



Tribute to
William Hannah

Luke Daniels

With Neil Ewart, Ian Carr and John Paul Gandy



William Hannah (1891-1961) was born in the mining village of Blackburn, West Lothian. Having started on the mouth organ as a boy he became well known as Scotland's premiere melodeon player by the end of the First World War, during which he served in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

Unfortunately, due to the passage of time we have very little information about his life, but his reputation as a popular bandleader in the 1920s and prolific recording artist for companies like Parlophone and Columbia is beyond doubt. Hannah was cited by Jimmy Shand in his autobiography as a major influence on him, via the Hannah tutor book & tune collection which was first published in 1925.

He worked as Head Postman at Bathgate Post Office and served again in World War II as a Lieutenant in the Home Guard, on one occasion bravely disposing of a live grenade and saving the lives of several people. He was later injured by a bomb and subsequently awarded the M.B.E. in 1944. He had three sons, John, William (Jnr) who also played accordion, Len and, according to the account below, at least one daughter.

His role in the development of the modern accordion was an important one. By expanding the simple tonic/dominant basses on earlier melodeons used by brothers, Daniel and Peter Wyper from Hamilton, South Lanarkshire to an Italian-style "chromatic accordion" with 8 (diatonic) basses plus a hybrid instrument, with a melodeon-style treble end with exposed pallets and a 24-button piano accordion-style bass end

The latter was developed and marketed by A.H. Wilkinson & Co. Ltd of Glasgow, under their "Wilkinson's Excelsior" brand and featured in Wilkinson's Accordion Tutor for 19 and 21 key Chromatic Melodeons (Glasgow, 1926).

By this time William Hannah was "Scotland's premier accordionist" whose signature instrument described as the "Hannah Model" (one of which was restored by Theo Gibb and used on this recording) has two rows of buttons on the treble side. The outer row of the melody keys contains the tones of "B" major, the inner row those of "C" major; so all notes of the chromatic scale can be played on these instruments. This was the foundation of Jimmy Shand's development of the Hohner Organola B/C in the 1930s and his "Shand Morino" B/C/C# button accordion of the 1950s as well as the B/C button accordions which became, and remains, highly popular in the Irish tradition.

Hannah was one of the finest melodeon players of his era with a band to rival that of his great contemporaries. Present day East Whitburn based band leader Dick Black (now 84) writes: "My father stayed next door to Will at Knowehead Cottages, Blackburn. As my father and his brothers all played Wilkinson Excelsior melodeons which Hannah himself played and endorsed, you will appreciate that Will was the local hero and much respected. I used to be visited by his son John, who at that time was coming up to Whitburn weekly to visit an invalid sister. He used to tell me about his father and the exploits of the band. One of his memories was when Will was asked to go down to London and record for Parlophone. He made the journey by motorcycle with the melodeon on his back. On another occasion the recording company supplied a drummer and pianist, who although talented musicians, had no idea of Scottish Dance Music tempos and the end result didn't please him in the least. I still remember my own father saying 'No-one has the lift o' Willie Hannah'".

William Hannah died in Carron, Stirlingshire at the age of 70, on 16th March 1961.

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1. Eightsome Reels

Unknown/ The Fair Maid of Perth/ Rachael Rae/ My Love She's But a Lassie Yet
Roxburgh Castle/ East Neuk of Fife/ The Drummer/ Hey Johnnie Cope

2. Jigs

Bonnie Dundee/ Wi' a Hundred Pipers an' a' an' a'
Rock and Wee Pickle Tow/ Kinloch of Kinloch

3. Inverness Gathering

Inverness Gathering/ 79ths Farewell to Gibraltar/ (Jig) Pibroch o' Donald Dhu

4. Waltzes

Leezie Lindsay/ Ho Ro My Nut Brown Maiden/ Skye Boat Song

5. Schottische

The Gordon

6. Highlands/Reels

Duncan Davidson/ Soldier's Joy/ Lord Lynedoch/ Fairy Dance

7. Dashing White Sergeant

Dashing White Sergeant/ (Jig) Kenmure's on and Awa'
(Jig) The Muckin' O' Geordie's Byre

8. Waltzes

The Auld Hoose (Intro)/ William Hannah's Waltze

9. Reels

Duke of Perth/ Staten Island/ The Auld Grey Cat/ Goodnight and Joy be wi' ye

10. Boston Two Step

Original version composed by Luke Cavendish Everett

11. Strathspeys

Glasgow Highlanders/Unknown

12. Waltzes

Little Annie Rooney/ Peggy O' Neill/ Molly O'Morgan/ Maggie Murphy's Home