

## 1.07 A Piping MP: Joseph Myles McDonnell (1796-1872), Doo Castle, Ballaghadereen, County Mayo.

Seán Donnelly.

Sir Antony Patrick McDonnell (1844-1925) of Swinford, co. Mayo (later Lord McDonnell), Under Secretary of State for Ireland, 1902-8, had previously served with great distinction in India, a background which, coupled with a choleric disposition, caused him to be known, even among friends, as "The Bengal Tiger".<sup>1</sup> During his term as Under Secretary, McDonnell was instrumental in the donation of a handsome set of Kenna Union pipes, a McDonnell family-heirloom, to the National Museum of Ireland.

In 1911 W.H. Grattan Flood wrote that the elder Kenna had made these pipes in Dublin in 1770 for a gentleman piper named McDonnell, who flourished between the 1770s and 1790s, and that after his death the instrument had passed into the possession of Sir Antony's family.<sup>2</sup> Flood was also likely to have written a brief anonymous account of these pipes that appeared in the *Freeman's Journal*, 2 August 1912, in which 'MacDonnell the gentleman piper' was more closely identified with the Mayo family:

The reference to Joseph Myles McDonnell of Doo Castle, Ballaghadereen, County Mayo, whose assets on the occasion of his insolvency in the late fifties consisted of "a flute, a bagpipes, and a setter dog," may be supplemented by mentioning that the bagpipe is now in the National Museum, Dublin. Mr. McDonnell acquired the bagpipes from his father Myles McDonnell, whose father purchased them from the elder Kenna of Dublin, 1770, the date of which is engraved upon them. Joseph Myles McDonnell was born in 1796, and was MP for County Mayo, 1846-7. His bagpipes subsequently came into the possession of his grand-daughter, and the lady, as Lord MacDonnell informed the present writer, exhibited them in the National Museum, where they still remain. Myles McDonnell was a noted gentleman piper of the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

'McDonnell the gentleman piper', who was performing on stage in co. Cork during the 1770s, is likely to have been the 'McDonnell the piper' from whom Edward Bunting collected music in the 1790s,<sup>3</sup> and to have given his name to the tunes 'McDonnell's Rant' and 'McDonnell's Hornpipe', which O'Farrell published in the early 1800s.<sup>4</sup> Like Denis Courtney, John Murphy and O'Farrell himself, McDonnell was to be found playing in London in the 1790s, where they all enjoyed the patronage of the Highland Society of London, and McDonnell and Murphy also visited Edinburgh to give recitals in the late 1790s.<sup>5</sup> But this McDonnell's forename was not Myles, but 'James'; and while it cannot be proved outright that he was not a Mayo McDonnell, this appears unlikely.<sup>6</sup> When identifying

<sup>1</sup> *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography II, 1901-70* (Oxford, 1982), p. 433; F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1971; 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 1973), pp 220-1

<sup>2</sup> *The Story of the Bagpipe* (London, 1911), p.154.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Carolan, 'MacDonnell's uilleann pipes', *Ceol* vi, 2 (1984), 59-61.

<sup>4</sup> *O'Farrell's Collection of National Irish Music for the Union Pipes*, (London, 1804), p. 23; *O'Farrell's Pocket Companion for the Union or Irish Pipes* (4 vols., London, c. 1813-15), III, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Iain McInnes, 'Who paid the piper?', *Common Stock* iii, 1 (August 1986), 19-22; Keith Sanger, 'Irish pipers and Scotland [I]', *Piping Times* 1, 11 (August 1998), 41.

<sup>6</sup> McInnes, 'Who paid the piper?', 21.

Myles McDonnell as this piper in 1911, Flood suggested, rather cleverly, that the Kenna pipes had been one of his sets: the actor John O'Keefe describes McDonnell in his memoirs, which Flood would have read, as playing tiny ivory pipes, tipped with silver and gold; tiny is one thing the Kenna pipes in the National Museum are not.<sup>7</sup>

Nor could the elder Kenna have made the McDonnell pipes in Dublin as early as 1770. While this Kenna was indeed making pipes by 1770, he was based just outside Mullingar, co. Westmeath, and the business subsequently moved into the town. It was to be 1812 before the younger Kenna moved to Dublin, to carry on the business on Essex Quay for a period of approximately twenty-five years. The problem with the Kennas is that though people are aware that they were in business for at least fifty years, everyone wanted their Kenna set to be as old as possible, and attributed them to the elder Kenna. Since these sets were usually stamped 'Dublin', the inference was that the elder maker must have worked in the city during the 1770s. Given their size and complexity, the McDonnell pipes were made by the younger Kenna, Timothy, in the early 1800s, and are a perfect example of the 'Grand Union Pipes' he advertised.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the claim that the pipes were stamped '1770' arose through their being confused with an earlier set in the McDonnell family. In the account quoted above, Joseph Myles McDonnell is said to have inherited them from his father, Myles McDonnell, for whose own father they were said to have been made. But here a father and son with the same forenames, both pipers, have been confused. The man mentioned as father of Joseph Myles McDonnell, Myles McDonnell (1740-1808), of Cloonmore, co. Mayo, was in fact his grandfather. Confusion arose because Joseph Myles' father was also Joseph Myles (c.1765-c.1845), and also owned Doo Castle. Family tradition had it that when Philip Phillips, who was to become bishop of Achonry, returned from Salamanca in the late 1760s, he brought with him silver mounts for a set of pipes, which he had then made by a pipe-maker in Urlaur, co. Mayo, for the elder Joseph Myles (who was just a child), to whom he was related. As this Joseph Myles was to live until c.1845, he could have commissioned the Kenna pipes, but it is far more likely that they were made for his son. Known from his prodigious size as 'Joe Mór', the younger Joseph Myles is still remembered around Doo Castle as a piper (McDonnell).<sup>9</sup>

Like many impoverished Connacht gentry of his day - 'as high-spirited and irresponsible as schoolboys' - Joe Mór refused to let debt cramp his lifestyle. Irish hospitality reigned at Doo Castle, and while local custom demanded that no drink be consumed before dinner, that meal was at 4 p.m. After, the dining-room door was locked, the key thrown out the window, and the man who could not take his bumper of claret as the decanter went around was forced to drink a pint of salt water. Joe Mór is not likely to have ever suffered this penalty: He was known to drink twenty-one tumblers of punch after dinner - though he was never seen to be drunk, or even under the influence of liquor (McDonnell Bodkin, 7-10).

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<sup>7</sup> Carolan, 'MacDonnell's uilleann pipes', 60.

<sup>8</sup> Seán Donnelly, 'A Century of Pipemaking, 1770-1870: New Light on the Kennas and Coynes' (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Harry Bradshaw, *Michael Coleman (1891-1945)* (Dublin, 1991), pp 18, 24.

The precarious state of Joe Mór's finances is highlighted in the story told of an unfortunate Dublin wine-merchant who supplied a barge load of his best vintages to Doo Castle. Realising, too late, that he was unlikely to ever see any payment for his wares, he visited Doo Castle with the object of buying back what was left of the cargo in order to sell it and limit his loss. After several days hospitality, the merchant nervously broached the subject,



'Big' Joe McDonnell 1796 - 1872

diffidently suggesting that Joe and his guests, from the short shrift that they gave to his best vintages after dinner, would be just as content with whiskey-punch. Not only would punch suffice after dinner, he was told, but it would be much preferred - but Joe, alas, had no ready money to buy the requisite lemons. (McDonnell Bodkin, 8-9).

Joe's stratagems for outwitting the summons-servers who besieged Doo Castle became legendary. He organised fox-hunts by moonlight, with the participants returning to Doo Castle for a hearty breakfast. Sunday being the only day on which debtors were free from arrest, when Joe found himself being pursued one Saturday evening he promptly went to ground in the hospitable house of the attorney who had taken out the summons against him (McDonnell Bodkin, 10-11):

"There he dined, drank punch, played cards and won heavily. But a little after midnight he said to his host, it's time for me to be going home. It's Sunday morning now, and I have already kept that poor fellow of yours too long waiting outside in the cold."

A year as MP for Mayo gave Joe a respite from his creditors. In March 1846 he stood as a Repeal candidate in a by-election caused by the retirement of Richard Blake, MP for Mayo. His opponent was George Henry Moore (1811-91) of Moore Hall, Carrahall, co. Mayo, father of the novelist George Moore. An election address by Daniel O'Connell on Joe's behalf was published on 21 February 1846 and, a week later, O'Connell remitted £250 for his election fund to John MacHale, Archbishop of Tuam. When the result was declared on 2 March, Joe had polled 477 votes against Moore's 417.<sup>10</sup>

A folklore account of the contest, 'A Parliamentary Election during the Famine', was one of the tales James Berry (1842-1914) published in the *Mayo News* between 1910 and 1914 - though Berry's informants confused the Repeal Movement with that for Catholic Emancipation nearly two decades earlier. The description of Joe in this account is not very flattering, and the odd spelling of his name, 'Joe Moore McDonnell', was probably due to his

<sup>10</sup> Maurice R. O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell VIII* (Dublin, 1988), pp 6, 8.

being confused in popular memory with an earlier MP for Mayo, James Moore O'Donel of Westport, who was killed in a duel in Galway in 1801:<sup>11</sup>

If the Archbishop had searched all Ireland he couldn't have found a worse candidate than his nominee, Joe Moore McDonnell of Doocastle, a country squire, who had nothing to recommend him save his drinking proclivities, his vile, immoral, immodest anecdotes, and his colossal stature; but the great Archbishop could find no other candidate, and he was determined to oust Moore at any cost in order to show the Government and the landlords what he could do. Some thought it a rash, forlorn hope, but the Archbishop was undismayed for, like Napoleon, he had a staff of priests around him, generals in fact, who were the bravest of the brave, foremost among them being Father Michael Conway, Father Luke Ryan, and Father Michael Curley who, although small in stature, was surely the Roman of them all.<sup>12</sup>

Berry caught the fervid, quasi-sectarian atmosphere in which the election was fought. O'Connell and MacHale were determined to defeat Moore because he had refused to take the Repeal Pledge. The enthusiasm of the young priests, which Berry so admired, ripened into an ugly fanaticism, and though both candidates were Roman Catholics, rumours were started that Moore was about to conform to the Established Church. The threat of mob-violence was so strong that Moore's mother, Louisa, one of the Brownes of Westport, wrote to O'Connell concerning the priests who were fomenting the storm of hatred against her son, asking in the name of humanity that he try to persuade MacHale to restrain their excesses before violence erupted.<sup>13</sup>

Joe Mór himself had a close scrape with his zealous supporters, but succeeded in wriggling out of it very adroitly, in the process proving the cliché that if you must tell a lie, tell as big a one as possible (McDonnell, 9-10):

On one occasion Joe, standing as the champion of the "ould faith" in Mayo, was caught by a horrified supporter eating meat on Friday. Instantly his popularity departed. There was shout of derision when he appeared on a platform. "Give him an egg to take the taste of mate off his mouth!" and an egg whizzed past his ear. 'Big Joe' was equal to the occasion. He drew a letter from his pocket.

"Does anyone here," he roared out in a voice of thunder that dominated the tumult, "know the handwriting of His Holiness Pope Pius the Ninth?"

There was moment's pause. No one seemed to know the handwriting of His Holiness. Without waiting for an answer, Joe read the letter at the top of his voice: -

'MY DEAR JOE,

I am well pleased to hear you are fighting for the old faith down in Mayo. You are neither to fast nor abstain while the good work is in hand.

<sup>11</sup> James Kelly, *'That Damned Thing called Honour': Duelling in Ireland 1570-1860* (Cork, 1995), p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> James Berry, *Tales from the west of Ireland*, ed. by Gertrude M. Horgan (London, 1966), p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> O'Connell, *Correspondence*, p. 9.

“With kindest regards for yourself and the boys that are helping you,

I remain,

Yours very sincerely,

POPE Pius IX.

A roar of applause followed the name, and “Big Joe” was once more the popular hero.

But Joe’s relief from his creditors was to be short-lived. In the general election of 1847, Moore, having this time taken the Repeal Pledge, swept home with 504 votes to Joe’s 53 (*Freeman’s Journal*, 1 August 1912); he held the seat until 1857 and served as MP again from 1868 to 1870.<sup>14</sup> During his year in Parliament, Joe never spoke, but did once attempt to serenade the members (McDonnell Bodkin, 12):

It is said that on one occasion ‘Big Joe’ determined to enliven the dull routine of the House of Commons by a spirited tune on his favourite pipes, and with this intent had carried his instrument with him into the front lobby, but was captured by his friends at the door of the legislative chamber.

Political opponents that they were, McDonnell and Moore shared an interest in piping. Moore was a patron of a professional piper in Ballyglass, near Carrahall, ‘Big’ Thomas Killeen (c.1830-1906). Thomas was one of two partially-sighted sons born to a comfortable farmer in the area - ‘a warm farmer’ - who arranged that they should both learn a profession that would support them. He had Thomas trained as a piper and Pat, the other partially-sighted son, as a dancing master, and both travelled around together. Tradition credited Moore with using his influence to ensure that the Killeens, and the pupils attending Pat’s dancing classes, did not suffer when the Coercion Act, which restricted people’s movement at night, was applied at the height of the Land War in the 1880s. He is also said to have brought Thomas to play for Queen Victoria on her last visit to Ireland in 1900.<sup>15</sup>

When Joe Mór’s father, Joseph Myles, died in 1845, he was buried in Kilcolman Cemetery; but Joe had him illegally exhumed at the dead of night, waked again, and reburied in Boyfathard Cemetery, which he had established near his mansion. His mother, Eleanor, who died in 1849, was presumably allowed to rest in peace (McDonnell).

Sometime in the 1850s, Joe lost the battle against his creditors, and was arraigned before the Encumbered Estates Court, the occasion of the much-quoted statement on his assets. He had no male heirs and the estate appears to have been placed in trust for his grand-children. Joe moved to Dublin, where he lived in Rathmines with a Dr Hughes, to whom he was probably related through his grandfather, Myles McDonnell. He died on 14 January 1872 and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery. Again, according to family tradition, there was not enough money to pay the grave-diggers to fill in the grave, and some labourers from Doo

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<sup>14</sup> O’Connell, *Correspondence*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ruairi Somers, ‘The Killeens of Ballyglass’ *An Piobaire* ii, 37 (Samhain 1987), 5.

Castle, who were returning from England, performed this service out of respect and liking for the big man (McDonnell).

Administration of his estate was granted to Dominic Darcy of Doo Castle; described as the father and guardian of Joe's grand-children; he was obviously his son-in-law. Early this century, the Doo Castle estate was sold to the tenants under the Ashbourne and Wyndham Land Acts, a prime-mover behind the latter being, ironically, Sir Antony Patrick McDonnell. It would have been about this time that Louisa Darcy, Joe's grand-daughter, came to live with Sir Antony's family, bringing her grandfather's pipes with her; Sir Antony's father, Morgan Garvey McDonnell, and her grandfather had been cousins. And it was through Sir Antony, that she arranged to donate the pipes to the National Museum: it was his name, if I remember correctly, that was given on the card that accompanied the pipes when I first saw them thirty years ago (McDonnell; McDonnell Bodkin, 12).

As previously mentioned, the McDonnell pipes are a superb example of the younger Kenna's craftsmanship. As well as a fully-keyed chanter, and an extended bass-regulator, the pipes have a fourth, single-key regulator, possibly an E. Unfortunately, like most of the pipes in the Museum, these have not been available for examination in recent years due to various reasons. It has been repeatedly stressed that the major difficulty in studying these old sets of pipes is that later pipe-makers have interfered with them, sometimes very drastically, in order to get modern reeds to play in them. But given that Joe Mór's pipes remained in his family up to the time that they were donated to the National Museum, there is a chance that they are reasonably close to the condition in which they left Kenna's workshop. Interestingly, they are an exceptionally large set, and Joe McDonnell is said time and again to have been a huge man. Did Kenna, then, match the set to the size of the man ordering them? More importantly, in view of Joe's perennial financial problems, did he ever pay Kenna?

### **Abbreviations and acknowledgements.**

McDonnell: Genealogical information on the McDonnells from M.P.H. McDonnell, New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, great-grandson of Mark Garvey McDonnell, for whose permission to use it, I am very grateful.

McDonnell Bodkin: Matthias McDonnell Bodkin, *Recollections of an Irish Judge* (London, 1914). I wish to thank Linda Lunny, Dictionary of Irish Biography, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, for drawing this work to my attention.

End.