

DANNY McPHERSON – Mildura Pipe Band’s first Pipe Major.

Donald “Danny” McPherson was a fascinating character: he was born at Portree, Skye, around 1881, the son of an accomplished piper, Donald McPherson, and learnt to play the pipes at an early age. He showed great aptitude and commitment, practising for three hours a day, and became something of a child celebrity. (It is said that people would gather outside his house to listen to him practising).

At 14, he enlisted in the Seaforth Highlanders as a drummer boy, and furthered his studies in piping with some of the greatest teachers of British regimental piping. He also became an expert wrestler (he later claimed to be “wrestling champion of South Africa”) and highland dancer.



He served with the Seaforth Highlanders in the Matabele Wars 1896-7, in Southern Africa, and then took up an offer to become the personal piper to a Sultan in the then British colony of Malaya.

When the Boer War broke out in 1899, Danny returned to Scotland, re-enlisted with the Seaforth Highlanders and served in South Africa till the end of the war in 1902.

After this, he again returned to Scotland where he learnt the trade of making and repairing pipes from the legendary pipe-maker, Peter Henderson of Glasgow. It was during this period that he met up with Colin Cameron, a famous exponent of the classical (and fiendishly difficult!) bagpipe style known as *piobaireachd*. Cameron agreed to teach Danny the technique, as payment for having his pipes repaired and maintained.

At the outbreak of World War 1, Danny again enlisted and served with distinction as a piper.

In about 1920, he emigrated to Australia and, when the Mildura pipe band was formed in 1922, Danny McPherson was appointed Pipe Major. It was decided that, in his honour, the new band should wear the McPherson tartan – as it still does today. He immediately organised learner classes in piping, drumming and Highland dancing and, six months later, took the new band to the Maryborough competitions where it won the prize for best Novice Band. Among the young people he taught was Bill Brown, who succeeded Danny as Pipe Major of the Mildura band and, later, as pipe tutor at Scotch College, Melbourne.

Around 1926, he moved to Millicent, South Australia, where he tutored the Millicent Pipe band, and married a young side-drummer called Clarice Waters. He worked for a time as an insurance agent during the Depression, but made much of his income from teaching the pipes, and from winning prizes for piping and dancing at the many local Caledonian Society competitions which were held over Victoria and South Australia.

When World War 2 broke out, Danny again tried to enlist, this time in an Australian unit, but was rejected because of his age. He wrote to a nephew in Scotland who happened to have the same name, and had him send out a copy of *his* birth certificate, which Danny passed off as his own! It was several months before the deception was discovered and Danny was discharged.

In 1946 he was appointed Pipe Tutor at Scotch College, where he started the enduring tradition of piping at that school and, in 1957, he began a second school pipe band at Haileybury College. He was, by now, an old man, severely crippled with arthritis, and often playing his pipes from a wheel-chair, but he still managed to teach for two afternoons a week at each school.

In 1959, he collapsed while playing at a wedding, and was found to be suffering from advanced stomach cancer. He died a few days later at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital.