

The Nicol-Brown Chalice: A Showcase for Amateur Pipers

by Jim McGillivray

Now in its ninth year, the "Nicol-Brown Chalice" was created as a showcase for amateur pipers and as a tribute to the influence of Bob Brown and Bob Nicol on piping in the eastern United States. Each year, ten to fifteen of the most successful amateur players on the continent are invited to the Albany area to play in a piobaireachd competition for the Chalice. In recent years, the "William Ross Challenge Targe" competition for march, strathspey and reel playing and a 6/8 march competition have been added.

Faced with a full day of events and the ominous presence of professional recording equipment, competitors experience all the pressures of aspiring Gold Medallists at the Northern Meeting. But thanks to the organizers, they are also treated to the advantages of professional competition and more: first-class tuning facilities and stewarding, advance knowledge of the tunes chosen, and the dignity of having their biographies appear in a printed program.

Though I had been asked to judge the competition, when I walked into Chancellor's Hall in the State Education Building, I wished I were playing. An acoustical wonder with 75-foot ceilings, a tiered balcony, and an expansive hardwood stage backdropped by an allegorical mural, it looks like something from an 18th-century Fathers of Independence painting -- certainly a venue to encourage inspired music.

All but two of the competitors this year were from the east. As age is not a factor, a mix of adults and teens provided contrasting playing styles, from whip-fingered upstarts to more canny veterans. Ontario piping was well represented by Andrew Hayes of

Napean, Jenny Hazzard of Woodbridge, Daniel Kenny of Hanover and Paul MacClelland of Hamilton. The polished technique, instruments and music displayed by these four spoke well for the competitive intensity and concentration of the southern Ontario amateur circuit. Several sterling tunes stood out.

years and easily won him the Nicol-Brown Chalice.

There were also some minor tragedies that deserve mention for the prizes they undermined. Rob Boyd's atomic bagpipe finally fought back and blew his lips to mush somewhere in the middle of an otherwise superb "Lament for the Only Son." Paul

MacClelland's subtle musicality and bright, refined pipe would have placed him highly in the M/S/R, but his foot-stomping on the reverberating wooden stage could have won Best Bass Drum at Maxville. Katy Rashid of Pittsburgh played a proud and sophisticated "MacDougalls' Gathering," but on a chanter reed that refused to be blown in tune.

Sadly, Katy's problem was not an isolated one. There was a distinct division in the players between stable chanter reeds and those that lacked resistance and the ability to be blown steadily. One cannot over-emphasize the importance of a tuned sound; even the greatest music fails when played on an unmusical instrument. Another concern was the number of competitors who might as well have been deep in the woods at night as on a stage, refusing to acknowledge the audience, the judge, or even that the

performing platform has a front and a back. Of course, one is inclined to forgive inexperienced players for these transgressions, but it is hoped that these are points they will address as they progress toward professional ranks.

Despite these distractions, all the competitors showed a preparedness, standard of play and personal style that made for three enjoyable contests. Each also deserves mention for keeping tuning times to a blessed minimum. Extended tuning is a major



Winners at the Nicol-Brown Chalice, William Ross Challenge and 6/8 march: (left to right) Andrew Hayes, Napean, Ontario; Rob Boyd, Morgan Hill, California; Daniel Kenny, Hanover, Ontario.

Young Andrew Hayes's winning 6/8 marches were a marvel of showmanship, confidence and steadiness. Robert Boyd of Morgan Hill, California won the march, strathspey and reel with a stirring set of tunes on a bagpipe that was loud enough to blow your hair dry but was also sweet, stable and perfectly tuned. This was professional material. Daniel Kenny showed a maturity for linking variations and building excitement in *The Desperate Battle* that belied his

contest report

impediment to piping competitions consistently attracting large audiences, and organizers of any event hoping for a break-even gate would do well to police tuning ruthlessly in the name of a good show. As this competition demonstrated, adequate tuning rooms no doubt contribute to the competitors' willingness to get on with it.

The evening prize-giving ceremony included photographs and presentation of the day's proceeds to The American Lung Association of New York State. On Sunday morning the tables were turned as the judge picked up the pipes for a breakfast recital and workshop in the hotel.

Donald Lindsay of Petersburg, New York, one of the most knowledgeable and likable piping men on any side of the ocean, should get a medal for instituting and administering the Nicol-Brown Challice. He and his committee see to every detail in staging a contest that recognizes the place of top amateurs as the future of piping in North America and accords them the prestige they deserve. □

Results

Nicol-Brown Challice

1. Daniel Kenny, Hanover, Ont.
2. Jenny Hazzard, Woodbridge, Ont.
3. Andrew Hayes, Napean, Ont.
4. Ken McKeveny, Ringwood, N.J.
5. Paul MacClelland, Hamilton, Ont.

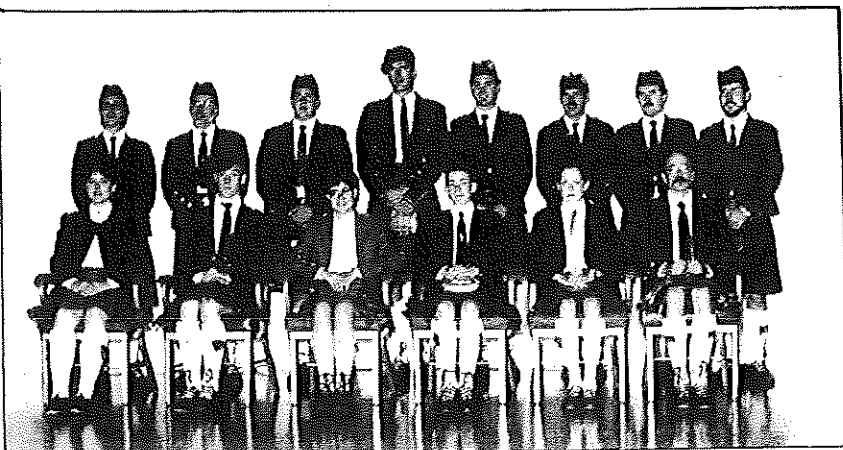
William Ross Challenge Targe

1. Robert Boyd, Morgan Hill, Cal.
2. Daniel Kenny
3. Ken McKeveny
4. Gordon Peters, Albany, N.Y.
5. Andrew Hayes

6/8 March

1. Andrew Hayes
2. Robert Boyd
3. Paul MacClelland
4. Gordon Peters
5. Daniel Kenny

Jim McGillivray is a frequent contributor to the Piper & Drummer. A top soloist, a former pipe-major and an experienced adjudicator, Jim currently plays with the 78th Fraser Highlanders.



Competitors in the 1990 Nicol-Brown Challice and William Ross Challenge: (2nd Row/left to right) John Chalmers, Gordon Peters, Peter Skae, Ken McKeveny, Rob Boyd, Bill Whiteley, Marty Travers, Paul MacClelland. (Seated/left to right) Maureen O'Connor, Daniel Kenny, Katy Rashid, Andrew Hayes, Jenny Hazzard, Andrew Hoag.

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