

### 3.12 Interview with Cecil Colville

Wilbert Garvin

Liam Glass, Ballymena



On Wed. 15<sup>th</sup> April 2009, I went to visit Cecil, who only lives a few miles from me, outside Kells in Co. Antrim. We bump into each other often in the village and I was telling him about the O’Mealy issue of the Seán Reid Society Journal that we were working on. He then informed me about meeting R. L. when he was a young man. Since Cecil is probably the last person alive who actually met R. L. it was vital that I got his memories of those events so that they were recorded for posterity. I therefore arranged to record an interview with him. We had a most enjoyable evening, Cecil reminiscing not only on R. L. but also other pipers that he had met from time to time. I had many specific questions to which he responded with his usual enthusiasm.

#### How Cecil became interested in the pipes

How I came to have an interest in the Uilleann pipes was, I would have been about 12 at this stage, and in Ballymena every year they had a fair – the big fair was always the last Tuesday in October in Bryan Street Square. All sorts of cowboys came there – they broke stones on their chests and they lay on beds of nails, ate glass bottles – you name it – they all came there. There was a guy in the other corner and he used to have a dancing doll and an accordion and the dancing doll danced to the music – he tapped the board and that made her dance. There was always a crowd about the town.

There was this guy who came to Ballymena, who he was I don’t know.<sup>1</sup> He had a metal box and there was a wee girl with him. He opened up this box – it was a clear aluminium box – I really couldn’t tell you if it was aluminium or not. He got this contraption out o’ the box – he had these things he strapped round his belly for a start. Then he set the box up on its end and he got one leg on it. Then he brought out these other bits and started to assemble the instrument. I watched him very intently and then he gave it two or three *squoshes* on the chanter to see they were OK and then he ran his fingers up and down the keys (on what I knew later were the regulators). Then he started to play.



NPU Archive

<sup>1</sup> I took Cecil a couple of photographs of Johnny Doran and let him listen to a recording of Johnny playing “The Blackbird”. Although a long time ago Cecil said that Doran looked and sounded just like the piper he met.

Now he would have played one or two slow airs you see, and one or two marches. One march that has stuck out in my mind was “The Mountains of Pomeroy”. He played that one first and he used to accompany himself on the regulators. You know nowadays how they just – their hand falls on the regulator and it’s just a real mix-up of notes – but this boy didn’t do that – he vamped them to marching time. I watched him, and watched him and watched him. And then the wee girl came and stood down in front of him and he started to play “The Blackbird”, which was a set dance. The way he played that was something special while the wee girl danced. Nowadays they go like the hammers of hell, but that man played music as it should be played because you see he went according to the proper time. I stood and I watched that man for about an hour and a half. He played hornpipes, jigs and reels, and the quality of his music was so good you would have felt like dancing along with the wee girl – that is exactly how his music sounded. He also played a lot of slow airs. It made some impression on me I’ll tell you that. Then he stopped for a smoke. There were crowds round him and they were throwing in half crowns in those days. This was round about 1945. He was getting half crowns the like you have never seen. The wee girl was putting them into a bag with a draw-string on it.

I asked him, I says “I’m very interested in music myself. I never saw an instrument like that before and I never heard as much beautiful music. What would you call your instrument?” He says, “You call it the Uilleann pipes. Some people call it the Union pipes but we call it the Uilleann pipes.” I said to him, “Where do you come from?” “I come from a long long bit away. I do the fairs every autumn – I always go round to play at the fairs.” I then said to him, “There can’t be a lot of people who play this instrument.” “Well, in the south of Ireland you would maybe get half a dozen in every county that would play them.”

The drones were just like a swarm of bees. I noticed that the head of the chanter went directly into the bag – it wasn’t like the modern way. Who made his pipes I don’t know.

After that I asked everybody about Uilleann pipes but nobody knew what I was talking about – they hadn’t a clue. My interest at that time would have been on this new instrument that I had seen. There was a great wee fiddle player from Glenarm – Jimmy Mitchell – he worked in Belfast. I knew him well because he tuned my fiddle when I was playing in the *Feis(es)*. I liked the fiddle then but my real interest was in these pipes.

Jimmy had said to me, “Why don’t you go and try and get a record o’ this sort o’ thing.” “Well,” says I, “Where would you go to get the like o’ that”, for there weren’t too many record shops about. But Thompson’s in High Street in Ballymena sold records and old George Thompson sold gramophones that you wound up so that was alright.

I was up in Broughshane Street in Ballymena, at what used to be called the Variety Market – it was down an entry – there was a wee market there on a Saturday morning.<sup>2</sup> I went down into the Variety Market the next Saturday morning and it was jammed with people but I found old George at a stand where he was selling records.

The first record that I ever heard was ‘Little Soria, how do you do?’ Folk were going forward, picking and buying records. I says to George, “Tell me this and tell me no more,

---

<sup>2</sup> There is to this day a Saturday market in Ballymena but at a different site.

you wouldn't have records of the Uilleann pipes, would you at all?" "Hmmm, I don't think so" says he, "But come round to my shop in High Street any day you like through the week.



NPU Archive

I have catalogues so I'll check. Uilleann pipes – how do you spell that?" "Oh," I says, "I don't know – you can spell it whatever way you like, but it's Uilleann pipes." That was alright, so I decided that the next time I was in town I would go round to George's shop. When I went in he says to me, "You were asking me about them funny pipes. Well, I have a catalogue here. Now there's a piper here called Liam Walsh."<sup>3</sup> "Well," says I, "Would you have a record of him?" "No, I have not, but I'll tell you what I'll do – I'll order a record – now if you don't take it, it doesn't matter." "What price is it?" says I. "Half-a-crown," says he. Says I, "You order it and I'll get the record." I had an old wind-up record player so I says, "Give me a box o' good needles to play this, for I wouldn't want to score it."

Lo and behold, the following week I got a message through a friend from him. "Come you up to the market on Saturday morning or down to the shop – I'm always there from about three or half-three. If you come down then, I'll have your record." So I had the half-crown and I got the record o' Liam Walsh. George played it for me and Walsh was playing "The Blackbird" and it was lovely. I says "That's a great record." "Well," he says, "I never had it out of the packet until now." "Well," says I, "I'll bring it in so you can play it in the shop and see what you think of it." He then says, "By the way, I found out there's another record here of a man they call Leo Rowsome." "Well," says I, "If you can get it – it would be great to get it." And I had them two records and I must have played them until there were no tracks left in them. That was the start of the Uilleann pipes.



Claddagh Records

### How Cecil found R. L. O'Mealy

Then the wee man Jimmy Mitchell from Glenarm – he worked in the city – he used to lodge in a – there were two pubs in Smithfield at a time – and he stayed in one of the pubs. He was a good fiddle player. I used to play along with a fellow called John Scott who was talking to Jimmy who told him to tell me that there was a man who plays the Uilleann pipes who is a floor-walker in Robinson and Cleaver's<sup>4</sup>. But you see, going to Belfast was like going to Australia. That was in August 1946. I explained the problem to John Scott; he drove the tar lorry for Stevenson's quarry. He says to me, "It's not a problem. Ten o'clock on Wednesday morning I'll be going up for my second load of tar. I'll take you up and I'll take you to that address – there's nobody knows how long it takes to get a load of tar."

<sup>3</sup> There are references to Liam Walsh in early editions of *An Piobaire* – see the NPU website ([www.pipers.ie](http://www.pipers.ie)).

<sup>4</sup> R. L. may have moved as a floor-walker from Arnotts to Robinson and Cleavers, opposite the front of the City Hall, which was the most prestigious store in Belfast at the time.

So John took me up – it was maybe 12 o'clock before we were there. Jimmy Mitchell was able to tell me that this man, who was called O'Mealy, lived in Rugby Avenue, but he wasn't sure of the door. So he said, "It will be up the Ormeau Road so go on the bus and get off at the white church, cross the street and there's a whole row of streets there – go along until you see Rugby Avenue, and when you go down there ask anybody and they'll tell you."

So John took me up and fair enough I could come back on the train – the last train was about 10 o'clock to get me to Ballymena. At least I got up here now and Mr O'Mealy can tell me how to get back down to York Street station.

So, I got to Rugby Avenue and asked this man who was walking along where Mr O'Mealy lived. He says, "Oh, that boy – he plays a funny instrument and he makes this funny instrument. He is a big boy with a moustache." So I eventually got to the door and knocked. And this woman<sup>5</sup> came to the door. So I said, "I was looking for a man they call Mr. O'Mealy." "Oh," she says, "That's my husband." So I says, "Where would I find him?" She says, "Wait till I get him, he's in the house at the moment."



### Cecil's first meeting with Mr O'Mealy



Ulster Museum

So Mr. O'Mealy came to the door. To me, a very young fellow, he was a scary sort of boy. He had glasses on him and a moustache – you wouldn't have been talking back to him. I said to him who I was and told him that I was interested in the Uilleann pipes.

"Come on in," he says to me. When you went in the door there was a wee door to the left – into the front room – it wasn't very big. He had a fire on. We sat down and he chatted away about everything but pipes. He asked where I come from – all about the countryside and all that sort of thing. He never mentioned music o' any sort. So I sat and sat and sat until about 7 o'clock when Mrs. O'Mealy brought me a cup o' tea, a bit o' a loaf and a bit o' cake that she had baked. And I said to myself – this is a funny oul' boy. Imagine, he plays the pipes

<sup>5</sup> Cecil got to know Mrs. O'Mealy well after R.L.'s death, when he called her Tilly.

and he makes the pipes and he never even mentioned pipes. So I says to him, “I would need to go shortly because I have to get the train to Ballymena.”

So he says to me, “So you were interested in pipes were you?” “Well,” I says, “Aye, I saw them in the street and I thought they were fantastic, and I said to myself that’s an instrument I am going to learn if I have my health.” “Well,” he says, “Are you free next Wednesday?” “Oh,” I says, “I could be free, certainly.” I knew that I could get John to bring me up.

“You come up next Wednesday,” says Mr. O’Mealy, “and we’ll have a bit of a discussion about pipes.” I said to myself – if it’s going to be like this it wouldn’t be worth my while comin’.

When I met up with John again he says to me, “How did you get on? What sort of player is he? Says I, “He never even mentioned pipes the whole time I was there.” John says, “He must be a funny geezer that; what’s he like?” Says I, “He’s a big, big boy with a moustache and a pair of glasses that sits just about here on his nose, and there seems to be right thick glass in them – they’re no’ just ordinary glasses, they seem to be thick glasses. “Well,” John says, “I’ll take you up next Wednesday.”

Anyway, the next Wednesday John took me to Belfast and he left me off. I says, “There’s the white church now.” I got out and went up Rugby Avenue to see Mr. O’Mealy again.

### **Cecil’s second meeting with Mr O’Mealy**

I knocked the door, and I could see out o’ the tail o’ my eye he was looking out the parlour window. So he opened the door. “Ah,” he says, “Very glad to see you. Come on in.” I thought he was going to shake my arm off. We went into the wee parlour where he had a good fire on. He says, “You know, I’m bothered with my chest; I cough a lot. I have to spit from time to time so you’ll forgive me.” Says I, “I couldn’t care, feel free if it gives you ease and comfort, that’s grand with me.”

I told him about being at the fair in Ballymena and seeing this boy playing the pipes and the wee girl dancing. “What I like about it – he didn’t need anybody – he had all the equipment he needed to play and he didn’t need anybody to play along with him.” I had thought to myself that it wouldn’t be the easiest thing to play wi’ all the stuff you have to hand.” “Well,” he says, “Have you a set of pipes?” “Not at all,” I says, “I would have to get a set made. I was talking to a wee man and he said that you played them and they were lovely – they were silver lookin’ and black.” “That’s right,” he says, “I make different sorts. I make some out of boxwood and silver and some of boxwood and brass, and I make ebony and silver. Now the ebony ones would be more expensive than the boxwood ones.” “Well,” says I, “I would know that. If I was going to get an instrument now I would be wantin’ to get something that would be a joy to look at and a joy to always have.” “Well,” he says, “I’ll show you both sorts of them anyway.” So he went and got these two wee bits of wood. “That’s the ebony – that black one’s the ebony, and that one there’s the boxwood. Now, I make a practice set – that’s the chanter, a bag and a set of bellows. That’s how you will be starting off.” He then brought a chanter he had made for somebody – it was boxwood and – you see the bits for the keys<sup>6</sup> – they were a different colour. I says, “Tell me, how come

---

<sup>6</sup> The shoulders for the keys.

that's not all the one colour?" "Oh," he says, "That's quite simple. You see those big circle things – I would be putting keys on those eventually. You start off with the basics and then you get the keys added if you needed them. The reason that's a different colour is because I bleached that and that's what brings it up that lovely colour to blend with the rest of the chanter. You then have a wee leather strap which goes round your leg and that's where you set your chanter – it seals off the bottom of the chanter to get certain notes." He went into detail like that.

He says, "Where did you hear this piper?" I says, "I heard him in the fair in Ballymena. It took me a long time, but I could just hear that sound and I could see nothing but that man and them pipes." "Well," he says, "You seem to be very interested." "Oh," I says, "Very much so." Then he said to me, "Did you ever see a full set of pipes?" Well, says I, "That man, I dunno, there was a lot – there were three bits and they were all wee keys." He says, "That was the regulators. Wait now till I get this box and I'll show what's in this box." So he opened this box and says, "Does this represent anything like what you saw?"



NPU Archive

"Well," says I, "The keys were wee narrow keys. Them of yours is broad keys." He says, "They call those spade keys." Then I said, "What's this bit here?" "That's the double bass," he says, "When you're playing certain tunes that gives you a big Bonk, Bonk, Bonk." He had all the bits of the pipes in wee sleeves, and corks in the ends of all the drones, and the chanter was in a bag with a draw-string on it, and it was corked. Then he had the bellows. Then he says to me, "Did that man have something like that?" "Exactly like that," I says, "I couldn't tell you the quality but it seemed to do the job for him, and he produced lovely music." "Well," he said, "That's the bellows – that's how you get the air – you don't have to blow with your mouth. This is how you fill this bag. This bag is made of horse-hide. Of course you treat it and the mixture for the treatment is tallow, sweet oil and sugar. You boil the sugar to make it like a syrup and you mix all those ingredients in a saucepan. Then you take all these bits off and you pour this in and you massage it round all the corners of the bag until it is properly sealed. When you have that sealed you could blow that bag up and it would never lose any air for five or ten minutes. Through time you will get to know all about that."

Then he says, "I suppose you'll want to hear them." "Aye," says I, "That would be wonderful." So, he says, "Wait till I come back." He had a claw-hammer coat you know. So, he put the bellows on. "This here sucks the air in<sup>7</sup>." It was ivory and wee holes in it so

<sup>7</sup> The bellows inlet valve.

that your sleeve wouldn't block it. There was this thing on the sleeve of his claw-hammer coat – I don't know what it was for – it was like a kind of a wee hook – whether it was to keep the strap of the bellows up or what – when he put it on it was OK and then he pumped the bellows a few times. “Why do you do that?” I asked him. “That gets rid of any dust in the bellows and it doesn't go into any of the reeds.” So, he got them on and all the rest, and he says, “I suppose you would want to hear what they sound like.” I says, “That would be great.”



NPU Archive



Ulster Museum

The first tune he played for me was “The Maids of the Mourne Shore”. And he played a jig – “The Knights of Saint Patrick” – I never forgot that because I had learned it on the fiddle.<sup>8</sup> He then played “Maggie Morrissey's Hornpipe”. He never ever told me that he had played in a film<sup>9</sup>. Richard Hayward was the boy that got him but Hayward was crafty – the film I think was “The Crooked Road” or “The Crooked Stone”. He never got any money for playing in the film, but as he said, “Isn't that a typical thing to happen.”

Then he said, “I'm going to play you a set dance called “The Blackbird”. He played the tune through twice and used the big double bass. Then he said, “This is the other way to play it.” He started off again and played “The Blackbird” on the regulators and harmonised on the chanter. Well, I'll tell you, that was something – you couldn't have sat on your chair. It was fantastic. “Did you like that,” he said to me. “That was brilliant,” says I, “I could listen to that for a week.” “Oh,” he says, “That's great.”

Then I says to him, “I would need lessons now on this.” “Well,” he said, “That's not a problem – we could maybe get you a wee practice set, but I usually make a practice set so that it can be extended into a full set of pipes.” “That's exactly what I would want,” says I. He said, “You'll go step by step. Then you'll get a stock, and then you'll get maybe a couple of drones and then you'll get a bass drone. Then we'll go a regulator at a time. As you advance then one regulator, and then two, and the last is the master but it takes a lot of wind to blow this big boy at the bottom.” It was wonderful when he played it, really wonderful.

He played me a selection of tunes – “The Kid on the Mountain” was a slip-jig.<sup>10</sup> He must have played for, I would say, round about three-quarters of an hour – that covered a lot of stuff. He played a lot of slow airs – beautiful slow airs. “The Maids of the Mourne Shore” is the one that stuck out most. He played one of my favourites of all – “The Snowy-breasted

<sup>8</sup> At that point Cecil whistled the tune.

<sup>9</sup> I (Wilbert) have been searching through old films by Richard Hayward for many years for one that had R. L. playing in it. Thanks to Glenn Walsh, it has at last been resurrected - the film in which he plays is titled 'Devil's Rock' dated 1938.

<sup>10</sup> Cecil whistled the tune.

Pearl” – one of my special airs – it’s really something super. And he played “The Lark in the Clear Air”. He said, “You know, “The Lark in the Clear Air” was written by a man not so very far from where you live.” I says, “That was a man by the name of Ferguson who lived in Parkgate.” He says, “That’s him.” Then I says, “Up in Donegore, in the Church of Ireland church there is a plaque on the wall in memory of Ferguson.

*Centenary of the birth of Sir Samuel Ferguson.*

*Celebrations in Belfast.*

*Pilgrimage to Donegore, Co.Antrim; memorial service in parish church; F.J.Bigger, tribute from lectern; extract from evening lecture, Wellington Hall, Belfast, delivered by A.P.Graves.*

*The Irish Pipes*

*‘...The Union pipes, on the other hand, which probably owed their origin like the fidil or the geige<sup>11</sup>, to the beginning of the sixteenth century, were gradually growing from the pipes, with two-scale chanters, to the more elaborate instrument in four scales that Mr.O’Maille played that evening.’*

—*The Irish Times*, 11 March, 1910.

I had a big discussion one time with adjudicators in the South about the music. They said that “The Lark in the Clear Air” was not a traditional air. Well I says, “I beg to differ, because it is a traditional air.” They said, “No way.” I said, “Do you know what the music is that the Lark was set to? It was set to a piece of music called “The Tailor” which was written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. How can you then tell me that it is not a traditional air.” There was a fellow at one time – Tommy McGoldrick – I was very great<sup>12</sup> with him. Tommy won the gold medal in the *Oireachtas* in Dublin, and they weren’t going to give him it and that’s how them and me crossed swords. The adjudicators withheld the decision and they must have got clarification from somewhere, for they awarded Tommy the gold medal.

O’Mealy was chesty at that time – very, very chesty. I went up five or six times to see him. There were some days I went up and he was in bed – he was that bad he couldn’t get out of bed. Mrs O’Mealy invited me in, then she went up and told R.L. that Cecil had called to see him. “Bring him up,” was the reply. When I went up he was propped up in the bed, breathing heavily and couldn’t have spoken very much because he was always fighting for breath at that stage. I often sat on the side of the bed and would have talked about the pipes. He said to me, “I don’t think that I will ever be able to make you a set of pipes.” That would have been around November of 1946. That was my hopes out the window.

There was a chest that sat in the corner and the late Jack O’Rourke told me that it was full of sovereigns – packed with sovereigns, and coming down the street with Jack he says, “Do you think that all the time that I used to lie in sleepless nights wondering how they were going to get the next day in, and here he had a big box full of sovereigns.” He probably got paid for his pipes at that time.

<sup>11</sup> A direct ancestor of the violin, the *Polnische Geige* (Polish fiddle) was mentioned as early as 1545 by Martin Agricola and later by Michael Praetorius.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Great’ is a County Antrim word – in this context meaning friendly.



NPU Archive



Brother Gildas used to call. He taught in the Christian Brothers. R. L. Mealy – because of what he was – the opposition wouldn't buy his pipes, and Gildas said to him one day, "You know, I have got the proper plan." I think that R. L. had maybe half a dozen sets made at that time and he had no takers for them. Gildas says, "I'm going back to Dublin at the weekend. Now, there's no point in doing anything until I come back." So, he knew somebody in Dublin that made dies – wood dies. He went to the die-maker and Gildas made out what he wanted made. When he went down again he brought back the dies and he says to R. L., "That



Ulster Museum

one goes along the chanter head, and that one goes at the back of the chanter, and you can put it in different places on the pipes if you want to.

That's R. L. O'Mealy." R. L. said, "That's not right, for I'm R. L. Mealy." "Well," Gildas says, "Does it make any difference if it can sell your pipes?" Gildas took a set of pipes to Dublin. He was a right good player but he had wee stumpy fingers. He went to the Pipers' Club and he played these pipes and everybody listened. "Oh, these are great, who made these?" "R. L. O'Mealy." "Oh, could you get us a set?" "Now I'm sure I could but you wouldn't get them for a day or two. He might even have a set that maybe nobody wanted. I would bring them down."

I think that a full set of O'Mealy pipes was £35 and £45 for the ebony. That was a lot of money in them days. He was so good – the quality of his work despite the old lathe that he had – it wasn't a quality lathe.<sup>13</sup>

"Why could we not have something up here for O'Mealy?<sup>14</sup> He came from O'Meath [*sic*–*Westmeath*?] and they called him "Squeak" because he made reeds and he was always puffin' and puffin' at them and they were always squeakin'. So that's how he got the name of "Squeak Mealy". He was known as "Squeak" when he came to Belfast. He told me, "When you are testing a reed never you blow it like that, suck it and if it gives a good squeak it is a good reed. Always if you hold the reed up between you and the light and look at the blades it should form a V."

All the pipes he made were 15 inch chanters. He would have got a bit ratty if you talked about concert pitch. I said to him, "Would these pipes be concert?" "No, these are what you



Ronan Browne

<sup>13</sup> O'Mealy's lathe is in NPU Headquarters, kindly donated by Ken McLeod.

<sup>14</sup> I informed Cecil about the O'Mealy room at NPU headquarters in Dublin.

would call continental pitch – that’s half-a-tone under concert.” I says, “Pianos are nearly all concert and all the flute players are nearly all concert. Them boys would be reluctant – maybe some of them couldn’t even tune a fiddle down half-a-tone and get it back up to normal again. They would kind of give you dirty looks.” “Well,” he says, “I can make concert, but that’s if you like that sort of thing.” “Oh, not at all,” I says, “The tone that you have is beautiful. When a thing is working well never change it.” “Well,” he says, “That’s what I thought.” All his drawings were for 15 inch.

He talked about wood. “Boxwood,” he said, “was a lovely wood – it was a softer tone and would probably be better to sing with. Ebony would be a harder wood but it would have a better carrying tone. The boxwood suits a wee parlour house like I would be in here. It’s ideal for that.”

His pipes were designed on Taylor. The ideas were the same as Taylor. Taylor’s motto was  
*“Anything that Taylor puts together let no man pull asunder”*

He also told me that boor-tree<sup>15</sup> was a more mellow tone and that he had a boor-tree bush down in the garden. He also told me about balancing the tongue with sealing wax like you put on a parcel that you were sending through the post.

When he died there was a big heavy fall of snow. It was hard enough to get to Belfast at any time, but to have gone to the funeral would have been impossible.

I called with Tilly after that and was always very great with her. She had said to me, “By the way, you call me Tilly – you told me to call you Cecil.” “Because” I says, “it would look fool if you called me Mister – you need to be some stature to be called Mister.”

I kept in touch with Tilly all through the years. She said to me that if ever a set of pipes would come up for sale I’ll make sure that you know about them. She wrote me a letter one day – that must have been ’49 – to tell me that there was a set of pipes for sale and the fellow that has them – he’s a very decent fellow and Richard had taught him and also Richard had taught him to work with a lathe, and him and Richard were very, very close. I have found about them and they’re boxwood and silver. I’ll get him to come up and play, some night just to play for you.

### **Recollections about other pipers who had known R. L.**

This wee man arrived with a big long box and he had a pair of glasses on him. “This is a friend of mine,” Tilly said and introduced me to him. “This is Jimmy McIntosh. I told him that I would like you to hear him playing.” The tunes that Jimmy played were “The Boys o’ the Town” and “The Bold Deserter”.

I was up one time with Jimmy and he was on the trams. Whenever the trams went off the road – he had been there so long – he wasn’t that keen about the buses – he said that they could find him a job working at night, cleaning the buses.



Trevor Stewart

<sup>15</sup> Elder.

Jimmy said, “I don’t know if I could stick the nights.” “Well, I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Give it a try for a couple of months. If you don’t like it we’ll find you something else, but we don’t want you leaving the company.” Jimmy would have been a very straight wee body, you know – a wee gentleman.

Jimmy used to come down here to me to Tildarg Dam to fish. He had a wee BSA Bantam motorbike and I had a push-bike. He used to ride along and I put my hand on his shoulder and that’s how he towed me along. We went some distance. We went to Knockagh Monument. There was a fiddle player there – another Jimmy – McIlroy.

The set that Jimmy McIntosh had was in Kavanagh’s<sup>16</sup> window in Smithfield. That was £25 that set.



NPU Archive

If I was in the city I would have called with Frank McFadden. Mrs. McFadden was a lovely wee woman – I used to bring her duck eggs. One day I called and Mrs. McFadden came to the door. She said “You’ve come at the right time. He’s lying on the sofa and if he falls he’ll hurt himself.” I went in and Frank was sleeping. I eventually got him awake and up sitting on the sofa. “Ah, how’re you doing?” he said. “I’m sorry I’m not in good shape. Wait till I tell what happened to me. I went to see the Catholic Orangemen<sup>17</sup> the day and I got too much.” Says I, “There’s nothing wrong with that.” Do you know, I laughed the whole way down Dunstan Street at the idea.

Seán McGuire lived nearly next door to Frank. If you went in and got Frank in a bad mood you knew that McGuire had been in. He said to me, “I made that so-and-so a set of pipes – a lovely set of pipes – going great – didn’t please him. He had to be into them, hoking at them.” Then McGuire says to me, “Them’s not going.” I says, “What have you done to them? They were perfect when they left here.” He said, “I started to adjust the reed, and then it cracked. I’m just after throwing them out.”



NPU Archive

Jack O’Rourke (left) used to go down to Seán McAloon’s (right). Jack had a lot of bits and pieces of pipes – regulators and things – from O’Mealy when he died and he had had them for years. McAloon, he moaned and moaned until he got them off Jack. He had a set of regulators – they were beautiful – spade regulators – a tenor, a baritone and a normal bass. No matter



NPU Archive



NPU Archive

<sup>16</sup> A well-known second-hand shop in Smithfield market in the centre of Belfast. Kavanagh sold almost anything.

<sup>17</sup> “The Ancient Order of Hibernians”.

what you gave McAloon it would need to have been better. I used to call in with Jack after early Mass and he says, “I haven’t long to stop because I’m going up to see McFadden” - there were a few bits he wanted McFadden to make for him on the lathe. I was up with McFadden this day and McFadden says to me, “what time is it?” “It’s five minutes to two.” “McAloon will be coming shortly with his bits and pieces. He is a terrible man. He brings an armful of bits and pieces. Could you do this and could you do that. He even tells you how to do it. Sure when he’s telling me how to do it, could he not do it himself.”



Ulster Museum

Jack was very good to O’Mealy and to Tilly. Jack came from O’Meath [*sic*]. Jack took him parcels of stuff. R. L. always gave the impression that he had nothing.

I knew W. J. Hope from about 1950. I was at a fiddlin’ do one time in a wee hall between Ballyeaston and Ballyclare and William Hope was there. He also played the Scottish pipes and trained Ballykeel Pipe Band and he trained a lot of bands. His son Frank took over and trained a lot of them, particularly in Co.Down. Frank was a good Highland piper. W. J. used to come down to Davy Mawhinney’s. I played often with W. J.



NPU Archive

Cecil at the NPU Tionól, Termenfeckin, 1971. He is right in the centre, with Seán McAloon directly behind him. There are many other well-known pipers around him.