

3.16.5 Patrick Maxwell 1906-1995

Wilbert Garvin

I first heard about Patrick Maxwell when his son Michael contacted me to see if I would have a look at Patrick's pipes, which were made by R. L. O'Mealy, with the intention of possibly restoring them to their former glory. I replied that I would certainly have a look at them since I had no idea what condition they were in.



On initial examination of the pipes it was obvious that Paddy's pipes were put together from various bits and pieces that R.L. had in his workshop. On questioning Michael about the pipes he informed me that they were made for Paddy for work that he had carried out for R. L., particularly in his workshop.

The mainstock (which had a dovetailed bar for attachment of a bass regulator), and the four drones (3 Cs and a G) were made of boxwood. There was no drone key, the drones being stopped by small corks.

The single regulator was of ebony, made by Michael Egan, although the keys were not original – R.L. probably added them. The chanter was original, a classic O'Mealy C in boxwood, without any keys.

The set was completely reeded, the drones having elder reeds. When I tried the chanter, with only a bit of fine adjustment of the reed, it sounded absolutely beautiful. Here we had an O'Mealy chanter with one of his original reeds. There were also extra chanter reeds in a small box.¹ The drones and regulator also worked well.

The bag was however completely rotted. When I tried the bellows they were also leaking badly, but the skin was completely covered by neatly sewn green velvet so I suspected that it was also rotted – this was confirmed later.

Naturally I was intrigued to come across a previously unknown piper so I asked Michael if he could gather some information regarding his father and his piping. He agreed to try and put something together while I put a new bag on his father's pipes, re-hemped all the joints etc. and got them going as well as I could.

In due course Michael returned for the pipes. He brought with him a photograph of his father and notes by Frank Bunting, who was the son of Frank Bunting, a close friend of Paddy's.

¹ See *The Seán Reid Society Journal*, Vol.2, Misc.2, pages 216 and 220 for measurements and photographs of the reeds.

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Paddy Maxwell's O'Mealy set

Frank's notes²

My daddy met Paddy at his first day at school in about 1920 in Milford Street School. Paddy Maxwell lived in Candor Street off the Shankill Road, which was about 3 streets away. Paddy's mother died around 1916 so the family included his father, three sisters and Paddy. His father put the three sisters into Nazareth House, a children's home run by nuns, but kept Paddy at home. His sisters stayed in Nazareth House until they were 16. One is still alive and lives in Newtownabbey. In 1920 the troubles began so, as Catholics, they had to move from the Shankill Road. They went to a house in Cargill Street near the mixed district of Millfield. In 1922 the house was burnt and they moved to Abbey Street in Bangor, and later to Hilden. Paddy remembers visiting his sisters in the home, travelling from Bangor by train and bus.

Paddy was working in the mill from 11 years of age and so was Frank Bunting – part-time at school and part-time at the mill. The flax-spinning mill, which was in Northumberland Street, was run by the New Northern Spinning Company. They got 6 shillings and 8 pence for working Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Their job was that of Cagers, which involved collecting the bobbins from the girls who worked on the machines and putting them into cages.

In 1923 both Paddy and Frank, then 17 years old, decided one morning to go down to Dublin to join the Free State army but had to return that night since they were too young to join. After this they were both unemployed for a number of years. During the troubles in the 1920s the Model School – a Protestant school beside Frank's house, was burned down.

Frank and Paddy joined the *Craobh Ruadh Uilleann Pipe band*, where they were taught by Billy Woods. Frank had joined the band before Paddy. They used to go to play the pipes at Gaelic Football matches in Corrigan Park.

² Frank Bunting Junior still has his father's O'Mealy set which he brought a few years ago to the Belfast Tionól for examination. They were a typical O'Mealy C# set in boxwood with a single regulator.



The Craobh Rua Pipe Band.³ Paddy is the piper standing on the extreme left

They had a club in Crown Entry off High Street in Belfast. Paddy wanted a chanter reed and heard about Richard Louis O'Mealy who built pipes and lived first in Edinburgh Street, Lisburn Road and then Rugby Avenue, Belfast. Mr. O'Mealy was born in Westmeath, moved to Cork and then came to Belfast. He was Church of Ireland. He taught the pipes as well as building them. He is buried in Knockbreda. He used a treadle lathe and made Paddy's pipes from elder wood³ grown on Divis mountain. Paddy had the wood for years to dry it and then the pipes were made and this again took many years. The pipes were made with new wood and using bits from old sets. A full set of pipes has three regulators.⁴ O'Mealy's family apparently made uilleann pipes for generations. Mr. O'Mealy told Paddy that when he was born a set of pipes were put in his hand. The ivory for the pipes was bought in Smithfield market. Paddy sewed the bellows for his pipes himself. The wool used in his pipes he got in Divis mountain from bits left by sheep going through hedges. Paddy's pipes were made in 1935. Paddy went to Mr. O'Mealy twice a week to do odd jobs, for example painting and papering, fixing the roof etc.

The Craobh Rua band practised in huts at the bottom of the Whiterock Road on the opposite side of the road. Frank thinks they were originally used by the army many years before. Apparently some people had lived in them. Paddy brought over goatskin for a bag for the pipes and he put it in lime water for a few days and then when it was drying out it had to be worked or it would go stiff like a drumhead.

Richard O'Mealy was married twice but had no family. The house he lived in was 45 Rugby Avenue.

³ Paddy's pipes weren't made from elder but R. L. certainly would have sent Paddy up Divis mountain to collect elder for drone reeds. This is where the celebrated reed maker Frank McFadden also collected elder for drone reeds.

⁴ This is presumably in relation to Paddy's and Frank's pipes having just one regulator.

Frank and Paddy went to the *Ard Scoil* to learn Irish but they could not make head nor tail of it. Frank started to work in Cosgrove's Bar in High Street in 1929 and served his time there.

Frank's cousin Roseleen Bunting, from Irish Street, used to play in the picture-house on the Shankill Road. An uncle of Paddy's – his father's younger brother – called Robert, left in 1927 for the USA but later on went to Australia. Paddy's father tried to trace him through the Salvation Army but nobody heard from him for over 30 years. In 1964 Paddy was working in the Midland Hotel on York Street. One night he saw this man wandering about and thought that he wanted to use the lift. He asked him "Can I help you?" and the man replied "No. I am looking for Paddy Maxwell." Says I "you are speaking to him." He says "do you not know me?" It turned out to be his uncle Robert home from Australia after all those years. Robert went to live in Kircubbin as his wife came from there.

I would like to thank Michael and Frank for these notes.



A commemoration service was held at R. L. O'Mealy's grave in Knockbreda graveyard on the outskirts of Belfast in the afternoon of Saturday the 1st March 2008. Michael kindly brought along his father's set. Nollaig Mac Cárthaigh and I therefore had the opportunity to play an O'Mealy set while sitting at his graveside. I must say, it was a most moving experience. I wonder if he heard us!

In due course Michael arrived down with the bellows wondering if I could do anything with them,

especially since his father had sewn in the skin. On removing the velvet covering it was obvious that the skin (sheep-skin) had rotted. I agreed to try and restore them. Removing the old sewn-in skin actually turned out to be a very time-consuming and tedious job since I wanted to make sure that I didn't damage the patina of the clappers. However, all went well and they are now back to their original glory.

