shield*, *The Hamilton Trophy* (for drumming), and were placed fifth in the Open (World's) Championship - a great introduction to playing in the senior grade

The following year the Dalzell Drum Corps, under Leading Drummer Willie Craig, won the Open (World's) Drumming Championships at Cowal and the "*Douglas Hamilton Trophy*." To Gordon this was the most coveted trophy in pipe band circles, and was a great achievement for such a young lad.

The drums the Dalzell had used for the first time in competitions were the newly developed Premier Rod Tension model. Having the whole corps of sides, tenors and bass outfitted with these new style drums, compared with the traditional rope tension drums that were universally played in pipe bands, caused quite a sensation at the Cowal Championships. Jimmy Catherwood, however, had convinced his band's committee to purchase the new Premiers. This proved to be the right choice and eventually all competitive pipe band drum corps would change to rod tension drums.

The winning Dalzell drum corps at Cowal, 1931, consisted of Leading Drummer Willie Craig, Drum Corporal Jimmy Catherwood, Gordon Jelly, Willie Gadston and James Smith, the bass drummer was Willie Duthart - Alex Duthart's uncle - and tenor drummer T Cowan. It is interesting to note that after the formation of the Scottish Pipe Band Association in Glasgow, October 1930, all bands were graded One, Two, Three or Juvenile, and there was also a competition for ladies pipe bands.

As his work took him away from the area, Leading Drummer Willie Craig resigned from Dalzell early in 1932. Jimmy Catherwood took over as Lead Drummer and tutor, and Gordon Jelly, still under Jimmy's guidance, continued to develop his knowledge of theory, music writing, technique and practical skills.

Dalzell continued to feature in the competition prize lists and in 1932 were again successful in winning the World Pipe Band Drumming Championships at Cowal. An interesting highlight that Gordon recalls was in 1934, when the Fintan Lalor Pipe Band from Dublin came over to Cowal to compete. Jimmy Catherwood was a great pal of the "Fints" Leading Drummer, Paddy Donovan. A great player and teacher, they had both exchanged many drumming ideas and scores, having corresponded for many years.

Dalzell competed in one event at Cowal earlier in the day, so Jimmy and his lads went back to the tuning park to hear the Irish lads practice. It was obvious that their skilful and proficient playing technique was being spoilt by the sound of their old rope tension drums. Jimmy did some fast thinking and after some hurried consultation with the rest of his band, it was decided to loan Paddy's corps Dalzell's set of new Premier rod tension drums. The result: Fintan Lalor first in drumming; Dalzell second. The members of the Flints corps were delighted and overwhelmed, but Jimmy's corps were just as thrilled for their fine performance. That was typical of Jimmy Catherwood.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, Gordon, with his trade as a molder at the Clyde Alloy Steel Company, was employed in the war effort. Many civilian bands now went into recess. Though he was keen not to lose his interest in drumming, Gordon joined up and became the Leading Drummer of the 6th Battalion Lanarkshire Home Guard ('D' Coy.) Pipes and Drums. Jimmy Catherwood joined up with the Edinburgh City Police, eventually becoming their Leading Drummer. The Home Guard Pipe Band had the honour of being the first pipe band to give a radio broadcast during the early war years.

Over the following years Gordon was very active as a Drumming Tutor, with the Home Guard, two Boys Brigade Bands, Craigneuk Parish and the Kingshill Colliery Pipe Bands. Having such a large area to cover with many miles of travelling each week, with his work in the foundry and very little public transport available in those difficult times, Gordon relied mainly on his bicycle for transport. He enjoyed teaching so much and had so many enthusiastic pupils that he felt that he should carry on. By the end of the war, due to his heavy workload, he was exhausted and not in good health.

Gordon Jelly describes the period during the war and its effect on the pipe band movement: "I can't stress enough the traumatic experience moving into the war years and the transition back to normality when the war ended. There was the feeling that the strength of the Scottish Pipe Band Association would be tested during these difficult times".

"During the hostilities, in my area, and I being one of the very few around who had the knowledge and the interest to teach pipe band drumming, the effort to continue became a dreadful drain on the time available, added to that the difficulty of getting round because of restrictions on transport and persistent blackouts. Fortunately I was able to cycle to most of the practices, but the more distant band venues could only be reached on less frequent occasions. I was very grateful for the fact that I was not in the fighting line and young enough to cope with the situation. Nevertheless, during this trying period, there were so many young learners keen to learn pipes and drums, so this did urge me on".

"There were also many other associated problems, especially with maintaining instruments. Spare parts were almost non-existent; we simply stripped parts from older drums, the case of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul.' Calf or goat vellum drum heads were also in short supply, we had to be careful that we did not break a drum head".

"When the war ended, most pipe bands still existing throughout Scotland were all suffering from a lack of good instruments and uniforms, and Dalzell Highland was no exception. The band and drum corps had a very long association with the Premier Drum Company. Since Premier had lost a number of buildings, plant and production designs during the war, and were now keen to rebuild into a strong company and start production again, I was invited by Mr Lawrie Snr, of R.G. Lawrie Ltd, Glasgow, to attend a meeting with Mr Albert Della-Porter of the Premier Company to discuss the situation of bands and their need for good replacement instruments. The results were very satisfactory with Premier setting up to produce parts for their existing pre-war drums and to set about designing a completely new model of side drum especially for pipe bands."

Now that things were slowly coming back to normal, people had the freedom to move around again. This created an upsurge in the interest in pipe band activities, adding strength to the SPBA. Ideas were circulated that a Pipe Band College should be started. In 1948, the Secretary of the SPBA, Robert Whitelaw, was enthusiastic and wrote many of his thoughts on how the pipe band movement should develop. In a series of articles in *The Pipe Band* magazine, entitled "Ancient and Modern", he covered many aspects such as "SPBA and Why," "The Panel of Judges," and "What Constitutes a First Class Pipe Band Performance." Though these articles were quite controversial and very progressive for the time, the pipe band movement must have been guided and influenced by many of Bob's writings. The Association from this time went from strength to strength.



*The Dalzell Highland Pipe Band at Meadowbank, Edinburgh, 1946, winners of the Grade One Championships and the drum corps prize. Leading drummer Gordon Jelly is to the right of the bass drum, Pipe Major William Hastie is to the left of it, and the late Alex Duthart stands directly behind the drummer on Jelly's left.*

Gordon Jelly continues: "Though I was feeling the strain from the time during the last few years of the war, I think a tribute would not be remiss to those young drummers who, during the war and immediately after, showed talent, tenacity and strength by starting a progression and a development that has taken pipe band drumming to the standard that we see today. One of the great leaders in the field, both in theoretical and practical development, was undoubtedly the late Jimmy Catherwood, and we all owe Jimmy a great debt. He was always a prime mover and his thirst for knowledge was tireless and ferocious. Added to this, he was always ready and willing to assist the younger drummers in the correct fundamentals of pipe band drumming."

At the end of the war in 1945, most of the members of the 6th Battalion Lanarkshire Home Guard Pipe Band, after a special meeting was called to discuss amalgamation, agreed to join up with the Dalzell Highland Pipe Band. This new combination under the leadership of Pipe Major William Hastie and Leading Drummer Gordon Jelly, practised very hard and were soon to be a force to contend with on the contest field. Now that things were settling down, promoters were starting to run pipe band competitions once again.

All over Scotland other civilian pipe bands regrouped and major pipe band competitions now organized by the SPBA became more regular. The SPBA was reformed and looked to promoting and conducting their own World Pipe Band Championship.

Dalzell continued to practise hard and were keen to test the strength of the combination of many talented young players. At the European Pipe Band Championships, held at the Meadowbank Stadium in Edinburgh in 1946, Dalzell Highland won Grade One, the Drum Corps Prize, and Gordon Jelly won the Silver Medal for the best Leading Drummer in Grade One. In the same year, the band won the Scottish Championships at Renfrew, but were unplaced at Cowal. Gordon, however, had the pleasure of seeing two of the corps that he had been tutoring take honours at

Cowal: Craigneuk Parish, winning the Juvenile Championship and Drum Corps prize, and Kingshill Colliery gaining second place in the Grade Two Championship.

Gordon now took a deeper interest in percussion and orchestral "kit" drumming. He recalls, that he had to stand in as Jimmy Catherwood's dance band drummer. Such were the requests for Jimmy's services for such engagements, but Gordon was happy to help his pal out on these many occasions. It is interesting to note that among Gordon Jelly's many pupils and members of his drum corps since 1942, many were to become great players in their own right. One of them was Alex Duthart, who was first to follow Gordon as Leading Drummer of Dalzell and later become one of the greatest exponents, innovators, composers and teachers of pipe band drumming.

Another pupil at the time was Jim Hutton, who was to play later with distinction with such bands as the Muirhead and Sons, and play with Alex Duthart in World Champion drum corps of the Invergordon Distillery and Shotts and Dykehead Caledonia. Jim is currently a drumming adjudicator on the panel of the RSPBA.

By this time, in addition to developing excellent practical and teaching skills, Gordon had gained a firm understanding of musicianship and music theory and like Jimmy Catherwood, he took a great interest in Dr Fritz Berger's Swiss Basle mono-linear system of notation and this style of drumming. They both could see the advantage of "above and below" system of notation, and that it could be used in the scores of the Scottish pipe band drummer. We see today the development, integration and acceptance of this form of notation in the modern drum scores.

It was at the end of 1947, after eighteen years with Dalzell Highland, that Gordon decided to retire from active playing. In recognition of his service to the Dalzell and to the pipe band movement, he was the recipient of a handsome presentation. However, Gordon did not sever his ties and interest with the SPBA and the organization's establishment of a drumming college. He remained as the drumming representative for Lanarkshire on the Association's Advisory Committee and was one of the first members of the Board of Examiners for the newly formed SPBA College.

In 1947 there were twenty two bands registered in the SPBA, and Gordon's tutorial influence was evident. Many corps played his scores and featured in the prize list. Gordon was instrumental in the fight for pipe bands to gain recognition by the Scottish Education Authority as a "Cultural Organization." Through many representations, pipe bands were eventually granted permission to use school buildings for tutorial evening classes and band practices.

The SPBA was now somewhat reorganized after recess during the war years, and it looked toward promoting pipe band competitions under a uniform set of rules. A College of Piping and Drumming was also envisaged. At the end of 1947 the SPBA formed a Piping and Drumming Advisory Committee and Gordon Jelly, with his wide knowledge of the practice and theory of drumming, was appointed in 1948 as the drumming representative for Lanarkshire.

With other Association Branch representatives a College syllabus was formed, and a format was implemented for various examinations, covering three levels for both piping and drumming in theory and practical: Elementary, Advanced, and Post-Graduate. Being one of the first members of the SPBA Advisory Committee to pass these new examinations, Gordon was appointed a College Examiner. On 25 June 1949, with the College Drumming Principal, Alex McCormick, and Jimmy Gray, the SPBA Stirlingshire representative, they examined the first successful candidates for the College Elementary Drumming Certificate.

Gordon was very enthusiastic about the College and conducted many classes on the syllabus in his area. Though it was his intention to retire from active pipe band playing in 1947, it was after a meeting in January 1948 with Pipe Major Tom McAllister Snr of the Shotts & Dykehead Caledonia

Pipe Band, that Gordon agreed to delay his retirement and take the position as Leading Drummer of Shotts. This was to be a wise and calculated move by Shotts, culminating with their winning the SPBA World Pipe Band Championship at Glasgow that year, and winning the Cowal Championship and Drumming Prize. The following year was also great for Shotts, as they won the Lothian & Borders Championship on May 14 and the first Glasgow Highland Gathering at Ibrox on May 21, the European Championship, and a second place to the Clan MacRae Society Pipe Band in the drumming at the World Championship later that year. Gordon was still very active tutoring and assisting a number of corps and he continued his involvement with the SPBA Advisory Committee and College. His Shotts Drum Corps improved and continued to have prize winning successes during the next season.

In 1950, through a war time association between Pipe Major David Duncan of the Bucksburn & District Pipe Band and Pipe Major John McAllister of Shotts, Gordon was persuaded to travel to Aberdeen for a weekend each month to tutor the drummers and bring them up to competition standard. To Gordon this was another enjoyable challenge and it was later that year that he resigned from Shotts to join the Bucksburn band. Though still living in Motherwell, he travelled the long journey up to Aberdeen and back for the weekly band practices. Thanks to his dedication and skill in teaching, Gordon's techniques have found a permanent place not only in Bucksburn, but in the north east region of Scotland.

An example of Gordon's brilliant playing technique on the snare drum was captured that year on a 78 rpm recording made by Universal Records, with Pipe Major Donald Shaw-Ramsay of the Edinburgh City Police Pipe Band, playing a March, Strathspey & Reel. In 1952, after seeing an advertisement for pipers and drummers to emigrate to Australia, Gordon applied and was successful. Later that year, he and his family, along with Drum Major Alex McCormick of the Glasgow Police Pipe Band, and two pipers and their families, set sail from Scotland to make a new life in Australia.

The concept was for them to make a nucleus for the formation of a new sponsored pipe band in the north of Victoria. Sadly to say some months after all had arrived and settled in Castlemaine, Victoria, the band experienced financial difficulties and was unable to reach their objectives. All the new arrivals had to seek alternative employment elsewhere. Gordon stayed a little longer to try to hold things together, but eventually with his family, moved south to the capital city, Melbourne. After arriving in Melbourne he was soon invited to tutor some of the city's pipe bands. There were many demands for his services and in due course he taught many of the leading drum corps in the Melbourne area.

The Victorian Highland Pipe Band Association (VHPBA), which was for some years affiliated with the SPBA, appointed Gordon to their Drumming Advisory Panel, and also to their Drumming Adjudication Panel, with the additional appointment as College Drumming Vice-Principal for Victoria of the Australian Federation of Pipe Bands Association (AFPBA), which had been formed in 1962. At that time Alex McCormick had been appointed the first Drumming Principal of the AFPBA Pipe Band College. Once again Gordon was well involved within the pipe band movement. His love of the teaching of drumming, and of ensuring that younger students were correctly guided, would not let him retire and this work was to continue for many years to come.

During his twenty seven years as a member of the Victorian Highland Pipe Band Association, Gordon contributed greatly to the improvement of the standard of drumming in Victoria and throughout Australia. His students valued his vast knowledge and his ever willing guidance and assistance to help them improve their technique and performance. In later years, Gordon took particular interest in the tutoring of the younger players to give them the benefit of his wide experience. As he rightly says, "The young players of today are the tutors and champions of the future, so we must ensure that they are taught the sound fundamentals of theory and practical playing, together with good technique."

In his last visit to Scotland in 1980, Gordon was able to spend a week with his lifelong pal, Jimmy Catherwood and, as would be expected, much time was spent by these two great exponents, with the sticks and pads, exploring Dr Fritz Berger's Swiss Rudiments Text Books and the scores played by the current leading pipe bands. After returning to Australia from his last visit to Scotland, Gordon retired from his employment and now is living quietly near Mount Gambier, South Australia. At seventy-eight, he is still in good health and from time to time gets the urge to play a few scores on the pad.

The example Drum Major Gordon Jelly has set by a lifetime of dedication to the development and teaching of pipe band drumming can only serve as an inspiration to the young drummers of today and a credit to the whole pipe band movement.

*Allan Chatto is perhaps Australia's most famous and accomplished drummer. He began drumming in Sydney, Australia, in 1949, and since then has played with and led several drum corps in Australia, Scotland, and New Zealand, namely the Glasgow Corporation Transport Pipe Band in the 1950s, the Sydney Thistle Pipe Band in the 1960s, and the New South Wales Police Pipe Band in the 1970s. In recent years he has been honoured with a life membership to the NSW Pipe Band Association. In 1987 and 1990 Allan Chatto adjudicated Grade One drumming at the World Pipe Band Championships. Now retired, he devotes most of his time to adjudicating and teaching drumming.*