

Grey's Notes

by Michael Grey



Photo: Ryan MacDonald Photography

Wandering Pipers

A COUCH that converts to a bed is a good thing to have. A spare bed is right up there with common household conveniences like, say, a toaster, a fridge or a bottle opener. A spare room may be best and the height of luxurious guest accommodation but you just can't beat the good old sofa bed for utility and handiness.

Pipers and pipe band folk are an itinerant bunch. We move around a lot. We always have. Think of the clichéd image of the gypsy piper, travelling highways and byways with pipes and little else in tow. Open doors and temporary accommodation were always a given in the old stories. In tune titles alone we have a repertoire that suggests the same. Our lot has always been on the trot: *The Wandering Piper*; *Wandering Home*; *Going Home* and *Bundle and Go*; the list is long. Then, of course, we have hundreds of tunes with “return” and “welcome” in their titles. If we're not going, we're coming.

I think that the old tales of the itinerant piper really do ring true today. Pipers have created a remarkable musical fraternity, great waves of hospitality and friendship abound and we couch surf those waves in a big way.

The freakish regularity that pipers (and drummers, too) move about has made the couch, or, again, even better, the fold-out sofa bed, a well-worn piece of furniture in a lot of homes. It seems we're always looking for “a place to crash”, an economical place to sleep, or sleep it off — and always with friends.

I think now of my most unforgettable unplanned overnight piping-related accommodation. It's seared in my memory. My palms sweat a bit just thinking about it.

The scene: Edinburgh, 1980-something. I'd been bumping around Scotland right out of university, not exactly flush with cash, still, managing to pipe, have a bit of fun and thanks to friends, fine-tune my itinerancy. On this occasion I was with my friend Colin MacLellan.

After one outing — probably after having taken in the National Portrait Gallery or, maybe, the rollicking Museum of Childhood, we landed at his parents' place. Many will be well aware of the famous Dean Park Crescent address, domicile of the MacLellans: Captain John A. and his wife, Christine or “Bunty”.



A young Michael Grey being taught by Captain John A. MacLellan

Photo courtesy of Colin MacLellan

I'd been there many times before for lessons with Captain MacLellan but never for any other reason. It had always been an awesome place (“awesome” used here in the literal, non-slang way) with Clasps and medals in clear, yet understated view, and impressively interesting photos, like, for instance, John MacLellan and Yehudi Menuhin in deep conversation.

Anyway, it was late in the day and knowing Mikie needed a place to crash, Colin offered up some floor space.

“Oh, yes, you must! It's no problem,” said Colin's mum. “The Captain won't mind and anyway, he's away judging in Chatsworth and won't be home until tomorrow.” Gulp. I wasn't loving this idea. The thought of couch-surfing at Dean Park Crescent was a bit unnerving to say the least. John MacLellan was (and is) a hero; a daunting presence; a big presence. At the time, he was part of a small, rarefied group of living piping legends. Stay at his house?

Seeing my (damned ungrateful) lack of enthusiasm, Mrs MacLellan added more encouragement, “Oh yes, we can get the truckle bed out and tuck you away in the Captain's office.”

Now I didn't know a truckle bed from one of nails but my options were limited. So, that night I hung my hat — with thanks — on something called a “truckle bed” in Captain John A. MacLellan's sanctum sanctorum: the garret room at the top of the house where reeds and music were made and priceless piping memorabilia was stored.

I remember like yesterday stretching out on the low, four-wheeled, fold-out mattress — the

famed truckle bed — and looking around the room. The dim light from the street below reflecting sloped walls adorned with handwritten manuscripts of G.S. McLennan and company. With my heart beating at its near-maximum rate, I knew there wouldn't be much chance of sleep. I closed my eyes and hoped for rest.

It seemed like only a few minutes before I was again staring eyes wide-open at the mementoes of piping greats. Clattery noise, footsteps, voices. Sweet Mother! It was the Captain — he was home! I'm pretty sure that at that moment the humidity in that truckle bed rose more than a few points. The Captain had opted for a long evening's drive home instead of staying south. I was in luck — or not so much.

With an instant crazed vision of me riding my wheeled truckle bed, careering down two flights of stairs and straight out the door to the street, I waited for what I was sure would be another great big brogue to drop. I couldn't imagine Captain MacLellan would be much impressed with me, a punk Canuck, bundled up — or truckled up — in his piping room.

Of course, as is so often the way, I was wrong. I was a guest, an invited guest, and shown, of course, only the very best hospitality. I'm happy to say I've never had it any other way in Scotland.

What a memory. Colin and I still talk of this time and have a good laugh.

I learned a lesson about hospitality and benevolence: it's everywhere — especially where pipers wander.

Have truckle bed, will travel. ●