

3.01 R. L. O’Mealy Preface

Ronan Browne

*“He was small ... low-sized ... stout ... very quick to talk!
And when he moved ... when he walked, he walked very fast – in a rush!
And he plays the same – in a hurry!”*

– Victor Mealy

I remember clearly my reaction to first hearing the music of Richard Lewis O’Mealy. The rich deep tone of his pipes was unlike anything I had heard before, as was the precision of his playing. I ran for a whistle and discovered that his pipes appeared to be in the key of A! I had heard of B flat pipes but never A; the speed of the playing felt normal so I didn’t question the pitch and it was to be many years before I realised that the tape had in fact been copied at the wrong speed and he was actually playing in C#.

Looking up his entry in Francis O’Neill’s “Irish Minstrels and Musicians” only deepened



From Irish Minstrels & Musicians

the mystery: either he had a higher-pitched set in the picture or else he was a very large man who belittled his massive set of A pipes. But these were minor details; my mind settled on ‘A’ and that was that regarding pitch.

O’Mealy was different to all pipers I had heard previously: he played music in an intricate but entertaining way; he wore knee britches and buckled shoes; he was in O’Neill’s “Irish Minstrels & Musicians” yet he had lived to be recorded as late as 1943.¹

I didn’t question the pitch of his pipes again until years later somebody mentioned that his pipes were in the key of C#; so the tape had indeed been slowed down to the point where the pipes appeared to be down as low as A. This now added an element of the supernatural – here was the same man but now playing at an incredibly fast pace.² I now knew that O’Mealy was quite an age (just short of his 69th birthday) when these pieces were recorded, making his musical acrobatics all the more amazing.

Speed, wit and perfection are good words to describe his music. His almost constant playing of the regulators never becomes boring or repetitive; indeed his accompaniment shows great humour in tandem with its inventiveness.

¹ Richard would have been forty years old when Francis O’Neill’s “Irish Minstrels and Musicians” was published in 1913. O’Neill died in 1936, seven years before the BBC recorded O’Mealy, who himself was just short of his 70th birthday when the recordings were made.

² See “The Sligo Lasses” in 3.03 Piping Style, for a shocking example.

We have all seen sets of pipes with extra regulators, over and above the now-standard three, but Richard O’Mealy is the only piper (to the best of my knowledge) of whom we have recordings showing them being utilised to their fullest extent, and in such a manner as to entertain the novice and hardened aficionado alike.

Not only could O’Mealy play but he also made and repaired pipes. He furthered the instrument’s development using an educated mix of old and new knowledge.



NPU Archive

The mechanics and external appearance of his pipes are unmistakably modern but the bores are more in the style of the old classic makers rather than the new wide-bore modern approach. His pipes are not commonly seen nowadays but I will not be surprised if there is a huge resurgence of interest in his instruments in the coming years.

This volume of the Seán Reid Society Journal is the result of many months of investigation, excitement and fun which took place on computer screens worldwide throughout the year 2007, as a group of us met, talked and exchanged information about this most fascinating man, Richard Lewis O’Mealy. Our adventure began when Cambridge University professor Ross Anderson ran some internet searches on the subject of pipes. One of these, for the Westmeath piper Richard Lewis O’Mealy, led him to a set of photographs uploaded by Leslie Drew who turned out to be a great grand niece of O’Mealy living in Canada. She had placed the pictures on the net for general sharing with her family but also in case somebody might chance upon them while searching for her musical ancestor!



Leslie Drew

Leslie Drew

Ross immediately contacted Leslie and alerted Wilbert Garvin and Ken McLeod, both of whom he knew had a special interest in R. L. O’Mealy. The next day, Ken copied the email to the distinguished historian Seán Donnelly, NPU archivist Terry Moylan, pipe-maker Robbie Hughes and pipers Jimmy O’Brien Moran and myself.

Over the following days, Ken expanded the list to include pipers Gay McKeon, Brian Vallely, Trevor Stewart and Robbie Hannan (Robbie was the presenter of a 1985 Long Note radio documentary on O’Mealy).

On the 17th of March 2007³, emotional first contact with O’Mealy’s great grand niece Leslie Drew was made by Ken McLeod and the roller coaster ride began. Days later, Clement and Jonathan Farrar joined in – Clement and Jonathan are great grandsons of George Farrar Snr. who was married to R. L.’s sister Letitia. Through them we met their grandfather Sam Farrar, who had carried on the tradition of piping which has now continued down to Jonathan.

Emails flew back and forth, each one laden with new information in answer to questions raised by previous communications. The group shrunk back down in size and while we often included the others on important emails, we continued on with Leslie, Clement, Jonathan, Ken, Wilbert and myself with important findings appearing regularly also from Seán Donnelly. We began to amass quite a collection of photographs, newspaper clippings and letters; people revisited earlier research, often bringing old information back into play and new research was embarked upon. We had originally considered that an article might be written for the *Seán Reid Society Journal* Volume 3 but it soon became evident that Volume 3 would have to be devoted in its entirety to the music, life and times of Richard Lewis O’Mealy.

It is our intention that this internet issue of the journal will become the repository for all information gathered in the past and any still to be gathered in the future. Updates will be possible and moderated interaction with the public is encouraged.

Enjoy...

³ The 17th of March has appeared again and again in relation to R. L. O’Mealy; the first tune R. L. learned was called “St. Patrick’s Day” and he learned it on St. Patrick’s Day; he used to broadcast regularly on St. Patrick’s Day and he was eventually buried on St. Patrick’s Day, 1947, 60 years to the day before Ken sent that email.