

International Pipe Band Drummer

PADDY DONOVAN: THE INNOVATIVE DRUMMER

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At the Cowal Games, Dunoon, Scotland, August 1939, the massed pipe bands stood awaiting the announcement of the results of the Open Contest, the World Championship.

Then:-

- 1st City of Glasgow Police.
- 2nd Glasgow Corporation Transport.
- 3rd Edinburgh City Police.

and the winners of the Worlds Open Drumming Championship: "The Fintan Lalor Pipe Band" from Dublin. A great cheer went up and for the Fintan Lalor's Leading Drummer, Paddy Donovan, it was probably the greatest thrill in his lifetime of dedication to drumming and percussion.

But let's go back to the beginning and see how Paddy got started. His life and character, simple and unassuming as it was, developed an expertise in the art of drumming that in time transformed the marriage of pipes and drums to a new dimension of concordance. Previously the drum had tended to be a glorified metronome for beating time and perhaps in some minor way, assisting rhythm and expression.

Paddy, during his involvement in the pipe band movement from 1932 till 1950, created a new era in drumming accompaniment to the pipe melody with the arrangement of scores to suit each particular tune, using rhythm to its fullest, subtle dynamics together with syncopation and a complexity of beatings that gave a new ensemble effect to the pipe band performance. His warmth of character, revealing friendship and readiness to assist all from the beginner to the most accomplished leading drummer, was always appreciated in his native Ireland and Scotland, and with the many drummers he corresponded with all over the world.

Paddy Donovan, characteristically Irish, was born in the fair City of Dublin in 1892. Of adventurous disposition, he enlisted in 1907 in the famous Connaught Rangers Regiment (88th) and commenced his military career as a Drummer Boy with the 2nd Battalion, drumming having captured his fancy since childhood. After three years' service he was discharged but in 1915 re-enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery, serving till the cessation of hostilities in 1918.

At this stage Paddy was probably not very interested in pipe bands as the drummers tended to play fairly rudimentary and nondescript beatings, the character offering little scope to one with initiative and imagination that was now becoming apparent to Paddy. He began to study music theory and for many years used his talents with various dance bands in the Dublin area, together with playing in a number of Flute and Drum Bands, these notably being the O'Connell Flute and Drum Band which had many notable successes in competition.

Later Paddy was to have an association with the Dublin Symphony Orchestra as percussionist. During the mid-1920s developments were starting with pipe band drumming in Scotland, firstly with the publication in 1922 of "*A Collection of Highland Bagpipe Music and Drum Settings*" by Pipe Major William Gray and Drum Major John Seton of The City of Glasgow Police. Then with the progressive innovators such as Drum Major A D Hamilton and Jimmy Catherwood, who were now changing the direction of pipe band drumming, by 1930 the technique of playing and the composition of scores had improved greatly. So rather late in life Paddy Donovan was suddenly attracted to the pipe band movement and therefore decided to concentrate all of his endeavours in that direction for the rest of his life.

Probably the most outstanding event in his career occurred in April 1932 when he was approached by and joined the Fintan Lalor Pipe Band, Dublin, as Drumming Instructor and Leading Drummer. As a remarkable coincidence, it was about the same time that the band's pipe corps was making very rapid progress.

At this point of time we should look back to the origins of this famous pipe band. The Fintan Lalor Pipe Band was started in Dublin in 1912 by Robert de Ceour, ably assisted by his close friend John Hanratty, with I believe some financial assistance from the Transport and General Workers Union. The band was very successful, but alas in 1916 it was disbanded. Efforts were made to revive the band in 1917 and a year later it was re-formed by two former members, Ed Mallin and Ted Tuke, practicing at the Gardiner Hall, 48 Lower Gardiner Street, Dublin. The remaining twenty members who formed the band were all raw recruits. Good progress was made and the band was fortunate in 1920 to secure the services of Pipe Major Alex Meikle. Alex had been a prisoner of war in Germany and married a Scots lass living in Dublin. Soon after settling there he started teaching the St Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band which is believed to be the first pipe band to be established in Dublin. Alex's services were in great demand, later he was teaching the Palmerstown Pipe Band and then in 1920 he took over the piping instruction of the Fintan Lalor Pipe Band.

Ed Mallin handed over the band to Pipe Major Stephan Murphy, who led the band from success to success in the early 1920's. Ill health forced the resignation of P/M Murphy in 1926, and though P/M Alex Meikle was still looking after the piping tuition of the band, Pipe Major Paddy Solan was appointed in charge of parades and his brother "Dinny", a very smart exponent with the sticks, was Leading Drummer at the time.

Enthusiasm and hard work soon had the band on its way with competition victories at Wexford and Limerick in 1927, Cork in 1928 and later in 1928 winning the coveted "Aonach Tailtean". That year saw a new field open to the hand - the famous Cowal Games, Dunoon, Scotland. Plans were made to visit Scotland later that year and compete. Intensive training began, again under the guidance of P/M Alex Meikle with the drummers now being taught by Paddy Donovan. This opportunity gave Paddy the chance to exploit many of his ideas on drumming accompaniment to the pipe melody. At the band's first appearance at Cowal in August 1934, the "Fints" created something of a sensation by coming second in the Worlds Open Drumming Championship, then in 1939 winning the title.

These visits to Scotland were just what Paddy needed as it brought him into contact with so many other leading exponents: Jimmy Catherwood, with whom he keenly corresponded; the Setons and Alex McCormick of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band; Alex Hamilton; and Charlie Davis of the

Glasgow Corporation Transport Pipe Band. After the contests there would always be a drummer's session where scores would be exchanged, new ideas, rudiments and innovations aired. Paddy of course was right in there exchanging material with other drummers. A keen letter writer, Paddy also corresponded with other overseas drummers such as Allan Bradford in Canada.

When the Scottish Pipe Band Association conducted its "Individual Solo Drumming Championships" from 1935 onwards, many of the prize-winning drummers played Paddy's drum score arrangements as they seemed to have "that something extra". Some samples of his exercises and scores are illustrated together with this article showing the complexity of his arrangements though they would have had to be heard to be really appreciated.

Winning the World's Drumming Championship in 1939, as I said previously, was indeed the highlight of Paddy's career and as we know only too well, the world was saddened not long after that event with the commencement of World War II. Apart from the fact that many pipe band members enlisted to serve their country, the whole pipe band movement was quite dormant. Eire was now a Foreign Nation and it became near impossible for the "Fints" to develop the friendships built up with their Scottish pipe band cousins during the previous years. Not to be disheartened Paddy still continued to correspond with the Setons, Jimmy Catherwood, Alex McCormick and others during the war years. As many of our drummers may not appreciate, during these trouble times all letters to the United Kingdom sent from foreign countries were censored by the Security Forces.

I recall D/M Jack Seton, formerly of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band, showing me a letter and drum score he had received from Paddy Donovan in 1942. Many sections of the letter and score had parts "cut out" ending somewhat like a child's cut-out stencil. There was concern from the authorities that the drum score may have contained some hidden secret or spy code, which may have upset the war effort, such were the times.

Paddy remained with Fintan Lalor for fifteen years, continuing to introduce and develop the innovative technique and presentation of pipe band drumming which had caused such furore at contests in Scotland. In 1946, after the cessation of hostilities, Paddy was a member of the committee of the formation and the establishment of the All Ireland Pipe Band Championships. The inaugural contest was held in Dublin later that year and has continued each year since, alternating the Championship between Ulster and Eire. It is interesting to note that D/M Charlie Davis of the Glasgow Corporation Transport Pipe Band was the Drumming Adjudicator at the inaugural contest.

For some reason Paddy left the Fintan Lalor in 1947 and joined up with the St Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band as Leading Drummer. He played with this combination until 1949, when shortly after appearing with them at the All Ireland Championships in Belfast that year, Paddy fell ill. This was to be his last public performance for unfortunately he did not recover from his illness and on the 9th January 1950, at the age of 58 years, he passed away, mourned by all who had known his genial personality or been infected by his enthusiasm for perfection in drumming.

The Irish Pipe Band Association inaugurated a Perpetual Challenge Trophy, known as "*The Paddy Donovan Memorial Cup*" to be awarded to the winning competitor in the Senior Solo Drumming Contest at the Annual All Ireland Championships. Paddy's sons, Paddy Jnr and Joseph, continued in their father's footsteps, playing in the bands Paddy had previously been with. Paddy Jnr, however, did come over to Scotland to live in the late 40s, where he played for a number of years with the Glasgow Red Hackle Pipe Band.

Though Paddy wrote a great number of drum scores during his lifetime, unfortunately most have not survived. Drum Major John Seton in his Drum Tutor "50 Years Behind the Drum (Mozart Allan 1954)" did include four of Paddy's drum scores in his publication, including the arrangement for "The

Highland Wedding” 2/4 March, the score the “Fints” played when they won the World’s Drumming Championship in 1939.

Paddy was elected to the IPBD Pipe Band Drumming Hall of Fame in 1995.

This is a brief documentation on the life of one of the pioneers in the development of pipe band drumming as we know it today. I will conclude with the words of that other great innovator and exponent, the late Drum Major Alex Duthart – “Of all the drummers I have known, perhaps Paddy Donovan was the greatest”. Some testimony.

Acknowledgements

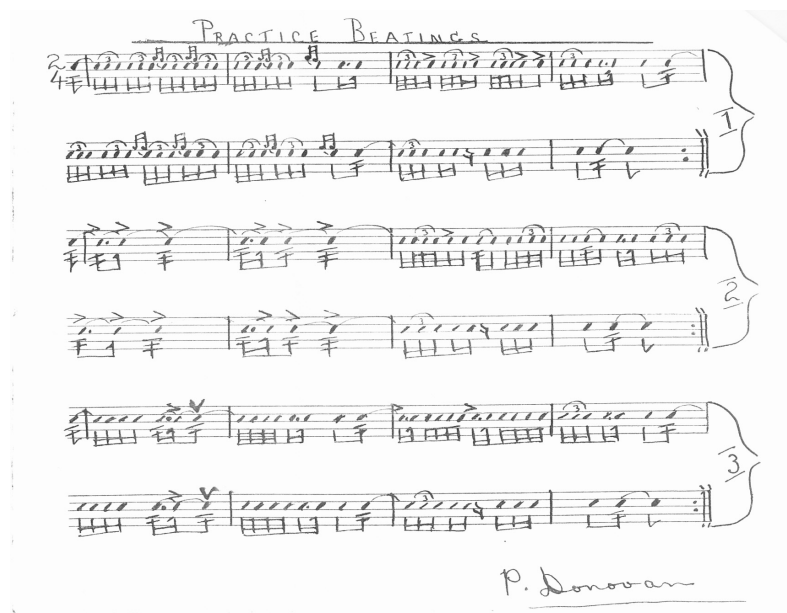
Thanks are extended to the following for assistance in providing notes and material for me to document but a small part of the life of D/M Paddy Donovan.

The Irish Pipe Band Association.

The SPBA (now the RSPBA) “The Piping and Dancing Journal” from 1935 onwards.

The late D/M John Seton, his son Jack and D/M Alex McCormick (now of Melbourne, Australia) all formerly of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band.

Allan Bradford, formerly of Belfast, Northern Ireland and now of Toronto, Canada.



Drums Siege of Delhi March

P. Donovan

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