

A Note on Irish union pipes

Robbie Hughes

Robbie Hughes is a respected maker of the Uilleann pipes. His firm, Hughes and McLeod, was established in 1977, near Downpatrick where he & Ken McLeod set up a pipe-making workshop. Today, in addition to pipes, Hughes is also renowned for researching and producing Clanrye Pipe Chanter Reeds, the world's first synthetic highland bagpipe reed. Again in this project Ken McLeod's knowledge of electronics and piping proved invaluable and in 1990 the company was awarded the Department of Trade & Industries' Smart Award.

This article was written in 2005 for the Lecale Review, one of the many journals published by the Lecale Historical Society (www.lecalehistory.co.uk). The society was founded in 1974 and has been very active in promoting the study of history and the environment with particular reference to County Down. Lecale, centred on Downpatrick, is an historic barony that includes Strangford, Saul, Inch, Ardglass, Killough and Dundrum.

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The playing of union, or uilleann, pipes threatened to disappear in the early twentieth century due to lack of skilled makers and maintainers of the instrument, but now it is recognised all over the world. One of our members, Robbie Hughes of Strangford, gave a talk and performance on the pipes to the Society in 2005. Here he recalls some piping links with Lecale, without mentioning that his own skills as a pipe-maker have established the strongest link so far between the place and the pipes.

The skills of the pipe-maker have always been regarded as important for the maintenance of a flourishing piping tradition. Such skills are even more crucial in the case of the highly complicated Irish union pipes, for, without the services of a reed-maker, a musician could not expect to continue practising his art for more than a few years.

At the end of the nineteenth century, there was an ever-increasing awareness that the playing of instruments such as the harp and the union pipes was in decline, especially in the northern part of Ireland. Therefore it was regarded by many as something of a coup when a very highly acclaimed young union pipe-maker rejected an opportunity to establish a business in Cork and instead decided to come to Belfast.

Richard Lewis Mealy was born in Templecross, Ballinacarrigy, in County Westmeath, which is close to Abbeyshrule in County Longford. His family



Larry Mealy, R L O'Mealy's father, playing the pipes.

traced its ancestry to the historically important O'Malley clan of County Mayo. In the Abbeyshrule area, the pronunciation of Mealy was 'Melia' and, in the 1890s, influenced by the Gaelic revival, Richard changed his surname to O'Mealy. Francis O'Neill, the Chicago police captain who did so much to record Irish traditional music a hundred years ago mentions that there had been four generations of O'Mealy pipers and pipe-makers.¹ This could very well account for the strong piping tradition in the Ballinacarrigy area which continues to the present time.

O'Mealy's early life in Ballinacarrigy was not without sadness, and an event on Sunday 15 August, 1872 may well have influenced his decision to leave the area. Since the day was a Sunday, O'Mealy and some friends decided to row a mile across Lough Iron and play some music in the village of Ballinalack, where they spent a very pleasant afternoon. On the return trip, O'Mealy continued to entertain the company by playing a beautiful set of old pipes made by James Kenna of Mullingar in about 1770. The quiet waters of Lough Iron provided a perfect background for the sweet sounds being played, but as they approached the home shore, rowing became more difficult due to the profusion of rushes. Therefore, to save time, someone decided to hop overboard and tow the boat to its mooring. Unfortunately, the volunteer misjudged the situation; upon stepping into the water, he went right under. When he surfaced a few seconds later, in panic he grasped the side of the rowing-boat, which overturned, throwing everyone into the water. O'Mealy, still strapped to his pipes,

managed to rescue one child, but tragically one of his daughters was drowned.

An interesting codicil to the Lough Iron tragedy was related to me by Jonathan Farrar, to whom the Kenna Set, which O'Mealy played on the day of the accident, has descended through the family. Jonathan pointed out that the boxwood and ivory of the baritone-drone slide were much darker than the same materials in the rest of the set. The reason

Monday, 27th February, 1905.
AT 8 O'CLOCK.

Lecture Hall,
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, STRABANE.

Mr. R. L. O'MEALY,
The famous Irish Piper will appear in Ancient Bardic Costume at the Elocutionary Competitions on MONDAY, 27th FEBRUARY, 1905.

Advertisement for a performance on the union pipes by R L O'Mealy in Strabane Presbyterian Church lecture hall in 1905.

for this difference in shade was as follows. When O'Mealy fell into the water, his pipes remained attached to him by their waist-strap; however, the end of the baritone drone became detached and sank. Three years later, someone noticed the missing part lying on the bed of the lough and a salvage plan was immediately put into operation. This involved nothing more complicated than lowering a rather tall bare-footed gentleman over the side of a rowing-boat. He managed to recover the part by grasping it between his toes, and soon O'Mealy's beautiful set of old pipes was again complete.

O'Mealy came to Belfast to work in Arnott's shop in High Street, from which he retired about 1937.² For many years the family lived at 17 Edinburgh Street, and later at Rugby Road, Belfast. There, Richard made instruments of the highest quality, and became widely acknowledged as a man of 'education and ability', who mixed in literary society and associated with those who were promoting the Gaelic Revival. The press became aware of this unusual man, and there followed 'flattering testimonials in Belfast, Coleraine, Newry, Dublin and Glasgow.'

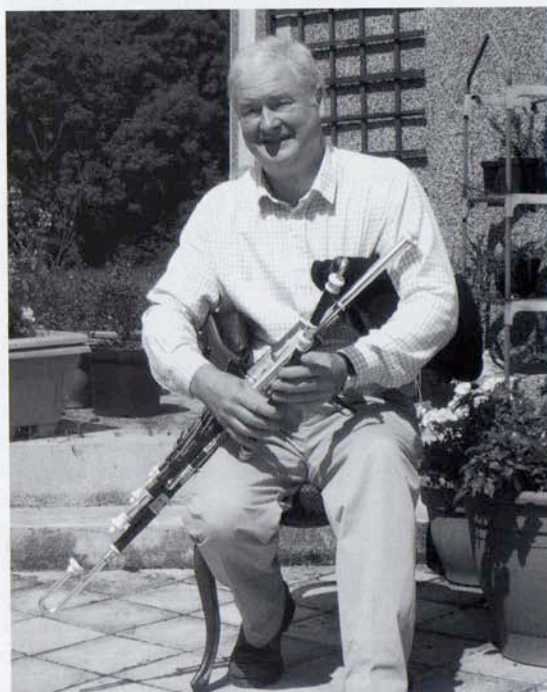
O'Mealy seems to have been something of a showman, and he added to his income from pipe-making by performing at various concerts and other events throughout the country. Often, he would entertain his audiences dressed in the imaginary costumes of figures from Irish mythology. This brought some derision but he was by no means out of step with the mood of his time, which is reflected in a letter to him from John Southwell, of Newry.



Richard Lewis O'Mealy.

Southwell infers a comparison between O'Mealy's cultural contributions and other events in the County Down town, but went on to complain: 'I am sorry to say that all the concerts that were held recently were of the modern and cheap variety, with practically little or no consideration to our native songs or music.'

A contemporary of R L O'Mealy was the very well known Francis Joseph Bigger who, at the time, owned Jordan's Castle in Ardglass. (See the article by Joseph McBrinn in this journal.) Bigger was active in many areas of the Gaelic Revival and, when in residence at Jordan's Castle, he would invite pipers, including O'Mealy, to join him and his friends as they celebrated Irish culture. Other union pipers in the company included Francis McPeake, Peter McFadden, and Brother Gildas, a De La Salle teacher, of Irish Street, Downpatrick. Brother Gildas



Robbie Hughes playing a set of his own pipes.

(O'Shea) was a well-known collector and a capable piper, but I remember being told by a very old man who had heard him playing that, such was Gildas' fascination and awe for the haunting acoustical qualities of the C Natural note on the chanter scale, he often would hold this note for a longer time than could be considered reasonable by either the composer or indeed the audience.

In the early years of the twentieth century, R L O'Mealy and his contemporaries laid the foundations of what in the late 1960s would become the international regeneration of union piping. He died in 1947 and was buried in the Church of Ireland parish churchyard in Newtownbreda. His most lasting legacy can be heard through the medium of the instruments which he crafted so carefully. Some examples of his work may be viewed at the Ulster Museum, Belfast, and at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, Holywood, County Down. BBC Northern Ireland's sound archive has a series of 78 recordings, which again testify to the extraordinary ability of a very gifted pipe-maker.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Jonathan Farrar, Robbie Hannan, Wilbert Garvin and Ken McLeod.

Notes and references

1. Francis O'Neill, *Irish minstrels and musicians; the story of Irish music; with numerous dissertations on related subjects* (1913, reprinted Cork 1987).
2. Fionnuala Scullion, 'R L O'Mealy: Belfast uilleann pipe maker', in *Ulster Folk and Transport Museum Year Book 1975/1976* (Holywood 1977), 8-10.