

MALCOLM MACCRIMMON, PIPER EXTRAORDINAIRE

(A short story of his life and legacy)

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Scotland's rugged northwest highland coast is the geographical setting of the Isle of Skye; ancestral home of the Clan MacCrimmon. MacCrimmons, probably the most enigmatic of all Scottish peoples, were believed to have originated from Ireland, due to the prevalence of the name Crimmins in Ireland. They were also thought to have returned periodically to Ireland to learn and master the skill of piping and bring that knowledge back to their island home.

Throughout Scottish History clans would appoint their own men as pipers. *"A passage in Sir Walter Scott's immortal 'Rob Roy' cites a contest between Rob Roy MacGregor and a contemporary, 'Aye, y'er as fine a piper as th're e'er was, but y'er still no contest to a MacCrimmon. The MacCrimmons were the hereditary pipers to Clan MacLeod. They played every day at dinner at Dunvegan Castle and at all special occasions. Originally, the pipers led the clans into battle."* The tradition of MacCrimmons being hereditary pipers to the Clan MacLeod started in approximately 1500 and continued *"until the 1747 Act of Proscription introduced after the 1745 Rising, which claimed bagpipes as being a weapon of war and the playing of these was a punishable offence."* *"The eighth chief (of the Clan MacLeod) endowed a college of pipe music at Borreraig, about eight miles from Dunvegan, and gave a considerable piece of land for the support of the MacCrimmons and their pupils. There the MacCrimmons taught for 300 years"*

In 1825, with the demise of the 8th Hereditary Piper to the clan MacLeod, Donald Ruadh MacCrimmon, the link in this hereditary chain was broken.

Nearly a century later, on December 21, 1918; the first of four children, a son, was born to Roderick and Christina MacCrimmon in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Named Malcolm Roderick MacCrimmon after his father and grandfather, the child was destined to return to the enigmatic island home of his ancestors and be officially appointed as the 9th Hereditary Piper to the Clan MacLeod of Scotland.

This is his story.

Malcolm's first childhood home was located in Edmonton's Saskatchewan River Valley area.

Throughout his youth, he learned of the positive impact that prominent Scottish families had in settlement of the west throughout the 1800's. Names such as MacInnes, MacArthur, MacCrimmon, and MacLeod were among those at the forefront. One eminent Scottish man was Colonel James A.F. MacLeod, second commissioner of

the North West Mounted Police. The bull's head within the MacLeod Family Crest was *"incorporated as the principal feature of the badge of the NWMP"*. The connections between the MacCrimmons and MacLeods go back a long way. *"Malcolm's uncle and father attended school with the daughters of Colonel MacLeod in Calgary, Alberta."*

Both the boy's father and grandfather had been prominent leaders in railroad development throughout Western Canada. His grandfather *"had the last Canadian Pacific Railway contract leading to the 'last spike' being driven". And as a part of this contract "In the late 1800's, supervised the surveying and grade work for the building of the Canadian Pacific railway through the massive Rocky Mountains...travelling to Fort MacLeod you can see his results when you pass through the 'Kicking Horse Pass"*.



In 1925 the family moved to the coal-mining town of Luscar (south of Hinton, Alberta) amid the rolling foothills of the Rockies, near the MacLeod River. There Roderick was the *"barn boss"* for the Luscar Mine and also started the first dairy farm in the area.

The MacCrimmons moved again in 1927 to the Grand Boulevard/Lynn Valley vicinity of North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. It was here at the tender age of ten that Malcolm heard bagpipes for the first time, played by a man (Donald MacLean) who lived within three blocks of his home. That event, combined with the family stories passed down through the years, became the spark, which ignited Malcolm's interest in his highland ancestry and his desire to learn bagpipe

playing. Between 1930-32 he was a member of the North Vancouver Pipe Band as well as the Seaforth Highlanders. Five years later Malcolm's father was asked to manage a 4800-acre mixed farming operation at Scotford, 10 miles east of Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, so again the family moved. The farm was owned by A.R. Mann Investments, a name synonymous with railroad financing across Canada.

In the absence of mechanization this type of enterprise required year round employment of a harness maker and blacksmith. Springtime planting of crops and fall harvesting easily involved up to 10 horse units and 30 hired men. All family members played an active part and Malcolm was no exception. Horsemanship came easy to this athletic youth who would ride or run 2 1/2 miles to school. His nightly chores included riding the quiet prairie fields and valleys for strays from the 500m head herd of Hereford cattle, and the more tedious caring of thousands of pigs, sheep, chickens and some turkeys and pheasants that were *"Quite often poached by hunters"*. Like all true horsemen Malcolm recalls that *"there was always something rewarding about walking through the horse barn at night after a full days work"*. Malcolm was used to farm life and attributes his current fitness *"probably because of my years as a youth"*. Malcolm's continuing education meant undertaking Grade 11 high school in Josephburg, a German settlement east of Fort Saskatchewan and a five mile horseback ride from home. While living with a family in Edmonton, he next studied electricity and mechanics at Edmonton Technical School. His continuing interest in the skill of piping manifested itself through his membership in both *"the Edmonton Boy's Pipe Band and the CNR Pipe Band"*.

In 1939, the world was at war for the second time in less than a quarter of a century and the 21-year-old Malcolm joined the Calgary Highlanders like many other western farm boys. In Malcolm's case *"It was the only Highland regiment around without going to Winnipeg"*. History would later record that the Calgary Highlanders would suffer a high casualty rate, attributable to being the lead contingent in the majority of battles involving them. By the spring of 1940 following 1 1/2 months of training at Shiloh Manitoba, Malcolm was sent to England as part of the 2nd Division. He remained there with his Regiment for 3 1/2 years. During this time Malcolm pursued his driving interest in genealogy, creating a complete compilation of all hereditary pipers of the MacCrimmons of Skye, ending with Malcolm himself. The young soldier wrote to Dame Flora, Mrs. MacLeod of MacLeod and 28th Chief of the Clan MacLeod telling of this genealogy and anxiously awaited an answer. A response, written by the Lady herself, Chieftain of the Clan MacLeod, dated October

10th, 1940, from Dunvegan Castle, Isle of Skye--to Malcolm's Commanding Officer. It read:

*"Dear Sir,
I venture to write to you as Chief of the MacLeod Clan who for 300 years were proud to have a celebrated family of the MacCrimmons as their hereditary pipers. It was a connection famous in Highland history. Your young piper, Malcolm R. MacCrimmon, wrote to ask me whether he would have my approval in wearing the MacLeod tartan attached to his pipes if he were permitted by the military authorities to do so. I should of course be proud if he is so authorized and I understand that Maj. Gen. Gervase Thorpe is intending to discuss this matter with you.
Sentiment means so much to Highlanders and very many Canadians are of Highland origin I am proud to think.
Yours truly,
Flora MacLeod of MacLeod"*

The Officer Commanding gave his permission.

*"Dear Madam,
In authorizing Piper MacCrimmon to wear your tartan attached to his pipes, a further interesting episode is written in the Regimental History. I thank you for your gracious permission."*

A reply to that letter came from the Isle of Skye on October 26. It said:

*"Dear Col. Scott,
Very many thanks for your letter. I am gratified to know that Malcolm MacCrimmon has been granted permission to carry the MacLeod tartan attached to his pipes and I am glad that you share with me the feeling that it is a reverent and fitting blending of the past with the present that this should be so..."*

All that was left to be done now was a meeting. *"Meeting Dame Flora, Mrs. MacLeod of MacLeod, (28th Chief), he was successful in re-establishing the link that had been broken (over a century) before. He was appointed 9th Hereditary Piper and was entitled to carry the clan ribbons on his pipes"*.

In battle conditions, pipers were utilized primarily as stretcher-bearers but were trained to fill in as required. In the seaport town of Portsmouth, England for two days and two nights Malcolm's regiment was bombed while awaiting embarkation as reinforcements to the doomed Dieppe Operation. I was apparent from the high casualty rate, as shown by the returning wounded, that no second wave would be dispatched. Slightly built Malcolm vividly recalls being loaded down *"in battle gear and Tommy-gun ammunition, and that if I had fallen off the dock they'd never have found me"*. His commanding

Officer had left him with the responsibility of handling the incoming wounded who were arriving by landing craft, separate the British and the Canadians and give direction to waiting ambulances and first aid stations. The scene was grim. *"Malcolm MacCrimmon, who had joined to play the bagpipes, was one of the men of A Company detailed to meet the boat: 'I could just see on deck. The bodies were just shoved in some of the corners around where the guns had been firing. It was a pretty scary sight when you saw what happened to those guys and how they came back....it sort of made you think' Malcolm recalls further that 'the first guys that came off were members of the Winnipeg Cameron Highlanders, who I'd trained with at Shiloh. Lot's of them didn't have any clothes or anything".*

The 3 1/2 years in Britain with the Calgary Highlanders increased Malcolm's contemplation of making a life out of piping, as opposed to the frustration of just *"marching and playing for the Regiment up and down the length of Britain".* He'd also encountered opposition from a senior officer who objected to the wearing of the MacLeod Clan Ribbons on Malcolm's pipes (even though the War Office had sanctioned it). These factors resulted in a verbal exchange between Malcolm and this officer. Malcolm recalls saying *"I want to get out of here, even if it means going to Churchill to get it. The Officer commented "MacCrimmon, what would make Churchill so Official?" Malcolm responded ""Well sir, you tell me what makes him unofficial!"* With typical military dispatch Malcolm was marched out by the Sergeant Major and transferred shortly thereafter to the British Army's Scot's Guards. *"Unique to the red tape of the War Office, Piper MacCrimmon was the only Canadian during the course of the war to be transferred into a British Regiment...the famed Scot's Guards."*

. Barracked in London next to Buckingham Palace, Malcolm remained with his new Regiment for 2 1/2 years - until wars end. His overseas venture had presented him with additional opportunities close to his heart; that of visiting his mother's family in Glasgow and studying under Pipe Major William Ross, world champion piper of the day, and himself formerly of the Scot's Guards and Chief Instructor of the Army School of Piping in Edinburgh.

Under wartime condition travel would involve three days from London by train, allow three day's to visit and then three day's by train back to London, Malcolm reports *"that he was never late or AWOL".* It was on one such trip that Malcolm would meet his future wife Mairi McLeod Chisholm of Stornoway, Isle of Lewis; who was nursing at Gartloch Military Hospital, near Glasgow. They were later married at Stornoway, on 7 May 1945; ironically, the same day that peace was

declared in Europe.

The last 2 months of the war, Malcolm's Regiment spent on mainland Europe travelling through the Netherlands and ending in Cologne, Germany Along the way, bagpipe playing accompanied many military mess functions, and as Malcolm says *"marching the squads."* Although on the list twice for duty in the Middle East, last minute changes precluded him from being sent.

At war's end Malcolm's piping expertise was required to parade the Guards Armoured Division (which he was apart of) when the Division was presented with Belgium's highest honour. the *"Crix de Guerre "*.

Following the war. Malcolm and his wife returned home to Edmonton, Alberta where they lived in a house near Clarke Stadium. In 1951 they moved to their current home in the Highlands District of Edmonton. Malcolm, given his farm boy' background, went to work for the Edmonton Exhibition Association from 1952 until 1979 as foreman and icemaker of the old Edmonton Exhibition Arena. He ensured the smooth running of all events. from *"Ice Capades, hockey games, rodeos, curling bonspells, you name it"* that were held in the building. Working 16-hour days was not uncommon. When the current Northlands Coliseum was built, Malcolm at 54 years old, declined the offer of continued employment and accepted his 20 years pension. Throughout his years with the Edmonton Exhibition Association he was away from home a lot, so Malcolm credits his hard-working wife Mairi *"with rearing their three children Flora, Padruig and Iain.* During these same years, Malcolm played for and received the following honours:

- Piper for the Alberta Curling Association
- Honorary Member of the "K" Division RCMP Sergeant's Mess
- Honorary' Piper for "K" Division RCMP Officer's Association
- Official Piper for "K" Division RCMP NCO's and Officer's Regimental Dinners.
- Official Piper for MacKay Ave School, Edmonton, Alberta
- Official Piper for the Dundonald Burns Club. Edmonton, Alberta
- Official Piper for the Strathcona Lodge, Edmonton. Alberta
- 1992 Played with the "K" Division RCNIP Pipes & Drums in their first performance at the "Change of Command Ceremony.
- 1995 A member and Honorary Piper for the Northern Alberta Society, was the recipient of the Annual Recognition Award of the Edmonton Historical Board.

- 1997 *Honorary Piper of the 49th Battalion, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment.


Malcolm is well known and highly respected for playing at weddings, funerals. Citizenship Court Sittings, Robbie Burns Nights gatherings, and Remembrance Day Services.

Iain has followed his father's path most successfully, and on 16 September 1978 had bestowed on him by John MacLeod of MacLeod (grandson of Dame Flora), the appointment as the *"TENTH HEREDITARY PIPER to the MacLeod of MacLeod"*. Malcolm's story is unique. His lifetime of piping excellence has been enjoyed by all that relish highland tradition, ceremony and bagpipe music. The history of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Alberta, originating with Colonel MacLeod, continues to be enriched through our association and the legacy of The 9th Hereditary Piper To 'MacLeod Of MacLeod, Malcolm MacCrimmon - "Piper Extraordinaire"

Malcolm's Piping Involvement/Accomplishments

- 1930 - 1932---- Member of the North Vancouver Pipe Band & the (Vancouver) Seaforth Highlanders.
- 1932 - 1935---- Member of the Edmonton Boys Pipe Band.
- 1935 - 1940---- Member , CNR Pipe Band
- May 1941---- Appointed 9th Hereditary' Piper to Flora MacLeod Of MacLeod, 28th Chief of Clan MacLeod. Dunvegan, Castle, Isle of Skye, Scotland.
- 1939 - 1942--- Member Calgary Highlanders.
- 1942 - 1945---- Member of the Scot's Guards and a pupil of Pipe Major William ROSS, world champion piper.
- 1953 - 1973---- Official Piper for the Alberta Curling Association.
- 1958---- Honorary Member of the "K" Division RCMP Sergeant's Mess.
- 1992---- Malcolm played with the "K" Division RCMP Pipes & Drums for their first official performance at the "Change of Command Ceremony
- 1995---- Annual Recognition Award of the Edmonton Historical Board to which he is also the Honorary' Piper.
- 1945-Present---- Well known for playing at weddings, funerals, Citizenship Court Sittings, Robbie Burns Nights gatherings, Remembrance Day Services.

- 1997 ---- Honorary Piper of the 49th Battalion the Loyal Edmonton Regiment
- Present---- Honorary Piper for "K" Division RCMP Officers assoc.
- Present---- Official Piper for "K" Division RCMP Regimental Dinners of both Officers and NCO's.
- Present ---- Official Piper for McKay Ave School Edmonton, Alberta.
- 1986-Present---- Official Piper for the Dundonald Burns Club Edmonton Alberta
- Present ---- Official Piper for the Strathcona Lodge, Edmonton, Alberta.
- 1992-Present---- Malcolm played with the "K" Division RCMP Pipes & Drums for their first official performance at the "Change of Command Ceremony. He has played with them on other occasions as well.
- 1995- Present ----Member of and Honorary Piper for the Northern Alberta Society, who received the Annual Recognition Award of the Edmonton Historical Board.
- 1997-Present---- Honorary Piper of the 49th Battalion, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment.
- 1945-Present -Respected for playing at weddings, funerals, Citizenship Court Sittings, Robbie Burns Nights, and Remembrance Day Services.

 <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Lane/2230/piperex.html> - top