

### 3.17 A National Treasure<sup>1</sup>

Michael Dooley

#### Sam Farrar and his James Kenna Set

For me, it is always a joy to meet the people who share my love and passion for Uilleann pipes and I take every opportunity possible to meet and talk piping. Also I love to see and measure different examples of the instrument. So you can imagine my delight and excitement recently, when I was invited to visit Sam Farrar in Abbeyshrule, County Longford, to talk piping and see his beautiful old set.

#### Sam Farrar

Sam Farrar is an 86 year old<sup>2</sup> who has played Uilleann pipes, on and off, all his life, until an accident a few years back affected his ability to cover tone-holes accurately.



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*Sam with his James Kenna Set  
in his kitchen in Abbeyshrule*

And what a treasure chest of information Sam proved to be. I just hope I get another chance to talk with Sam and maybe gather some more of his memories of Piping.

Sam had a wealth of information on Richard O'Mealy, the famous Uilleann pipe maker who lived much of his adult life in Belfast. There had to be a family connection, and so it proved. Sam's father George's first wife was Letitia Mealy, a sister of Richard. Of course, Richard O'Mealy was born and reared in Templecross, Ballynacarrigy, very close to Abbeyshrule. Richard's great grandfather Tom Mealy relocated from Mayo and settled in this area.

As we talked, Sam frequently referred to 'R. L. Mealy' or, more often, just "Dick" or "R. L." (meaning Richard Lewis). Other members of the family, like Larry Mealy (Richard's father), were always mentioned without the 'O' in the surname. It was only later I remembered hearing that Richard had adopted the 'O' into his name (the first reference I found was 1897 Feis Ceoil winner of Composition, Professor O Mealy) but the family are still known in the midlands as Mealy. Another complication is that the name is pronounced locally as 'Melia'.

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This article was originally published in *The Pipers' Review/Iris na bPíobairí*, Vol. XXI no. 2, Spring 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Since this article was written, Sam Farrar has sadly passed away in 2007. We retain the author's references to seeing Sam again.

Sam told me he started piping at twelve or thirteen years old. His father had ordered a lovely C# practice set from Richard O Mealy (Sam's grandson Jonathan is now taking Uilleann pipe classes in NPU on the same practice set). Sam's father travelled to Belfast in 1924 to buy this practice set and he tried to play for a few years, but did not persist.

Interestingly, this set came with a diagram of the chanter, a hand-written set of instructions and several beginners' tunes (all by R. L. O'Mealy's hand). Each tune was annotated with details of the technique needed to execute. I wonder if any of those pages still survive in the Farrar household.

At the time Sam's family were living at Rath, Ballynacarrigy where his father made a living from their forge and small foundry. Their kitchen was quite small so everyone had to listen to Sam practising. Far from being a problem, Sam remembers his father and a friend listening to him practice and offering encouragement. According to Sam, they would happily sit through any kind of racket if it would lead to music in the house. What a wonderful attitude!

Speaking of practice, Sam mentioned that the Mealy home-place was near Templecross Church and this was where R. L. spent much of his practice time - undisturbed, and undisturbing, in an acoustic paradise.

### **Piping around Ballynacarrigy**

There must be something in the air, down around Ballynacarrigy; it is unusual to find such a strong tradition of Uilleann piping outside the big towns and cities. Sam remembers a number of Uilleann pipers in the locality. Joe Kilmurray was a neighbour and family friend. He was an enthusiastic Uilleann piper and was particularly friendly with R. L. O Mealy. He stayed in touch by post when R. L. moved to Belfast and Sam remembers great nights of music in the homes of the Mealys, Farrars, and Kilmurrays, especially when R. L. was on a visit.

On most visits, the designated house would be crowded with eager musicians and listeners, and R. L. would strap on the pipes and play throughout the evening into the early hours. But sometimes he was not in good form and would not play at all, or only a few tunes on whistle. Sam remembers R. L. carrying two chanter reeds, one for practice and one for performance. On one occasion, R. L. astonished all present by removing a peeled rush from a chanter and rolling it between his hands before carefully replacing it again. Without any further ado the set played perfectly. Although this is a common, and well-known, technique, with drone reeds, it is the first time I've heard it used on a chanter rush. I must check out the effect for myself.

There were obviously no reed-making classes in those days, and in spite of the excellent piping connections within his family, Sam had to learn reed making by dissecting old reeds and by trial and error. Judging by the examples shown to me, Sam was a fine reed maker in the O'Mealy style and he still has a number of original R. L. reeds in fine condition.

I asked Sam about local styles of piping, in particular the fast tight style we associate with R. L. Sam was only aware that R. L. was considered a good player and that was how pipes should be played. I got a similar response when I asked about the predominant pitch of pipes played locally. Sam could only say that some sets sounded particularly nice and that he, personally, liked the tone of O Mealy C# pipes. It seems that there was a mixture of pitches from F# *[sic]* to C, but most played in various shades of D or C#.

Other pipers in the locality were Peter Brown who was a blind piper, and Robert Shaw. Peter Brown made a living playing at fairs and race meetings. Both of these pipers were influences on R. L. growing up. They would have been just before Sam's time but he can remember his father and others in the locality referring to them.

Sam's contemporaries were Willie Reynolds, Peter Carbury, Mike Keenagh of Legan, Jim Dolan pipe-maker and player, and his uncle Jimmy McCrone *[sic]* another maker and player. Peter Ward was from Walderstown (townland of Willie Reynolds) and he acquired an R. L. set. This was a brass and ebony C# but it had a Rowsome chanter when Sam last saw it played. Sam thinks this set went to someone in the West of Ireland, but I think this may be the set currently played by Joe McKenna.

Although it was common for pipers in the locality to play in the 'Piping Houses' Sam found it difficult to get tuition. He had the notes and hand-written instructions from R. L. and the occasional 'master-class' when R. L. was on a visit. Most of Sam's tunes were picked up from local fiddle players such as Johnny Baird, a friend who often came over for a "few tunes".

He does remember enrolling for weekly piping classes at the local school. The cost was one shilling each week. This was before the Second World War and the teacher was Willie Reynolds. For one reason or another though, the lessons petered out, and it was back to more improvised learning again.

Sam can remember R. L. O Mealy playing at local sports days. These were called the



The Farrar Family

Tristernagh Sports, and R. L. was a regular visitor. He showed me some wonderful old photos, including some of the sports with R. L. and others playing music on stage (from 1926 or 1927). One older photo shows four Uilleann pipers, all reputed to be Mealys. The oldest is reputed to be Larry Mealy (who died in 1900). The pipes being played by Larry in that photo appear to be a different (possibly flatter pitched) set than the Kenna.<sup>3</sup>

In talking about R. L. a recurring theme was St. Patrick's Day. The first tune R. L. learned to play was St. Patrick's Day. As a young man R. L. played in Templecross Church every St.

<sup>3</sup> It has since been learned that this photograph is of one of the early meetings of the Cork Pipers' Club around 1900. While we are not certain as to whether or not the young man playing the big Egan set is R. L. we know for certain that the piper who was mistaken for Larry Mealy is, in fact, Shane O'Neill who is playing a Harrington set of Union pipes.

Patrick's Day and in later years (1930's) lots of eager listeners in the locality would tune in to BBC Radio on St. Patrick's Day to hear R. L. play pipes. Finally, R. L. was buried on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1947.

### **The Farrar Pipes**

Sometime around 1938, R. L.'s sister, and Sam's step-aunt, Katie called down to see Sam. It was obviously a big moment because Sam talked as though he was describing an event from yesterday. It was just after a threshing when she arrived. Katie had Larry Mealy's pipes (her father and Richard's father) and she wanted them entrusted to a piper within the family. So Sam acquired a lovely James Kenna Set.

It seems that Katie recovered these pipes after her brother Edward died (about 1935). Edward (Ned) had these pipes in America and reputedly played them in several New York St. Patrick's Day parades. Ned was not regarded as a great piper within the family. We think that Ned went to America after Larry died in 1900. Sometime before departure R. L. had set-up this set with a new bag, bellows, and reeds.

We know for sure that Larry Mealy owned and played the Kenna set, and that his father, John, and grandfather Tom, were also Uilleann pipers. However, it is not clear which of these men bought the pipes originally. The Mealy family, reputedly, sold their best cow to buy a set of pipes at one stage. Whether or not it was the same set we can't really be sure, but the pipes were reputedly bought from a neighbour in Ballinacarrigy, and had been owned by a man executed for his part in the 1798 rebellion. This neighbour must have lived close to the Mealys because both farms backed onto Lough Iron.

Thinking about this logically, I think it more likely that Tom, or even John Mealy, bought the pipes from this neighbour. Although this is just conjecture, I would be surprised if a set in such good condition remained unplayed for many years, while near neighbours were known to be Uilleann pipers.

Sam has never heard what happened to other sets of pipes owned by Tom, John, or Larry Mealy. It is probably reasonable to assume that some of Larry's other children acquired these, because we know that Edward, William and John (in addition to R. L.) all played pipes. Johnny is remembered as a fine piper and fiddler and was noted for teaching music, although mostly on fiddle.

So we possibly have the set traced as far back as 1798, and passed through generations of one famous family, and now Sam Farrar is delighted to see his grandson Jonathan playing this set. I must say the condition of this set is a great credit, not only to Sam Farrar, but the generations of owners/players who came before.

The set, made from boxwood, brass, and ivory mounts, has four drones and one regulator, held in a plug which fits into a hollow stock. The stock is stamped 'Kenna Mullingar'. This stamp, along with the design of the pipes would imply that these are a "James Kenna" set. James was the father of Timothy Kenna who set up business in Dublin in 1812 and made some fine sets, highly valued today.

We know that James Kenna advertised in 1770 that he had been supplying Irish bagpipes in the provinces of Munster and Connaught for several years before setting up business near Mullingar. Judging by other examples of James Kenna's work, this set would appear to be a very early example. I would guess that early 1770's would be reasonable estimate. At any rate, the set is right at the beginning of Uilleann pipe development.

What is amazing is the sophistication of the acoustic design. I cannot remember seeing a set with the regulator and drone reeds set in a single chamber before. This feature alone, suggests the set is earlier than other examples of early Uilleann pipes.

The other unusual feature is the bass drone arrangement (which I have seen examples of). This type of arrangement can be seen on several examples of pastoral pipes. I wonder was there any acoustic advantage perceived from this.

The first piece of this drone is permanently set in the plug and accepts a reed (about 2 o'clock in the picture). On the end is a 'U' bend of brass tubing and the second piece of the drone returns (permanently) to the plug (about 10 o'clock). Within the plug there is a chamber broken, connecting the tubes, which hold incoming piece two with outgoing piece three (allowing air and sound to pass through). Piece three (about 7 o'clock) looks similar to a normal middle drone butt piece, and the fourth piece is the tuning slide, which again looks similar to a middle drone tuning slide.



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There is no drone switch-off key but individual drones could be stopped by using plugs (no longer present - but the ornamentation near the sound caps suggests that plugs were attached by cord to each drone end).

There are three octave drones (as normal) and a long tenor drone, which plays a 'fifth'. The original tuning slide to the A drone is missing. The single regulator has 5 keys and plays the notes D, F#, G, A, and B.

## The Chanter

Although made from boxwood the chanter is now a beautiful rich darkish brown colour with a wonderful patina developed over the years.

The most obvious sign of wear is at the bell where part of the wood and ferrule has worn where the chanter is in contact with the thigh.

The chanter head is original and was tied directly into the bag. Many years ago Sam adapted the top to take a normal air inlet tube.

The chanter length is 359 mm, which is only marginally shorter than most modern concert pitched chanters today. I have tried a series of reeds and the chanter plays nicely with most. It seems happiest with short reeds, narrow heads, and short tapered staples. The back D is very tolerant, even with heavily shaved blades, and all notes sound beautifully harmonic against the drones.



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The most comfortable pitch is A440, or marginally flat of this (but no more than 5 cents) with some reeds. I suspect this is a coincidence, as A440 would not have been a reference pitch at that time. Warping, shrinkage, and modern reed making methods may well be contributing to a significant lowering of the original pitch. Interesting also that the regulator plays happily about 20 cents above A440. This was easily brought into tune with a little rushing and opening of the reed.

The tone is very pleasant, perhaps slightly unusual by modern standards. I would describe it as a clear, sweet, rich tone.

The small drone and the 'A' drone both play very stably and comfortably with elder reeds. The middle drone required a very big, large bore cane reed (I had no elder twigs big enough). The bass drone required a wide bore with a heavily waxed tongue. Overall, the regulator and drones are loud when played against the chanter, but the harmonic effect is gorgeous.

Looking at the inside bore; there is no reason to suspect it has been altered in any way. The throat, at 4 mm is very slightly wider than expected (3.8 mm is common on later flat chanters). There are clear signs of deliberate bumps and hollows in the bore and I can see where the bore has been opened slightly above the back D and in other critical areas. Even though this is a very early example the acoustic design is more advanced than most instruments made within the last hundred years. Compelling evidence of the folly of modern makers attempting improvements or alterations to old instruments!

## The Loch Iron Tragedy

This story was told on a radio program some years back. I think it was R. L. O'Mealy's nephew talking to Robbie Hannan on 'The Long Note'. At any rate, it is worth repeating.



Sam asked if I noticed a difference in the wood colour on the two large drone ends. One was noticeably darker than the other. He then told me this story.

The 15<sup>th</sup> August 1872 was a Sunday, and pubs could only serve drink to travellers on Sundays. This was not a problem to Uilleann pipers and other smart folk in places like Ballinacarrigy.

So Larry Mealy and a group of local people set off by boat to row about a mile across Loch Iron and then a short walk to the village of Ballinalack. A grand day was had with drink, music, and good company.

On the return trip the good form continued and Larry played the pipes as the others rowed. The water within 100 yards of shore was generally shallow and it was customary for one person to step into the water and pull the boat in. This may have been due to rushes making the rowing difficult. One volunteer offered to tow and stepped overboard. Unfortunately the water was too deep and down he went. When he surfaced he grabbed the side of the boat and in the panic, the boat overturned and everyone went in the water. Larry managed to hold on to the overturned boat and rescued one child. Tragically, one of his daughters was drowned.

The set of pipes, being connected by the bellows, were retrieved along with Larry, when help arrived. However, the end piece of the middle drone had fallen off. Larry and some of his friends went back often to search for the missing drone end. Sam thinks it was three years later when they eventually came across it. They spotted the drone on the bottom. I suppose there was little pollution in those days.

In those times very few people could swim, so a man who could, was summoned from another village, and rowed out to the spot. At this stage, I was caught up in the story and could not resist jumping in, I suggested that the 'swimmer' dived in and retrieved it. No! said Sam, he carefully lowered himself into the water, holding on to the boat all the time, and managed to lift it between his toes.

## Completing a Piping Circle

At one point Sam talked about the style of pipes made by O Mealy. He suggested that O Mealy had improved on the Taylor pipes. Intrigued, I asked Sam had he ever come across a Taylor set. Indeed he had.

Sometime around the late 1920's Sam was asked by the local schoolteacher to come around to the house for a few tunes. This man liked to sing and play piano. In the middle of their session, the teacher invited Sam to retrieve a set of pipes from under the couch. Sam remembered a big four regulator Taylor set, lots of silver and ivory, and he played a few tunes



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on this set. Sam was impressed by the tone etc. and said he fell in love with that set.

I asked the name of the schoolteacher. Brian Cody was the answer. Now, I had always thought Brian Cody was a Bank Manager from Tipperary. However, I must have misheard when I bought this Taylor set from his son in 1974.

Now I must complete the circle by taking the Taylor set to Abbeyshrule. I'm dying to see Sam's face when I open the pipe box and say the immortal words "play it again, Sam".

Many thanks to Sam Farrar, his grandson Jonathan, and all the Farrar household, for hospitality, friendship, and the privilege of playing and measuring this wonderful set. Thanks also to Geoff Wooff for technical advice and to Ken McLeod for advice and background information.

*N.B. Since writing this I have new information about James Kenna, which suggests that he worked in Ballinacarrigy. Also, he used the name stamp 'James Kenna - Mullingar' at that time.*