

3.11.1 The Life and Times of Richard Lewis O'Mealy

Piper and Pipe-maker. 1873-1947

Ken McLeod

This slide show and lecture was presented at the William Kennedy Piping Conference staged by Brian Vallely in November 2007 by Ken McLeod.

To keep the pdf file size small I removed all the O'Mealy recordings.
The MP3s are all available for download from the SRS website.



Opening tune: The Blackbird

This short presentation is naturally just a brief summary of all that we have learned so far about R. L. O'Mealy. For the anoraks who want it all, volume three of the Seán Reid Society Journal will be issued next year. It will be a special issue dedicated to R. L., and will include all the data that has been gathered, including all the pictures and recordings.

Much of the O'Mealy, or perhaps more properly, the Mealy family history has been preserved by the Farrar family of Ballynacarigy, County Westmeath.

The opening tune was, as most of you will know, the Blackbird. All the tunes I will play for you today were recorded by the BBC in Belfast during August 1943 when Richard was almost 70 years old. It is as well that they did, for it is all that we know of his playing.



The actual spot where R.L. was born is known as Templecross in the townland of Tristernagh near an old ruined abbey where Richard would often visit when he returned home now and then, and apparently he would sit there and play alone. The place is situated between the small town of Ballynacarigy and Lough Iron in west county Westmeath, not far from Mullingar.



Richard Lewis Mealy was the son of Letitia Lewis and Lawrence; better known as Larry Mealy, who were married in 1857.



This picture must have been taken around 1900 because Larry died in 1903 aged 80 years old. Left to right are Kate Mealy, Letita and Larry. Richard's aunt and parents.



Here is the house in 1959

Richard was born on the 22nd of October 1873 and had eight siblings. Edward or 'Ned', a piper, William and Johnny, fiddlers, Robert; who died a baby, Katie, a concertina and fiddle player, Letitia, Isabella and Louisa Annie.



Another tune: The Donegal Reel

These are Katie, Ned, Johnny and perhaps Willie Mealy

Larry had a 20 acre farm there but he also worked on a local estate where he acted as steward.

The family came originally from County Mayo and were O'Mallys way back. The variations Mally, Mealy and Mealia are still quite prominent in Mayo.

It was sometime in the eighteenth century that they moved from Mayo to Horseleap in West Meath and then west to Templecross, in the time of Richard's great-grandfather Tom. Apparently there are Mealy graves surviving at Horseleap. Tom was a carpenter, Tom's son was John and he was Larry's father. The folklore in the family says that they were all pipers and certainly we know for certain that Larry and his sons Richard and Ned were.



As far as being pipe-makers as well, one must note that Larry played a set made in the eighteenth century by James Kenna.

It is worthy of note that if the Mealy's were in the Templecross area in the late eighteenth century then they must have known Timothy Kenna and possibly his father James as well. As Sean Donnelly has pointed out, James Kenna came to Ballynacarigy in 1770 and in a newspaper advertisement of November 27 of that year he stated the following;

James Keena, Pipe Maker, who for several years supplied the Gentlemen of Connaught and Munster with Pipes, Chanters, German Flutes, etc. takes this Method of letting his Friends and the Public know that he now lives at Balnacargy, within 5 Miles of Mullingar on the high Road leading to Longford, where he carries on Said business in an extensive manner and hopes that his Assiduity and care, the newest fashions now in Taste, as also several Inventions discovered by the said Keena, will merit the continuing Custom of his friends and the Public in General.

Ballynacarigy is the nearest town to Templecross.

As Tom's son John was born in 1784 this may have been a bit late for him to have known James Kenna who had probably passed away by around 1800 or before, so it is just possible that Larry's set of pipes was made for his grandfather and Richard's great-grandfather Tom, by their neighbour the famous James Kenna.



This is Richard's brother Ned.

Ned and Richard, in their early days seem to have played sets not of Mealy manufacture, or surely there would have been a mention of it somewhere. It was Ned who inherited Larry's pipes and they came from him to Sam Farrar, his nephew, and from Sam to his grandson Jonathan who plays them today.

Another tune: The Drops of Brandy

On the 15th of August 1872 a tragedy struck the Mealy family when several of the family and friends went across Lough Iron to get a drink at a pub at Ballinaleck on a Sunday. They had perhaps one too many and on the way back, with Larry playing his pipes, a storm suddenly came up and the boat began filling with water. Larry asked one of the neighbours to start baling out but he could not find the utensil used for this purpose, and to make matters worse he then stood up on the side of the boat and tipped it over. Larry had the pipes strapped on of course but when he went into the water with the rest, the baritone drone tuning slide fell off and sunk to the bottom of the lake. Richard's sister Isabella, was found next morning on the shore drowned. She was 12 years old. The rest survived. After a while they tried to search for the missing drone and found it after a year or so. Sam Farrar, Richard's nephew, tells us that one man spotted it sticking in the mud bottom upright, brass ferrule downwards. He went over the side of the boat and lifted it up between his toes.

The following year Louisa Annie was killed when a trap she was travelling in overturned. She was 16 years old.



Richard was married twice but produced no children. His first wife 'Nellie' died in 1920 after a long illness. It is said that he did not play after that for several years.

Here is a tune which he called Harvest Home, better know these days as the Cork Hornpipe.

Richard's sister Letitia married George Frederick Farrar making the connection that thankfully we have today .

This is their wedding picture which took place in Dublin in 1904.



Here is a picture of George Farrar, son of George and Letitia, as his brother Sam plays the same set that once belonged to Larry. The drone piece is discoloured from its time in the water.

George has passed away since this picture was taken in 1973 and Sam is presently 91 years old – still living at Ballynacarigy. Sam's younger brother John and he are the last surviving nephews of Richard's.



This is Sam and his grandson Jonathan the piper taken a few months ago when Wilbert Garvin, Ronan Browne and I went to visit him in hospital. He got home again shortly after that, I am happy to say. He is a lovely old man and became quite emotional when we were talking about Richard and pipes in general. He made several chanters himself.

Victor Mealy, son of Ned Mealy, now deceased, said that it was his father who taught Richard his first tune. The tune was 'St Patrick's Day' which he taught him on Saint Patrick's day at Templecross. Victor said that uncle 'Dick' taught himself after that. The story goes that one night after Larry had played the pipes for a while 'and went off rambling' Richard went out to look around and seeing no sign of his father went back into the house and began to play. Larry returned more quickly than expected and was shocked at what he heard. He said 'Dickie, you just keep them on you and never take them off.' I imagine the children had been told never to touch the pipes. Obviously this was the Kenna set which was inherited by Ned who took them to America and played them once in New York during the St Patrick's day parade. Another thing Sam told us that at one stage the pipes were sent off to Leo Rowsome to be reeded. When they returned Rowsome had fitted the drones with cane when they had always been elder reeds in them. Sam's words were 'you couldn't be in the house with them.'

RL eventually left for the town of Ballymahon to serve his time as a draper. He then moved to Dublin in the same position. He was in Boyle, Co Roscommon in 1897 and competed in the Feis Choil in Dublin in that same year. He played all around the country at all sorts of events and here is one of them.



"The Irish Times" Ui Breasail Series.

Published by Eason & Son, Ltd., Dublin.

The Comic Pageant—Slainte at Ballsbridge.

Back Row—Master Fletcher, Mrs. Harter, Miss Cosgrave, Miss Stokes, Mr. Jackson, Mr. Fletcher, Miss Stanuell. Sitting—Piper Omealy, Master Hilliard, Master G. Fletcher, Miss Jellett, Miss Hamilton, Miss Stanuell, Miss Greer, Miss Coffey, Miss Irwin, Miss Chatterton. Ground—Miss Ursula Reddy, Miss Bay Jellett, Miss Dargan, Miss Gwendoline Harter, Miss Eileen Moore.

Play: The Maids of Mourne Shore.

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It was probably from Boyle that he went to Cork for two or three years where he was deeply involved in the formation of the Cork Piper's Club. From Cork he went to Belfast where he spent the rest of his life. It is a pity that he is not in this early picture which features Shane O'Neill, John Wayland and Alderman William Phair, the first chairman of the club. I think that Wayland is the person to the left of O'Neill. William Phair is probably the large man in the centre of the picture.



It appears that Richard came to Belfast in or before 1900 where he lived at number 5 Edinburgh Street, off the Lisburn Road.

Here is the text of a press cutting which is quite informative if a little fanciful here and there.

MR. R.L. MEALEY, THE IRISH PIPER

'There has recently come to Belfast from Cork a descendant of an old and celebrated family of Irish pipers - himself an accomplished manipulator of the Irish pipes - Mr. Richard Lewis Mealey. Already he has made several public appearances in Belfast, with great success, and at the entertainment on Tuesday night, in connection with the Ulster Ladies' Works Society Bazaar, he was personally complimented (in the hearing of the writer) by Lady Dufferin, who spoke of the sweetness of the music of the pipes, and the splendid expression with which they were played by Mr. Mealey. Mr. Mealey, whose name was originally O'Mealey, was born in Westmeath, where it is said that the great harper, Carlin, played amongst the country people. He is descended from the O'Mealeys, of Castlebar, County Mayo, a place famed at the time for its pipers. He has in his possession a fine collection of Irish pipes and of manuscripts, some dating centuries back, even before the time of Elizabeth. His father, who is over seventy years of age, is alive still, and can play the pipes with great skill. The great secret of Mr. Mealey's success as a player is that he thoroughly understands the instrument, and can make all the fittings, including the reeds, which produce the music. He has worked very hard all his life to bring the art of pipe-playing to the greatest perfection attainable, and has lectured on the pipes and pipe-playing in different parts of the country. Last summer his lectures were given in Killarney and the South. He says that there seems to be a growing demand for the instrument, the prospects of which some years ago, when he took up the pipes and brought them before the public, were very dark indeed. "What is the difference between the Irish and the Scotch pipes?" Mr. Mealey was asked, and he replied: - "The Irish pipes are competent to music in four parts. We have a range of 26 notes, including semitones, on the chanter.[sic] In the Scotch instrument there are only nine tones. Then, on the Irish pipe we have the keys as an accompaniment, and by their aid beautiful chords are produced. Also, we have very little trouble in playing our pipes, the wind being supplied with the bellows." Mr. Mealey holds many testimonials from distinguished musicians for his artistic and masterly work upon the Irish pipes. He has been appointed as a judge at the Feis Uladh to be held in Ulster Hall on December 1.

[In ink '1900"]



There is further proof of his being a favourite of the nobility because it was Lady Aberdeen who got him the job of chief floor-walker with John Arnott and Company in Bridge Street, Belfast, an important department store at that time.



O'Mealy was a friend of Roger Casement, who presented him with an ornate walking cane. At Lord Shaftesbury's garden party in Belfast in 1902 a newspaper afterwards stated that *'Mr R. L. O'Mealy was present, clad in his picturesque costume and the visitors from England and Scotland were especially interested in this clever musician and the instrument which he knows how to use with such effect.'*

Eamon Ceannt – another revolutionary of the 1916 rebellion – for those not familiar with Irish history, said that Mealy *'spoiled his playing by the ridiculous costume that he wore,'*

I wonder if it was this one.

A colourful character indeed!

There is an interesting letter in the National Library worth reciting. It is from O'Mealy to Lord Castletown.

LORD CASTLETOWN PAPERS
NLI MS 35, 304 (5)

5, Edinburgh Street
Belfast
15th August 1901

Dear Sir,

Your letter received this morning to which I wired a reply as requested.

My fee is 2 guineas, except for a weeks engagement, but notice being so short in this case I could not make other reply than as wired – perhaps it will enable you to get me other engagements in future.

I have sacrificed much for the pipes, & my ability, as a performer, has cost me a life long study together with what my forefathers left on a sure foundation.

I have heard that an ordinary piper from Cork is engaged.

Please let me know by return, if necessary to go early on Monday (no Sunday delivery here)

I am busy at present making pipes & hope to get an order from you for a set in the near future.

I am, dear Sir
Yours Respectfully

R.L. O'Mealy

PS
Canon Goodman, Skibbereen, & I used to play together.
RLO'M



Richard moved to number 17 Edinburgh Street in 1908. The street directory shows his name changed to O'Mealy in 1903. He was however already calling himself O'Mealy in 1901 as we can see from that letter. In 1917 he disappears from the street directory records but by 1926 he reappears at 107 Rugby Avenue and by 1931 and for the rest of his life he was at number 45. As I stated previously, his wife died in 1920 and perhaps that is something to do with it.

He was visited there by many famous names in piping circles such as Brendan Breathnach, Andy Conroy, John Kelly – the fiddler, Brother Gildas, Sean Reid etc. Andy spoke highly of him and said he found him friendly. I think Andy would have liked his piping style because there never was an – as we say 'tighter' player than Andy Conroy, who once said that 'it is a pity there has to be holes on a chanter at all.'

Another tune: here is one of R.L's several compositions, O'Mealy's Hornpipe



Uilleann pipes made by Richard Lewis O'Mealy
Richard O'Mealy (1872-1947), originally from Westmeath, was both
an accomplished uilleann piper and pipe maker, a trade and
talent passed down from father to son through four
generations. Around 1900, he moved to Belfast where he lived
in Edinburgh Street and later Roppy Avenue. O'Mealy
won many prizes for the quality of his workmanship including
at the World Fair in St. Louis, 1904. An
accomplished musician, a recording of his playing was
made for the BBC in Belfast at the grand age

Ulster Museum

This set he made for Netta Jane Johnson, a very eccentric spinster who lived in Carnlough, Co Antrim. Wilbert Garvin wrote an article about her in the January 1997 issue of *An Piobaire*.

Let's now turn to O'Mealy's pipe-making. We can show that he began making pipes before 1900 and it is plain to see that he had great respect for the old masters. There are a number of sets extant which I know of that are part O'Mealy with other bits added that were made much earlier by the old masters - Coyne, Egan and Harrington.



Here is a set of pipes made for Paddy Maxwell of Belfast in 1935. The regulator is Egan of Liverpool circa 1840. This is Paddy with the pipes and there are the pipes sitting over there.

Paddy; like Jim McIntosh, Jack O'Rourke, William Hope and I'm sure many others, began as highland pipers and moved to the uilleann pipes. It seems to have been a common thing to do in those times and of course many continued to play the GHP. Wilbert Garvin is a living case in point and so indeed is Seán Donnelly. Paddy was born in 1906 and died in 1995. He started work in the mills at eleven for six and eight pence a week. He got to know RL quite well for he became his sort of odd-job man, painting papering and fixing his roof is mentioned in a short interview with Paddy which survives. He also helped out in the workshop and collected elder for drone reeds from Black Mountain.



RL seems to have preferred *C#* as so many of his existing pipes are of that pitch. It is also apparent that he liked the metalwork and style of the Taylor's for he copied their external metal-work designs from possibly around 1910 and for the rest of his life. He also continued to make the simpler style of pipes as he made for Miss Johnson and Paddy Maxwell. It is stated in IMM by Francis O'Neill that he bought the Taylor pipes that had belonged to a piper named George McCarthy who had died in 1908. RL's work is some of the best craftsmanship I have seen. The one thing he did not do was to adopt concert pitch and the wide bore as did most other makers of the time. He stuck with the Kenna, Coyne, Egan and Harrington style of bores. He also made pipes for a musical instrument dealer with shops in Dublin and Belfast by the name of McCullough.



In the 1930's R.L. was appearing at the annual sports days at Tristernagh. It was there that he met Leo Rowsome and where he first showed his Taylor outline style of pipes. Victor Mealy talked about a set of pipes that he played during one or more of these visits which had a double chanter.

Perhaps it was this one, but as this seems to be a painting, I think it more likely to be the artists interpretation. The double chanter in question was more likely to be from the Taylor set, mentioned earlier, which originally belonged to George McCarthy. Whatever became of it is unknown.



Tune: The Sligo Lassies




The Sligo Lassies: Reel



This is the tune transcribed in Richard's own hand.

There are quite a few of his written manuscripts in various collections. He seems to have written out simplified music of his tunes for those who bought pipes from him and lived too far away to come for lessons, because Jim McIntosh wrote out all of his own tunes and would often write 'arr. O'Mealy' beside the name. R.L. also supplied written instructions.

fingers too much or your hands will get cramped.
In trying over your first octave, test your
covering frequently by sounding your fundamental
note, . The low D will always tell you about
your covering. Take the little lesson slowly
and close each note before making the next one
you will notice that it is quite easy to slur
to certain notes as G to F etc  but for the
present close the 2 fingers & then make the one.
We will have plenty of slurring later on.

D  the thumb note is always in the first
octave pressure of wind and should never get
more pressure no matter what the fingering or
passage. When going from, say,  to back
D lead notes are much inclined to give the thumb note
too much pressure and doing so leads to spoiling
the note () and spoiling the reed by giving
it a bad habit. Before trying anything
at any note in second octave the covering
should be really good

R. J. O'nealy



R. L. never played on RTE (or Radio Eireann as it was at that time) but he played in the thirties and forties quite regularly on BBC Northern Ireland. From 1933 to 1935 he played weekly on a children's programme, and also on St Patrick's Day for many years. Willie Reynolds, the great Mullingar piper said that he looked forward to St Patrick's day because he knew he could tune in to the BBC in Belfast and hear Richard play and that it was wonderful. Willie also was able to tell us that his style was the common style in his part of the country at the time.

Mick Kilmurray, an old friend of the Mealy's and Farrar's who Harry Bradshaw interviewed in 1984 for the 'Long Note' programme on RTE said that he could not compare RL's 1943 recordings with what he could do at an earlier age. Such a pity we don't have any from that period of his life.

Ned's son Victor Mealy told Harry Bradshaw of RTE that he only remembered 'Dick' as a teenager and that he was a contrary man because he was always in bad health.

On his trips to Templecross Victor said he would give lectures on music, flute, tin whistle, fiddle, pipes and if he was asked a question he could talk for hours on the subject. The house would be full and Victor told us that he would have had to sleep in the cow byre as these sessions would go on all night. Some nights he would not play at all and just talk about the music. When the humour would take him he would play all night, sometimes on the pipes but more often on the tin whistle. He smoked a little black pipe. He was well educated. He gave credit where credit was due and contrary to what some say he was not bitter.

So RL was a very serious person which shows in his legacy, these recordings at a time when he not at his best and his workmanship which certainly is among the best.

(Play. Smash the Windows).



His workshop for most of his time in Belfast was the attic at 45 Rugby Avenue and Jim McIntosh told us that he had a string running down the stairs to a little bell at the bottom which he would ring to let his wife know that he wanted a cup of tea.

I remember Sean Reid telling us that when he visited him and this must have been during the war, he seemed to be in virtual poverty because it was cold, the fire was not lit and he was in poor health. Sean when he left went to the nearest coal merchant and sent him a few bags of coal. Andy Conroy also mentioned that he had the feeling O'Mealy was not in good financial stead.

When we found his will recently we discovered that he left an amount of just under £1700 to his second wife Letitia. That was a lot of money in those times when £300 and even less would have bought a house. So it would appear that he was a bit tight fisted but of course it was just post wartime and the future was so uncertain. Interestingly £300 was invested in Scotland and very recently we have discovered that he played in Scotland at least twice.

Robbie Hughes relates Frank McFadden telling him of going to R.L. for a reed and the reed was five shillings, not cheap! Frank had something over four shillings but left without the reed! Perhaps and indirectly, RL was creating one of the best reed makers of the 20th century in Frank McFadden - the reed-maker to Seamus Ennis.

RL died on March 14, 1947 and was buried in the graveyard at Knockbreda parish church, Belfast – believe it or not - on St Patrick's Day. At his funeral there were two pipers, Jack O'Rourke and Jim McIntosh, and one relative, George Farrar, his nephew, and a few neighbours. It is peculiar that another piper who knew him well, William Hope was not there. Hope bought O'Mealy's own set from the widow and passed them on to his son. It is not known where they are now.

This is William Hope with the set together with Leo Rowsome and Davy Mawhinney, fiddler, in the garden of Davy's house at Dunadry sometime in the early fifties.



Unfortunately this is the only picture we can find of Jack O' Rourke playing pipes.

I knew Jack quite well. He spent a lot of his time at Sean McAloon's house which I visited frequently from the seventies to the nineties, at first for help with reeds and later just for the crack. Jack died on January 16th 1981. It was most coincidental that his best friend Seán McAloon died on the same day in 1998. I only wished I had asked Jack more about RL for he often told us things about him. A good example is when RL asked him to come to his house and carry his pipes on foot to St Mary's hall in the middle of town because he didn't want them shaken up on the tram.



This fine O'Mealy set belonged to Jim McIntosh and is now in the safe hands of piper Trevor Stewart who has brought them along today for us to see. Jim McIntosh was the last living person who was taught to play by R.L. Sadly Jim died in May this year aged 92. Jim told us that O'Mealy never played the pipes when he was teaching him, only the whistle. Jim then had to play the part of a tune on the pipes and Richard would correct him as necessary. Jim went to Rugby Avenue once a week and said that sometimes O'Mealy would be in bad health and the lesson would be cancelled which left him very disappointed.

After RL died Jim bought his lathe and some tools and got the collection of measurements and letters from customers which eventually found their way to Séan Reid in County Clare via Jack O'Rourke.

Eventually Séan gave the papers and some hand tools, including the reamers to Wilbert Garvin. The lathe remained in Clare until the late seventies when Séan McAloon mentioned to me that he would love to have it. I mentioned this to Sean Reid who in his typically generous style, told me to take it to him. I loaded it onto the roof of my Ford Escort and with the headlights pointing into the air set off to Séan McAloon's house in Belfast. He only had it for several weeks when he told me it was too big and he had not the space for it. He asked me if I would take it, which I did. After several years I gave it to NPU. Earlier this year Wilbert gave all he had also to NPU and so there now resides in Henrietta Street, Dublin, a great collection of memorabilia of a very important piper and pipe-maker.



IN AFFECTIONATE REMEMBRANCE
OF
ELEANOR (NELLY)
BELOVED WIFE OF R. L. O' MEALY
WHO ENTERED INTO REST 3RD JULY 1920.
ALSO THE ABOVE RICHARD L. O' MEALY
WHO DIED 14TH MARCH 1947.
LETITIA O' MEALY
WHO DIED 24TH AUGUST 1960.

On the left is the grave as we found it earlier this year.

As you can see his second wife Letitia followed him in 1960. It is peculiar that his mother, sister and second wife were all named Letitia.

On the right you can see it after restoration.

The caretaker and I did the work but a family member insisted on paying the costs.

Tom Clarke, who organises the Belfast tionól, has re-named it The O'Mealy Tionól and there is a planned visit to the grave during the next one in March 2008, when a short non-denominational service will be held and Trevor will play Jim McIntosh's pipes.



Let us finish with the last of the ten recordings: The Wheels of the World.

I gratefully acknowledge the work of the following persons and bodies that together made this talk possible and dedicate it to those who have passed on and gave us so much information to save for posterity about the great man.

Ross Anderson. Piper.
BBC Archive, London.
Harry Bradshaw of RTE.
Ronan Browne. Piper.
Tom Clarke. Piper
Lucy Delap. Piper.
Sean Donnelly. Piper and researcher.
Mick Dooley. Piper and pipemaker.
Leslie Drew. Grand-niece.
Clement Farrar. Great-grand-nephew.
John Farrar. Nephew.
Jonathan Farrar. Great-grand-nephew and piper.
Sam Farrar. Nephew and piper.
Wilbert Garvin. Piper.
Robbie Hannan. Piper and broadcaster.
Robbie Hughes. Piper and pipe-maker.
Terry Moylan. Piper and archivist at NPU.
RTE. For The Long Note programme 1984.
Trevor Stewart. Piper.