



Fred Sangster: A Cleveland Pipe Band Drumming Legend

by Barry Conway

After the article “Cleveland’s Gem” which appeared in the spring 2016 issue of the Voice, I thought it only appropriate to write about another member of the Ohio pipe band community who had great influence over this region with regards to pipes and drums.

Like a lot of cities, Cleveland’s pipe band landscape was greatly influenced by mostly Scottish immigrants who came to this country for a new life but kept a deep love of the music for their homeland. In Cleveland, no one had greater influence in pipe band drumming than Fred Sangster.

Fred William Sangster was born in Edinburgh in 1905. His love of music developed early. By the time he was eight, he was already studying drums, clarinet, and bugle. When he turned fourteen, he joined the Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders. Fred rose to the rank of Corporal Drummer and served with the “Cameron’s” in Queenstown in Ireland during the Irish War of Independence. The battalion engaged in several fire-fights with the Irish Republican Army. Fred also served in Germany, Southern England, Spain, France, and on the island of Shamock in the Mediterranean.

One notable event Fred attended with the Camerons was the 1924 Olympics held at the Stade de Colombes, Paris, France. As depicted in the movie, *Chariot’s of Fire*, the Camerons were positioned in the infield while Scottish runner Eric Liddell, “The Flying Scotsman,” won a Gold Medal for Great Britain in the 400 meter race after withdrawing from the 100 meter race as the qualifying rounds were on Sunday.

Because of the Depression, the highland regiments were forced to cut back. Fred was given the option of enlisting for another eleven years or leave so, in 1929, Fred left his beloved Cameron Highlanders and move to the United States.

Fred first worked for the Interlake Steamship Co. working on lake freighters. Because he was usually traveling the Great Lakes, he was not active in pipe bands. While docked in Cleveland, Fred heard the Cleveland Kiltie Band performing and got the itch to start playing again. He took a job with the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Authority, a job he would later retire from in 1975, and began performing with the Cleveland Kiltie Band which had formed in 1923 by a group of immigrant Scots working at the Fisher Body Plant. They were the only pipe band in Cleveland at the time and



were associated with the Masonic Order and played at their functions as all members were also members of the Masons.

In 1948, Fred was part of a group of musicians who broke off from the Cleveland Kiltie band and formed the Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band as they wanted to enter into pipe band competitions. The Band was under the direction of P/M James Sheil with Fred as Drum Sergeant. The founding members included Don Ross, father of Doug Ross (former member of the Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band, Clan MacFarlane Pipe Band (Gr1) and Toronto Police Pipe Band (Gr1), Pipe Major of the North Coast Pipe Band (Gr2) and retired EUSPBA Adjudicator). The band also included Willis E. Slagle, father of Noel Slagle, who went on to become Pipe Major of the Caledonian band as well as Pipe Sergeant of the Clan MacFarlane Pipe Band, Pipe Major of the Western Reserve Pipe Band (Gr 2), and an adjudicator for the Pipers and Pipe Band Society of Ontario.

The band was dedicated to a high standard of play and competed successfully at many Highland Games from its inception. A superb solo drummer, Fred won many medals and trophies including the Open Drumming award at the Toronto Indoor Games in 1951.

In 1957, as drumming instructor, Fred traveled to Iona College in New Rochelle, NY with the St. Patrick Church



Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band 1948. Fred is in the first row to right of bass drum



PIPES AND DRUMS 1948

Shamrock Pipe Band of Cleveland, to compete at an event sponsored by the Council of Gaelic Societies where it won first place, Irish Pipe Bands.

In 1958, the Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band, under P/M Jack Thompson, finished first at the Hamilton, Ontario Games where Fred's drum corps also finished first. Over Labor Day weekend in that same year, the band traveled to the Schenectady Games where the band finished second to the Boston Caledonian Pipe Band. After the games, the players from Boston convinced the band to travel to Brookline, Massachusetts to compete in the games held on Labor Day. Again, the band placed second to Boston Caledonian Pipe Band. Because not all players could make the trip, Fred played bass drum and was awarded the "Best Bass Drum" award in the contest.

In 1959, under P/M Noel Slagle, the band again traveled to the Hamilton, Ontario Games and again finished first. The 1960s was a period where the Caledonian Pipe Band did not compete. Instead, the band performed locally especially at their Tartan Ball, which was the largest pipe band event in the state of Ohio at that time. Fred and his Drum Section "stole the show" with the unique drum beats and flashy stick work. As an aside, it was during this period that Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band pipers Don Ross, Doug Ross, Noel Slagle, Stanley Limon, Bob Sloan, and Dick Finnigan traveled to St. Catherines, Ontario to play with the Clan MacFarlane Pipe Band.

In 1977, the Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band reentered the competition arena with Pipe Major Bob Sloan, now with the Atlanta Pipe Band, with Fred as Drum Sergeant. The band won first place at the inaugural Ohio Scottish



Games as well at the Ligonier Highland Games. The band also traveled to the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) in Toronto, Canada to participate in the parade of pipe bands and to enter the pipe band competition. At the time, Fred was the only person to have held the drum sergeant position for the band. Fred retired from active playing in the early 1980s.

An excellent teacher, Fred tutored more than 200 individual drummers and worked with drum sections of many different bands including Rocky River (OH) High School, the Cleveland Greys, the Heather Highlanders, the Shamrock Pipe Band, Ohio State University ROTC Pipe Band and the Band of Ohio, a concert Band. Fred's more recent list of students includes Les MacLeod, lead drummer of the Western Reserve Pipe Band Gr 2, Patty Slagle of the Clan MacFarlane Pipe Band Gr 1, Michael Crawley, lead drummer of 87th Cleveland PB, Windsor Police PB Gr 1 and

Great Lakes PB Gr 2, and David (Van) Walters of the 87th Cleveland PB, Western Reserve PB, and North Coast PB.

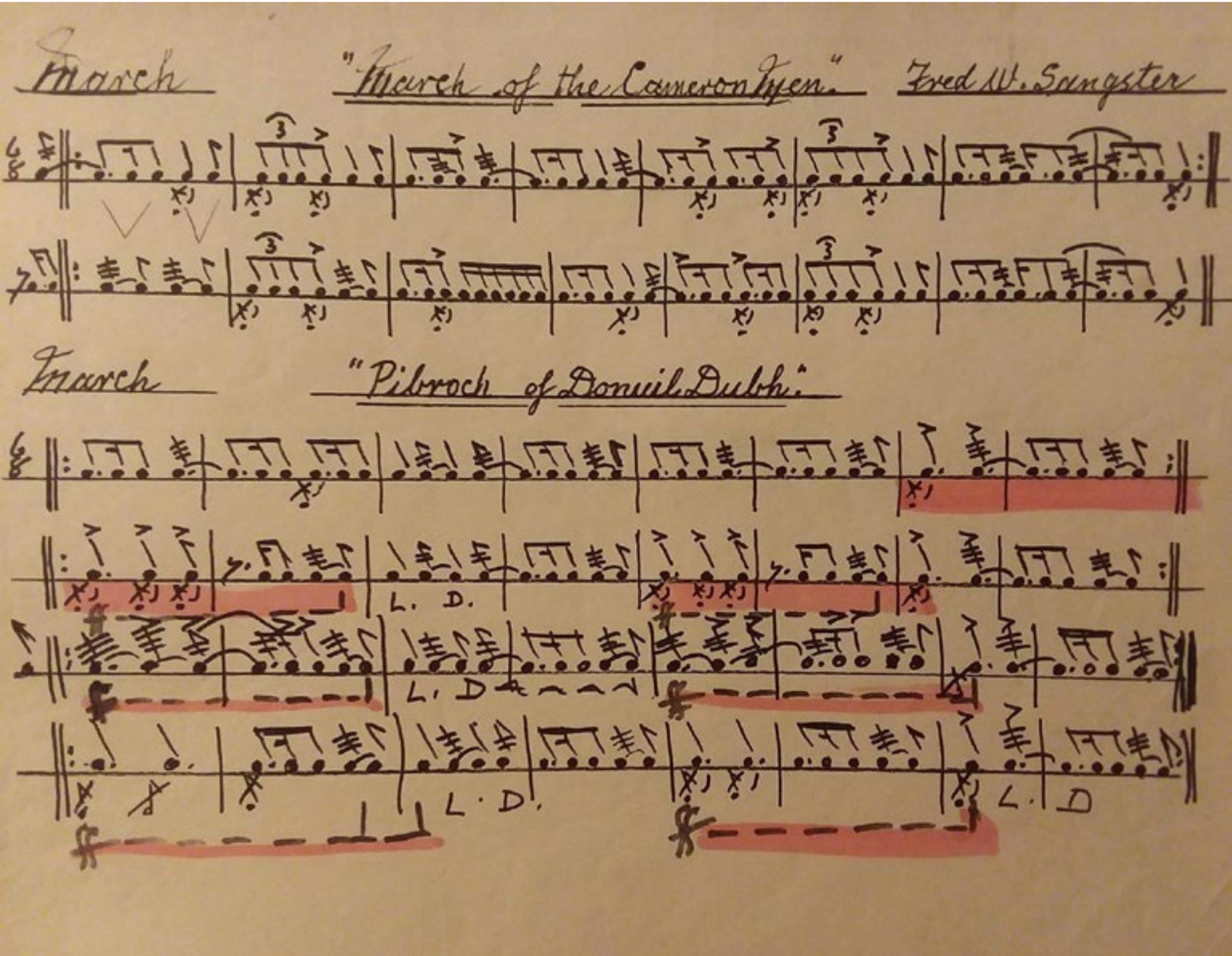
A lover of all things "drumming", Fred would frequently correspond with pipe band drumming great Jimmy Catherwood to exchange ideas and drum scores. Jimmy Catherwood, of Dalziel Highland and Edinburgh City Police Pipe Band fame, was instrumental in the founding of the Scottish Pipe Band Association which later became the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association. Fred also corresponded with other drumming greats such as Gordon Jelly, Alex Duthart and John Kirkwood. Fred was not limited to pipe band drumming and also corresponded with Gene Krupa, drummer for the Benny Goodman Band, where they exchanged ideas and drum scores over many years. One such composition was a score Fred referred to as a "Spanish 3/8" that Gene later incorporated into his show.

From left to right, John Crawley, Fred Sangster and Jack Thomson performing





Fred Sangster Drum Score March of the Cameron Men and Pibroch O'Donauil Dubh



Fred did not drive an automobile and always carried his drumsticks with him. He was well known for playing on the dashboard of whatever car he was in. No matter how long a trip it was, Fred never stopped drumming.

A man of many talents, Fred was also an exceptional artist and woodcarver. He painted intricate designs on dozens of drums and was once featured on a cover of the *Sunday Magazine* of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Fred also designed the Cleveland Caledonian Pipe Band Crest and carved and painted a bar in his basement to replicate a rope tension drum complete with ropes, tension adjustments and painted snare head.

Fred passed away in 1992 at the age of 87 and is interred at the Brooklyn Heights Cemetery. Fred will always be missed by those who knew him but will never be forgotten.

I would like to thank the many people who helped pull information together for this article including Ken Eller, Michael Crawley, Patty Slagle, Sandy Hain, Bob Sloan, Alec Murphy, Dick Finnigan, David (Van) Walters, and Bruce Greig.