

### 3.08 Publicity: The O’Mealy Flyer & Memo Ronan Browne

In many areas, the modern world tends to look back in time with a feeling of superiority - but not always! We have here a lesson in humility for any young buck who thinks themselves ahead of a lad from a quiet townland in County Westmeath around 1900. Here are two examples of Richard Lewis O’Mealy’s publicity material which show him to be in total control of his public image. We can also see that he has come to expect positive reaction from reviewers.

The first is a 1905 flyer for a concert in the Lecture Hall of the Presbyterian Church, Strabane, incorporating press quotes and a full length sketch of Richard with his pipes; the second is the “O’Mealy Memo” which has a photograph of Richard at the top left of the front page with the rest of the page blank for writing. It includes 2 pages of press quotes with dates ranging from March 1901 to February 1904.

Between them, we are shown a confident young entertainer who appears to be playing quite a number of engagements to appreciative audiences; these performances mixed music with lecturing about the instrument and music in general and this must have made for a very interesting evening’s entertainment.

**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 Elucutory Competitions on MONDAY, 27th FEBRUARY, 1905.

**PRESS OPINIONS.**

**PAN CELTIC CONGRESS.**  
“Mr. O’Mealy contributed some exquisite melodies on the Irish Pí etc. The native instrument, under his mastery seemed to bubble over with rollicking tune-fulsness.”—*The Irish Times, Dublin*

“The gentlemen’s playing of the Irish bagpipes is one of those unique artistic achievements along traditional lines that musicians of culture will thoroughly appreciate. Mr. O’Mealy’s pipes stand in the same relationship to the ordinary instrument of the itinerant piper that a Rudel-Carte clarinet of to-day does with the clarinet of Handel’s time.”

“There is the right ring about this playing; it goes straight to the heart: the whole art of the thing is healthy and sound.”—*Belfast Evening Telegraph*

**BRITISH ASSOCIATION IN BELFAST.**  
“Mr. R. L. O’Mealy, the well known Irish Piper, was also present, clad in his picturesque costume, and the violator from England and Scotland were especially interested in the clever musician, and in the instrument which he knows how to use with such effect.”—*The Belfast News-Letter*

“The music was soft and sweet . . . perfect harmony produced by a master hand, with such subtlety, such grace and power of inflection, that the audience were spellbound.”—*Coleraine Constitution*

“Mr. O’Mealy, the famous Irish Piper, created quite a furore of applause; his marvellous manipulation of the historic pipes, and the exquisite musical results thereof, being the theme of general remark during the subsequent part of the night.”—*The Newry Reporter*

“Mr. O’Mealy assisted Mr. Manning on the violin. The combination of pipes and violin in Mr. O’Mealy’s own idea and produce a really beautiful effect.”—*Irish Times*

**Memo. from**  
**R. L. O’MEALY.**

**Press Notices.**

“Mr. R. L. O’Mealy, the famous Irish Piper, was also present, clad in his picturesque costume, and the violator from England and Scotland were especially interested in the clever musician, and in the instrument which he knows how to use with such effect.”—*The Belfast News-Letter*

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**CONCERT IN NEW YEAR’S AGONY.**  
“Mr. O’Mealy, the famous Irish Piper, created quite a furore of applause; his marvellous manipulation of the historic pipes, and the exquisite musical results thereof, being the theme of general remark during the subsequent part of the night.”—*The Newry Reporter*

“Mr. O’Mealy assisted Mr. Manning on the violin. The combination of pipes and violin in Mr. O’Mealy’s own idea and produce a really beautiful effect.”—*Irish Times*

**PRESS NOTICES.—Continued.**

“The concert given at last year’s session, again enhanced by the music of his Irish Pí.”—*The Glasgow Examiner*

“A feature of the evening was the selection on the Irish Pí by Mr. R. L. O’Mealy.”—*Belfast News-Letter*, 19th Sept., 1904.

A brilliant selection on the Irish Pí. The selection was clearly marked, and was an object lesson of the music that can be produced on the national instrument of Ireland. . . . There can be no doubt that for a mixed audience of a concert the Irish Pí (part of the pipe) is music, especially when accompanied by such a good master of the art as Mr. O’Mealy.”—*Newry Reporter*, 19th April, 1904.

“A very attractive feature of the proceedings was selection of Irish air played by the popular Irish Piper, Mr. O’Mealy, which obviously secured the warmest approval.”—*Lancashire Sentinel*

“Gives a very fine selection on the pipes as one that would rank no mean” . . . very highly appreciated.”—*Belfast News-Letter*, 19th Sept., 1904.

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“The chief attraction on the programme was the playing of Mr. R. L. O’Mealy, the famous Irish Piper. He is a master, a genius . . . His playing is a masterpiece of artfulness.”—*Coleraine Constitution*, 1904.

**CONCERT OF IRISH MUSIC.**  
“Mr. O’Mealy . . . played some of his Irish airs and played up, the latter with admirable success, as a contrast to the slow air, it was very heartily sung in the chorus. An encore was requested and it is interesting to mark the effect of the pipe on an audience, which has quite the same spellbinding effect.”—*Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 19th Jan., 1904.

R. L. O’Mealy is no wallflower waiting quietly to be noticed - he is using technology to his advantage; by advertising more than just his concert, he is also showing people that he has critical acclaim and ensuring that his self-created “celtic-revival” image is recognisable to all. Everything is well thought out, and in common with other aspects of his life, it is forthright and self-assured - any professional entertainer of today working on their publicity would be more than satisfied with these examples of product advertising. Indeed, while discovery of such material might be expected in an investigation of a modern performer, it is highly unusual in somebody playing an obscure minority musical instrument one hundred years ago!

R. L. often played to audiences unaccustomed to Irish music. Having had experience of same, I find these audiences to be open-minded and more receptive than typical Irish music audiences who tend to have pre-conceived ideas about who you are and what you do. While O’Mealy’s general audience were celebrating him, we get a glimpse of how he was perceived by his peers in Éamonn Ceannt’s piece for *An Píobaire* III (1901-2) where he says that O’Mealy “...spoiled his performance by the ridiculous costume he wore”. Ceannt says nothing whatsoever about O’Mealy’s playing but goes to great length to describe his clothes and even the colours of those clothes!<sup>1</sup>

Both the memo and the flyer date from roughly the same time, around 1904-05. Richard was 30 years old at this time and quite obviously at the height of his career as a performer. He may have published more publicity material in later years but if he did, none of it has surfaced. His career would have continued on until the beginning of the great war during which it must have declined.

After the war, his wife Nelly was very ill and died in 1920. We are told by his family and friends that he didn’t perform publicly for a number of years after her death. While we know he broadcast quite regularly, other than reports of him playing at the Tristernagh *Feis*, we have no accounts of concerts in later years. In fact, he mentions in his letters to the Delaps<sup>2</sup> that concerts are hard come by and if it were not for the odd “engagement” from the BBC, he would “not be able to stay here at all”. I presume he meant that he wouldn’t be able to afford to live in his present house and would have to move back down the housing ladder. All of this paints a very different picture to the highly successful and hopeful career depicted below.

*[Note: The memo press quotes are included as verbatim text below the scans. The flyer and memo can also be downloaded from the associated files section with this article.]*

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Éamonn Ceannt attended the 1908 Jubilee Celebrations in Rome, in honour of Pope Pius X. As the Irish athletes marched into the arena, they were piped in by Ceannt dressed in an 11th century Irish costume with kilts. This was only six years after he had ridiculed O’Mealy for the very same thing!

<sup>2</sup> See 3.13.1 “A method for Miles” for more on these letters.

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"This gentleman's playing of the Irish bagpipes is one of those unique artistic achievements along traditional lines that musicians of culture will thoroughly appreciate. Mr. O'Mealy's pipes stand in the same relationship to the ordinary instrument of the itinerant piper that a Rudal-Carte clarionet of to-day does with the clarionet of Handel's time."

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**BRITISH ASSOCIATION IN BELFAST.**

"Mr. R. L. O'Mealy, the well-known Irish Piper, was also present, clad in his picturesque costume, and the visitors from England and Scotland were especially interested in this clever musician, and in the instrument which he knows how to use with such effect."—*The Belfast News-Letter*.

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190

## Press Notices.



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### CONCERT ON NEW YEAR'S NIGHT.

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### BRITISH ASSOCIATION IN BELFAST.

#### Lord Shaftesbury's Garden Party.

" Mr. R. L. O'Mealy, the well-known Irish Piper, was also present, clad in his picturesque costume, and the visitors from England and Scotland were especially interested in this clever musician, and in the instrument which he knows how to use with such effect."—*The Belfast News-Letter*, 13th Sept., 1902.

" Two imperative encores showed the influence of his music upon the audience."—*The Irish News, Belfast*.

" Mr. O'Mealy was a delightful change. . . . He has great powers of execution, and is very expressive. In the old Irish airs he played with all the feeling that could be imparted to them, and in the old planxties, reels, and jigs, he rattled them off in a pleasing style. Mr. O'Mealy is a refined performer . . . no doubt that at the Cork Exhibition the Irish Pipes will be recognised as the sweetest of all instruments."—*Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 11th April, 1902.

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“ . . . Gave two welcome selections on the union pipes . . . inimitable dance-rhythms come tripping off his keys . . . There is no laughter like the laughter of the pipes in Mr. O’Mealy’s hands; the jig is a compelling thing, and the reel ripples off in that deliciously suave fashion that knows no peer.” . . .  
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