1.02 Transcriptions of Tunes by R. L. O’Mealy.
Robbie Hannan.

Among the musical instruments collection housed in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum is a set of pipes which is probably one of the last O’Mealy was to make. The museum acquired the set in February 1976 from Angus McDonald, an antique dealer from Holywood, co. Down. The set is in C#, which was particularly favoured by O’Mealy, and is of boxwood with ivory mounts and brass fittings. It was made, more than likely, c 1945 for a man by the name of McWilliams (his forename is at present unknown) of Groomsport, near Bangor in co. Down. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about McWilliams, but he was known by Jack O’Rourke, a piper from Ballinamore, co. Leitrim a close friend of O’Mealy’s who spent his adult life in Belfast. In fact, Jack remembered O’Mealy actually making this set of pipes for Mr McWilliams.

The pipe box in which the set was stored also contained a letter from O’Mealy to McWilliams as well as a number of tunes written out by O’Mealy with notes on ornamentation and general hints useful to someone learning the pipes. The letter contained details of a planned visit by O’Mealy and his wife to Mr McWilliams’ home in Groomsport. It would appear that the purpose of the visit was for O’Mealy to carry out minor repairs to the pipes, and quite possibly to give McWilliams a piping lesson.


One of the most interesting items in the collection is a transcript of ‘The Little House under the Hill’ and the accompanying commentary on it by O’Mealy. The word ‘Lesson’ is written at the top right hand corner of the transcription, as is the word ‘Fingers.’ The point O’Mealy seems to be trying to get across in this lesson is the importance of making an airtight seal with the fingers on the chanter. The test he suggests for ensuring this has been achieved, namely by sounding the bottom D, is fool-proof since this note will not sound unless the finger-holes have been completely covered. The tune, ‘The Little House under the Hill,’ was no doubt chosen by him as it contains the notes B and F#, which require respectively two fingers and one finger to be raised to sound the note. It provides a good exercise for the beginner to master the art of making an air-tight seal.

Another issue raised by O’Mealy in this lesson which must be addressed by the beginner at an early stage is not to over-blow the back D, especially when descending from the second octave.

It is interesting to have a transcription by O’Mealy himself of ‘The Cork Hornpipe’ as this was one of the tunes he recorded for the BBC in Belfast in 1943 and it appears to have been his curtain-call piece. The version here, however, is much simpler than the recording from the 1943 BBC recording, the second part of which abounds in back-stitching. His argument that the sequence G’ D’, F#’ D’ is easier to play than G’ A F#’ A is undoubtedly correct. O’Mealy’s comment that there were two further parts of ‘The Cork Hornpipe’ is intriguing since there does not appear to be any trace of them in music collections. In his notes to his two-part setting of ‘The Londonderry Hornpipe’ he states that there are two other parts, although a five-part setting is quite common.
It is somewhat curious that he describes ‘The Round of Beef’ as a single jig even though he gives the time signature as 6/8. Similarly, he describes ‘The Moving Bog’ in one of the transcriptions as a slip or sling jig despite the fact that the time signature is 6/8. His suggested fingering for back D in this tune with the thumb, B fingers and G fingers open is somewhat unconventional.

‘The Sligo Lasses’ is interesting in that, like ‘The Cork Hornpipe,’ this was one of the tunes O’Mealy recorded for the BBC in 1943. The version here is close to his 1943 recording. It can be found in DMI 636.

‘The Lagan Slashers’ is not unlike the well-known reel ‘The Flags of Dublin,’ and it is very similar to ‘The Miller’s Maid’ (DMI 528). It is interesting to note that another version from O’Mealy’s playing appears in JFSSI where it is given the title ‘The League and Slashers.’

It is submitted that this may be a misinterpretation by J. H. Neill, who supplied the transcription, for ‘The Lagan Slashers’ and it may be that the mistake arose from his unfamiliarity with O’Mealy’s midlands accent.

Editor’s note. See the associated directory for full size copies of the original manuscript, letter and notes.

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1 F. O’Neill ed., The Dance Music of Ireland, Chicago 1907.
2 F. O’Neill op.cit
3 Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society vol vii 1909 pp32-4
45 Rugby Avenue.
Dorna Road,
Belfast.
26 July 1945

Dear Mr. McWilliam,

I got your last letter alright, thank you very much.

I am now allowed on tram or bus, I do not walk quietly or very far.

This is only a short note to say that if either Tuesday or Wednesday (28th) is fine, and if all goes well, R.D. O'Nealy and I will go there to see you and the Pipes.

There is much to say, but in the hope that I will get there to see you, please let them know. If we get there, it will be midday or early afternoon before we arrive, and we must not risk a late train back from Dungar.

Yours very sincerely,

R.D. O'Nealy
Reel The Soggy Slasheen

First time

Second time

Second ending

The measure is of playing

Keep the E make space note
till it slides your second P to
3 finger like to the blues back

whether the difficulties you find let me know and I'll
help you. The turn on the E is done by making then second
E into a perfect make space note stick over E finger only and you
will Soon make . When we meet again still
Put the right back then

J. O'M
Double jig  
Jackson's Morning Bush

Keep A open, make grace note with B finger - it will make next A
Keep C flat open & slur to BAB, just grace note on B as possible.
Keep D open, make A + let it slur into next A
When doing the high F6 A BAB, keep the 6 finger clear
When going to A and B + A finger open when going to
Always up all the time. I see how you first on

N S
One with 3rd finger. This is one without 3rd finger.
The Round of Reels

A Single Jig

When you dance in the 6/8 time, see that you mark

For open - At Feé, make the Feen with the lower 3 figures

of double the Feen, so to get 5 + ten aline back to F to form

the turn - keeping being the same notes on the first

six time as the turn with the 6 in every bar.

I think you know the Feen before. When you become

 accustomed to making the turn on 4 with open F

you will produce the correct quality of tone.

There are two more parts, but you can make

it compete with the 2 for the present. For many

years the Kilt has been known as the Dublin

Stage Breakdown.

You can use the second as either way.

L.B.


The Moving Bag = A Slip or Slingsbag

First

Second ending

often

Thumb

3rd finger

2nd fingers

1st finger
This type of jig is about the oldest Irish music. They were known as "Shine Jigs". It is very nice to see them danced properly. Though set in 6-8 time, they are not at all the double jig type, but have a lovely shine when danced properly. Collectors and publishers generally couldn't understand them, sometimes wrote them out and put them with the Reels.
Lesson

Tunes: 2. 1. 2. The Little House under the Hill

This will help to get the fingers into the way of the first fingering, first octave and will enable the next fingering better. Naturally, in correct playing, the fingerings are interchanged. Best wishes yours.
finger to touch on your hands and get used to it by trying over your first octave. Test your covering frequently by sounding your fundamental note. The low D will always tell you about your covering. Take the little lesson slowly and alone each note before making the next line. You will notice that it is quite easy to start to certain notes as b to F# and b to E but for the present close the 2 fingers then make the one lead and place plenty of slurring notes on. D The thumb note is always in the first octave pressure of wind and should never get more pressure no matter what the figuring or passage. When going from say... back to lead notes are much inclined to force the thumb not too much pressure and doing so leads to sagging of the note (F) and spoiling the sound by giving it a bad habit. Before trying anything at any note in second octave the covering should be really good.
John Cosh, the Kitchen

When you play, make it plan and the infants and open
Play either change from one way to the other never the assumption

End.