One of the unusual aspects of the whole O’Mealy saga is the amount of memorabilia, documents and letters which people have seen fit to preserve. I am sure this is because of the importance Richard himself placed on every move he made - an importance he impressed on all his pupils and on those who bought his pipes.

While building up our stock of knowledge over the last few years, we were fortunate to be given scans by Dr. Lucy Delap of a series of letters from R. L. to her grandparents over the course of their purchase of a set of pipes in the 1930s. These letters contain very interesting instructions on how to approach piping but also insights into how O’Mealy felt about the state of Irish music. By the 1930s Richard was married again and seems to have been making pipes more than playing music although from reading these letters it would seem that he would have preferred to be playing more concerts. A consistent topic running through most of his correspondence is financial worry. He gives the impression of being in great poverty and it would seem that he lived frugally - Seán Reid is known to have bought him a load of coal after a visit because the house was cold but no fire was lit; yet when O’Mealy died, his will showed that he was, in fact, quite wealthy.

Much is to be learned by all pipers from close study of O’Mealy’s words and advice. He has thought a great deal about such matters and his advice merits heed. He explains all manner of things very clearly and when he considers something to be of great importance, he underlines it and underlines it again in red and often repeats it a few times. A good example is his advice that one should always ensure there is no twist in the bellows tube, taking great care to set
it so that the tube is straight when the pipes are up in playing position - he must have been exasperated on more that one occasion by kinked bellows tubes!

Rather than try to illustrate what he wrote by re-typing his words and ending up with a transcription which is not as clear as the originals, I have decided to just leave the letters speak for themselves; they can be read umpteen times without becoming boring.

R. L. is not reluctant to ask for help, as can be seen when he asks the Delaps to write to the BBC requesting more O’Mealy, nor is he averse to expressing gratitude for payment.

He takes great care of his customers, writing in detail how to mind the instrument and how to approach playing it. His obvious love for his art comes out again and again as you read the letters.

The best thing to do is just read through the letters and build up a picture of how the man felt and the great amount of care he took in his business. There is one page of each letter on each page of this document and individual scans of the letters can be downloaded from the associated files section along with this article.

Ronan Browne
Dear Mr. Delah,

I have great pleasure in sending you one of the best Charters in existence. It would be very hard to get its equal or anything like it, and I want you to take very good care of it. As for the bag and bellows they will last for generations. Be most careful not to blow or allow anyone else to blow into any part of the pipes with the mouth. One blow with the mouth is equal to £1 damage every time.

Arrange all bellows straps to suit your size and when placing the pipes in playing position see that the bellows tube is free from twist. I mean when the bag is in playing position put the bag just well back causing the bellows to come somewhat forward so that your elbows will "sit" well back. On the pad first, not come over or interfere with the valve. When you attach bellows put bag up see that there is no twist in tube.

When putting the Charter blow pipe into the fitting in neck of bag leave it so that you can keep it well in, it can come forward a little if necessary when you fit more of the pipe. I am putting a
[Handwritten text not legible]
he got the fundamental note when he
found the way of "covering."

If the pipes are kept in a suitable case, it is
surer not to detach the blow-pipe from the bag:

Dust of any sort, including cigarette
ashes, is not at all good for William's pipe
needs. It sometimes gets drawn in through
the bellows there. Always see that the
pipes are tight, particularly the chanter, and
when "bedding" (lapping) is required, a little
flap is about the best; so it can be put
on light and even. Inclined a little flap.

The two "lip marks" on the valve tube should
be upwards when lips in playing position.

All parts are now tight. If at

anytime the chanter
requires "bedding" let me know. The
other parts are simple for yourself.
4th August 1930
Page 4/4

[Handwritten text]

Thank you for your letter with cheque.

£3 dated 1st August 1930 to hand in due course. I'll try to find out about the flute.

That's now £13 you have paid.

Nothing to hear from you by return.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Lewis O'Meara
109 Rugby Avenue, Comenan Road
Belgfort
15th August 1930

Dear Mr. Doherty,

I hope the enclosed will be helpful at the start. It comes to the same thing as I have already dealt with the chapters. I think from what you say, you will find various hints in my letter useful as you go along, together with the general instructions for beginning, and, leaving my remarks in mind, you will get along quickly. But just better not to rush too much at once and you will get along quicker with safety from wrong method. In the beginning, learn proper breathing—never blow your nose from short puffs—is most important, and better use the little time I sent for the first—did you get it?—and don’t try to get that note for the present. Then you can try something with a 

The first mode of fingering is called because it is the basis of all here and more advanced fingering, and, in playing proper, both are used intermixed according to the passage, time and rhythm of the time, and also for getting the effect. So you see it is an instrument for the artist just like the violin. You can’t expect to get the full tone or value out of your chapter till you get an a good bit. If you heard it here with me you would be greatly surprised.
you will notice that I \( \frac{1}{2} \) is the first note in the second octave pressure, and is set with some 2 fingers. On the first note, always. The next note 1 \( \frac{1}{2} \) (on the finger; right hand) is set got with the same fingers in both octaves, for the present. Little finger of right hand does not set anything by itself, for the present. You will notice by my diagram, it is not set with Chanty. That the index finger alone of right hand is not a note. Never blow into any part until mouth. Hope you got all instructions. Let me know how you are getting on. But in any case, I'll look to hear from you in the beginning of the month. Then you will have a magnificent instrument, if you will do so when you have it. I played your Chanty, Fellows in my living room several evenings, with window open, 4 great crowds gathered in the Avenue. They thought it was a wonderful violin with need instrument in unison. Take me as a friend. Be patient and careful in your effort. If you will put on well and will I can see, find your musical knowledge assist help.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Lewis Dineal.
45 Rugby Avenue,  
Belfast  
13 Feb. 1936

Dear Mr. Black,

Your kind letter with cheque no. 3 reached me in due course. Mr. O’Grady and I are very, very grateful to you. I have just sent the Pipes to you today by Reg’d post, most carefully packed. The lid of box is put on with screws for safety in opening—no need to hammer. I enclosed the pipes to cost 20p. I sent the Bellows as separate Reg’d parcel so in this case, the pipes packed better by themselves. They will, I am sure, reach you in good order. The whole instrument is now in splendid playing order, and the tone was greatly liked by musicians here. All that require now is playing to keep them in order.

The enclosed photograph shows the proper playing position holding a one-regulator set. The player adjusts straps to his or her size. The player should see that the bellows tube is free from twist when pipes in playing position.
I put a little gum paper mark on tuning tenon of baritone and bass drones showing the correct place I had them in turn here. Please let me know when you get the pipes. If you let me have future address I’ll try and help Mr. Delap over some of the pipe difficulties. It would be necessary to give him some help at the start.

The ten drones tune to the fundamental note of the chanter.

P. S. Sincere,

R. L. O’Meally
45 Rugby Avenue,
Belfast
14th September 1936

Dear Mr. Reape,

Your letter of 20th. Ult reached me a few days ago. Many thanks for your letter which will be very useful. Mr. Mc Hale and I are very proud of your letter. We most heartily congratulate Mr. Reape and yourself, and pray God Bless your Son.

Now this is only a note to thank you. Congratulations you and assure you I will gladly do the best I can possibly in writing some information helpful to you with your Uillean Pipes, and you will hear from me soon. I am glad you tell me how you stand with the pipes because it will give me a chance in my efforts. I quite understand your difficulties. With natural patience and effort difficulties with the Uillean pipes become less & result in pleasure. Take it that you have a photo of mine showing the instrument in playing position—try as best you can to place the pipes in that position. It is usual for beginners to have some difficulty in acquiring correct & steady blowing and at the same time curve the Chanties fully.

When you place the pipes in playing position, see that the bellows tube leading to the valve tube is free from kink or twist such as might impede the wind. The bellows tube should be attached to suit.
The playing position if attached to pipes straight on the player’s knees. Placing the bag in the playing position will cause a twist. Keep the bag well back and don’t lean forward over the instrument. See that you can move your drone stop key (very merchant end of stock) left towards the stock for opening and down from the stock for closing, and, when not using a drone or drones, close it fully in case of unwanted leakage. When you find that you can blow reasonably steady and can play some simple things, go a couple of notes into the second octave pressure, but only your tenor drone go, keeping the two in the lower drones, and work on your practices that way, feeling the pulse of the thing, until you feel you have mastered the blowing sufficiently to use, say, the double drone with tenor. When chanter is fully covered, the fundamental note (Chant, off force allowing valve to open) should sound round and full like D string of violin, and the tenor should be tuned unison with that note, forming thereby a 5th with open A on chanter—same as D in fiddle.

Never forget that the thumb note (octave of fundamental note) is in the first octave wind. The first note in the second octave pressure wind is the one made with the 2 lower fingers of right hand, written modern notation. We next will deal with fingerings, tuning, some advanced fingerings, tuning, effect of open and close fingerings, and pitch and tuning with other instruments.
The violin and the wire instruments can always be tuned as if with the Uilleann pipes.

I had a little broadcast for Empire on the 10th inst., I don’t know whether it went to few part. From this time I got confirmation if the engagement a letter from there would not have reached you. I should get a better fee than 2 guineas for Empire stuff. Not only for odd engagements from the B.B.C. I would not be able to stay here any more in the town. Other authorities do something for fellows like me, but our authorities local are terrible compared for want of brains, and where the brains exist, there is pandemonia.

For any help I shall always be most grateful for the sake of others. Of course I am growing old and am not so able for all sorts of things as before. Playing is the best thing I can do now. The latter work I feel too much for me lately and you see, no matter how or how long I am allowed to worth of drink, now all must be done by the lady’s first plays.

Ever Blessing to your good /
This by yours etc.

Richard Lewis O’Hare
45 Rugby Avenue,
Belfast
30th Oct. 1936

Dear Mr. O'Cathain,

I write you on 14th Oct. This is to give some further information to help in learning our pipes.

The fingers of lower hand are placed straight across the chanters so that the little finger reaches the hole comfortably. The place of holes differs when fingers in place.

No matter what pitch the chanters, the lowest note is always called D, and written G in modern notation. Same as 3rd string of violin, therefore, if we play the diatonic scale D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D and notice it in modern notation, it will naturally be 2 sharps, thus F♯♯.

(My D, apart from pitch.) And it is the natural key of the chanters. The fingers getting the necessary intervals without the use of finger keys.

The violin tuned in unison with chanters will help to show this clearly.

In the first simple mode of fingering the first octave the chanters is raised (value open) to make (1) D G. Close value to get (2) E with 2 fingers. The major 3rd, written (3) F♯, one finger. (4) G♯, 2 fingers.

(If F♯ & G♯) (5) A, known as close A, one finger. (6) B, 2 fingers.

(7) A & B falcon) (8) C♯, 3 fingers. (9) Ordinary D, 4 fingers. (10) Fundamental note, in simple form, is thumb only. The 4th finger should never be used with D, but certain other fingers are used — we will get them later — when it becomes clear.

Yours Truly,

[Signature]
First octave. First mode of fingerings. For ordinary open notes in first octave we will take A as first. The first often finger
C#1 has the 2, 6 fingers with it. Third finger
B, 2. T tells which has the whole lower hand open with it. 4th finger
A, 1. All according to colour. 5th place is required. This
6th place stands some interval with "open" or "close" as A string
G to D string of violin (6th fifth) and so it is used in tuning.
F#. 2
E#. 1
E, 2

is important. Ordinary "open" G 3 finger
F#. 2
E#. 1
E, 2

and 2 finger. In these 2 notes the same applies in finger 2nd octave. Some more must happen. It must be born in mind
A that the first method is the one upon which all advanced fingerings
are built. In playing all fingers becomes intensified. The first
note in 2nd octave pressure is E 2 finger. Close E finger before
pressing F#. Value of all finger properly closed, the E 2 finger
is easy with slightly more than first octave pressure kind. In practicing
some find it easier to get 6 by slaming from F# into it, then
which means you don't close the F# but slam into G. Then keep the G
finger open 7 slam up to C#. 3 finger open. It is wrong to produce
a note in first octave and, with fingers open, try to force it into its
2nd octave. If we play say, E we must close the 2 finger and
manipulate them with reasonable 2nd octave pressure to get
F#. Value must be kept closed on knee except for its own note, or
certain effects we will mention later. So value works Joseph
+ if the pad falls off, fix it in place with Osid, elastic line, or
other. Good adhesive (x) 3 finger (2mm interval)
3rd October 1936

Page 3/6

I know this, help will help you understand me. Don't let pitch confuse you. Taking it on tonic note on, say, violin, the most natural position for the fingers give some intervals as finger on chorder without using finger key.

Please drop a line and tell me any difficulties you find and I will do all I can to help you.

There is not even one playing engagement at present. Nothing from the B.B.C. Do you know Mr. Brown, the music director here? (E. Godfrey Brown, A.B.E.). Even a short note from you— not saying I asked you— of course, them. If B.B.C. 31 Linenhall St., Belfast would be good for me.

Pipes from D. are trying to get engagements here.
3rd October 1936
Page 4/6

Hoping you are all quite well,
and that I will hear from you soon.

Your very sincerely,
Richard Lewis Thealy

P.S.
Send regards to all
from Mrs. O’Neagle

Practice II Little House
first room