

## **Balvenie Medal, 2009**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**The Balvenie Medal is presented each year for outstanding service to Piping. This year's presentation will be the twenty-fifth, and the list of recipients contains the names of many legends of the piping world, quite a few of them, I'm delighted to say, here today.**

**It is traditional at these presentations to keep the audience guessing by withholding the name of the nominee until the last moment and I'll try to follow that approach as best I can. However, I fear that many of you will guess who it is before I have finished my first sentence and its just possible that he himself will also figure it out me pretty quickly.**

**This year's nominee for the Balvenie Medal is an Australian, albeit one with a Scottish name and very Scottish ancestry, whose contribution to piping covers the fields of professional competition at the highest level, judging, teaching, serving on committees and boards, intellectual input to debate and unstinting kindness and hospitality to pipers visiting his home over many years.**

**As a boy in Australia in the fifties he was smitten by the desire to play bagpipes, and he went for lessons to Peter Davidson, from Dunedin, who had previously competed with some success in Scotland. Peter Davidson had been a pupil of Robert Reid and had also had lessons from Bob Brown, so his piping pedigree was good and his pupil progressed quickly to become an excellent player.**

**He came to Scotland in 1967 to work in Glasgow where he teamed up with Donald Bain, a well know New Zealand piper. To further his piping he went for lessons in piobaireachd to Bob Brown at**

**Balmoral, traveling regularly and in all weathers with Jim Mackintosh in a tiny car, which came with his job. These lessons continued for two years until he returned to Sydney at the end of 1968.**

**During that time he established a strong bond of friendship and mutual respect with Bob Brown, who considered him one of the best of all his pupils. He admired Brown not only as an outstanding musician, but also as someone able to analyse the music and communicate the subtleties of it in an infectious and inspiring way. He is still a devotee of Brown's ways of playing tunes and is a great believer in the oral tradition in teaching piobaireachd.**

**Back in Australia, he couldn't resist the lure of Scotland and returned to compete in 1973. He married in Australia in May 1974, came to Scotland on honeymoon, and stayed here for 30 years! By this time Bob Brown, his old teacher, had sadly died so he went to Robert Nicol for tuition, until *his* death four years later. He is therefore steeped in the Brown and Nicol approach to piobaireachd, which came in turn from John Macdonald, Inverness.**

**He collaborated with Robert Wallace and Norman Matheson in the production of their highly acclaimed 'Masters of Piobaireachd' series of CDs of the music and teaching of Bob Brown and Bob Nicol.**

**His serious interest in the traditional ways of playing piobaireachd led to many interesting and productive friendships, not least with James Campbell, son of Archibald Campbell, Kilberry, who, when he died, entrusted him with his whole archive of recordings and documents which, I think, he is still ploughing his way through to this day.**

**As a competitor he met with considerable success during the 70's and 80's, winning many major prizes including the Gold Medal and Open Piobaireachd at**

**Oban, the Braemar and Dunvegan Medals, the Open Piobaireachd and the Bratach Gorm at London and many prizes for light music. He was also a regular competitor here at The Glenfiddich Championship during these years. His pipe was always immaculate, and still is!**

**On retiring from competitive piping he turned to teaching and judging. He has taught piping at the College of Piping and the National Piping Centre and is a qualified examiner for the Piping and Drumming Qualifications Board. He is also much sought after for individual piobaireachd tuition by pipers from all over the world.**

**He was an excellent and influential president of the Piobaireachd Society from 1988 until 1997 and, not content with that, followed up as Chairman and Secretary of the Music Committee for several years. He still makes a valuable contribution as an ordinary member of the Music Committee. During his time in these positions he took his responsibilities seriously, and was particularly influential in promoting the development of judging skills, and broadening the knowledge of styles and settings of tunes, through the discussion seminars run by the Piobaireachd Society.**

**He was a founder director of The National Piping Centre in Glasgow and is a former President of the Competing Pipers' Association. He also served for many years on the BBC piping advisory committee and on the piping committee of The Northern Meeting.**

**Much of this work was done during fairly turbulent times for these organizations, some of which had just started up and others of which were going through times of change. His calming influence and diplomatic skills were invaluable.**

**He is a lawyer by profession and his day job was, latterly, with the Highland Council in Inverness as Head of Legal Services until his retirement in 2004, when he and his wife moved to Queensland, Australia, for some sunshine. He does, however, return to Scotland each summer to judge and enjoy the piping season here.**

**He is in considerable demand as a judge, and it is greatly to his credit that he is just as happy judging half a dozen pipers at a small, wet, traditional highland games in the back of beyond, as judging the very top players at Oban, Inverness, London, Dunvegan and here at the Glenfiddich.**

**Despite all this piping activity, his wife of 35 years and four children are still on good terms with him! He is perhaps fortunate that his wife was also a piper, so she knows a bit about it, and her kindness and hospitality at their home to a large number of pipers from all over the world in different states of sobriety, elation and depression is legendary. She still has vivid memories, or possibly nightmares, of her Aga cooker covered in soaking wet sheepskin pipe bags drying out after competitions!**

**Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure you will agree this has been an outstanding contribution to piping in the best traditions of the Balvenie Medal and I am delighted to present it now to a worthy winner and good friend:**

**Malcolm McRae**

**Alan Forbes  
31 October 2009**