

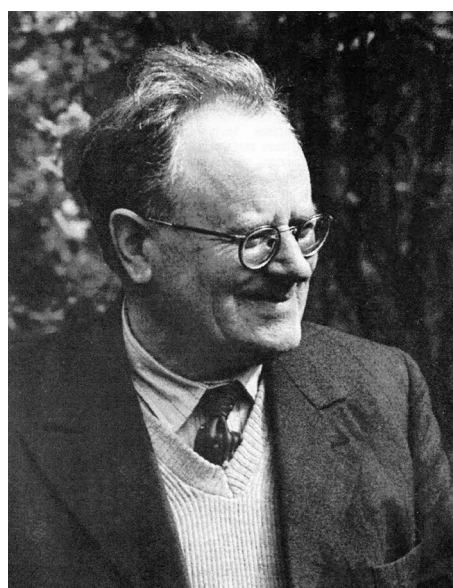
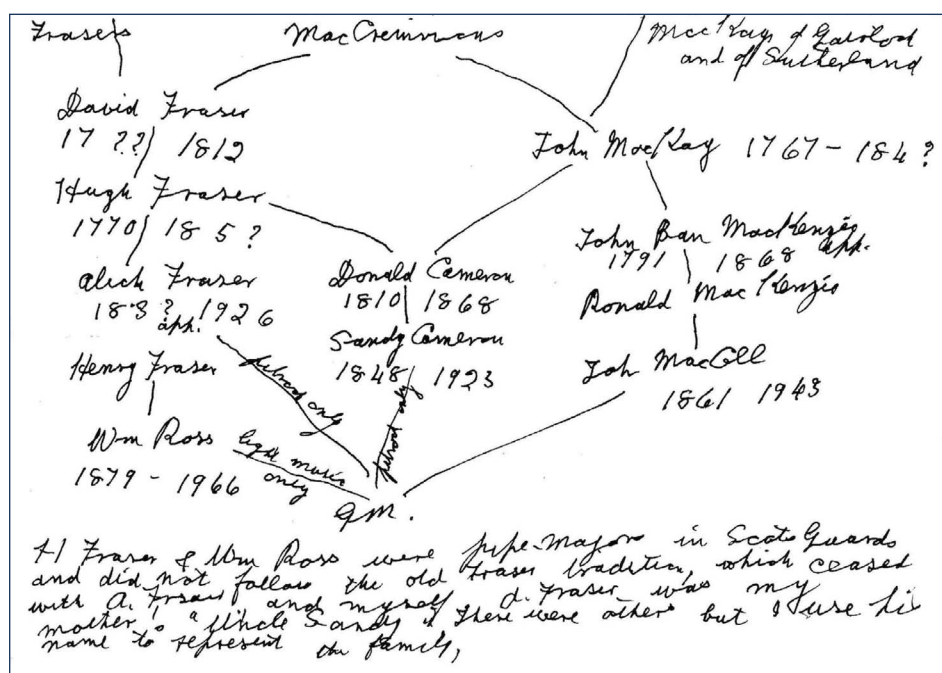
George Moss recordings re-released

GREENTRAX RECORDINGS

THE news that Greentrax has now released in CD format the *Scottish Tradition: Pibroch* album featuring the playing and teaching of George Moss is good news indeed. Released first in boxed cassette format by Tangent Records in 1982 and re-issued by Greentrax in 1995, it has been out-of-print for years. The content is unchanged – 74 minutes of piping, chanting and discussion about what George considered to be an older but more correct style of *ceòl mòr* performance than that heard at competitions during the second half of the 20th century and up to the present. It is a digest of many hours of discussion and music-sicking recorded during my fieldwork visits to him and spanning the period 1972-1985 (over 32 tapes in all). The CD presents a summary form of those discussions and a goodly collection of tunes that illustrate his performing style.

George Moss (1903-1990) was born at Tomich on the Tweedmouth estate in Strathglass but his father, an estate gardener, moved with his family to Taymouth Castle estate while George was still an infant. George's keen boyhood interest in piping meant that for several summers before he reached his teens he was allowed to go and stay with relatives in Beaulieu, Strathglass, to learn all he could about *ceòl mòr* from his aged grand-uncle Alick Fraser (d. 1926). Later when his father became head gardener at Lochiel's estate in Achnacarry, George was for a period of some nine years able to visit Lochiel's famous piper, Alexander (Sandy) Cameron (1842-1923) for lessons and discussions. Bridget Mackenzie's recent article on George in *Piping Times* vol. 67 gives a good deal of information about his piping connections, especially regarding the Fraser family piping tradition. They are summed up in a diagram George gave to me many years ago and it is reproduced here since readers may be interested in how he gained his knowledge of *ceòl mòr*. The shaky hand betrays the fact that throughout his later life his eyesight deteriorated badly. This was

not always the case for his nephew Jim Hamilton reported that around 1950, when George was teaching him his penmanship was excellent and that he could write out both *ceòl mòr* and light music tunes at speed from memory.



George Moss

As one can see, after Fraser and Cameron a third stream of influence on his piping came from John MacColl who had retired in 1925 from his work at Lawrie's bagpipe firm in Glasgow. Bridget Mackenzie wrote that George took a forestry job near Oban so as to be near John McColl's home at Dunach and evidence of that last pupil/master relationship can be seen in one of two hand-written tunes by MacColl which he gave to George.

When the George Moss cassette was first published by Tangent in 1982, it came boxed, along with a booklet giving a transcript of the recorded discussions as well as notations of the music played and sung. A few of the notations included were provided by George Moss himself but the others were my attempts to convey with reasonable accuracy the finer rhythmic details of his performances. Needless to say I found standard staff notation with its rigid time signatures an inadequate tool for transcribing *ceòl mòr*, as did also some of the early pipe music notators

such as Donald MacDonald and Peter Reid. A couple of pages of the booklet are given over to discussing the problems and the notational solutions employed. The booklet's complete content does not easily fit into a CD album and the solution has been to provide a facsimile of the original booklet which is available on line, courtesy of the School of Scottish Studies. Anyone intending to use the CD should make a note of this url – <http://www.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/george-moss> – from where the booklet can be freely downloaded as a pdf file.

The very mention of the name George Moss has, over several decades, proved enough to raise the blood pressure of some pipers and aficionados of the styles of pibroch performance that have been dominant from the early 1900s. The most recent, a letter from Dugald MacNeil in *Piping Times* (March, 2015) about George is typical of the responses of some members of the piping establishment who have preferred to answer with snide comments rather than reasoned and informed argument in reply to Moss's criticisms of how the performance tradition had been changing. Competitions, as we know, are the principal context in which the playing of *ceòl mòr* has survived for over two centuries and inevitably they influenced piping styles as did also the teaching provided by the Piobaireachd Society. In contrast to his critics, I found George was unfailingly polite about them and I think he was more sorrowful than angry at the ignorance they often betrayed, for by the time I came to work with him, public protests in the Oban Times and piping journals about the direction the performance of *ceòl mòr* was taking had all but dried up, as men like John Johnson of Coll, G. F. Ross and Somerled Macdonald passed on. Some of the story is fleshed out in the book *The Highland Pipe and Scottish Society 1750-1950*, where William Donaldson discusses in detail reactions to the 1925 issue of the second series of the Piobaireachd Society's edition of the repertory.

When I first met George Moss he was in his 67th year and had all but retired but was working part time in the ticket office on the quay of the Kessock ferry. In between taking customers' fares and issuing tickets, he sang bits of *canntaireachd* and discussed pibroch songs and the so-called 'redundant A' in taorludh movements with me. He said he had not blown the pipes for several years. For some months I had been pondering over the rhythmic differences between the early staff-notated records of

Joseph Macdonald, Patrick MacDonald, Angus MacArthur and those of the young Angus Mackay, especially the particular formula where beats on low A are prefaced by an introductory ('cadence') E. The first meeting with George was enough to cause me to re-visit him at his home in Kessock many times during the next 15 years, for I realised that here was a very knowledgeable piper still able to demonstrate a style which I thought must have vanished decades earlier, under the impact of competitions and the Piobaireachd Society's prescriptive notations.

Before meeting him I had become curious as to why Angus MacKay's notation of introductory Es mirrored closely the written out forms of the 'long appoggiatura'. This is a specific type of appoggiatura that had evolved as part of the classical European tradition during the 18th century and is distinct from what were regarded as 'short' appoggiaturas. Theory books throughout the 19th century included instructions on how long appoggiaturas should be performed and notated. They are illustrated by this example from Muzio Clementi's immensely popular *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (London, 1801) which went through 11 editions up to 1826.

of classical European music and why the 'rule' as to how much time to take from the succeeding melody note should be adhered to so strictly regardless of the musical context. I assume that it was clearly obvious to him that the difference between 'E introductions' and the other graces, strikes and cuts that are also feature in *ceòl mòr* would need to be indicated somehow. Perhaps he asked for advice from the music tutor in a big house on how to write out what Patrick MacDonald had labelled 'appoggiaturas' and was given the answer exemplified in Clementi's tutor. I recall that as late as the mid- 20th century the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music theory examinations sometimes tested students' ability to write out long appoggiaturas (in the way that Clementi and Angus MacKay wrote them) – showing them sounding on the beat and taking a precise amount of time from the melody note that followed them. The Board wisely no longer requires this because modern scholarship shows that any written-out solutions will depend very much on the date of the composition, the particular composer and the musical context. Indeed, they need to be treated as Clementi himself wrote – "as taste best directs in the passage".

More importantly, the long appoggiatura

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The **APPOGGIATURA** is a GRACE prefixed to a note, which is always played **LEGATO**, and with more or less **EMPHASIS**; being derived from the **ITALIAN** verb **APPOGGIARE**, to lean upon; and it is written in a **SMALL** note. Its **LENGTH** is borrowed from the following **LARGE** note; and in **GENERAL**, it is half of its duration; **MORE** or **LESS**, however, according to the **EXPRESSION** of the passage.

APPOGGIATURAS, and other **GRACES** in small notes explained.



One can easily imagine the intelligent young piper MacKay looking up a page like this in the library of one of the big houses where he or his father worked. Raasay House, for example, where Mackay's father John was piper to MacLeod of Raasay until 1823, had an excellent library.

But it is harder to understand why Angus MacKay should think that the 'introductions' in Highland pibrochs should be written out in exactly the same way as the 'long appoggiatura'

evolved as a special type of musical effect derived from its harmonic function: it was sounded on the beat and invariably made a discord against the other sounding parts in harmonised music and then resolved stepwise upward or downward onto the melody note it preceded – in effect, creating harmonic tension which gives way to relaxation. For this reason alone, quite apart from others, E introductions in pibrochs should not be regarded as behaving like European classical long appoggiaturas,

Inverness Piping Society group in 1952. George is the bespectacled gent standing back centre. Seated from left are Mr Paul, then Sheriff John P Grant of Rothiemurchus (wearing a bonnet).

for these piped introductions make a concord with the A drones and they frequently do not resolve stepwise – the most common being the introductory E before beats on low A at openings, as well as at the end of phrases or sections – hence the alternative name ‘cadence E’. In other words they served as phrase or section markers and, as George Moss averred, they were to a large extent optional.

Introductory Es appeared in some pipers’ notations of a tune but not in others’ notations of the same tune and in the case of the Colin Campbell *canntaireachd* manuscript, very rarely at all. George maintained that adding too many introductions or holding them for too long plays havoc with the flow of many pibroch melodies because of the danger that they can be perceived to be part of the melody itself. For this reason he, like others before him, was highly critical of the prescriptive notations issued by the Piobaireachd Society with its prime reliance on Mackay’s treatment of E introductions.

Since George Moss’s pibroch cassette has been out of print for so long we hope that



this new issue in CD format will prove useful to many pipers too young to have known of his playing and teaching or of the controversy surrounding his views. One can already listen to some of his recorded material via the *Tobar an Dualchais* website <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/>. There, however, it comes as raw unedited audio with minimal documentation

and no notations. Some of the excerpts are not divided into discrete items but span the entire content of a tape. In contrast the CD’s 74 minutes of singing, chanting, discussion and piping provide a distillation of the invaluable piping lore that this so-called ‘maverick’ George Moss recorded for posterity. Happy listening! ●