

### 3.06. Pipes made by R. L. O’Mealy

Ronan Browne.

*Please see the associated files folder along with this article for a PDF spreadsheet index of the instruments.*

#### Introduction

The purpose of this article was originally to begin an inventory of pipes made by Richard Lewis O’Mealy. Over time it has grown into an ongoing investigation into his making style with descriptions of many sets. As with other articles, there will be more work to do as sets appear.

While there are quite a number of his instruments in existence, the whereabouts of the sets played by R. L. himself are unknown at time of writing; these comprise a full set with contrabass, an early three-regulator set, and the set with the turned up baritone drone from the ‘R. L. Memo’.<sup>1</sup> As the photographs we have are in black & white we can’t even say with certainty whether his pipes are made in brass or German silver – as they appear to have been made of a dark wood, it is convenient to say that the metal must be German silver just because we haven’t seen an ebony and brass set, yet we could very easily be wrong – he sometimes used boxwood and German silver, the very opposite combination!

We know of more than 13 full sets of pipes including 5 of the ‘normal’ configuration of tenor, baritone and bass regulators, and at least 8 in his own unique style with the tenor regulator replaced by contrabass; there are roughly 10 one and 2 two-regulator sets and a number of single chanters; there is a chanter made for McCullough’s music shop with “McCullough Belfast” stamped on it and there are also two ‘Brian Ború’ chanters in the Museum of Scotland.<sup>2</sup> There must be more sets still to surface which will tell us more and more about this wonderful instrument maker.

While later O’Mealy sets have flat Taylor-style regulator keys,<sup>3</sup> a small number of sets have the classic key design of the older makers. In the early picture of Richard, the keys have Egan tear-drop touches and square/rectangular pads.<sup>4</sup> Another early set owned by Éamonn Curran also has these Egan-style keys on both the tenor and baritone while the bass is plainly a later, flat-keyed addition by O’Mealy himself. Éamonn Curran’s other set has Coyne-style fiddle-back touches as does the McPeake set from circa 1902.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the regulators on the Paddy Maxwell and NPU sets, which are of the Egan tear-drop style again, and Wilbert Garvin’s added bass regulator, made to match his existing Coyne set, the rest of the regulators are of O’Mealy’s modified Taylor flat style of key.

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<sup>1</sup> See 3.08 ‘The O’Mealy Flyer and Memo’ by Ronan Browne

<sup>2</sup> Brian Boru pipes were Ireland’s answer to the Great Highland pipes of Scotland. The Brian Boru pipes have two drones and a keyed chanter.

<sup>3</sup> The Taylor brother from Drogheda revolutionised the accepted Union pipes design in the latter half of the 19th century. R. L. Borrowed many of these new design elements whilst keeping many elements of the old classic makers.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Egan, celebrated pipe-maker of Mayo, Liverpool and New York, in the middle of the 19th century.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Coyne, another celebrated pipe-maker of Kildare and Dublin, in the middle of the 19th century.

From the sets I have examined, R. L.'s workmanship is always of a very high standard and remarkably confident. Bill Haneman has borne this out in his examination of, and subsequent journal article about, the Jim McIntosh/Trevor Stewart set.<sup>6</sup> We know also, from the old black box of notes and patterns given to NPU by Wilbert Garvin, that O'Mealy did a lot of repair work to older sets;<sup>7</sup> according to Wilbert, this work was meticulously carried out in the style of the original set. Referring back to Eamonn Curran's set, I am therefore surprised that he added a 'modern' bass regulator to an early set of his own rather than make one in keeping with the earlier set. Perhaps he held his own work in lower esteem than the work of the Old Masters.

R. L.'s earlier sets are of differing styles, as if he was experimenting, learning and refining his style. He seems to have settled on two distinct models, firstly the simple, one-regulator set with a choice of more wooden than ivory mounts and then secondly the more complex set with three regulators and more ivory, these being more common in boxwood and brass than in ebony and German silver. But as we shall see later in this article, the former was capable of transforming into the latter, indeed it was often built with this in mind.

## The Pipes

This inventory should ideally be chronological but as we don't have proper dates I have broken it down into types of set beginning with the obviously early sets, moving on to the large sets and one and two-regulator sets. I have included a photograph where possible and more photographs can be seen in the 3.06 Associated Files folder.

### 1. Early boxwood 1 regulator set



*NPU, Dublin  
D  
Boxwood  
Brass  
Tenor*

This is an interesting set to begin with. It looks early and is stamped O'Mealy Belfast which dates it after 1900. At first glance it appears to be unique in that it is the only Mealy set with a straight bass drone; on

closer inspection it is obvious that 'work' has been done on the set – the straight tuning section appears to my eye to be the very first section which should be inserted into the stock. Something happened (I don't know what) but the first section was now employed by a later pipe-maker as a

<sup>6</sup> Anyone wanting an in depth exploration of this model of O'Mealy's work should refer to 3.11 'A Deluxe Richard O'Mealy Full Set of Pipes' by Bill Haneman.

<sup>7</sup> See 3.13 'The O'Mealy Box' by Wilbert Garvin

straight tuning section and a whole new first section including bends was made. It should be easy to restore the drone by referring to other O’Mealy sets.

Something which is interesting is that this is a D set. To date, very little in D has appeared and we know from Richard’s letters that his preferred pitch was a semitone lower, at C#.



Looking at this chanter I could see that it was narrow bore and small holed so on a whim, I tried the reed from my James Kenna<sup>8</sup> and it worked perfectly. So, It would seem that at this early stage Richard was making chanters (and probably sets) based on the set of early Kenna pipes which resided in his family home. This is a narrow bored, small holed, very sweet and responsive chanter. To date we know of only two other D chanters, one made for McCullough’s Music Shop and one owned by the McPeake family. I wonder if they could be similar to this one.



The single baritone regulator has Egan-style teardrop key touches and slightly chamfered square pads.

The tuning pin mount is made from a boxwood ring, this disc with and without a centre hole being a design element we see in some other sets which may also date from the first few years of the 1900s.<sup>9</sup>



Although it is likely that this set hasn’t had much playing, it has had a number of owners in it’s one hundred years of existence. My initial knowledge of the set came from my cousin Peter Browne: at the bottom of Sandycove Avenue East, where he grew up, lived an old retired bank official named Stevie Carroll. In the early 1970s he told Peter that in his family house in Tramore, County Waterford, where his sixty five year old sister still resided, there was “...one of them yokes you play” and that Peter should call there to look at them some time. Peter’s mother Anne came from Tramore and they soon visited Stevie’s sister. After a suitable period of time had passed drinking tea and poring



over the pipes, she offered them to Peter. It was decided that money of some sort should pass hands so she proposed £10. The Brownes paid over the money and departed with this set. The woman, whose name Peter doesn’t recall, said that the pipes had originally been bought by her uncle. He

<sup>8</sup> This wonderful set dating *circa* 1780 was given to me by Ken McLeod. The reed was one I had originally made for my little E-flat Leo Rowsome chanter and it worked beautifully in the Kenna.

<sup>9</sup> Both O’Mealy’s personal ebony set and Brian Vallely’s boxwood set have the same tuning pin mounts.



had suffered a broken elbow and somebody recommended the playing of the pipes to speed his recovery. He duly bought the pipes but never did much with them and they remained in the house, unplayed, till then. Now, if this woman was roughly 65 in the early 1970s, she must have been born during the first decade of the 1900s; if she had an uncle he must have been between 20 and 50 years old when she was born; if this is an early R. L. set, and the man came from Tramore, the initial contact may quite possibly have been made with O'Mealy while he was living in either Cork. The set has the Belfast stamp but could be ordered before the move to Belfast and finished in Edinburgh Street.

It might be thought that O'Mealy could have sold him a dud set as he wasn't likely to become a serious player. I don't think that was the case here – while there have always been makers quick to pull a fast one, we know

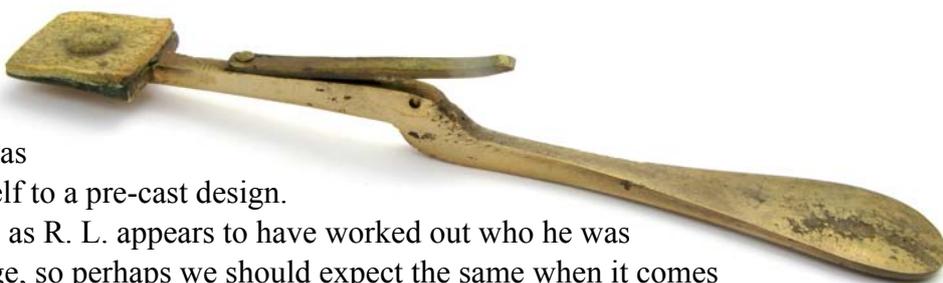
the very opposite was true of R. L. On many occasions he provided the highest quality instruments for musicians unlikely to make something of themselves musically. He took great pride in his work and knew that his pipes would survive centuries longer than himself – by 1900 a number of classic sets had already passed through his hands and it is clear that he understood the value of quality work.

So, Peter Browne went back to Dublin with his new set of pipes. Peter had the set put in order but wasn't playing them as he was already well equipped with instruments. He later swapped them with Matt Molloy for a flute made by the London makers Fentum. I went to Matt recently to photograph the set and after the photo session, Matt offered the set to me. I felt (for the same reason as Peter, being well kitted out with pipes already) that I probably wouldn't be the right home and after some discussion we came up with the idea of Matt donating them to Na Píobairí Uilleann. If they are as nice a set as I think they are, they will be played happily by many people over the next few centuries.

Some points of interest in this set include the regulator keys, the stock material, the regulator tube, the undercutting of the chanter tone holes and the way in which the bellows leather is attached. It is a very well made set of pipes. Most of the other sets dealt with in this article have been studied only through photographs. The handful which I have photographed were looked at in great depth and detail but over a very short period of time and details are missed in such circumstances. This set, however, is sitting here on the table beside me and I can double check something easily.

The regulator keys are cast, not forged. This is surprising in a fairly new maker as it indicates that he had systems in place and was confident enough to commit himself to a pre-cast design.

It probably shouldn't be surprising as R. L. appears to have worked out who he was and what he did at a very young age, so perhaps we should expect the same when it comes



to his pipe-making. It is only with hindsight that we can look back and say that this key method and design is one of at least three methods utilised by O’Mealy over his lifetime.

There is great attention to detail seen in the neat brass spring-bed for the long D Key on the regulator. Notice also how he has filled in the leftover channel rather than leaving it as many makers would. (Pic to right)



The stock is made from solid mahogany. On first examination of the pipes I thought it might have a hollow stock as the single regulator looks like it is in a brass tube but on closer inspection the ‘tube’ extends only 3/16 of an inch into the stock and the regulator is



actually sitting in the plain drilled hole like in any solid stock. I think the reason for this short length of copper tube was that R. L. was protecting the thin edge of the stock from cracking.

As can be seen on the left, the bellows leather is nailed to the flat rather than the side of the clappers mimicking the old style of stitching.



## 2. Early boxwood ¾ set with added bass regulator



*Monaghan*  
*Appears to be C#*  
*Boxwood*  
*Brass*  
*Tenor, Baritone, later O’Mealy Bass*

These pipes appear to have been built as a two regulator set to which Richard later added a new full-length bass regulator. There is no slide and it is joined to the stock by the later style permanent fixing with the stock plate cut away in his unique style.

The bass drone slide bend has no bracing to protect it from being bent out of position and this is common on all four early sets including the set from the memo which has an un-braced baritone drone bend also. Notice also, the way the bass drone end-mount joins the brass tube and how the tube is closed by what looks like a piece of ivory. To my eyes, the end-mount appearing to sit on the tube lends an air of instability. I also feel that while the set sits well as a whole, O’Mealy’s proportion was improved on greatly in later years.



M. O'Malley is stencilled or written on the main-stock. I presume this is the name of the original or an early owner. The set is stamped "R. L. O'Mealy" on the chanter and the baritone regulator. "R. L. O'Mealy Belfast" is stamped on the lower back of the chanter and on the main-stock. It is impossible to date the set but the stamp with Belfast on it could have been added when the bass regulator was added.



The chanter has two keys, the C Natural and C Sharp or High D. It has unused blocks for a B Flat and a small semi-circular F Natural. There is an early, slightly crude clack valve on the bottom D.



The clack valve is gravity operated and has no spring. There is an ivory ring at the bottom but the top mount is turned from the main wood of the chanter.

The whole set is clearly made of boxwood but a very different boxwood to the type usually seen in Irish pipes. Most of O'Mealy's pipes are made of some form of this boxwood. It sometimes has a grey hue, feels waxy to the hands and is knot-free unlike all but the finest Irish boxwood. When I mentioned this to Brian Vallely, he said that because of the Belfast linen trade there had been a huge amount of tropical boxwood passing through Belfast Docks and into the factories. This wood was then also available to R. L. for pipe-making.<sup>10</sup>

This set of pipes has an original carrying case made by Richard with padding and green baize inside.



We are very lucky that a number of original cases still exist with sets of O'Mealy pipes and they give another indication of the time, care and effort he put into his craft.

<sup>10</sup> In a 1929 letter to George Farrar, O'Mealy mentions being able to offer pipes made from "...good Persian, Indian, African, N. American, or Irish Boxwood". Wilbert Garvin: "Some years ago I managed to obtain a number of boxwood logs when a linen mill on the Crumlin Road in Belfast closed down. I was informed about it then by the Ballymoney piper Sam Robinson. The boxwood was apparently used to make rollers for the machinery since it was virtually unaffected by the very damp conditions i.e. it didn't swell like other woods. I was informed that it was probably originally Rhodesian boxwood." Ken McLeod adds that smaller sections of the same boxwood were used to make loom shuttles.

### 3. Early ebony 2 Regulator set belonging to the McPeake family



According to Francis McPeake IV, this set of pipes was made for the St. Louis Exhibition of 1902 and was sent by boat to America, along with two harps by the Belfast maker McFaul. The drunken exhibition curator failed to organise the off-loading of the cargo for the exhibition, and the pipes – and presumably the harps – were sent back to Belfast. Joseph Bigger<sup>11</sup> is said to have picked them up and they were given to Francis McPeake (born 1885) who had professed an interest in playing, after seeing a Belfast street musician

play pipes. McPeake started out as a pupil of O’Mealy whose friendship with Bigger explains the procurement of the set of pipes. McPeake was 17 years old in 1902 when the pipes were made and maybe a year older when R. L. started to teach him. Sadly, according to Francis O’Neill ‘temperamental difficulties’<sup>12</sup> came between O’Mealy and McPeake which kept them apart for the rest of their lives. Left without a teacher, it was arranged that the Galway piper John O’Reilly move to Belfast for 6 weeks in 1907 to teach Francis to play.



*Belfast*  
*C#*  
*Ebony*  
*Brass or Silver*  
*Tenor, Baritone,*  
*W. Rowsome Bass*

In later years, Francis taught his son Francis to play the pipes; it was this Francis who started the McPeake Trio. When old Francis grew too old to play the pipes he had a bag and chanter made by Hamilton, the Glasgow pipe maker, which he played while he passed the O’Mealy set on to his son Francis, who in turn passed the pipes on to his son Francis McPeake III, who is playing them to this day – when he is ready to move on to the bag and chanter, he will pass the O’Mealy pipes on to young Francis who is waiting in the wings.

The McPeake set originally had two regulators with fiddle-back keys. The third regulator came about in 1912 when John O’Reilly heard Francis McPeake playing in an *Oireachtas* competition and called for him to enter the singing competition. Francis won and with the prize money he went to William Rowsome who made a bass regulator for the set.

There is a set of O’Mealy pipes (made in 1902) listed in the catalogue of the 1903 Harp Exhibition in the Linenhall in Belfast.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition also included some pipes made by [William] Kennedy, [Michael] Egan, the Belfast maker, James Williamson and very interestingly, a chanter made by R. L. out of a mule shin bone!

- 54.—SET OF IRISH UNION PIPES (Kennedy). [J. N.]  
55.—SET OF IRISH UNION PIPES (Egan). [St. C. B.]  
56.—SET OF IRISH UNION PIPES. [H. L.]  
57.—SET OF PIPES (1902)  
    Made by R. L. O’Mealy, Belfast.  
58.—CHANTER  
    Made of Mule Shin Bone by R. L. O’Mealy.  
59.—SEVERAL SETS OF PIPES  
    Made by James Williamson, Belfast.

It is very likely that the 1902 set is, in fact, the McPeake set before O’Mealy and/or Bigger gave it to young Francis. It is strange that the set has a date after it but it might be because the Kennedy, Egan and the unnamed pipes were all old sets and they were indicating that the O’Mealy set was a modern or new instrument.

<sup>11</sup> Bigger (1863-1926) was an historian, nationalist M.P. for Belfast and friend of R. L.

<sup>12</sup> Francis O’Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, Chicago 1913.

<sup>13</sup> The catalogue was unearthed by Wilbert Garvin in the Linenhall Library, Belfast.

#### 4. Early ebony set from the picture of R. L. Playing



*Whereabouts unknown*

*Pitch unknown*

*Probably Ebony*

*Brass or Silver*

*Tenor, Baritone, Bass*

When I first saw this picture I believed that it might be an early O’Mealy set but I had no evidence to back that up until the appearance of the boxwood sets above.

This set sports large tear-drop key touches and rectangular/square key pads. The regulator tuning pins are similar to the Brian Vallely and Matt Molloy sets; the wooden reed cap on the bass regulator is echoed on Eamonn Curran’s Coyne/Egan-style set. All the early bass regulator bars are straight as opposed to the Taylor-style bent-back section of the later sets. This bass regulator has a slide system.

I am placing this set as later than the sets above just because it looks more confident and it sits nicely as a unified whole. It may be that this set, being played by the maker himself, was finished to the highest degree as it was advertising his workmanship to prospective buyers. This is just the sort of thinking I would expect from O’Mealy.

This is a very well made set and it’s overall proportions are lovely. The lines of the set are already starting to show the chunky O’Mealy look and the workmanship exudes the confidence familiar in the later sets. Notice that the bag is tied directly onto the chanter. The bass drone slide section has no bracing to protect the bend which appears to be bending nicely down towards the wooden section – another example of O’Mealy strongly adventurous design process. The bass drone bend itself looks to be slightly thicker than the tube as it enters the ivory mount but this might be a trick of the light. Unless or until this set appears to be examined, we are unable to be absolutely certain as to many of these details. Meanwhile, guessing is an enjoyable pursuit.

It is interesting to note that this is a posed photographic studio shot – the first of many to be taken throughout his life. While I have dealt with this in the article on Richards life, I think it is worth mentioning here that, thanks to his firm grasp on the concept of self promotion, we have many pictures of his pipes and, because he liked to provide a photograph showing the correct handling of the pipes to new purchasers, we also have pictures of a number of the sets coming out of his workshop.

## 5. The Pipes from the Memo<sup>14</sup>



*Whereabouts unknown*

*Pitch unknown*

*Probably Ebony*

*Brass or Silver*

*Tenor, Baritone, Bass*

I am taking a chance here venturing that these pipes are made by O’Mealy. If we guess that the pipes date from his early experimental mode, with the unconventional bobbles on the end of the bass regulator reed-cap, the familiar but precariously un-braced drone bends (and here we have a bend on the baritone too, something attempted and dropped by at least, both Maurice Coyne and Leo Rowsome in their respective careers) and the Egan-esque regulator end-mounts, it seems extremely likely to me that these are an O’Mealy set.

The straight bass regulator is attached to the main-stock by a slide; the neck of the bag is tied directly onto the chanter stock.

The whereabouts of this set are unknown. It would be an interesting set to study and I look forward to its re-appearance.

Noting the ebullient tassels on the bag cover, the “ancient bardic costume”, and using the dates of the

press quotes included on the memo, we are now in or around 1905 and Richard is living in Belfast. He is young and at the height of his musical career – however, his pipe-making has yet to evolved into the fine instruments he would produce over the next 40 years.

It is interesting to see that O’Mealy is standing for this photograph. This is clearly a conscious decision, common to most of his other publicity pictures from this time. It is another indication of how deeply R. L. involved himself in whatever he was doing.

<sup>14</sup> See article 3.08 for more info on the O’Mealy Memo and flyer

## 6. Early boxwood set with elements of Coyne and Egan



These pipes seem to me to be later than the previous sets. Much work has gone into finish and decoration; the lines are finer and there is a cohesive feeling to the whole set. The ivory proportions are lovely – nothing is too big or too small. Junctions between different materials and from one plain to another are addressed nicely in a confident but unselfconscious manner. The set as a whole looks just the way I feel a set should look with no bits sticking out in an ungainly fashion or hiding away nervously. An example here is the bass drone bend which, although unbraced, doesn't have an ungainly and disproportionate feel similar to the previous sets. We are now without doubt in Belfast as each time the set is stamped it says "R. L. O'Mealy, Belfast".



The chanter has 5 keys and, in a nod back to the work of Timothy Kenna, has doubled blocks for the Bb and CNat keys. The lines are nice and there are more design elements than we have seen so far; in fact I don't think that O'Mealy chanters often get more elaborate than this. The bottom ivory mount looks, on first glance, to be upside-down but it is, in fact, the right way up and we're just not ready for it yet!

*Monaghan  
C  
Boxwood with  
blackwood chanter  
German Silver  
Tenor, Baritone, Bass*



The reed cap of the bass regulator is made of wood; this could be an attempt to balance the wood to metal ratio looking at the whole set; or more likely it is because O'Mealy preferred the sound of wood rather than metal in a bass regulator reed cap - certainly, all the other reeds are sitting in wooden chambers. This wooden reed cap is echoed in the dark set in the early photograph of Richard (number 4 above).



Two design elements of note are the double beads on the drone slides and the squared-off (rather than fully-removed) blocks underneath the bass regulator. Considering that Richard's 'next move' would be to make all regulators square section, this is of particular interest.



We have another fine example of the R. L. pipes-case resplendent with padding, green velvet lining, gold trim, corner brasses and a brass name plate. Where the lid meets the main section of the box the junction is tongued and grooved, providing great strength and stability.



### 7. Early Contrabass Set, Double Chanter, R. L. standing (& later William Hope)



This is the first time we see the new style of pipes with the classic flat-keyed baritone, bass and contrabass regulators with the tenor sacrificed to make room in the stock for the contrabass. I say this is an early model as the first section of the contrabass has no tuning pin, something present in all later sets.

*Whereabouts Unknown*  
*C#*  
*Ebony*  
*Double Chanter*  
*German Silver (presumed)*  
*Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*



Another feature of this set is what looks like an air-release key on the main stock. This exists on the Patsy Touhey, Taylor pipes<sup>15</sup> for rapid deflation of the bag, therefore lessening the possibility of the dreaded farting noise as pressure equalised on both sides of the blowpipe valve. Richard O’Mealy was at the height of his career as a performer and the last thing he needed was blow-back noise while he introduced his next piece of music.

Note the corks to stop individual drones alongside the presence of a stop key. The regulator keys are sitting in metal blocks attached to the body of the regulators as in the Jack O’Rourke(Seán McAloon) regulators (top right pic) in contrast to the Jim McIntosh set



where key lugs are bent over the regulator body and pivoted on pins (bottom right); this happens again on the baritone of Brian Vallely’s set but his bass and contrabass are the same as this set. Notice, lastly, the beads closing the H-ends of the bass drone are not simple round beads but have a compound shape starting wider and narrowing towards the ends. If these pipes ever surface and we can examine them first hand, these beads and the stock key should help to identify them.

<sup>15</sup> If I am not mistaken, I think that it was added by Michael Carney after Touhey’s death.

## 7. (cont.) The same Ebony Contrabass set again, now owned by William Hope



We are told that William Hope's pipes had been O'Mealy's personal set and that he bought them from R. L.'s widow Letitia after his death. This is borne out by studying the two photographs above. The two sets look strongly to be one and the same. There are, of course, differences:

- O'Mealy is playing a double chanter but that is of little consequence as Hope would have used another chanter.
- There is a big difference between the H-bends of the contrabasses on each set, but as O'Mealy later adopted a system of stopper beads with tuning pin for the upper bore section I feel he would have updated the set to his latest standards before passing it on.

*Whereabouts unknown*

*C#*

*Ebony*

*German Silver (presumed)*

*Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*

More importantly, there are a number of similarities which in themselves might mean nothing but taking into account that R. L.'s pipes become William Hope's, become more interesting:

- The general proportions of the two sets look to be identical
- The compound stopper beads on the bass drone H-bend are identical
- There are small regulator tuning pin beads on both sets
- General layouts of the bass drone slide section are the same
- The extra key on the main stock, an element I have not seen on any other O'Mealy set.

We may never know for sure but hopefully as more sets turn up we will learn more from each one.

### 8. Boxwood Contrabass Set owned by Joe McKenna



This set was bought from Willie Reynolds who had previously bought them from Peter Ward. Sam Farrar, remembering hearing this set

*County Wicklow  
C#*

played with Sam's O'Mealy chanter said that the sound of the chanter matched the set perfectly, much better

*Boxwood  
Rowsome Chanter  
Brass*

than the Rowsome chanter which was with it; I suppose that would be only natural just as a Rowsome set would sound better with a Rowsome chanter rather than an O'Mealy!

*Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*



Some years ago, Joe McKenna removed the contrabass and replaced it with a tenor regulator he made himself; after playing the set that way for many years, he has recently restored it to its original configuration.

A problem with the weight of the lower end of the contrabass is that, being free-standing, it exerts huge pressure on the H bend and this is an area where failure would be sure to occur. R. L. has approached this differently on different sets. On this one (pictured on the left of the photograph) he has a bracket attached to the end of the contrabass which sits over the first section of the bore just as it exits the stock. This provides the stability needed to take the weight off the H bend over to the right (not visible in the picture).



### 9. Boxwood Contrabass Set owned by Brian Vallely



Brian bought this set from Frank McFaddan who said that they were made by O’Mealy for a Protestant minister to play in his church as he couldn’t afford an organ. This is a fine set of pipes and from this point on there is not a huge amount to say about any of the sets. You may be starting to notice that an element which changes from set to set is the regulator tuning pin; in this set it is a round perforated disc while in Joe McKenna’s set it is like a flat button; in O’Mealy’s early personal set it was a classic bead.

*Armagh  
C#  
Boxwood  
Brass  
Baritone, Bass,  
Contrabass*

Looking at the regulators it is interesting to see that the bass and contrabass have the keys sitting in brass shoulders attached to the sides of the regulator whereas the baritone keys are made of one piece of brass folded down and around the sides. This appears to be the only set where both approaches are seen.



We have yet another fine pipe case made by O’Mealy himself. This one, however, is unique in that it is long and narrow, allowing you to place the set in the case without being dismantled in any way.



The chanter (stained darker) is a plain affair with no ivory mounts but the set was probably built up around an earlier one-regulator set (see below, No. 9).



Two features of note in the picture below are the support bracket (less successful than the Joe McKenna above), this time springing from the baritone drone, to hold up the loose end of the contrabass, and the extending tuning handle on the tenor drone.



#### 10. Boxwood Contrabass, Jack O'Rourke, now owned by McAloon family



This set was built for Jack O'Rourke. Interestingly, in Ken McLeod's article about Jack, he mentions Seán McAloon talking about Jack playing on the BBC shortly after R. L. had added the contrabass.

This is an good example of how O'Mealy worked, where Jack had received his pipes in stages with that last addition of the contrabass happening after the rest of the set. Looking at the layout of the stock

and comparing it to the one-regulator sets, you can see that any of those basic or beginner sets could be expanded into a full contrabass set and that the un-bored or blank tenor drone (which looks like it might be drilled out only after a cash instalment) was in fact an up-market regulator hole plug! This explains why the big sets only ever have 3 drones but the smaller sets have 4 - it was possible to expand any of the sets up to the full set but that extra drone (even if operational) would then be sacrificed to make way for the contrabass. This in turn offers an explanation for the simple often unadorned chanters which tend to be with some of these big elaborate sets. These were obviously plain chanters on one-regulator sets and the big set would have been built up around them. There are some high-spec. chanters with one-reg. sets, the Delap set being a good example. These would have cost more initially but would have suited the final upgrade to full contrabass setup. Looking at the Jim McIntosh set (No. 11. Below), it could have been built in one go or it may have started off life as a one-regulator set with later additions bringing it to the fine splendour it exudes today.

*Monaghan*

*C#*

*Boxwood*

*Brass*

*Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*

## 11. Ebony Contrabass, R. L. O'Mealy



I had first thought that this might be another personal set of O'Mealy's from later in life – the sepia photograph is dated the 11th of May 1933 when O'Mealy was 60 years old so I thought it was a later personal set. This set is missing. We only have these two pictures, both from the same photo session. Of course, from what we know of the DeLap set, these could be photos given with the set to show how it is held; I think this is the more likely situation and that the Hope set remained as

*Whereabouts unknown*  
*C#*  
*Ebony*  
*German Silver (presumed)*  
*Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*



O'Mealy's personal set till his death. It is very likely that he made a full set for someone and had a photograph taken with it before handing it over. But, as always, we just don't know. In favour of these pipes being his personal set, I draw your attention to the copper tube inserted into the end of the baritone drone - hardly something to allow out of the workshop in a new set!

A few elements to notice in this set:

- The above copper tube inserted into the baritone drone mount.
- The side-mounted half billiard ball bass drone end-mount.
- Long F Natural key blocks on both sides of the chanter.
- There are a number of unused key-blocks on the chanter.
- The bass regulator reed section is facing outwards and is not twisted around to sit against the main-stock.
- The contrabass stabilised by bracket attached to the end of the regulator which rests down on the first section before it enters the stock (the more successful approach).
- The lowest regulator keys (we can't see the upper ones properly) are cut at 45° rather than being rounded or square.
- The same part of the baritone regulator key is square in shape.
- The H-bend of the contrabass has extra stabilisation in the form of 4 short lengths of wire soldered onto the short tube connecting the two sections.
- O'Mealy is not using a popping strap but instead appears to have a clack-valve on the chanter bottom.
- Looking at the sepia photo, the bass regulator stock plate appears to be cut away to a sharp point rather than the usual curved shape.



## 12. Ebony Contrabass, Trevor Stewart (Jim McIntosh)



This is Trevor Stewart's (formerly Jim McIntosh's) fine classic O'Mealy full set. It is the finest instrument we have access to and we are fortunate that Bill Haneman was able to measure and draw it up. Bill has written an article (article 3.10) detailing all his findings which can be seen elsewhere in this journal.

*Belfast  
C#  
Ebony  
German Silver  
Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*

Elements of this set:

- Fully keyed and ivory mounted chanter with clack valve.
- Original embroidered bag cover and bellows.
- Original chanter protective cover.
- Old or original bag.
- Assorted O'Mealy reeds.
- Contrabass supported by bracket on baritone drone – the less successful solution
- Thumb-operated F Natural chanter key



**13. Ebony Contrabass, (private ownership)**

This set is said to be very similar to the Trevor Stewart set but as of time of writing we possess no photographs of this set.

*Private*  
*C#*  
*Ebony*  
*German Silver*  
*Baritone, Bass, Contrabass*

**14. Boxwood 2 Regulator set (private ownership)**

This set is interesting in that it has baritone and bass regulators but no contrabass. Considering how O'Mealy liked to build sets up from having just the baritone regulator, one would think that there might be more sets like this but at present we only know of two. The other two-regulator set is in also in private ownership (15 below).

*Private*  
*C#*  
*Boxwood*  
*Brass*  
*Baritone, Bass,*



The set was bought by the present owner in the late 1970s from Seán McAloon. Seán had bought them from Finbar McLoughlin who had bought them from Jack O'Rourke. As can be seen in the photograph above, the tenor and baritone drones are not original and are, in fact, made by William Kennedy (1768 - 1834) the famous blind pipemaker from Tandragee.<sup>16</sup> They were added by McAloon before he sold the set to the present owner and the whereabouts of the originals are unknown.

<sup>16</sup> For a biography of William Kennedy, see <http://www.armaghpipers.com/wkpf/williamKennedy/index.html>

**15. Boxwood 2 Regulator set (private ownership)**



*Donegal  
C#  
Boxwood  
German Silver  
Baritone, Bass*

This set was bought from Cecil Colville through Seán McAloon.

Once again, it has baritone and bass regulators but no tenor or contra bass.

This set has German silver instead of the more common brass. It is not unique in this and other sets of box and brass include Miles Delap's 1 regulator set and Éamonn Curran's early full set.

Note the other plainer, possibly earlier chanter.

**16. Ebony 1 Regulator set (William Hoey)**

This set is in the Ulster Museum. It belonged originally to William Hoey. It has the typical layout of three drones with a dummy or blank smaller tenor filling the hole for the contrabass. We see here again, the lovely embroidery and nicely proportioned bellows so common in O'Mealy's work.

*Belfast  
C#  
Ebony  
German Silver  
Baritone,*



Something which is slightly less common is that the set is made from ebony or some other dark wood instead of boxwood which seems to be Richard's most used material. Some of the big contrabass sets are indeed made of ebony but at time of writing, this and the Crampsie set are the

only one-regulator sets in ebony. In O’Mealy’s ideal world, both of these sets would have later revisited the workshop to have their bass and contrabass added.



The ivory proportions are generous and the making hand is confident. The top mount on the chanter is different to most in that it is almost circular. The F Natural key is a long straight one as opposed to the curly short key. It has been quite difficult to place a lot of these sets in a timeline and while there are many features which might tie certain sets into being early or late, attempts at dating are always vague. This key design could be another area of study as there are many chanters with no key or block at all, some with straight and some with curly keys – there is even one right-handed chanter (boxwood Eamonn Curran) with a long-key block on the other side to normal.

### 17. Boxwood 1 Regulator set (Paddy Maxwell)



This is a pieced-together set which was built over time with love and care by R. L. and the set’s owner Paddy Maxwell. The set was built in part payment for handyman work done by Maxwell for O’Mealy. There is a nice account of its genesis given by Frank Bunting in the article 3.16.5 *Paddy Maxwell* by Wilbert Garvin. According to Wilbert, the regulator is an Egan (with Mealy keys). The stock came from an old set as can be seen by the vestigial bass regulator slide. The chanter foot-mount looks to be from another instrument while the rest of the instrument is made by R. L. The small drone filling the contrabass hole is a working tenor, said to play the note G. The bellows was recently restored by Wilbert Garvin. The set can be heard in the audio section of the article 3.07 *Continuing the Tradition* by Ronan Browne and Jonathan Farrar

*Belfast  
C#  
Boxwood & Ebony  
Brass & German Silver  
Baritone,*

**18. Ebony 1 Regulator set (James Patrick Cramsie)**



We have here, *Belfast*  
 another set *C#*  
 with an *Ebony*  
 interesting *German Silver*  
 provenance. *Baritone, Bass,*  
 They were *Contrabass*  
 originally  
 made for James Patrick Cramsie  
 (born,1897 *Belfast*, died,1972  
 Monroe, N.Y.)

The set is still in the Cramsie family and in the above photograph is being played by Cramsie’s granddaughter Kathy while Gerry Cramsie (James Cramsie’s 80-year-old son) is playing a Seth Gallagher set.

**19. Boxwood 1 Regulator set (Netta Jane Johnson)**

This is a typical one regulator set with dummy tenor drone, embroidered bag and bellows, cork drone stoppers and side mounted bass drone end-mount. What is a little more unusual is the chanter. There has been a pin-mounted G# key added. This seems to have happened after the set was made as there is no wooden key-block to house it. It would be hard to know without further examination and key-matching, to know if this addition was carried out by R. L. or by another pipe maker.

*Belfast*  
*C#*  
*Boxwood*  
*Brass*  
*Baritone,*



Another interesting element is the thumb-operated F Natural key. The pad is to the front whereas it would normally be to the rear and the key would be operated by the E finger just below.

### 20. Boxwood 1 Regulator set (Miles Delap)



This is one of a handful of sets made in boxwood and German Silver. Other similar sets include Éamonn Curran’s early “Egan/Coyne” full set and the two regulator set (no. 15 above).

All the usual features are here – embroidery, dummy drone, drone stoppers – in fact, this set is almost identical to the Netta Jane set. I can’t see if there is a small F Natural key although I don’t see a block for a long version so perhaps it is there. The ivory chanter mounts are of the generous sort.

England  
C#  
Boxwood  
German Silver  
Baritone

The picture on the left was included with the pipes to show Miles the proper playing posture.

For more information on this set see article 3.14 “A Method for Miles” elsewhere in this journal.

**21. Boxwood 1 Regulator set (McWilliams)**



Nothing is known about McWilliams other than that he lived in Groomsport, near Bangor, County Down.

*Belfast  
C#  
Boxwood  
Brass  
Baritone,*

The set was made around 1945 and is of the more expensive, higher-quality type of set with all the usual features of embroidered bag and bellows, generous ivory mounts, blank dummy tenor drone in the contrabass/tenor regulator hole. There is a lovely flamed grain on the wood of the chanter which interestingly for such a high quality instrument, doesn't have any keys.

The drone stoppers don't seem to have survived and the bass drone slide section appears to be warped – a rare occurrence for R. L. The baritone reed tenon is broken off inside the stock – an easy repair for a skilled maker.



## 22. O’Mealy Re-Build (Éamonn Ceannt)



This set was built around two regulators, a tenor drone and baritone drone stand made by Timothy Kenna.

*Pitch Unknown  
Boxwood  
Brass*

The bass regulator appears to be partly Coyne while the rest of it, the baritone drone slide, the full bass drone and the chanter are O’Mealy. The stock is a little strange – it is not of the same vintage as the early elements of the set but it is re-

*Tenor, Baritone, Bass*

used as can be seen from the old filled-in regulator-plate screw-holes. It is of a simpler, later design and the rings are on the same plain as the stock itself showing a lack of design sense and confidence than the older makers.

It could be an older O’Mealy stock being re-used by him himself.

As can be seen from the picture of the full set above, the lines are particularly pleasing.

In the photograph of Éamonn Ceannt on the left, there is a different chanter with the set.



### 23. O’Mealy re-build (Jim McIntosh)



*Pitch Unknown  
Ebony  
Brass  
Tenor, Baritone, Bass*

This set was built for Jim McIntosh who later sold them to Jack O’Rourke. It consists of an O’Mealy chanter with Harrington stock and drones and Coyne regulators. The bass regulator has been chopped and turned back on itself much in the manner of the Taylors and of course O’Mealy. It is not known who carried this out and I hope it wasn’t R. L. but the evidence surely points in his general direction!



The bass drone stand section looks like Coyne to me while the slide section has a Coyne stabiliser and end-mount but the rest is clearly Harrington.



Equally, the stand section of the tenor drone is new (perhaps O’Mealy) and the slide section has been chopped just beyond the centre bead to bring it up to the “required” pitch.



The chanter has Kenna style double blocks and just one key, C Natural.



## 24. Wilbert Garvin's bass regulator



Richard made this regulator to add to a two regulator Coyne set now owned by Wilbert Garvin. While it is generally in the Coyne style, the reed-cap mount and the end-mount are not true to style but the keys are very much so. I think that while it was important to O'Mealy generally match the existing set, he didn't slavishly copy – sympathetic but not pastiche, something to his credit in my mind!

## 25. Miscellaneous Chanters

Here, we have four chanters only two of which are known to be by R. L. The one on the left is stamped "McCullough" but we know from a letter in the black box that O'Mealy was commissioned to make it.<sup>17</sup>



The other chanter (above) is owned by Hans-Jörg Podworny who bought it from Seán McAloon. According to Hans-Jörg, the key and mounts are not original.

The chanter on the left is reputed to be an O'Mealy but I'm not convinced. It is a very nicely made and proportioned chanter but I don't see what would make it be an O'Mealy.

Meanwhile the chanter on the right is with the Gandsey pipes in Killarney and again I just don't know.

Measuring the bore of both these chanters would surely help us identify them.



<sup>17</sup> See Wilbert Garvin, article 3.13, "The O'Mealy Box" and Bill Haneman, article 3.24 "Reamers used by R. L. O'Mealy" elsewhere in this journal for more information about this chanter.

## 26. Brian Ború Chanters



These two chanters are in the National Museum of Scotland and we don't know of their provenance.

The Brian Ború pipes were ostensibly Ireland's answer to the Scottish instrument and were different in that they had only two drones and they had keyed chanters.

We don't know of any other chanters or of any Brian Ború drones but it stands to reason that R. L. would have made them, considering that many of his pupils and the people playing his pipes were Great Highland Bagpipes players who, no doubt, also played the Brian Ború pipes.



This is by no means the end of this journey – more sets and information are sure to surface as a result of this publication. Of particular importance will be building up a stock of measurements of different chanters which will add hugely to our understanding of this enigmatic maker who bridged the eras of both the old and the new makers.

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Bill Haneman

Robbie Hannan

John Hughes

Robbie Hughes

Donncha Keegan

Joe McKenna

Ken McLeod

Francis McPeake

Violet Medforth

Matt Molloy

Terry Moylan

NPU Archive

National Museum of Scotland

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Úna Treanor

Ulster Museums

Eithne Vallely

Brian Vallely