

Ian Conn



Ian Conn was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1931 and was raised in Galashiels, Selkirkshire. He started to learn the bagpipes at age 14 through the local Boys Brigade Pipe Band, 2nd Battalion in Galashiels. His Pipe Major and tutor William Bruce, and his uncle William Bertram were instrumental in guiding him through his early days of piping tuition. Within seven months he had mastered the instrument and had eight tunes memorized. At his first competition, he placed first in all categories. He was quickly upgraded to the Senior Section and continued to win at that level. When he aged out of the Boys Brigade, he moved on to the local Ex-Service/Legion Pipe Band.

In 1951, Ian was called up for the 2-year compulsory military national service enlistment. Basic army training was with the K.O.S.B. Regiment in Edinburgh. (King's Own Scottish Borderers) He was assessed by P/M George Stoddard, who assigned him to the Lowland Brigade Band where all the top players were transferred. There were 16 of them stationed in Dreghorn Castle Barracks, Edinburgh, where they underwent intensive practice everyday plus all their other duties. During this time Ian became friends with Tom McAllister Jr. of Shotts & Dykehead Pipe Band (his father was the P/M) and Harry McNulty who was the nephew of William Sinclair of the Wm Sinclair Bagpipe Company. This was how Ian was invited to play with Shotts & Dykehead, where he gained great insight as to how a Grade One band practiced, was set up, tuned and competed. While in Edinburgh, he was chosen to be the Lone Piper at the Edinburgh Tattoo and made almost weekly visits to the Sinclair shop, learning a lot about bagpipes

and reeds. This knowledge would be of great future benefit to his pipe band. The Shotts & Dykehead Caledonia Pipe Band, with Ian, won the World Pipe Band Championship in 1952.

Qualifying to become a pipe major was no small task. First there was a three- month course run by P/M Stoddard. From here he took the full pipe major's four- month course with P/M Willie Ross, which was quite grueling but gratifying.

After his army service was completed, he moved back to Galashiels, but continued his piping career with Shotts, until moving with his wife Betty and daughter Linda, to Winnipeg, from 1957 until 1961. He became friends with P/M Neil Sutherland of the City of Winnipeg Police Pipe Band, and played with them occasionally as a guest. He joined the RCAF 402 Squadron Pipe Band under P/M Jack Reay Sr.

Ian returned to Scotland for five years and played with various bands. During this time he met P/M Alex Cupples who eventually immigrated to Brandon, Manitoba. Ian and the family immigrated back to Winnipeg in 1966 as a partner with Winnipeg Building and Decorating. Eventually he formed his own company, River Valley Construction, which flourished for many years. He then spent the remainder of his working career as the Project Manager for Bison Trucking and as a building consultant. In conjunction with his very successful business career, he and his wife Betty ran Clan Scotia, a Scottish import business supplying piping and drumming equipment to local customers.

When Ian returned to Manitoba, he chose just to compete solo, winning numerous local and provincial titles. However, it was only a matter of time before he felt moved to start up a pipe band. The year was 1967 – thus the name The Centennial Pipe Band. This was the beginning of a whole different style of playing and sound control. Their Grade One Drum Sargent was Jim Barrie who completely changed the drumming technique, creating a major advance in styles. With the complement of such a strong drum section, the band continued to win prizes wherever they competed.

When P/M Neil Sutherland passed away, Ian took over the Selkirk Kiwanis Pipe Band where Neil had been teaching. During Ian's tenure, the band moved from Juvenile through to Grade One and won many prizes over the years. When Ian started to encounter some health issues, he handed the reins to Tom Thompson, an ex Shotts and Centennial player and a local Selkirk resident.

Ian stayed in pipe band circles by being on the Adjudicating Panel of PPBAM as a Grade One principal judge. He travelled throughout Canada and the States in this role. It took almost ten years before he would get back into piping himself. Alf Mather of the ANAVETS 60 Pipe Band (now ANAVETS #303) invited Ian to their practice sessions where he found comfort in playing again and enjoyed the camaraderie of some great band mates. Bill Ramsay was the Pipe Major at the time and Ian assisted him. Together they enhanced the band's overall quality of sound, tone and playing execution. When Bill Ramsay retired as Pipe Major, Ian was ready to take over the leadership. When his health deteriorated again, he asked Robyn McCombe, his student from years ago and the Centennial Pipe Band, to take over as Pipe Major of the band. Robyn was very appreciative to be asked to be Pipe Major and it was a pleasure to be playing with Ian again.

Robyn has many fond memories of being taught by Ian and playing with him in the Centennial Pipe Band. Ian had very high, but not unobtainable standards. Robyn remembers playing about twenty D throws and on the 21st try, Ian said in his understated way, "**That one** was good." At that point Robyn

realized he was being taught by a superb teacher, and he always respected Ian's patience and piping knowledge. One of his memories of playing with the Centennial Band was at the Moose Jaw Competition. On the morning of the competition a number of senior pipers were feeling unwell, and Robyn thought the band would definitely not have a good performance that day. However, Ian had other ideas, and as he was tuning Robyn's pipes he looked him right in the eye and gave him a great big wink. With this act Robyn's worries disappeared, and after more rigorous tuning and remedies to cure the sick contingent, the band went on to win the day and Ian's legacy as a masterful Pipe Major was confirmed.

Ian's wife Betty passed away in 2005. He found companionship once again and married Shirley in 2006. His life was complete with the birth of his grandson Alan.

Ian Conn's impact on the piping scene in the prairies was enormous. His gifted ear for tuning and setting up pipes was exceptional, and he was a good teacher as he shared his knowledge with others. His groundbreaking work with the Centennial Pipe Band set the stage for many bands to follow.

Ian passed away on June 14, 2011.

-contributions from Iain MacDonald, Regina, Saskatchewan; Robyn McCombe, Winnipeg, Manitoba; and from Ian's own words in "*Through the Mists of Time*"