

3.07 Continuing the Tradition

Ronan Browne & Jonathan Farrar

While we can look back at three musical generations¹ before R. L. O’Mealy, an impressive tradition of piping continues (if not directly, then at least within Richard’s extended family) down through three more generations. It is interesting to look at the old set of James Kenna pipes which were handed down from generation to generation in the family and to use them as the backbone of this introduction. Of course, we can’t be certain as to whether or not the pipes were originally made for Thomas Mealy but, as it makes for a nice story, let’s say that Thomas and James knew each other and that Kenna made the set for Mealy or Melia. The set was then passed on to Thomas’ son John and then in turn to Larry until eventually Richard started to learn. But the Kenna set was already being played by his older brother Ned so Richard must have looked at making a new set for himself – by the time he left home in the mid 1890s, his life as a master maker of Union pipes had begun.

The journey of the little Kenna set doesn’t stop here – one of R. L.’s sisters, Letitia, married George Farrar in 1904; they had three children but Letitia died in 1913. George later met Margaret Timms; they married around 1915 and had seven children.² The eldest child of the second marriage was Samuel who took up piping as a young man. His half brother Stephan had started earlier on a practice set made by R. L. and it was on this instrument that Sam began to learn.³ Not having any teacher, Sam taught himself. When Ned Mealy died, his sister Kate retrieved the Kenna pipes and passed them to Sam with strict instructions that they be kept in the family.



The Farrar Family

Back: George, Harry, Stephen, Margaret, Jimmy; front: John, Sam, Lizzie & Suzie Farrar

¹ Richard’s father Larry, grandfather John and great grandfather Thomas are all said to have been pipers.

² For more information see Leslie Drew, “The Mealy and Farrar Genealogies”, article 3.05 of this journal.

³ See associated files folder concerning this practice set: http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.07/George_Farrar_Letter.html



Larry Mealy



Ned Mealy



Sam Farrar



Jonathan Farrar

So the set had now moved sideways, a little zig-zag – the pipes and the tradition of piping jumped bloodlines but remained within the extended family. Sam would eventually pass the set on to his grandson Jonathan Farrar who plays the set to this day!

Sam continued to play throughout his life; he made reeds and even turned a few chanters. He always hoped to buy a full set of Mealy pipes but it was never to happen.⁴ As an old man he was astounded to realise that young Jonathan was taken by the idea of piping. In an email from early 2007, Jonathan tells his story better than I could ever hope to:

“I know my first real encounter with the pipes was in the late 1980s. My father was sick in hospital and for a time Clement, Diane (my sister) and I lived with our grand-parents Sam and Molly (Papa and Granny to us). We stayed in a fusty room at the end of the house and through the process of rooting through anything I could find I discovered that unmistakable hybrid of plumbing, felinity and insanity. The pipes had a particular smell, old and dry and stale; they were wrapped in yellowing newspaper in a chest of drawers and they looked complicated and absurd enough to hold my attention. My interest was fleeting and more rooted in mischief than music. They were a novelty and, being an eight year old, they grabbed me in much the same way a big aeroplane might have or a broken circuit-board. Actually playing them wasn't a consideration.

It was years later in 2000 that I thought of playing the pipes and started finding out more about them. At first I was half afraid to question Papa about them too much and made enquiries about ordering myself a new practice set. The moment he heard I was doing this he lit up. He knew I had an interest and he sent me down to the room, to the same chest-of-drawers to bring up the pipes. He reckoned we should try to get his O'Mealy C# practice set up and running and learn on that. So we set about messing with some of the old reeds he had, trying to glue a leatherette bag together etc. He also got me in touch with Peter Carberry in Deryhawn. We called to see him and the pair of them chatted for hours. Peter was and is a total gentleman and a more positive influence I couldn't have hoped for.

⁴ See: <http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.07/Mrs%20Mealy%20letter%20to%20Sam%20Farrar%20-%20only%20have%20page1.jpeg>

Papa is a very intelligent man and has lots of information about all sorts of things. He adores the pipes as, he assures us, did his father. He played when he was younger but they were different times, poorer times and a lot of people were guarded and secretive about their specialist knowledge. Though closely connected to the O'Mealys a lot of the technicalities my grandfather knows he picked up himself. When a reed went, it was a big job to acquire/ make another one and I suspect that such frustration aided the demise of his own playing.

He is in hospital at the moment and fairly weak, but sure at this stage he's made a bit of a habit of defying doctors' worst-case scenarios so hopefully he'll make it home soon! I know he's always delighted when anyone shows an interest in O'Mealy or the old times in general and would love to chat and hear Ronan play a few tunes. He taped The Long Note off the radio years ago and when he first played it for me it was in a sort of gleeful "Now for ya, I told ya so" sort of way! (Don't tell him I said that!)."

—Jonathan Farrar, 2 April 2007

On the 6th of July, 2007 a group of us made a trip to meet Sam. He was staying in a nursing home while he recuperated after a bout of illness (he returned home to his beloved Molly soon after). Our party consisted of Ken McLeod, Wilbert Garvin and myself. Jonathan and Clement had set up our visit and their mother Geraldine made a lovely tea for us with tasty sandwiches, scones and sweet treats. Sam's brother John (the youngest in the family) was there also, as was Sam's wife Molly who sat patiently throughout.

I brought along a small digital recorder and although the background noise in the big room in the nursing home was quite loud, we were in our own little world talking about Sam's youth and his family and of course, Richard Lewis O'Mealy. The day was broken into three sections: we began in



Ronan Browne

Molly watches John and Sam Farrar listen to Jonathan playing the Mealy pipes

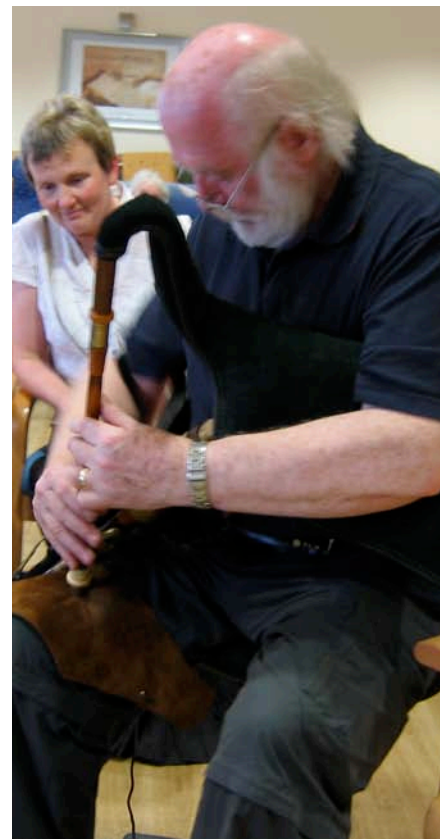


Ronan Browne

Jonathan Farrar

that big room where Jonathan (left), Wilbert (right with Geraldine Farrar looking on), and I played Paddy Maxwell's O'Mealy set for Sam (and the other residents!). Sam's excitement and satisfaction at hearing the pipes was palpable.

After a while we adjourned to a smaller, quiet room where we could talk whilst eating a feast prepared by Geraldine Farrar. Sam was clearly enjoying himself although he was quite blind and his hearing wasn't great. Every so often he got going on a topic and talked away in great detail. Pipes and music in general were still dear to him and he loved to meet people like us who were also deeply immersed.



Ronan Browne

Wilbert Garvin

The day finished up in the library where Sam and Jonathan showed us some old bits of pipes, a chanter Sam had made himself, and music books including his own transcriptions from Francis O'Neill's book of 1850 tunes.



Ronan Browne



Wilbert Garvin, Sam Farrar, Ronan Browne and Ken McLeod

The audio, photographs and a short video clip from our visit to Sam can be downloaded from the associated files folder linked to this article.

Links to these files are below:

2007 Sam Farrar Interview Audio (in three parts):

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.07/2007_Farrar_Interview/01_In_the_Big_Room.m3u

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.07/2007_Farrar_Interview/02_Having_the_Tea.m3u

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.07/2007_Farrar_Interview/03_In_the_Library.m3u

2007 Sam Farrar short video re. Making chanter by candlelight:

http://seanreidsociety.org/SRSJ3/3.07/2007_Farrar_Interview/03_Having_the_Tea/03_Sam_making_Chanters_by_Candlelight.m4v

While on a visit to Templecross on the 8th of March 2008 Jonathan and I went to Mullingar hospital to see Sam but the ward was in quarantine because of an MSRA outbreak and we weren't allowed in. We left our biscuits and Lucozade, departing with heavy hearts; although Jonathan and his family saw Sam every day, Jonathan thought Sam would have loved to hear of the wonderful day we had just spent rambling around Templecross, Tristernagh Abbey and our precarious walk on the overgrown Lough Iron! We were dying to tell him of our adventures but were thwarted on that day (Jonathan was able to relate all at a later date).



Ronan Browne & Jonathan Farrar

Jonathan Farrar and Ronan Browne Tristernagh Abbey March 2008

Sadly, less than a month later, Sam passed away and was buried in Abbeyshrule Cemetery, County Longford. Looking at his funeral notice you can see that he was much loved and is missed by many:

FARRAR, Samuel John (Heatherview, Abbeyshrule, Co Longford) – April 3rd, 2008, Peacefully at Mullingar General Hospital.

Deeply regretted by his loving wife Mary. Pre-deceased by his much loved son John whose wife Geraldine gave much loving care. Sadly missed by brother John, sister May, son and partner – George and Dolores, daughters Beatrice and Louise, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, nephews and nieces, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, extended family, neighbours and friends. Removal this evening (Friday) from Mullingar General Hospital to arrive at Tashinny Church at 8pm. Funeral service tomorrow at 3 o'clock followed by burial in Abbeyshrule Cemetery. *"Safe in the arms of Jesus"*



The Farrar Family

Both Sam and Jonathan were lucky to spend many years as piping co-conspirators. It is obvious that they both had deep love and respect for each other and Jonathan's life was much the richer for having his mentor and inspiration.

In the short time I spent with Sam that day in 2007, I learned a huge amount. We were all moved by this gentle man who lived to see his passion shared by his grandson Jonathan. We were welcomed into his family especially by his brother John, grandsons Jonathan and Clement and their mother Geraldine and for that we are hugely grateful.

I'll leave the last word to Jonathan from Sam's funeral:

"...I'd like to say a few words about our late Grandfather, Sam, or Papa as we always knew him.

It's funny, it feels like I've known him for so long but really considering he was born in 1916 it was only one section of his life. I know we all feel time flies but 91 years is quite a while and we have a lot to be thankful for. Ninety-one years is a long time and I was thinking to myself that time was something that was always very important to him. Time, and order really too. He could remember eras and specific dates clearly in his head, right up to the end. I know I sometimes think I'm part of the Google age where information is so easy to look up that not many people actually learn anything. But information is a very different thing to knowledge, and whereas information is readily available, knowledge is not. Papa was a particularly knowledgeable and skilful man. He was a man for doing the right job, not the fastest job. He knew so much; whether it was about engines, woodwork, gardening, wildlife, cooking, knitting, electronics. The list is could go on. He was a man, I suppose like many of the men in my family, who could make things and make things happen. He took such an interest in so many things, and if you asked him about any one of them he'd show you how to do it properly. He tended to know the old way, the new way and his own best way.

He liked order and he always liked to be on time for everything he did. He worked hard but he took time out too and I think himself and Granny, in my memory anyway, were most happy in the garden together. I suppose in many ways the garden was where time stood still. Gardening is an honest sort of work. The garden was something they found useful and beautiful too. They kept all sorts of flowers and vegetables, and he recycled anything he could.

He made a greenhouse out old windows someone was throwing away. He sowed seeds in yoghurt pots and plants in car tyres. He knew how to splice plants together and how to make cuttings grow. Granny too. And apart from working in the garden, they took stock of it all too. I remember them both sitting on their bench in the front lawn, under the big evergreen, in the middle of roses, lupins and delphiniums.

It's funny; in ways the pair of them were an unusual match. Granny takes a much more relaxed view of the clock. She always gets her times and dates mixed up. You could set your clock by it! But as the Canon said they were married 65 years; they met very young and over the years they had some really great fun together. People nowadays have all sorts of ambitions and ideas but Granny was always very proud of the fact that she was "Mammy's pet", and she got to stay at home and not have to go abroad anywhere. She was delighted to have her family in Abbeyshrule and was always very proud of the things our Grandfather could do. At one stage they used to have an autocycle and the pair of them would travel the country on it; him on the front with his helmet, Granny on the back with her headscarf. They went lots of places; Clonmacnoise, even as far as the coast. In the past few years he was in and out of different hospitals and places and in the last few weeks in particular. He always asked for her and made sure to get us to tell her he loved her. And he did love her very much.

Something Violet talked about last night was how he always liked trying something new. He got a new driving licence and a Mini and started driving again well into his 80s – a great feat, mind you, not necessarily to be recommended! I think George in particular encouraged him in his gadgets and in his 70s and 80s he got a knitting machine, metal detector, a set of walkie-talkies, a mobile phone and even just before his sight started to really go he got himself an internet box. It was a device that you connected to your television for using the Internet. It's one of those things like the Betamax video recorder that just fell by the wayside. He was ready for it though. If he could have, he'd be there on Google and Bebo with the rest of us!



Sam Farrar with his granddaughter Diane circa 1987

At times he could be stern, but really the driving force behind that was that he was a principled man. He delighted in all his extended family and their achievements, and was very proud of everyone.

I suppose I should mention too his love of animals. Over the years he kept pigs, sheep, cattle, goats, cats, dogs; at one stage he even had a Jackdaw with a broken leg. He fixed it up and it stayed his pet for a long time. There's a picture at home of Clement beside him and the bird sitting on his shoulder. He loved animals and when a pet died it was as big an ordeal as a close relative.

Something that opened up a whole other side to my Grandfather was the Uilleann Pipes. When I was staying with them as a child I remember in the big end room poking through a chest-of-drawers and coming across the pipes and not really having a clue what they were. Then years later when I wanted to start playing them he lit up and it opened a whole new area of stories. He loved the pipes and was always talking about other musicians he used to know like Pierce Butler or the Kilmurrays from Ballynacarrigy. Ronan, who's going to play a piece later in the service, came to see him and chat to him before, and took a great interest in his stories, and I know Sam would be delighted that he's going to play here today.

I talked a bit about how important order and time were to him and, in latter years when his eyesight failed him, and his usual ordered world was crumbling around him, he found it harder to keep a handle on things. It's funny how these things work out but the last real bastion of order he had was his talking clock. He'd whack it on top and get it to read him out the time... loudly mind you! ... So in ways he listened to the time passing, and I think really he knew his time here was coming to an end. He had a great faith though and I know he was very grateful to Canon Kingston for all his time and care.

And that's all I have to say really. (I know Clement mentioned Nancy Mullen and the pot of tea in the field, I'm just thinking of Granny coming across the hayfield with tea in a jamjar but that's another story.)

*Thank you,
Jonathan Farrar"*