

Bagpipe Music : Pipe Tunes : Pipe Music : Bagpipe Composers : McGillivray Piping

**John McLellan, D.C.M., Dunoon
(1875-1949)**



Known to pipers as “John McLellan, Dunoon” but to friends and family as “Jock,” John McLellan was a quiet and shy man who composed some of the most enduring melodies in pipe music.

Among his greatest contributions are the retreat marches *Lochanside*, *The Highland Brigade at Magersfontein*, *Heroes of Vittoria*, *The Bloody Fields of Flanders* and *The Dream Valley of Glendaruel*, the competition marches *The Taking of Beaumont Hamel*, *The Cowal Gathering*, *South Hall* and *Glen Caladh Castle*, the slow air *Mary Darroch*, and the 2/4 slow march *The Road to the Isles*. The latter tune, composed around 1891, began life as “The Bens of Jura,” soon became “The 71st’s Farewell to Dover,” then “The Highland Brigade’s March to Heilbron” and later “The Burning Sands of Egypt.” What probably began as a rousing 2/4 march was gradually transformed into today’s

popular song and slow march.

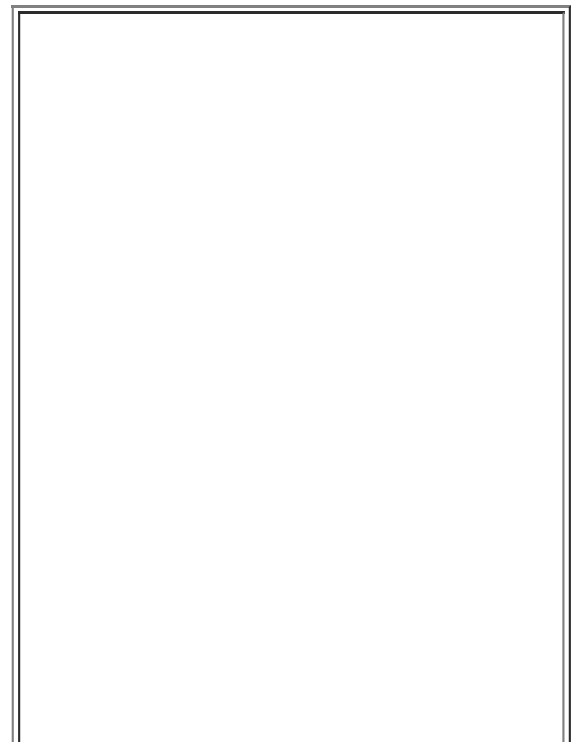
He was born in Dunoon on August 8, 1875 of an Islay father and Jura mother, Neil McLellan and Mary Darroch McLellan. He had two brothers and three sisters. His father died of pneumonia when John was just 8, leaving his 41-year-old washerwoman mother to raise the family, the youngest of which was just a year old.

Little is known about his early piping life, or even who taught him. This was perhaps partly because he was known to be modest to a fault and would very rarely talk about himself. Very few photos of him have come to light.

He enlisted in 1892 at age 17 with the Highland Light Infantry and went with the 1st Battalion to Malta in 1897. It was at this point that he began naming his compositions for places where he served or people he served with. He saw action in the Boer War in South Africa, where he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry in the field.

He left military life soon thereafter and in 1903 joined the Govan Police Pipe Band in Glasgow before returning to Dunoon around 1905. Some of his compositions can be found in the old Peter Henderson publications as written by "J. McLellan, Govan Police."

However, most of his tunes were first published in the *Cowal Collection* books. Because he never published his own collection of bagpipe music, his status as one of the greatest and most prolific and pipe music composers is perhaps not as clear as it is with G. S. McLennan and Donald



MacLeod.

During the Great War he was a piper in the 8th Argyllshire Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders – Willie Lawrie’s regiment – and served with the 51st Highland Division on the Western front. He and Lawrie served in the same band during the war.

He became pipe-major of the 8th Argylls in 1919 held that position until he retired in 1930.

During the 1930s, he compiled and published a book of tunes composed by members of his regiment – *The 8th Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Collection*. He contributed 40 of the 65 tunes in the collection, and this remains the largest single collection of his work published while he was alive.

In later life he was active in piping around Dunoon, teaching the Dunoon Grammar School Cadet Pipe Band and helping the local Boys’ Brigade band.

Besides being a piper, he played the fiddle and was said to be an excellent whistle player. He was a middling painter and poet, and one of the few composers who often wrote lyrics to his tunes. In some cases he wrote the lyrics first. He was known to write light verse at the front, 100 yards from the German lines, and his poetry was often published in newspapers in the west of Scotland.



A rare, early photo of John McLellan of Dunoon, courtesy of Andrew Berthoff and [pipes | drums](#).

