

# Donald MacDonald

Player and Pipe Maker

Part One

*Competitor, music publisher, and fine instrument maker, Donald MacDonald had a profound impact on the music of his time, and continues to play a significant role in the music of the highlands today.*

*Photos by Nicole MacHarg*

Donald MacDonald was born in Glenhinsdale, Isle of Skye, in 1767



Several years ago, the Vermont Institute of Celtic Arts was extremely fortunate to have a set of Highland pipes, made by Donald MacDonald, donated to the school. Since that time, we have measured the set and are now reproducing these historic pipes.

Since Donald MacDonald started making pipes in 1806, our set is likely quite close to 200 years old. All of the sections of the pipes are original, but some sections have had some repairing done to them. This set was made out of cocuswood, sometimes called Jamaican ebony. Cocuswood is a very dense tropical hardwood with excellent tonal qualities. The set is mounted with cow bone, and again some of the mounts were damaged at some point, and were replaced with cow horn.



Interesting to examine the front and back of the chanter. Also, in the above photo, we can see color differences from the reverse side of the drones, pictured on the first page of this article. This set has been made with wood that has patches of both sap wood, and heart wood.



*First, to play well on the pipe, much depends upon the method of placing the fingers.*

*— Donald MacDonald*

Donald MacDonald was born in Glenhinnisdale, Isle of Skye, in 1767. His father John MacDonald, born about 1720, had been herd to MacDonald of Kingsburgh and a servant of Flora MacDonald. John had a good knowledge of piping, the MacCrimmons, MacArthurs, and was fluent in canntaireachd. Donald was educated and is said to have had tuition from the MacArthurs, which would have been possible as the MacArthurs were pipers to Lord MacDonald. In 1795, Donald joined the

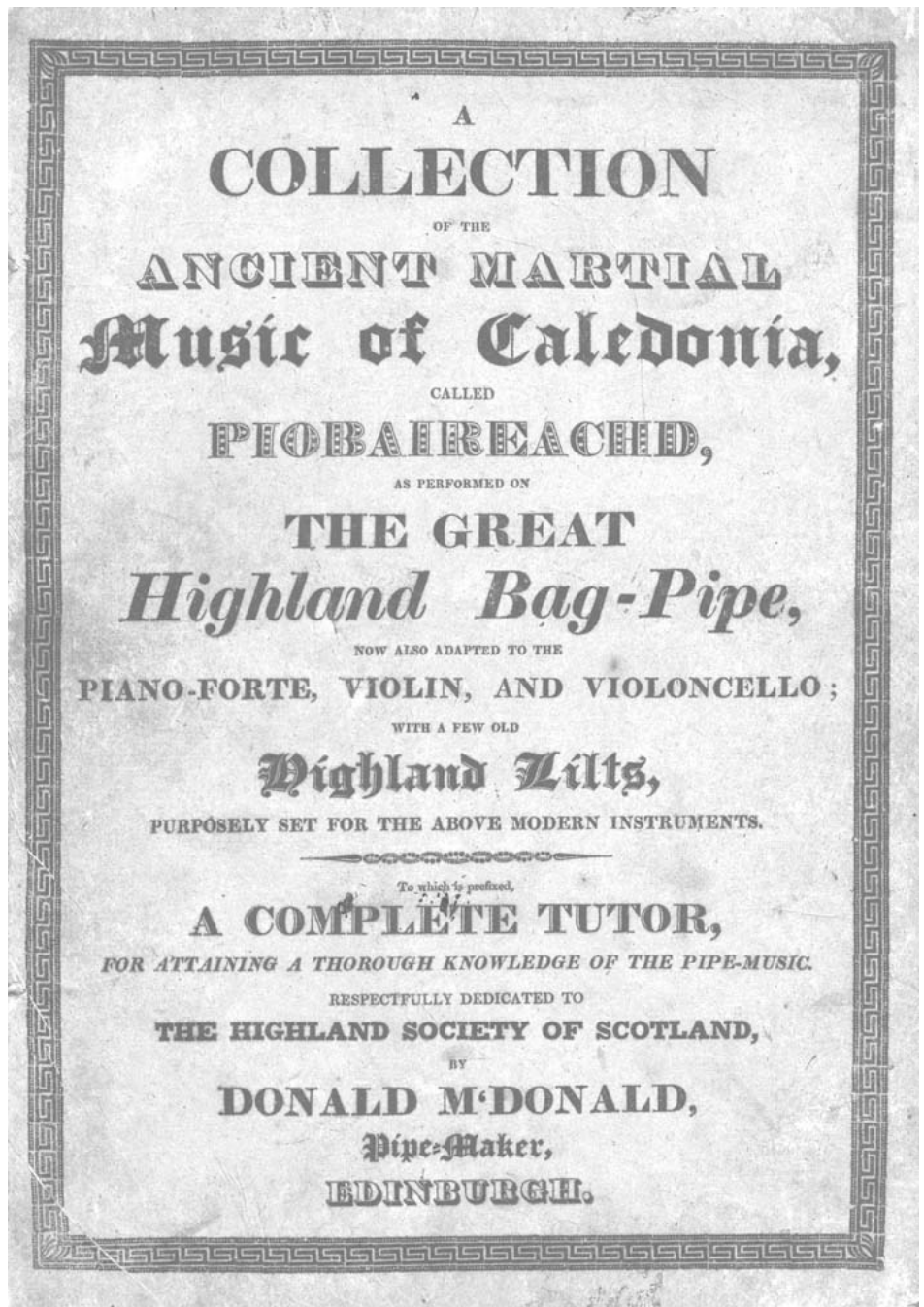




*200 years later, still setting a standard for tone*

Fencibles, a regiment raised at the outbreak of the Napoleonic wars. It isn't known where Donald MacDonald learned the art of pipe making, but it is possible that he was associated with Hugh Robertson, who supplied pipes to the MacDonalds of Skye, and also may have been employed by Muir Wood & Co.

About 1803, Donald settled in Edinburgh and went into business as a bagpipe maker, and his instruments, while quite rare today, set new standards for craftsmanship and tone. In addition to Highland pipes, he also made and taught the Irish pipes, and the Northumberland pipes, and in 1808 published a leaflet for these instruments.



## TAIL TODDLE .

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In this well know tune, Tail Toddle, published in Donald's tutor, it is interesting to see that reels were played evenly during the 1800s instead of dot cut as some players do in MSR sets today. He also produced three collections of music. In 1817, he advertised a new tutor for the pipes. His second book, A Collection of the Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia, called Piobaireachd, was published in 1820. Donald's final volume never went to an engraver during his lifetime, but he did finish the manuscript and it has recently been published by the Piobaireachd Society. A solid competitor, in 1817, he competed in Edinburgh and won first prize and the prize pipe.

At the top of Glenhinnisdal, just before the last house, there is a memorial to mark the place where Donald MacDonald was born.



As Competitor, music publisher, and fine instrument maker Donald MacDonald had a profound impact on the music of his time, and continues to play a significant role in the way we interpret the music of the highlands today. Through the work of other pipe makers, copying Donald's instruments, the Piobaireachd Society publishing his works, and the preservation of his remaining instruments we may keep his legacy alive for future



A reproduction of a Donald MacDonald Chanter, made by Michael MacHarg, to be featured in a future issue.