

## Rona's life story

As well as being a legendary piper and traditional Gaelic singer, Rona is a gifted storyteller and song teacher.. This summary of her extraordinary personal and piping life, and the music and cultural legacy she has shared with us all, aims to weave in a number of her stories, in her own words.



Rona was born in a croft house in Geàrraidh-Sheilidh (Garrahellie) in South Uist. to Kate (born Campbell) and Archie MacDonald. She was closest in age to her older sister Màiri and brother Neil, and her younger brother Ronald. Rona remembers a very happy childhood.



These pictures of her parents Archie MacDonald (Rona's father) and Kate MacDonald (Rona's mother) were both taken by Dr Robertson. Here is Archie again walking along the road from the house:



This pictures is of Rona's) Mother Kate with GP Dr Alasdair. Kate MacDonald is famous for having been recorded giving 200 of her songs to the School of Scottish Studies, recorded by Dr Alasdair MacLean and his brother Calum MacLean. Rona's father Archie was a piper in the First World War and afterwards a ghille, during the angling season at the Loch Boisdale Hotel. He was famous for making up

stories – once claiming improbably, after being reminded that he hadn't shut a gate, that "my grandfather will shut it!"

Rona's earliest memories are of borrowing her mother's tongs and a cushion and walking over the moors pretending they were bagpipes (losing a lot of tongs. ..). And of soldiers leaving for WW2 on horseback, and the birth of her younger brother with her father distracting her by teaching her Paliglidge dance [CD 1 track 1].

She grew up in Daliburgh, and has a charming story of how every Saturday it was her job to take 2 bottles of milk to godmother Mrs Mackinnon ¼ mile up the road, and one day having a lift with the milk bottles with non-Gaelic-speaking servicemen [CD1 track 4].



Rona also spent a lot of time with her grandparents at Frobost, visiting her mother's parents Neil and Mòr Campbell. She called her Grandfather Neil Campbell "Gen", "him and I were the best of pals", and tells several lovely stories about him – his sweet tooth and collecting and toasting honey, making toffee in a pan on the old black stove, and naughtily burying the broken platter. [CD 1 track 10] Rona tells another lovely story about her grandfather playing for 4 little girls to dance. [CD 1 track 13]

The picture below is of Rona's granny Mòr with her brother Angus MacLellan.



When she went to school, she joined the class of Miss Morrison – sister of Father John Morrison (“Father Rocket”). She describes her teacher as very kind, and how the children had to learn English, having started as Gaelic speakers. For high school, she went away to Fort William/ Lochaber, and stayed with her married sister Marion until they moved out of town, then stayed in the girls convert, run by the Sisters of Notre Dame. When asked by boys about the initials ND on their bonnets, the girls would reply “Nothing Doing”. Rona says she was a bit of a rebel, several times in trouble, caught smoking and threatened with expulsion, and she carried out a dare, rescuing a ball from outside the wall. She was also taken for a ride on a motorbike! [CD 1 track 7]

After finishing school, Rona came home to South Uist and got a job in the local Lochboisdale Hotel as a Pantry Maid. She then attended classes to train as a nurse at the Western District Hospital (Oakbank) in Glasgow, where her sister had also trained. In her early days of working as a nurse, she met her future husband Tony Lightfoot. It was a New Year’s Eve party that launched her romance with Tony Lightfoot and going to the dance with friend Ina, both of them seeking a dance partner.

After their honeymoon on the Norfolk Broads, Tony and Rona stayed in Kent in Tony’s father’s house while he sat his Ship’s Master’s exams (which followed on from the Chief Officer’s certificate), along the way Rona learning some of the maritime “rules of the road”. Their baby Archie was born in Kent, Tony went to sea

and Rona returned to South Uist with baby Archie. Her brother met her at the gate of her parents' house to pipe the first grandchild up to the house. Archie grew up there in South Uist until he was nine when the family moved to Inverness.



Rona competing at the South Uist Highland Games (Duncan Johnstone is the Judge sitting on Left) - Rona was married and living in S Uist.

Sometimes Rona joined Tony on board the ships he was commanding. The first ship Rona joined sailed from Falmouth in Cornwall with Tony as Chief Officer under Captain Exton, while a young Archie stayed in South Uist with his grannie. But Rona missed him so much that she did not go to sea again until Archie was 8 and able to join them on the voyage – and later Archie was able to go to boarding school.

Rona loved life at sea, with the chance for charades and games. She describes visiting many interesting countries – USA, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Chile, India, Japan and Australia. Tony was fortunate to be Master of the same ship “The Bibi” for eight years. The Agents for ship would put a car on to take to her to see features and attractions such as Inca temples, Acapulco divers diving with torches, restaurants, the houses of famous stars like Frank Sinatra, San Francisco’s Crazy Street etc. Between trips they would return to Inverness and South Uist (and on one occasion, staying on in Canada to tour round Canada). It sounds like an amazing life! [To 27:10] And on board ship, Rona continued to practice and to learn new tunes. She would use the “Owners’ Suite” (usually empty on board) to practice! Tony and Rona still live in Inverness and are also blessed with two grandsons, Calum and Ruairidh.

So how did Rona come to start learning the pipes?

Rona comes from a long line of pipers.



An Oban Times article dated 5 February 1916 show Rona's father Archie and four of his five brothers, all in the Army and all pipers.



This picture shows Angus MacDonald, older brother of Rona's father – Angus was killed at Gallipoli. His pipes were the pipes Rona always played, and are now played by Rona's son Archie. Rona herself was named after her father's father and brother Ronald. Rona says, of the South Uist peoples' love of the piping traditions, that "some say the piping is in the grass, it grows there with the people". Similarly, an old man in South Uist said "if they don't play pipes in heaven, I don't want to go".

Her father's cousin John MacDonald (Shonnie "Rhoidainn") was a Pipe Major in the Glasgow Police pipe band and won the world piping championships at the Cowel Games in 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1939, a record interrupted only by WW2 – and then again after it on 1946, 1947, 1948 and 1949. John had walked across South Uist to Skye to enlist in WW1, aged only 16, and lied about his age to be recruited. At the end of the War three friends and pipers - Shonnie "Rhoidainn", Rona's father and Neil MacLennan from Loch Boisdale were chosen to play the pipes to march a group of German prisoners of war into captivity. One of the tunes they played was the 72nds' Farewell to Aberdeen.



Humphreys (Campbell) J. Frohse,



Rona tells a marvellous story about her uncle Angus Campbell [CD 1 track 16]. The picture shows Angus aged 9 barefoot and wearing trousers made Rona's mother Kate (herself aged 13), at the request of her own mother Mòr (Rona's grandmother) who was going away to Loch Boisdale to gut herring. Angus was originally taught by John MacDonald of Inverness. Angus was himself a famous piper, who only once went to the mainland to compete at the Argyllshire Gathering in Oban, where you had to submit six pibrochs for both the Gold Medal and the Open competition. He was hoping for a favourite tune such as Patrick Og but instead was asked to play "The Bells of Perth" both times – his least favourite of the six!



Four generations of the family - Rona's Grandmother Mòr Campbell "The Dictionary" (in the shawl, who also gave many songs to the School of Scottish Studies), Kate (Rona's mother), Rona, and baby Archie.



But of course when Rona was young, girls did not usually play the pipes. (Rona does know of a distant relative – a great-great-aunt of her father’s called Kiorstaidh (Christine) who would steal pipes to play out of the house on the hills, but she would be told off for unladylike behaviour – and ultimately emigrated to Australia).

How did Rona’s playing start? Rona describes her early years of learning pipes – how she copied everything her father did, including playing the chanter, borrowing and losing her mother’s tongs with a cushion and some string, and pretending they were pipes, and that she had the gift of remembering a tune [CD2 track 1]. She was also very dominantly right-handed, and (like Shonnie “Rhoidainn”’s brother Roddie, but unusually) she lifted the pipes to her right rather than her left shoulder. Her father initially taught her tunes, and she learnt and played by initially by ear. Then she started learning with her Uncle Angus, taking over the chanter and book over to him every Friday for lessons by the fire, also learning to play by staff notation. But returning in the dark, she would be assailed by fears of ghosts! She would have to run past a dip in the road known as Lag nam Bogan.

When she started learning the “big music” - Ceòl Mòr with Uncle Angus, she loved it and would be caught learning phrases by torchlight under the bedclothes. Rona says she would worry more about playing for her tutor Uncle Angus than for adjudicators. Praise had to be earned, otherwise performance would not improve. On one occasion Rona was playing The Big Spree to Uncle Angus, who criticised the 1st cadence by saying “the 1st cadence there was a yard long”.

Rona says that her grandfather “Gen” also used to teach her tunes, and he said “you’ll be in front of the king one day A Rona”, if she played well. [CD 1 track 13]. One of Rona’s early tunes was Gabhaidh sinn an Rathad Mòr, one of the songs and tunes she taught at Feis Rois, and which is recorded at CD2 tracks 8 and 9.

At her father’s suggestion, Rona later took a lesson on MacIntosh’s Lament, from famous piper Shonnie “Rhoidainn” MacDonald (“the sprinter”). Shonnie “Rhoidainn” played an end grace note on F rather than E at the end of the first variation. This story explains how exacting the standards of piping and pipers are. When Rona played this pibroch again to Uncle Angus, he was most displeased, and declared that he would stop teaching her if she played the grace note on the F. He died at the age of 102. When he was buried, the Priest Fr Angus MacQueen told Rona that she had been left out of his will over the pibroch notes! (CD 2 track 7]

Rona’s first competition on the chanter was at age 9-10, playing The Atholl Highlanders (the March Past of the Cameronians), and also competing was her cousin Catherine Campbell from Benbecula. Catherine won and Rona was 2nd, but Catherine did not carry on competing as Rona did. In 1949 Rona won the juvenile chanter competition at the South Uist Games and was third in the Juvenile piping.

THIS young Highland lass lives on Uist, said to breed the finest pipers, and as she practises on her chanter in the classroom of the little local school, she well may dream that one day she may emulate the art of these famous Islesfolk of hers. Lessons must come first, however, but with the advent of radio, rural schools, where the children of all ages often have to rely on tuition from one solitary teacher, can now augment the curriculum by listening to the courses of Broadcasts for Schools. Some of these are designed specially for schools in the country districts. 'Exploring Scotland', for instance, helps to broaden the horizons of country children by taking them on radio visits to the factories and workshops of our great industrial centres, made more real by the playing of recordings made on the spot 'as the wheels go round'.



Rona and her piping featured in an article in 'The Bulletin' insert booklet about talented children from Daliburgh Primary School,

This picture was taken at Seumas MacNeil's house before Rona competed at the Boys' High School, Glasgow in 1950, and shows Rona with her brother Neil tuning her pipes. Seumas MacNeil had put a challenge in the Oban Times for young pipers from South Uist to compete at the College of Piping Amateur Championship in Glasgow. Rona's Dad took both her brother Neil (aged 15) and Rona (13) to Glasgow to compete.



Below are pictures of a teenage Rona: Rona piping on the machair at Askernish, waiting to play at S Uist Games (colour); and at school aged 14/15.



Learning piping and canntaireachd could come in handy in unexpected ways, as Rona describes when she was a student nurse in Glasgow, and her brother Neil living on Paisley Road West, and how they agreed to meet at Glasgow Queen Street Station [CD 2 track 10]. Rona and her brother Neil are pictured below.



And the gentle family banter between Campbells and MacDonalds is captured in a Christmas story. Rona has a story [CD 2 track 17] about making Christmas dinner with Angela, her brother's wife, and piping in the Christmas pudding with a new cover for her pipe bag she had sent off for, made in Campbell tartan. Her father declared that he would refuse to eat any pudding piped in in a Campbell tartan, but relented when he saw the pudding in brandy!

## Pipers at South Uist Games, 1956.



About 1911 or 1912 Pine-Major Willie Lawrie, then of the 8th

Initially Rona competed at the South Uist Highland Games. The picture show Pipers at the South Uist games in 1956 (Rona is front row, 3rd from left, Judges are centre of front row). Rona names the people in the picture as:

Front row: L to R Rona's Dad Archie, John MacLennan (Committee Member), Rona, Neil MacLennan, (Committee Member), then the 3 judges with in the centre Sheriff Grant of Rothiemurchus near Aviemore; Archie MacNab piper, Dr George MacKinnon of Uist (related to her mother Kate), John MacDonald, a 1st cousin and son of Roderick who was on the Committee. In the back row L to R: John Garroway, Willie Macdonald, Neil Angus Macdonald of Barra, James McGillivray, Donald Macleod, Micky Mackay, Seumas MacNeill (who founded the College of Piping in Glasgow), Angus Campbell (her uncle and tutor), and brothers John Scott and Adam Scott.

For many years she would apply to enter other major competitions, only to have her applications rejected solely because she was a woman. Rona describes how she became the first woman to play at the Northern meeting [CD2 track 14]. By 1971, having won the Piobaireachd competition at South Uist, Rona had qualified to compete at the Bratach Gorm in London. (The Bratach Gorm is a qualifying event for the following year's Glenfiddich Piping Championship. The event is seen as one of the premier achievements in a top solo piper's career.

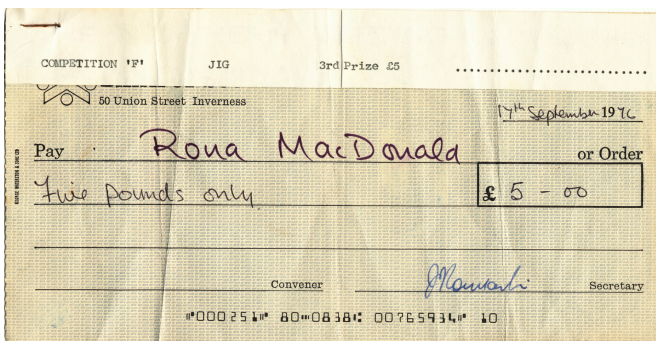
<http://www.scottishpipingsocietyoflondon.co.uk> )

However she was not allowed to compete due to being a female piper.



Then the Sex Discrimination Act became law in 1975. Consequently Rona was allowed to compete at the Northern Meeting in Inverness in 1976, and she was the first woman to do so. But when she about to go onstage to compete at the Dr Black Memorial Hall, she was

challenged by an official for not wearing a sleeved jacket. She got a taxi home to change into a jacket (see pictures above of Rona in full gear). But on her return she was still not allowed to play as she had “missed her turn”. Her friends then urged her to play in the Jig competition. She won 3rd



prize, a cheque for £5, and the first prize ever awarded to a woman at the Northern Meeting. Rona got a standing ovation and said she'd never cash it, and here's a picture of the original cheque, which she still proudly owns.

Rona's subsequent enduring piping success is well known and documented and therefore not repeated here. You can find Rona playing on her own CD "Eadarainn". This also features one of the tunes composed by Rona herself, the Lament for Alasdair. Dr Alasdair was their highly respected GP and she composed this pibroch in his memory. Rona also herself became a well-known competition adjudicator. So far our hopes of including a recording of Rona's playing in her peak competition years have been confounded by lack of success in tracking one down.

So here's the next best thing, some canntaireachd sung by Rona: Fhuair mi pòg [CD 2 track 4] and MacIntosh's Lament, the first pibroch that Rona learnt from her Uncle Angus [CD 2 track 11]. A video of Rona's hands "playing" part of this pibroch can be seen at: <https://linnphippfolk.co.uk/salute-to-rona-lightfoot/>

Rona tells an associated story about the King's Hand [CD 2 track 4] about Fhuair mi pòg and the 1651 Battle of Worcester. According to legend, King Charles II came to thank the 1000 highlanders in his army and asked about the one in the bonnet, who was identified as John MacCrimmon, the best piper in Scotland. The King reportedly offered his hand to be kissed, hence the derivation of the tune.

... And finally, one of our favourite stories (the one about the two cows and the two boys who argue over whose is whose ...) is at CD 2 track 17].

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