

### 1.13 Piping contests at the *Feis*, 1897-1935.

Barry O'Neill.

Right from its beginning in 1897, the *Feis Ceoil* held piping competitions. They started out vigorously and were taken very seriously by the pipers, but over the decades, they went into decline, and by 1935, they had disappeared from the *Feis*. Most pipers today would say that this was not a great loss, that it is an illusion to think that there is one piper who is somehow the best, or that a judge's choice is more than one person's opinion. I agree, but the competitions are worth examining because their story suggests how players' attitudes and motives have changed. Why did the master pipers pursue the awards back then, and why do they not do it now? This article recounts some facts about the contests, and tries to explain the change. My explanation is only speculative, but I want to put it forward for others to respond.

#### The Origin of the Contests

The idea of a musical and literary competition to promote Irish culture was raised in newspaper correspondence in 1895. Members of the Gaelic League took the idea forward, citing the tradition of the Welsh Eistedfodd and the 1792 Harpers' Festival in Belfast. The first *Oireachtas*, which emphasized Irish language skills, plays, poems, essays on history and culture, and other literary forms was held May 17-19, 1897. Piping had some role in the first *Oireachtas*: Thomas Rowsome opened the awards ceremony, an affair in the Rotunda Room at the Rotunda with many Dublin dignitaries on the platform, by playing the Coolin, and later Prof. Thomas Garogan held forth. The next year the *Oireachtas* introduced dancing, and then in 1899 piping contests. Over the years, however, the literary aspects of the *Oireachtas* dominated. Some performers competed through the years, but piping competitions were spotty, with many years seeing no winners announced.

The real site of piping activity was the *Feis Ceoil*. Meant as the musical companion to the *Oireachtas*, the first competition was held in 1897, a week later. Classical musicians and vocalists predominated, but traditional performances were included. At the piping competition, held May 22 at Ballsbridge, Robert Thompson took the top prize, followed by Turlough MacSweeney, Thomas Rowsome, John Cash and John Flanagan. Variety and tradition were typical of the early years, when the *Feis* drew pipers who played in their local style. Thompson and Rowsome were urban players, but their families had a piping tradition. Many others, like Cash and Flanagan were travellers, and others in the early contests were blind or at least visually impaired -- Peter Kelly, John Reilly, Stephen Ruane, Martin Reilly, Denis Delaney, Philip Goodman and Michael O'Sullivan. They were from the older tradition.

The evening newspapers reported only the three or so winners each year, but in 1899, the New York gaelic league magazine, *An Goadhal*, listed all the competitors, and the group represented an assortment of home places around Ireland. Philip Goodman and Dan Markey came from Castleblayney, co. Monaghan; Michael O'Sullivan from Kerry; John Cash and Patrick Toomey from Wicklow; Thomas Rowsome and John Flanagan from Dublin; Denis Delaney from Galway; Jeremiah O'Donovan, John Wayland, T. Crosdale and Robert Thompson from Cork; a Mr. Harris from Tipperary; and Patrick Gallagher from Mayo. One change in the *Feis* as it continued over the years, and perhaps in piping in Ireland in general, would be the growing prevalence of first-generation pipers and of Dubliners.

## Tales from the Feis.

A photograph of the 1901 competitors has survived, and most of them are clearly the salt of the earth. Anna Barry, then in her teens, travelled from Cork, and sits in the picture in her white gown. An adjudicator said that she looked like a dove among a flock of old crows. The pipers' rustic ways often contrasted with the decorum of the Dublin gaelic leaguers, and Martin Reilly, who was brought from Galway and put up on Henry Street, was a source of stories.

Another remnant of information from 1901 suggests that the old tradition was strong then at the Feis. Patrick Gallagher was reported to have played 'The Woodpecker.' The tune is lost, but Breandán Breathnach noted that there are no woodpeckers in Ireland, and he suggested that it was an imported air. On the other hand, Karl Partridge, who was learning the pipes while studying zoology at Trinity College, countered that there had been woodpeckers in Ireland within the last few centuries, when there were forests. So it is possible that Gallagher's tune was not in the tradition at all, but it is also possible that it was Irish and quite old.

The Feis also included occasional contests for pipemaking, and in the early years, it had a competition for the presentation of unpublished airs, at which the old pipers did well. Playing evidently was not as important as the quality and originality of the air. The three winners in 1897 were MacSweeney, Flanagan, and Professor O'Mealy, the pipemaker. The officials recorded the airs they liked on waxed cylinders, and printed a selection in the 1914 booklet *The Feis Ceoil Collection of Irish Airs Hitherto Unpublished*, edited by Arthur Darley and P.J. McCall, now reprinted and available at the NPU website. The idea may have been to turn the airs over to a competent musician who could add proper orchestral settings, but whatever we think of this plan, we can thank them for letting us hear the music of these players from a century ago. We can listen to Denis Delaney, John Cash, Dan Markey, Michael O'Sullivan, George MacCarthy, James Byrne and, very faintly, Martin Reilly.

Delaney's banter with the officials was reported in *An Goadhal* of July 1899:

Denis Delaney played a number of airs, from which were selected, viz, "The Woman of the House on the Floor," "The Kid on the Mountain," "The Repeal of the Union," and "The Hag on the Hill." The first is a translation of the Irish name. "The Repeal of the Union" is a very fine tune. The piper played it in marching time and said it was also a quadrille. It is really a double jig and its well-marked rythym no doubt induced the Repealers to adopt it for a marching tune. His other tunes were also double jigs and the first is descriptive of the lady of the house dancing. When the Repeal march was mentioned, Dr. Joyce jocularly asked the player if Repeal were abandoned. "No," said Delaney, "until it is carried." "But," a spectator interposed, "it was rejected." "Not rejected," retorted the piper, "it was half passed. Did you ever meet a cow that gave all her milk at once?" and the discussion ended in laughter.

It is interesting that all of the tunes mentioned above are still preserved on cylinders, so this is very likely the year and the event that produced the tunes of Delaney that we can now hear.

Local *Feiseanna* started up. The British Library has saved the program for the 1904 Mayo Feis, and if the Dublin event was a night at the opera, this was a day at the county fair. In Dublin most of the musicians were classical musicians and singers, but Mayo had competitions for lace-

making and butter-making, churn and cream to be provided by the committee. A prize was awarded for the best unpublished collection of stories in Irish, and for the best professional and amateur piping. Winners in the story-telling, dancing, music and singing contests had to agree to stay and contribute their talents to the evening performance. School authorities were encouraged to declare a holiday so students could attend the Mayo *Feis*, and the railway provided half-price fares to Newport for competitors.

In the local contests and in Dublin, small amounts of money were given as prizes, usually one or two pounds. Sometimes, however, the judges would decide that no one deserved a prize, or perhaps award first and third but not second, and so on.

Nicholas Markey, who taught many of the old Dublin pipers, consistently refused to compete. Denis Delaney competed more often than anyone, and won repeatedly. (One time when he lost a competition, he sent out his famous challenge, reprinted in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*.) By 1928, the *Feis* rules were evidently changed, since the paper notes, "Thos. Rowsome and James Ennis played brilliantly but were eliminated as past prize-winners."

In 1919 Liam Walsh took the prize, beating Delaney, Flanagan, and five other entries. Arthur Darley had adjudicated since 1902, and I wish I knew what he meant when he called the contest just "a prizefight," that did not uphold the ideals of Irish music. In 1922, adjudicator Robert O'Dwyer diplomatically commented that "Mr. Rowsome's pipes had distinctly different treatment in character, in tone and in technique to the older ones. Pipes had not shown any adjustment for a number of years, and the very fact of them having this improvement, whether it was a move in the right direction or not, was commendable."

Junior competitions seem to have been held in the Dublin *Feis* starting in 1923. Johnnie Doran, about 15 years of age at the time, took first place. In 1926, the junior and senior winners were Edward Potts and Leo Rowsome. O'Dwyer "praised the good tuning of Potts' pipes and the full tone of Rowsome's."

Breandán Breathnach related that in 1931, as young Brendan Walsh, he entered the junior division. The first stroke he gave on his bellows, his inlet valve popped out. He stuck it back in, but the same thing happened. Leo Rowsome got up from the adjudicating table, took out the tube connecting the bellows to the bag, and turned it the right way around -- with the flap valve inside the bag instead of the bellows. The moral is that when preparing your instrument for the competition, try your best to stay calm.

Another new rule was to assign specific tunes to the contestants beforehand, to make the comparison easier. It suggests a broader change in the contest -- it is hard to imagine telling Mickey O'Sullivan or Martin Reilly what to play. Some examples, as the paper gave them, show what was considered the basic piping repertoire:

1929 senior: 'Slieve-na-Mon', 'Copperplate', 'Frieze Britches', 'Quarrelsome Piper', 'Ace and Deuce of Piping';

1930 junior: 'Eamonn a'Chnuic', 'Heathery Breeze', 'Humours of Bantry', 'Boys of Blue Hill';

1930 senior: 'Dark Woman of the Glen', 'Flogging Reel', 'Jackson's Morning Brush', 'High Level Hornpipe', 'Bonaparte's Retreat';

1930 junior: 'Donnybook Jig', 'Greencastle Hornpipe';

1933: "Four airs of varied character from the O'Neill or Roche collections."

A measure of health of the *Feis* was the numbers of entrants, which were reported sporadically in the newspapers. In 1899, the contest had drawn the 14 listed above, but in 1924 Leo Rowsome competed alone in the adult division. This may have been an artifact of a public dispute between him and James Ennis over piping styles and adjudication. There was a slight rise, but from 1929 to 1934 the numbers competing were 3, 4, 1, 4, 2 and 1. The final player received a very low score, and in 1935 the traditional fiddling was continued, but the newspapers gave no results of a piping competition at the *Feis*.

## Judging the Judges

The information on who competed in the contests and how they did is given in the table at the end of the article. It can be used to ask which kinds of players did well and which did poorly. These questions are really about the adjudicators: What were they listening for? Was it something that we would now call good piping? There have always been complaints about the competence of the judges, and not just from the losers. Chief O'Neill told of a highland bagpipe contest in Chicago, where someone took the prize by playing 'The Campbells are Coming.' The reason, as far as O'Neill could see, was that it was the only tune the judges recognized.

The straightforward way to find out what the judges were after would be to tally the players' scores, counting their numbers of first, second and third places. However, if the contests in fact declined, then the earlier entrants were competing against better players and more of them, and later they faced less of a challenge. Winning in 1900 meant more than winning in 1930. An alternative way is to look at the details, to consider who beat who, and this will allow us to make comparisons across the years. For example, at the 1906 *Feis* Stephen Ruane beat William Mulvey, and in 1915 Mulvey beat Pat Ward. Ruane and Ward never faced each other, but if they had, the past competitions would tell us to bet on Ruane. Accordingly, we can tentatively rank Ruane above Ward. The method gives only a partial ranking of pipers and one that is very rough with considerable error likely for individual pipers. However, it should show the overall pattern of the judges' tastes.

By continuing to combine contests in this way, one produces the figure shown.<sup>1</sup> It integrates the judges' decisions over all the contests. It allows us to compare many pipers, but not all of them, since sometimes there is no sequence that allows an inference.<sup>2</sup> One piper was judged

---

<sup>1</sup> I included the results from local Feiseanna, but stopped at 1925 to keep the number of names manageable. One possible complication was that sometimes, a certain piper A would beat B, then later they would play again but B would win. It turned out that when this happened, one or the other won a majority of times, and this allowed a definite ranking. Also, it is possible in a system like this one to come up with a circle: A over B over C over A, and I was fortunate that this did not happen here. One problem, however, is that with only the top three or four choices announced, it is possible that a player won at one contest, and at another did not even get into the top three, and so was unlisted in the paper. If this happened, but the winners' list would not show it. One has to regard the figure as showing an overall pattern, not reliable for every individual piper.

<sup>2</sup>According to some computer manipulation, with the ordering shown on Figure 1 an arbitrarily chosen pair of players can be compared as better or worse about 30% of the time. The people who deserve the credit for allowing me to deduce more comparisons are those who turned up year after year, like Denis Delaney and William Mulvey. They functioned like markers separating those beating them from the players below.

better than another, only if the figure has a downward path from the former to the latter. Leo Rowsome is above George McCarthy, for example, since there is such a path: Rowsome beat somebody who beat somebody, etc., who beat McCarthy. However, we cannot say anything about William Andrews versus Michael O'Sullivan, because there was no sequence of victories leading from one to the other. The fact that the Andrews' name appears higher up on the diagram means nothing, and for all that the contest results imply, O'Sullivan could have beaten him.

Based on the figure, then, how competent were the *Feis* judges? Only about a quarter of the players on the figure left any recordings -- in most cases, all that remains about their playing are brief opinions by contemporary writers whose tastes we might or might not agree with. Given all these qualifications, I will state that by my own tastes, the *Feis* judging was reasonable and not at all outrageous. Many old-time pipers with good reputations appear at the top of the figure, like Ruane, MacSweeney, Martin Reilly, and Robert Thompson. Granted some players are up high who should not be there, and others seem to be too low, like John Reilly, James Ennis, Michael O'Sullivan or Philip Goodman, but on the whole, the figure suggests that merit and tradition seemed to count.<sup>3</sup>

### **Prestige, Secrecy and the Contests**

I would explain the early attraction and later neglect of contests by this principle: if you want to let the world know about your skill, but cannot demonstrate it to them directly, get a third party to attest to it. A century ago, a piper could be appreciated in his immediate locality or on his travelling circuit, but beyond that no one could evaluate him. Contests were the answer -- a player could gain fame across Ireland by taking a prize at the *Feis*. This situation changed due to the growing concentration of piping in the cities, where more people could hear the player for themselves. Ironically, it was the efforts of revivalist individuals and groups like the Captain O'Neill, the Gaelic League, and the different pipers' clubs that increased the numbers of city pipers.

Not all contests have been undermined by modern developments, but the exceptions tend to support the explanation I am giving here. Young people still meet for step-dancing or music, but their motive is not broad fame. The Nobel Prizes seem to go against my explanation, since they are sought after as much as ever. However, it is just because science is specialized, that the Nobel prize is seen as important. Scientists work in their own "villages," so that an economist cannot judge the field of biology or physics. The route to world recognition is a prize from a third party.

A further change involved technology, in particular, sound recordings and the growing ease of travel. Again, these allowed people to hear for themselves, without relying on others' opinions. Today a win at the All-Ireland can help a young musician get a record contract or book a tour of America, but with this achieved, entering further competitions has less purpose. One is only liable to lose.

---

<sup>3</sup> Only a few names of adjudicators came up in my research -- Arthur Darley, Robert O'Dwyer, James Ennis and Leo Rowsome.

**Table: The Competitors and Their Prizes: 1897-1934**

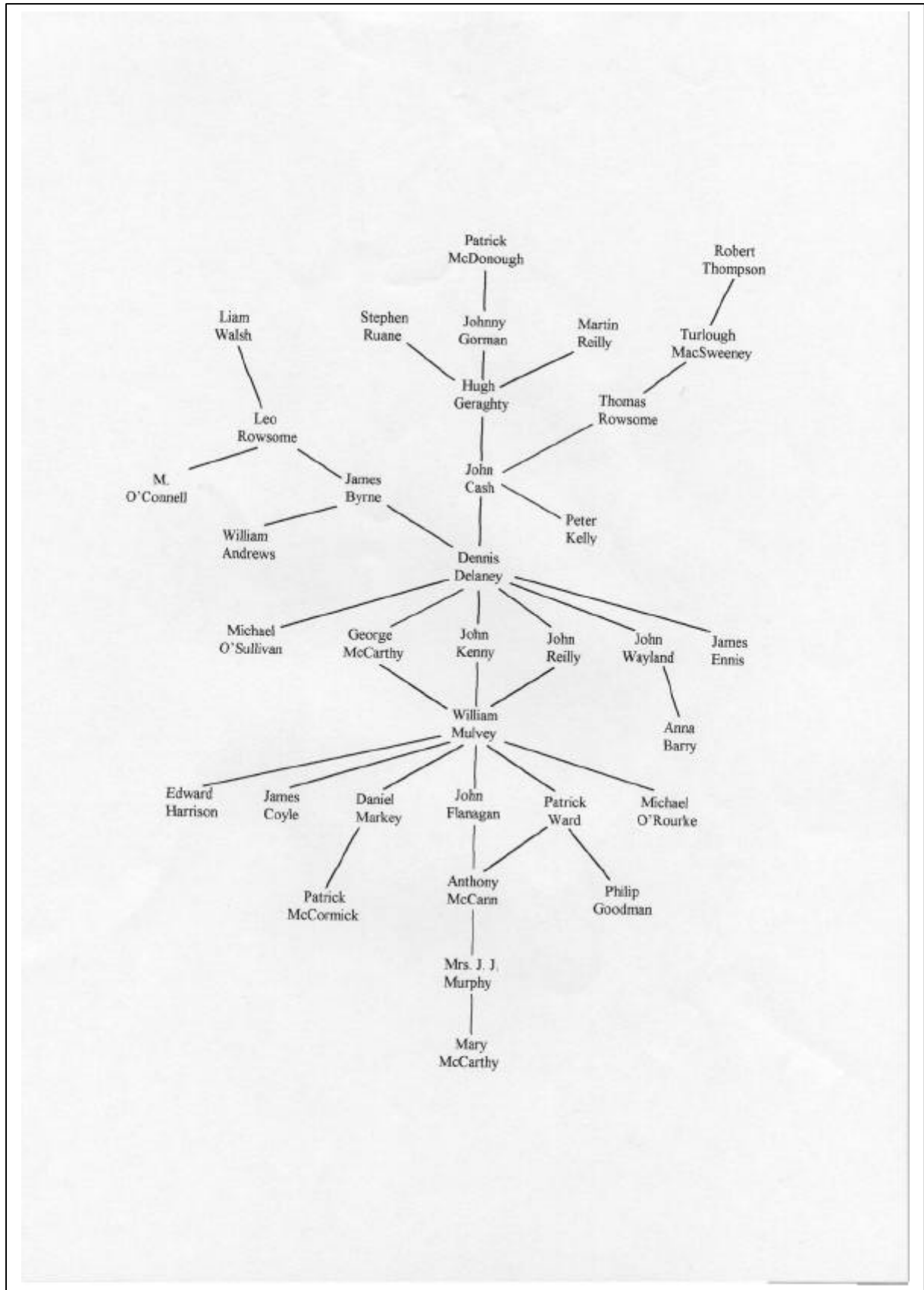
Here is a list of the competitors and their prizes. Most of the information appeared in the Dublin evening papers, although some of it, especially the pipers' home places, came from the notes of Séamus Ó Casaide. A few more contest results appeared in the second issue of *An Piobaire*, 1901, the Dublin journal of the old pipers' club. Except for the main *Feis*, the list is very incomplete.

Regarding the notation, "Robert Thompson: 97-1" means that he took first place in 1897. In the 1920s junior competitions were added and the judges evidently began assigning scores, so "21jr-2[80]" means that in the 1921 junior competition, the player took second place with a score of 80. "Unpub" refers to the unpublished airs competition, "sp" is special prize and "hm" is honorable mention. All the standings are for the *Feis Ceoil* in Dublin, unless another competition is stated, in which case, for example, "Tuam" means the Tuam *Feis*, and "Oir" means the *Oireachtas*. A special event which I am sorry to have missed, was the 1901 Cork Pipers *Feis* in 1900, abbreviated "CPF".

Robert Thompson (Cork) 97-1, 98-1, 01CPF-1  
 Turlough MacSweeney (Gweedore, Co. Donegal) 97-2, 97unpub-1  
 Thomas Rowsome (Wexford, Leo's uncle) 97-3, 99-1  
 John Cash (Wicklow) 97-4, 98-2, 00CPF-3, 00Belfast-1, 01Oir-4, 04Oir-2  
 John Flanagan (Dublin) 97-4, 97Unpub-2, 98-3, 99-4, 00Leinst-1, 09-2, 11-3, 12-2, 14-2, 16-3, 19-3  
 Richard L. O'Mealy (Belfast) 97Unpub-3  
 Peter Kelly (Belfast?) 98-3  
 Denis Delaney (Ballinasloe, Co. Galway) 99-2, 00-3, 00Ulst-1, 00Conn-1, 01-2, 01CPF-2,  
 01Youghal-1, 02-3, 02Conn-2, 03-2, 03Conn-1, 03Tuam-1, 03Thurles-1, 04-1, 04Oir-3, 8-1,  
 10-1, 11-1, 12-1, 13-1, 15-2, 16-1, 17-2, 18-1, 19-2  
 Michael O'Sullivan (Castlecove, Co. Kerry) 99-2, 01-3  
 Jeremiah O'Donovan (reporter's error for Bernard?) 00CPF:learner-1  
 George McCarthy (Ardee, Co. Louth) 00-2, 00Ulst-2, 00Unpub-3, 01Leinst-1, 02-2, 03-3, 03Oir-4, 04-  
 2, 05-2, 07-1  
 Dan Markey (Castleblayney, Co. Monaghan) 00-4, 00Ulst-3, 02Ulst-2, 08-3, 09-3  
 Michael O'Rourke (Greenock, Scotland) 00Ulst-4  
 John Kenny (Dublin) 01Unpub-3, 03Unpub-3, 12-3, 13-2  
 Patrick McCormick (Bog of Ardee, Co. Louth -- pictured on the NPU website) 00Ulst-4, 01Leinst-2  
 Martin Reilly (Galway City) 01-1, 01Oir-1, 02Oir-1, 02Conn-1  
 Anna Barry (Cork, later Dublin) 01-3, 01Youghal-hm  
 Hugh Geraghty (Kilmessan, Co. Meath) 01Oir-2, 03Oir-3, 05Oir-2  
 John Wayland (Cork) 01Youghal-2, 03Munst-1  
 Patrick McDonagh (Spanish Parade, Galway) 01Spiddal-1, 03-1, 03Oir-1  
 Stephen Colbert or Culbert (Watertown) 02Ballybrittas-1  
 John Gorman (Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon) 02-1, 08-2, 03Oir-2, 04Oir-1  
 Edward Harrison (Glasnevin, Dublin) 03Oir-4, 06-3  
 John Reilly (Cloonfad, Co. Roscommon, later Dunmore, Co. Galway) 03Tuam-3, 14-1  
 James Prendergast, 03Youghall-2  
 Bryan O'Donovan (reporter's error for Bernard?, Carberry, Co. Cork) 03Youghall-1  
 Philip Goodman (Donaghmore, Co. Monaghan) 04-3, 07-3  
 Thomas Phelan (Roscommon) 04Ballybritas-1

Steven Ruane (Shantallagh, Co. Galway) 04Oir-1, 06-1  
James Byrne (Trim, Co. Meath; later Mooncoin, Co. Kilkenny) 05-1, 17-1, 21-2[85], 28-1[90]  
William Mulvey (Dromod, Co. Leitrim, later Mohill) 03unpub-3, 05-3, 06-2, 09-1, 10-2, 11-2, 12Oir-sp,  
13-3, 14-3, 15-1  
Pat Ward (Blackbull, Drogheda) 07-2, 15-3, 16-2, 18-2  
James Coyle (Belfast, later Cavan, a student of O'Mealy's) 10-3  
William Andrews (Dublin) 11Oir-1, 21-3  
Hugh Newman (Athboy, Co. Meath) 12Oir-sp  
Mrs. J. J. Murphy, formerly Maggie McDonnell (Thomondgate, Limerick) 12Oir:learners-2, 18Oir-2  
James Ennis (Dublin) 14unpub-1, 22-4, 23-3, 25-2, 26-1  
Liam Walsh (Waterford) 17Oir-1, 19-1, 20-1, 22-2[90], 23-1  
Andrew McCann (Carnolin, Co. Wexford) 17Oir-2, 18-3, 18Oir-1, 19-4  
Seán O'Currin 17Oir:learner-1  
Mary McCarthy (Cork) 18Oir-sp  
Leo Rowsome (Dublin) 20-2, 21-1[91], 22-1[95], 23-2, 24-1, 25-1  
Thomas Rowsome (Leo's brother, Dublin) 21jr-1[90], 22jr-1, 23jr-3, 25jr-2, 26-4, 27-1  
John Fleming 21jr-2[85]  
Denis Nugent 21jr-3[76]  
M. O'Connell 22-3  
John Doyle 22jr-2  
Edmund Potts 22jr-4, 23jr-2, 24jr-1[90], 25jr-1, 26-2, 27-2, 28-3[87], 29-1  
Johnnie Doran (Rathnew, Wicklow) 23jr-1, 24jr-2[87]  
Seán O'Leary (Springhill, Enniscorthy) 25-3, 26-3. 28-2[88]  
Edward Gorman (Dublin) 25-4, 27-4, 33-1[90]  
James Blake (Dublin) 26jr-1, 27jr-1  
Neilius Cronin (Cork) 27-3, 29-2, 30-1[87]  
James McGuirk (Dublin) 27jr-2, 28jr-1, 33-2[87]  
James O'Brien 27jr-4, 28jr-3  
John Dempsey (Tallaght, Dublin) 27jr-5, 28jr-2,  
Michael Padian (Munimore, Co. Galway) 28-4[75]  
David Page (Dublin) 28jr-3, 29jr-1[90], 30-2[81], 32-2[82]  
Thomas Brasil (Dublin) 28jr-3, 29jr-2[81]  
Andrew Keane (Limerick) 29jr-2[87], 29jr-1[89], 31-1  
Brendan Walsh (Dublin) 29jr-3[71]  
Patrick Brophy (Kimmage) 32-1[90]  
James Reynolds (Clonsilla, Dublin) 32jr-1  
Daniel O'Dowd (Dublin) 33jr-1  
John Markey 34-1[60]

Chart.



End.