

Tulsa—Like You’ve Never Heard It Before

My grandfather was Dr. Charles W. Kerr, longtime pastor of the First Presbyterian Church (1900 to 1941) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In 1932 he was elected Moderator of the 144th General Assembly of the (national) Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

My grandfather’s career began in 1898 as a young Scots Presbyterian missionary to the Indians and Freedmen in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). In 1907, he brought a bankrupt Presbyterian college in Muskogee, Oklahoma, the Henry Kendall College, to Tulsa and re-established it as the University of Tulsa, with a world renown College of Petroleum Engineering.

During the infamous 1921 Tulsa Race War, in the manner of John Knox, Grandfather Kerr directly confronted a howling lynch mob at the Tulsa County Courthouse to stop the lynching of an innocent black youth, Dick Rowland, falsely accused of “attempted rape” by the racist publisher of *The Tulsa Tribune*, who deliberately incited the attempted lynching of this youth by his editorial, “To Lynch A Nigger Tonight.”

Because Grandfather Kerr was very proud of both his own Scots origins and those of the American (national) Presbyterian Church, a Scots bagpipe major, Lindsay Davidson, who was greatly impressed by Dr. Kerr’s stand against racism during the 1921 Tulsa Race War, is composing the world’s first bagpipe opera to honour Dr. Kerr.

The Sunday 27th April 2003 edition of *The Glasgow Sunday Herald* published an article (see below) about this opera being written to honour Grandfather Kerr for standing up for racial justice against the Tulsa Lynch Mob during the infamous 1921 Tulsa Race War. The e-address for this article is www.sundayherald.com/33392.

In honouring Grandfather Kerr for his tartan-clad courage in facing down the Tulsa Lynch Mob, Presbyterian Reformed Christianity will also be honoured for its long-term commitment to racial and social justice. This is derived, in fact, from John Knox’s teachings on “the equality of all believers.”

An earlier article about Dr. Kerr’s personal role in the 1921 Tulsa Race War was published in the 10th February 2002 issue of *Scotland on Sunday* and may be found at www.scotlandonsunday.com/spectrum.cfm?id=153422002.

Oklahoma! How the world’s first-ever bagpipe opera will be set in America

Story of US race riots to be backed by skirl of pipes
by Liam McDougall, Arts Correspondent

It was a turning point in American history: a bloody race war that led to 300 black men, women and children murdered by an army of whites and the Ku Klux Klan. But now the infamous Tulsa race riots of 1921 are to be commemorated—by becoming the focus of the world’s first bagpipe opera.

The three-act production, to be called *Tulsa*, is the brainchild of piper and composer Lindsay Davidson who plans to perform it in Glasgow and Edinburgh before taking his composition to the U.S. Not only will this be the first opera to be led by the bagpipes, the libretto will also be sung completely in Scots.

Based on the story of Dr. Charles William Kerr, a Scottish pastor and missionary who founded the First Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, it dramatises his attempts to stop the lynching of a black teenager who has been falsely accused of rape.

Set to the music of the Scottish bagpipes and full orchestra, the opera begins with the events of May 31, 1921, when a racist editor publishes an editorial urging citizens to “lynch a nigger tonight” and to gather at the courthouse, where the boy is being held, “for a lynching bee.” In response to the article, more than 3000 whites congregated at the town’s courthouse to demand that the “nigger boy” be given over to them. But Kerr, risking his own life, confronted the crowd and forced them to disperse by angrily preaching about their damnation in hell if they murder the boy.

Later that night, however, after Kerr had gone home, the white crowd encountered a group of well-armed blacks who were marching to the courthouse to protect the boy—and chaos ensued. Already that year, there had been 140 lynchings, mostly of young black men or Native Americans.

The angry confrontation prompted the police to form 500 “emergency deputies” from the same courthouse lynch mob and they were joined by thousands more white gunmen and vigilantes from across the city. Local hardware stores were broken into by the police to supply their “deputies” with arms and ammunition.

The next day, on the morning of Wednesday, June 1, 1921, an army of whites attacked Greenwood, the black district of Tulsa. They murdered 300 unarmed blacks, burned more than 1100 of their homes to the ground—leaving over half of Tulsa’s black population homeless—and deliberately destroyed 23 black churches. Greenwood’s business district—35 city blocks—was completely devastated and more than 700 blacks were left seriously injured.

The situation got so out of hand that the Oklahoma governor declared martial law and sent in the state militia to stop the murder of the blacks. On the orders of the militia commander, the mayor of Tulsa revoked all “special commission” of the “emergency police deputies” and the city’s other armed forces on the grounds that they were the very people responsible for the murder of hundreds of blacks in the city.

The commander also found that no authentic “civil insurrection” by the Greenwood blacks—the pretext used by the police to launch the race war—had ever occurred. After the rioting was over, the accused black youth, Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old shoeshine boy, was found innocent. It was discovered he had stumbled by accident into a white female lift operator after the elevator had jerked, and was released.

The story, an unlikely basis for a Scottish opera, was given to Davidson by Professor Stephen Kerr, who commissioned him to write pipe tunes dedicated to his family. Kerr, a human rights lawyer and Charles Kerr’s grandson, gave the piper a book he had written about his grandfather and the race riots for inspiration, and immediately Davidson saw the potential in the story for a bagpipe opera.

Davidson, 29, said: “I looked through the book and saw there was a lot more in this than a couple of pipe tunes. There was something dramatic in it so I decided to write an opera. Bagpipes traditionally have had no place in an opera. There was one in the 1960s that had a piper but the guy only played about five notes. This will be the first to be based entirely on the music of the bagpipes. When I tell people what I’m doing they look at me like I’m a wee bit mad.”

He added: “This will be a real opera with the voice of the pipes. For instance, in the opera when the race riot happens I use the music of the bagpipes as a commentary. Instead of having a race riot on the stage, I’ll project photographic images of the actual riot with the pipe music behind it. We are using pipes to their full dramatic effect. The sheer force of the pipes is a tremendous dramatic tool.”

Davidson, who divides his time between Linlithgow and Krakow in Poland, where he is the musical director of the Galicean Celtic Orchestra, began writing the opera in January. The first performance will be next year in Edinburgh as part of his PhD in bagpipes and Western art and culture, which he is studying at Napier University. With the help of Dr. Tom Hubbard, of the University of Edinburgh, who is writing the libretto for the opera in Scots, Davidson hopes to take his unique work on a tour of Scotland.

“I’m almost finished writing act one and I hope to have it finished by the end of this year,” Davidson said. “The plan is to form a small operatic company and to perform a concert version in Edinburgh towards the end of next year and then take it on a tour of Scotland. Once the chamber version is better known I plan to talk to Scottish Opera about a version with a full orchestra and performance. But I’ll have to make sure that it works first. Then I would hope to take it to America.”

Despite some puzzled looks from fellow pipers when they hear about Davidson’s plans, Kerr’s reaction to the work has been positive. Speaking from his home in Tulsa, he told the Sunday Herald: “The parts of the music that I have heard so far have been beautiful. What the pipes do is give a unique Scottish sound to the orchestra, and their interaction with the other instruments is wonderful.”

“What Lindsay Davidson is trying to do is to legitimise the Scottish bagpipe as a concert instrument. What better way than to do this than through an opera about a Scottish minister in the wilds of America standing up for racial justice?”