

Alex Duthart

... a small history

by Jim Blakely

News of the sudden death of Alex Duthart came to us here in Australia on St. Andrews Day. Apparently Alex had been in New York with the British Caledonian Airways Pipe Band playing at the United States Thanksgiving Day parade on 21st November. The band had finished playing and Alex was talking to some of the people gathered round as was always the case with Alex, obliging with drumming tips and demonstrations, when he suddenly collapsed and did not respond.



To all of us in the pipe band movement, and to his good wife and family, it comes as a great shock. For Alex had devoted a lifetime to Pipe Band drumming and the development of it's score structure and technique. I don't think that there is any competing band in the world today that has not had some of Alex's influence in the drum scores they play.

Some of his scores and drum salutes will become legends, many corps influenced directly by Alex and his way of ensemble presentation will carry on with his teachings, but we will sadly miss the "Big Yinn".

It is indeed unfortunate that Alex was unable to have printed the three volumes of drum scores he indicated to me in 1985 that he was putting together. Though many of his scores which he gave freely to those who asked are in circulation will ensure his objectives and teachings are carried on.

I would like to dwell briefly on the story of this great drummer who greatly influenced me since I first met him and his corps at the World Pipe Band Championships in Paisley, Scotland in 1957. Then later on during his judging at the Australian Pipe Band Championships In Melbourne in 1974 and the 5 day seminar and workshop in Sydney following the Championships. Once again in Sydney on his stop-over from a New Zealand tour in March 1985. Alex was only too willing to share his wealth of knowledge and discuss pipes and drums till the "wee hours". Alex started drumming when he was seven years old and was taught by his father who had been a drummer in the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders during the 1914-1918 War. In Alex's words, "My father must have had a hell of good teacher as he taught me all the right things. With the basic rudiments he made me play everything with either the right or left hand, and that's the way it has to be done".

Alex's father taught him until 1942 when he joined the Dalziel (pronounced Dee-El) Highland Pipe Band. The corps was under D/M Gordon Jelly who, later In 1952, migrated to Victoria, Australia.

Alex played with Dalziel Highland for 11 years and became leading drummer in 1947. During this period, the band won many major prizes in Grade I - the most notable being the 1955 World Drum Corps Championship and also Alex winning the Worlds Solo Championship, Alex resigned from the band at the end of 1953 (Dalziel Highland disbanded in 1954) and for the next three years was involved in playing kit drums at local dance halls.

In 1956, Shotts and Dykehead Caledonia Pipe Band appointed a new Pipe Major, John K MacAllister - the son of Tom MacAllister - who had been Pipe Major of the band since the 1930s. John was keen to exploit his new theories on ensemble and Alex Duthart was approached to take on the position of Leading Drummer.

It is now history as to the change that was to take place in pipe band presentation and performance from the first contest of the MacAllister-Duthart combination at the British Pipe Band Championships at Renfrew in 1957.

Their ensemble performance won the Championship and drumming prize and from then on Shotts was virtually unbeatable In Grade I up until the early 1960s. From 1957 until 1965 Alex and his Shotts Corps won the World Drumming Championship eight years in succession. That was followed by two years when Alex left Shotts and went with some of his drummers to the newly formed Invergordon Distillery Pipe Band and further Worlds Drumming Championships. His next move was early in 1968 to the Edinburgh City Police Pipe Band where again followed yet another World Drumming Championship.

Alex then returned to his old band, Shotts, now under the direction of Pipe Major Tom MacAllister Junior the younger brother of John K MacAllister. After getting the corps together again, many championship victories followed.

During the 1970s, Alex's services were much in demand for conducting drumming workshops and seminars and also for contest adjudication. He visited many countries - including USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia and freely gave of his time and knowledge to help drummers of all levels.

In 1985, Alex left Shotts again taking with him some of his young drummers, including his son Drew, over to the British Caledonian Airways Pipe Band (Gatwick) which had just won its way up to Grade I level. Alex's new team was doing quite well in contests until his untimely death. By now many of the drummers of his old Shotts Corps were champions in their own right. Tom Brown of Boghall and Bathgate, Jim Kilpatrick of Polkemmet and many of his other drummers and students are now leading their own corps with the high disciplines that Alex had set. Bert Barr, who is in the British Airways Corps, has been playing in corps with Alex since Shotts in 1957.

Alex's drum scores for tunes like "The Highland Wedding", "Donald Cameron", "Lord Alexander Kennedy", "The Cameronian Rant", "The Smith of Chilliechassie" and his drum salutes of 1960 and 1965 have become, and will remain, classics in pipe-band drumming. We in the pipe band movement owe a great debt to Alex and in some respects he does not appear to have received the credit due. He was a humble man who put many hours into establishing the Royal Scottish Pipe Band College, its drumming syllabi and the many exercises and groupings in the drumming sections of the RSPBA Tutor and Text Books 1 and 2. He designed drumsticks and was instrumental in the design of the modern pipe band snare drum produced by the Premier Company.