

Two leading pipers had Empress link

Written by Donald Fullarton

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TWO of Scotland's leading pipers of their respective generations lived in Rhu and worked on the Clyde Training Ship Empress in the Gareloch.

Murdo MacDonald and Archie McNeill shared their love of the bagpipes, but otherwise lived very different lives — Murdo as a soldier, Archie, who was blind, as a teacher and composer of

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pipe music.

A farmer's son born in Muir of Ord, Ross-shire, in 1862, Pipe Major Murdo MacDonald was considered one of Scotland's finest and most distinguished soldiers and a piper of national fame.

He died at his village home, Osborne Villa in School Road, on February 9 2016, and many tributes followed.

Early in his life he joined the Army, and served some 27 years with the colours.

In 1884 he went out to the Sudan with the 2nd Battalion of the Scots Guards, where he was in combat for two years and incurred slight wounds.

When that campaign ended, his battalion had a march of 32 miles to their point of embarkation, and along the entire route he played his bagpipes — a feat which was a proud memory in the Guards for many years.

At the outbreak of the South African War he was transferred to the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Scots, and with them fought the Boers for about three years.

He earned a great number of decorations, which included the long service and good conduct medal, Egyptian medal, Khedive's star and clasps, and South African medals King's and Queen's and five clasps.

The Helensburgh and Gareloch Times obituary stated: "His was a stalwart figure, beautifully proportioned.

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“He swung his kilts in the proud way that the real highlander does, and adorned with his numerous decorations was a never-to-be-forgotten picture of soldierly pride and high, quiet courage.”

Dr W.Semple Young, one of the surgeons in charge at the British Red Cross auxiliary hospital in Hermitage Park, once told him: “Heaven send us a few thousand Highlanders like you, MacDonald.”

For years he was greatly sought after as a model by many of London’s greatest artists.

He was as well-known in the Metropolis as on Garelochside, and in London’s Scottish circles he was a big favourite.

He taught some of the royal Princes dancing, and was the piper who played for HRH The Prince of Wales, afterwards King Edward, when he danced at the Cadets College.

Murdo was also a crack shot, and held many trophies which confirmed his prowess as a marksman.

At the outbreak of World War One he offered his services to King and country, was accepted, and after a time at Swindon and elsewhere was soon in the firing line.

But he caught Bright’s Disease, which affects the kidneys, in the trenches because of exposure, and was invalided back to Britain in August 2015.

After a time in hospital he arrived back in Rhu on leave, but had a relapse from which he failed to rally, and passed away, his wife Annie Murphy at his bedside.

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He was considered a great piper, and any band he was in charge of was always second to none. In the South of England while he was training, English and Belgian Generals complimented him on his excellent music.

As Pipe Major on the Empress for nine years, he was looked up to by the boys and made a major contribution to their musical lives and the several bands on the ship.

The obituary concluded: "At home and abroad, in his battalion and in the firing line, Pipe Major MacDonald was a first favourite, whose death will be lamented on all hands as the passing of a brave soldier and generous friend.

"To his widow and her two fatherless girls, as well as to his two sons, who are doing work for their country, the very deepest sympathy is extended."

At the time of his death, one son, John Joseph, was serving on a transport ship in Russia, and the other son, Murdo, who was a Pipe Corporal, was in hospital in Yorkshire.

His brother Alexander was a Chief of Police in Wales, while another brother was piper to the Mackintosh of Mackintosh at Moy in the Highlands, close to Tomatin.

The funeral took place from Osborne Villa to Helensburgh Cemetery in very bad weather. But despite that, many people turned out to watch the procession as it wended its way to the burial ground.

The cortege was headed by the Highland Light infantry Pipe Band from Portkil, and there was a firing party from the same regiment. Six sergeants were pall-bearers, and Captain McAuslan was in charge.

Four representatives from the Royal Scots HQ at Glencorse were joined by representatives from Rhu and Helensburgh pipe bands, and from the Supernumerary Company of the 1/9th

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Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

There was sadness on board the Empress that the stormy weather prevented the pipe band and other boys attending the funeral.

Beautiful wreaths were sent by mourners from all over the country, including one from the sergeants of the Royal Scots.

The Rev Hugh Miller MA of Shandon Church officiated at the house and held a short but impressive service at the grave.

The customary volleys were fired; Pipe Major Day of the Royal Scots played the mournful 'Lochaber No More'; the buglers sounded the Last Post, and the Pipe Major was laid to rest.

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