

### 3.02 The Life and Times of Richard Lewis O’Mealy

Piper and Pipe-maker, 1873-1947

Ronan Browne



Ulster Museums

Richard Lewis (R. L.) O’Mealy was a union piper and pipe-maker, born in Westmeath in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He lived most of his adult life in Belfast where he was renowned as a piper, broadcaster, piping teacher and pipe-maker. His piping was crisp, entertaining and inventive and his broadcasts were essential listening for anyone with an interest in Irish music. Through his teaching and making of the instrument he was central to the continuance of piping in the north-east of Ireland in the early twentieth century. As an entertainer he was widely celebrated for both his knowledge of piping and the eccentric costumes he wore while performing.

Richard was born on Wednesday 22 Oct 1873, the youngest of nine children of Laurence (Larry) Mealy and Letitia Lewis. He was born into a relatively prosperous house; as well as working twenty acres of his own farmland, Laurence Mealy was steward on the local Tristernagh Estate, owned at that time by the Goodbody family. The house where R.L. O’Mealy was born was called Templecross Cottage, just yards from the old ruined chapel and burial ground which gave the cottage its name.



Violet Medforth

*Templecross Cottage circa 1895. On the right are Kate, Letitia and Larry Mealy*

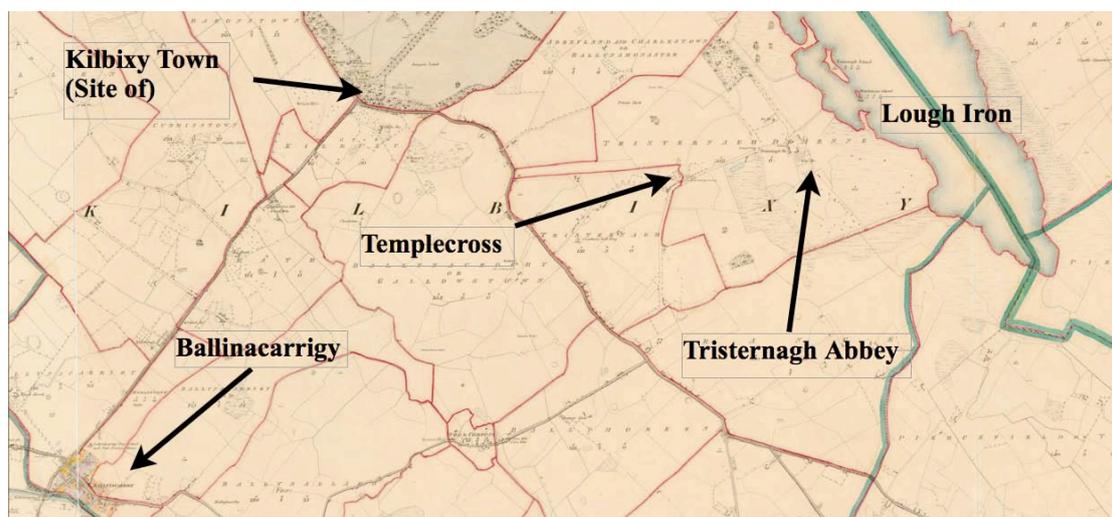
Thanks to George Farrar’s daughter Violet Medforth we have the above picture of Templecross cottage which continued to be inhabited until the late 1970s. At present a ruin, the present owner has restored, and is living in, the western end of the building.

Templecross is situated eight miles from Mullingar and two miles north-east of Ballynacarrigy.<sup>1</sup> It is in the townland of Tristernagh, parish of Kilbixy, in the County Westmeath. Here in Templecross Chapel in later years Richard would often sit alone and play, listening to the sound of the pipes reverberate in the stone-walled ruin.



Ronan Browne

*Templecross Chapel and castle, built at the centre of an ancient circle seen in the map below*



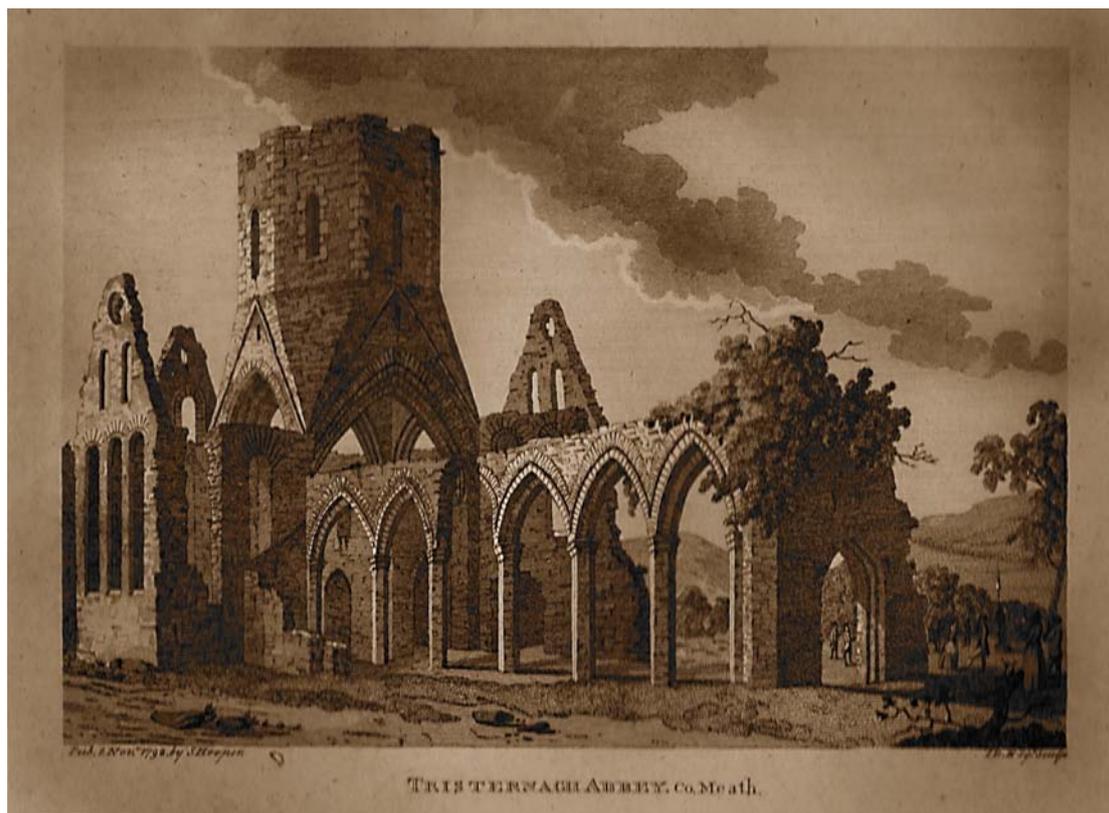
Reproduction of section of old OSI map in author's possession

*Parish of Kilbixy, Co. Westmeath from Ordnance Survey 1830<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Ballinacarrigy, (bottom left on map) sometimes spelled Ballynacarrigy or Ballynacargy. The village owes its existence to the Royal Canal which opened in 1817. Prior to that the local big village was, the now deserted, Kilbixy. Ballinacarrigy grew quickly in size due to its large harbour on the canal. It was to Ballinacarrigy that the celebrated pipe maker James Kenna moved in 1770.

<sup>2</sup> See 3.02 “Associated Files” for higher resolution version of this map.

Next to Templecross are the ruins of Tristernagh Abbey on the shores of Lough Iron, a long thin and shallow lake now overgrown and preserved as a nature sanctuary.<sup>3</sup>



Ken McLeod

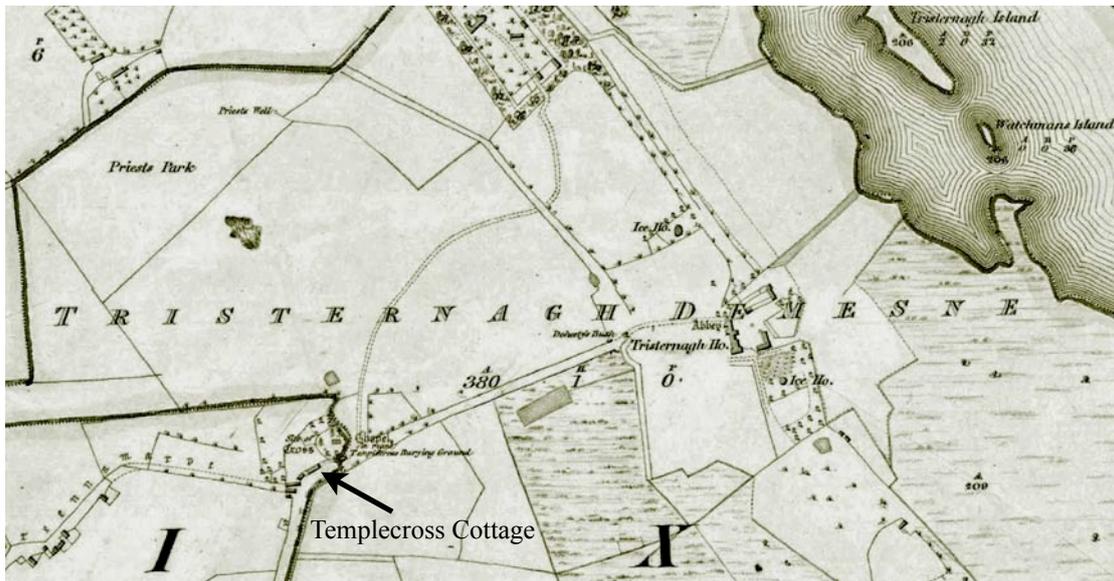
*Tristernagh Abbey in the 1790s around the time the Mealys moved to Templecross*



Roman Browne

*The remains of Tristernagh Abbey (left) and House (right), 2008*

<sup>3</sup> Tristernagh from the Irish *Triostarnach* (The Place of the Briars) consists today of a small square section of the Tristernagh Priory of Canons Regular, two walls of Tristernagh House and two intact ice houses. The abbey was founded by Geoffrey de Constantine in the late 12th/early 13th century and appears to have been important throughout history. Much has been written about this abbey's history and research is easily carried out. Tristernagh House, which was built from the remains of the abbey, was the seat of the Piers family who were granted the lands by Queen Elizabeth in the 16th century as reward for delivering the head of the great northern leader Shane O'Neill. Most of the remains of the abbey were demolished by the then owner Sir Pigott William Piers in 1783. Neighbouring Lord Sunderlin of Baronstown Demesne attempted to save Tristernagh by making a generous offer to Piers but it was rejected. A later Baron Piers made a name for himself in 1807 as a result of a botched bet that he could steal the wife of his friend Lord Cloncurry. Piers was taken to court by Cloncurry, lost and was ruined. He ended his days locked in a cottage in the walled garden only coming out on Sundays on which day the law stated he was safe from approaches by his debtors. Tristernagh is now in the ownership of the Franciscan Friars.



Reproduction of section of old OSI map in author's possession

1830 OS map of Tristernagh showing Templecross, Tristernagh House & Abbey and Lough Iron



Westmeath County Council

This aerial photograph shows the same area today with Lough Iron grown over

Looking closely at the above, you can see that Templecross is at the centre of two ancient circles long predating the founding of the medieval abbey on the boundary of the outer ring. Visible also is a water channel leading from the abbey to Lough Iron which would have provided the monks with easy access to the lake without tramping through marshy terrain. In the picture below of the present day (2008) overgrown Lough Iron, the light coloured area is the thin layer of vegetation covering the lake.



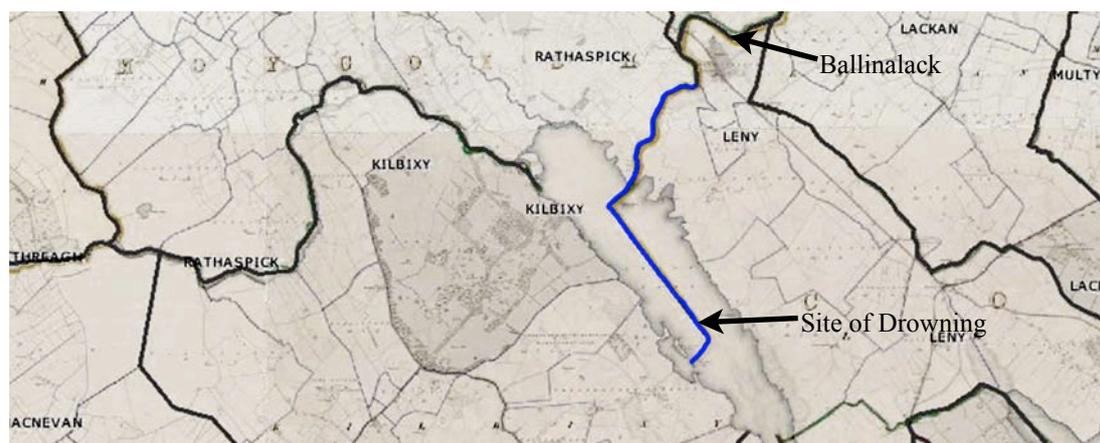
Roman Browne

## The Lough Iron Tragedy

While hardship and misfortune were no strangers to most Irish people of the time, Richard was born into what was to be a tragic home; his 12 year old sister had died just over a year before he was born, drowned in Lough Iron;<sup>4</sup> his nearest sibling, a brother born just a year and a half before Richard, died five months later;<sup>5</sup> his eldest sister would die a week before his first birthday.<sup>6</sup> Life must have been difficult to say the least and was probably laden with regret.

Isabella Mealy drowned on the 15th Aug 1872, aged 12. We have two versions of the drowning, one from Victor Mealy and one from Sam Farrar. They differ only slightly and in general tell the same story. It seems that Larry and others, including Isabella, went across Lough Iron by boat to Ballinalack. There was a law in Ireland causing public houses to be closed to locals on Sundays but if you were travelling you could get a drink; the common way around this annoying law was to travel to a pub a few miles down the road and you would then be a bone fide traveller in that area and could be served alcohol.

So, they went across Lough Iron, up the river to Ballinalack and had drinks. While rowing back the boat capsized and Isabella and a man drowned. One version of the story says that water had entered the boat during a sudden storm and that they capsized while looking for a billycan to bail; the other says that at the particular point in question the lake was shallow and thick with reeds so someone had to get out and lead the boat in. Either way, it seems that a particular man (held to have been a bit of a foolhardy braggart) managed to capsize the boat either looking for the billy can or getting out to wade. All survived except Isabella and that man.



Reproduction of section of old OSI map in author's possession

*The probable route taken from Ballinalack to the site of the drowning shown in blue*

<sup>4</sup> Victor Mealy's version of events can be heard in the MP3s of the Long Note programme and Sam Farrar's in two versions, one in the interview with Mick Dooley and one in the interview with Ronan, Jonathan, Ken and Wilbert.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Mealy was born 4 May 1872 and died 18 September 1872, aged 5 months. He died of gastroenteritis; the informant was Eliza Mealy. We do not know where this Eliza Mealy fits into the family tree.

<sup>6</sup> Louisa Annie Mealy, born 11 Oct 1858, died 14 Oct 1874, age 16 in a trap accident. Around Toor between Templecross and Ballinacarrigy, the donkey took short, the trap overturned and the sideboard ran across her throat and broke her neck. Louisa Annie is buried in Templecross.

## Music

The family tradition of music continued on to Richard and his surviving siblings. As well as R. L.'s father Larry being a piper, family lore states that so were Larry's own father John and grandfather Thomas. Francis O'Neill says in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* that Larry and Thomas were fine pipemakers and in saying that the "...trade and talent passed down from father to son through four generations", we may infer that John was also a maker. In his own generation, Richard played the pipes, as did his brother Ned; William, Johnny<sup>7</sup> and Kate played the fiddle while Kate was also said to have been a fine concertina player.



Violet Medforth

*Kate, Ned (playing the Kenna pipes), William & Johnny Mealy*



Violet Medforth

*Richard Mealy (early R. L. set)*



Violet Medforth

*Ned Mealy (Willie Rowsome set)*

<sup>7</sup> At an "American wake" near Multyfarnham in 1890, Johnny was greatly admired for his dancing as well as his fiddle playing.

## Mealy pipes

Naturally, there would be many sets of pipes associated with a family like the Mealys. We know of three (and there may have been more) – the James Kenna set, the Willie Rowsome set played by Ned and the full set played by Richard (an early set of his own manufacture). The James Kenna set are now in the possession of Jonathan Farrar, great grandson of George Farrar whose first wife was Letitia Mealy, Richard's sister [see note 9 below]. We have a pictures of Larry and Ned Mealy playing this set. This Kenna set would have been made in the second half of the eighteenth century possibly in the nearby town of Ballinacarrigy.

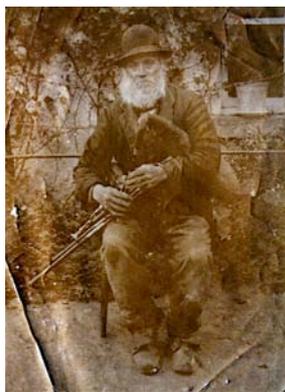


NPU

*The Mealy-Farrar Kenna set of Union pipes*

There is a family story of a prize cow being sold to buy a set of pipes from a neighbour, the owner having died in the 1798 rebellion. We aren't told what set was bought with the best cow – all but the Kenna set are of the wrong era if the 1798 connection is true; it is possible that it was the Kenna set but if not, it is possible that set was made by James Kenna specifically for R. L.'s great grandfather Thomas Mealy. It might be the case that the story of the cow dates back to the original purchase of the James Kenna pipes direct from the maker himself. Certainly, the sale of this cow was an event of such importance that it is remembered to this day. Although the regulator and chanter are later additions, this set of pipes was quite obviously a deluxe instrument in its day and although heavily worn by generations of playing, to my mind nothing exists by any early maker (including Kenna himself!) to match it for workmanship and flair. It is quite possible that the original purchase price required the selling of a prize cow back as far as the late 1700s.

Another possible 'cow set' could be the one mentioned by Sam Farrar, when he talks about Richard coming back on a visit and taking down a 'black' set from the loft and bringing it back to Belfast. Sam says Richard returned to the Tristernagh *Feis* the next year and the set was singing. However, this could also be the set Richard played in the early photograph (above, bottom page 6) made by himself. Perhaps in time we will solve this mystery - so much information has surfaced in the last while that you never know what will turn up as people root through old papers lying around their house.



Larry Mealy



Ned Mealy



Sam Farrar



Jonathan Farrar

We have the above photographs of the Mealy-Farrar Kenna set being played by Larry, his son Ned, Sam Farrar and now Sam's grandson Jonathan. Larry, who was born in 1823 was probably playing them by 1840, Richard played them after him, then Ned, Sam and they are still being played today. They were certainly played for roughly seventy years preceding Larry taking them up, perhaps by Larry's father John and if so, as mentioned above, it is very possible they were made originally for John's father Thomas. Recent research by Leslie Drew<sup>8</sup> poses the possibility that the Mealys and Kennas may have intermarried, pointing to a possible inter-family relationship which could explain the high quality of the Mealy Kenna pipes, and also the Mealy interest in pipe-making. The pipes zig-zagged slightly when Sam began to play them as he was not a blood relation of the Mealys<sup>9</sup> but apart from that, this set of pipes have very likely been played by members of the same family from the time it was made in the late 1700s right up to the present day!

### **The Story of the Pipes in the Lake**

On the day of Isabella Mealy drowning in Lough Iron, there was another memorable event – the Mealy Kenna pipes were nearly lost and the incident has lived on strongly in family folklore since. Again we have two versions of the story. Victor Mealy says that there were two “drones” lost and that they were recovered in a matter of days.<sup>10</sup> In Sam Farrar's account there was one drone tuning section lost and it was underwater for considerably longer than a year.

The local people helped in the search and any bright day Larry would go off in the boat looking to catch a glimpse of the drone. If true, this must have been difficult for him as each time it would bring back strongly the tragic drowning of his daughter.

Eventually one day, he saw it standing upright in the mud, the light wooden end upwards and the heavier metal ferrule end pointing downwards. A local man known as a “man for the water” went out and, hanging off the end of the boat, managed to lodge the drone between his toes and brought it back to the surface.

<sup>8</sup> See 3.19 Argentinean Mealys elsewhere in this journal

<sup>9</sup> Sam is a son of George Farrar's 2nd marriage after the death of his 1st wife Letitia (R. L.'s sister).

<sup>10</sup> This would presumably refer to the tuning sections of each drone.

## Caught Playing the Pipes

Although we have no picture of Richard playing the Kenna set we know from the following story that he was secretly playing the set whenever his father was away from the cottage. Here is an extract from the Long Note interview with Jim Dolan<sup>11</sup> talking about Larry's suspicion that somebody was interfering with his pipes:

“... this night he knew someone was at his pipes when he was gettin' up after playing them, the father did. And, this night, he went out – he was after playing the pipes and the young lad was there, listening to him and he passed no remarks but... the father went off to rambling and when he was a good while gone, this young lad got up and he went out and looked around him, and the father was hid. But when he seen no one knockin' around, he went in and he got the pipes and he put them on him.

Well, the father nearly dropped! He rushed in, and when he rushed in, the young lad went working the pipes, you see, and all...

“Oh!” he said, “Dicky!” he said, “leave ‘em on ye and never take ‘em off ye!”

We may never know what happened in the intervening time up to the picture where he is playing a set obviously made by himself. But he must have used his time well because he was to become highly successful in his attempts at both piping and pipe-making.

## Richard's first Tune

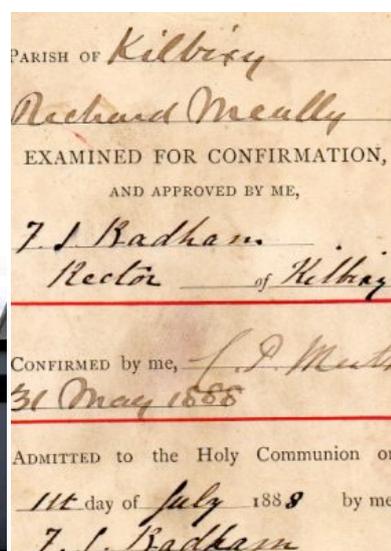
According to Ned Mealy's son Victor, Richard learned his first tune from Ned (presumably on the James Kenna pipes). The tune was “St. Patrick's Day” and he learned it on Saint Patrick's Day. Victor then says “...from there on he never looked back – he learned himself then after that.”

## Education and Training

Richard received his education in Ballynacarrigy and later in the Church of Ireland school Wilson's Hospital<sup>12</sup> between Bunbrosna and Multyfarnham, 5 miles away on the far side of Lough Iron.



Ronan Browne



Violet Medforth

<sup>11</sup> Jim (Piper) Dolan from Long Avenue, Colehill, was a nephew of James Mulcrone, the Abbeyshrule pipemaker. He was a good friend of pipers Sam Farrar, Peter Carberry and Willie Reynolds, and fiddle player Pierce Butler. He died in the 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1761 as a school for young Protestant boys and a hospital for old men, hence the name.

Victor Mealy:

“From Wilson’s Hospital, Richard went to Nally’s of Ballymahon to serve his time to be a drapery shop assistant and he went from there to Dublin in the same position. Then he went to Cork – I don’t know if he was transferred there – but he went from there to Belfast and that’s where he settled down.”

### Dublin, Boyle and Cork

The years immediately preceding moving to Belfast are a little uncertain but it seems that he was in Dublin and Boyle for short periods and then Cork. Interestingly, the 1897 *Feis Ceoil* list of competitors included “Richard L. Mealy” from Boyle, County Roscommon. In this competition, he won 3rd place for “unpublished tunes”. He also played at the *Feis* concert, and *Feis Ceoil* records show that he played “The Lad that I love” and “Love among the Roses”.<sup>13</sup> Richard also won awards at the *Oireachtas* in 1901 and 1902 for pipe-making, “... a skill which he learned from his father”.<sup>14</sup>

Francis O’Neill:

“O’Mealy was in attendance at the inaugural meeting of the Cork Pipers’ Club early in March 1898, along with Mr. Thomas Croasdale, Robert Thompson, Shane O’Neill, James Barry, Morgan Galwey lately returned from Australia. Alderman William Phair, himself an enthusiastic performer on the Union pipes, was elected first president; P.J. Lawless and John S. Wayland vice presidents, and Jeremiah O’Donovan secretary.”<sup>15</sup>

Seán Donnelly found the following ad in the Gaelic League newspaper, *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge*, 11 February 1899. Seán feels that, “... R. L. obviously timed it to take advantage of the forthcoming first meeting of the Cork Pipers' Club. Though everybody (including Francis O’Neill) claimed that the club was formed in March 1898, there is no trace of it before 1899, and the inaugural meeting took place in March 1899. What probably happened is that the club was discussed at the Macroom *Feis* in March 1898, and the founders later pushed the foundation date back.”

*THE IRISH PIPES REVIVED:*

*Mr. Richard L. Mealy, Professor of the Irish Union Pipes, the most ancient of musical instruments, having now settled in Cork, begs to inform lovers of the "pipes", and also those about to take up the study of the same, that he is prepared to execute all kinds of repairs to sets, and will guarantee to put them in perfect tune: Keys, guills, bags (rubber or goatskin), bellows, bag-covers; also reeds made of the best seasoned Spanish cane, to suit any chanter, supplied at moderate prices.*

*Please write for full particulars of your requirements to:*

*R. L. Mealy (Feis Ceoil Prize Winner for unpublished airs),<sup>16</sup>  
23 Dyke Parade, Cork.*

<sup>13</sup> This information and many other snippets, from the 1984 RTE Long Note radio programme (3.22 The Long Note)

<sup>14</sup> *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland* By James R. Cowdery, Kent State University Press, 1990

<sup>15</sup> Francis O’Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, 1913

<sup>16</sup> In inimitable R. L. style, he omits that he attained only 3rd place!

### The Cork Pipers' Club Photograph

The photograph below is of the Cork Pipers' Club (perhaps 1899); it has come to us through Sam Farrar from the Kilmurray family. It was thought that the bearded piper on the left was Larry Mealy but he is the Cork piper Shane O'Neill.



The Farrar Family

Both myself and Seán Donnelly agree that there is a strong possibility that the piper playing the Egan set is Richard O'Mealy.



The general facial structure of the piper and known pictures of O'Mealy are very similar; the Egan set is identical to the Brother Gildas/ Peter O' Loughlin set (below) and we know that O'Mealy and Gildas were closely connected in later years in Belfast, it being very possible that R. L. sold the set to Gildas; our possible Richard is better dressed than the other Cork pipers and his tie is the only one of the group which is straight – an indication of R. L. obsessiveness? The more I look at the series of heads above, the more I feel that this is O'Mealy with the Cork pipers. His ownership of the Egan set along with his playing of a fine Coyne set (right) easily explain the strong Egan and Coyne influences in his early pipe-making.



Ulster Museums

In Seán Donnelly's article about "The Fox Chase",<sup>17</sup> he mentions an interesting letter published in *The Leader* 26 March 1910, written by one of the founders of the Cork Pipers' Club, John Wayland, where he says that the popular version of "The Fox Chase" is still with us because of R. L. O'Mealy – Richard's great grandfather Thomas had written it on a manuscript and it had remained in the Mealy family up to the time of R. L. who himself, according to Wayland, "despised this old favourite". Richard gave the scroll to Wayland, the Cork Pipers' Club sent it to America to Patsy Touhey's cousin Jimmy Touhey; Touhey gave it to his famous cousin who in turn passed it to Francis O'Neill who published it in 1903.<sup>18</sup> O'Neill didn't seem to know that it had come from R. L. and it is only because of Wayland's letter that we know of its provenance. Seán Donnelly:

"While in Cork, R. L. gave John Wayland a copy of "The Fox Chase" as written out by his great grandfather, which Wayland copied in turn to send to Jimmy Touhey, a cousin of Patsy Touhey's, and according to Tom Busby (via Jackie Small), a poor piper who capitalised on the family name. As I mentioned in the article, this version of 'The Fox Chase' came to O'Neill through Patsy Touhey, but with no mention of Jimmy Touhey, and attributed to Dick Stephenson and later to Mrs Kenny the fiddler in Dublin."

What a pity that R. L. disliked the piece as he would have made a fine job of it!

### **From Cork to Belfast**

Richard married Eleanor Williams (1871-1920) between April 1898 and April '99 probably just prior to his move to Cork, in early 1899 – the Census of Ireland, April 2, 1911, sourced by Trevor Stewart, states that he was, at that time, married for 12 years.

The Dublin Pipers' Club was founded in 1900, shortly after the Cork club. The first minute book tells us that the club undertook to meet the expenses of two "Melia Brothers, Ballinacarriga, Westmeath" to travel to the upcoming Leinster *Feis*. It is interesting to know that Richard was traveling to a musical event with his brother, presumably Ned, and this is the only time we hear of the two brothers mentioned together. Perhaps Richard and Eleanor (Nelly) had temporarily moved back to Templecross at this stage before moving north to Belfast.

The circumstances of the move are well described by his friend Mick Kilmurray:

"And how he came to go to Belfast was this: Lady Aberdeen – Lord Aberdeen was Viceroy in Ireland at the time<sup>19</sup> – she was always holding fetes and garden parties for the kids up there [*in Dublin*]. Well, she got a haul of him one morning and of course being a Scotch woman I suppose she was attracted to the pipes, ye see. And she got him a job, floor one floor walker, in Arnotts in Belfast. That's how he got to Belfast, now."

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<sup>17</sup> S. Donnelly "Francis O'Neill & 'The Fox Chase': a tale of two Touheys", *Ceol na hÉireann* (1993)

<sup>18</sup> Francis O'Neill *The Music of Ireland* (Chicago 1903)

<sup>19</sup> During their short initial time in Ireland (Aberdeen's term ended along with Gladstone's Government in 1886) the Aberdeens had become beloved of the Irish for their enlightened social works (which they continued after their departure). They were to return for a proper term in 1905.

## Arrival in Belfast

So, through the altruistic work of Lady Aberdeen, O’Mealy was appointed Chief Floor Walker in John Arnott’s and Co, in Bridge Street in Belfast City. This would have been a prestigious job as Arnott’s flagship shop was ahead of its time with regard to employment conditions and technology. Its philanthropic founder John Arnott had just died in 1898.<sup>20</sup> Richard appears to have remained in similar employment till retirement age and his profession on his will states that he is a “Retired Draper”.

Marking R. L.’s arrival in Belfast is a press cutting given to us by Seán Donnelly (no date but 1900/1 added in ink). O’Mealy had included it with his letter to Lord Castletown in August 1901 (see p17). In the cutting, his name is written as Mealey (and O’Mealey), while Turlough O’Carolan is written as ‘Carlin’. It is interesting to see that Richard already possessed a number of sets of pipes (some of which he no doubt made himself). He was by this time putting himself forth as an authority on the instrument and Irish music in general. He appears to have built up great self-confidence during the 1890s and I imagine he held forth, lecturing as much as playing at his musical engagements. Richard had embarked on a path of well planned self promotion, tempered and backed up by a clear passion about pipes and all subjects related to them – it had now become his life’s work:<sup>21</sup>

### MR. R. L. O’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 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



Trevor Stewart

<sup>20</sup> Revered by the poor, honoured and respected by the rich, Arnott’s passing was regretted by all.

<sup>21</sup> While there were many people in that era dedicated to various aspects of Irish culture, Richard stands out conspicuously amongst them. I can’t help but wonder if his great sense of individuality, deep immersion in piping and his move away from Templecross were all part of dealing with the great tragedy of the deaths which bracketed his birth? It is quite possible that he was overly protected as a child, something which might have led to a rarified existence and his need to break free from the nest.

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 chantre[*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 in December. [“1900/1”]

The move to Belfast happened around 1900. R. L. and Nelly spent their first few years at 5 Edinburgh Street just off the Lisburn Rd.<sup>22</sup> Modest as the house was, Richard seems to have had a good lifestyle in these early years in Belfast - he had a



Ken McLeod

wife, a stable job, concerts to play and was, no doubt, busy in his workshop; he was a good friend of Roger Casement who presented him with a valuable ornate walking cane;<sup>23</sup> he mixed with the gentry and became quite of a celebrity, playing at musical functions all over the North. With our knowledge that he was employed as Chief Floor Walker by Arnotts, it can only be assumed that many of Richard’s musical engagements were carried out at the weekends. He must have also made time in this busy schedule to be in his workshop as he was by now well established making and repairing pipes. While it is difficult to date his instruments other than in the broadest sense of “early” or “late” we know that by 1899 he was advertising himself as a repairer of high expertise and must have soon moved into being a maker – both the Linenhall Exhibition and the McPeake sets (possibly the same instrument) are documented to have been made in 1902.

<sup>22</sup> We have many street directory entries for R. L. sourced in The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland by Ken McLeod. While the first entry is in 1902, we know from the Lord Castletown letter that R. L. was living at 5 Edinburgh Street in 1901.

<sup>23</sup> Casement, 1864-1916, remembered in England as a "traitor" but passionately revered in Ireland as a poet, a revolutionary Irish patriot and a founding father of the Irish State. Glenn Walsh: “Interestingly, looking at the credits of Devil’s Rock (the 1938 Richard Hayward film in which R. L. appears briefly), Tom Casement had a very small part as 'Dandy Dick' the gentleman thief. Tom was Roger's brother who lived in Ballycastle for many years and was a keen amateur actor.”

## Eamonn Ceannt and Mealy's "Ancient Bardic Costume"

When performing, R. L. wore what he called "Ancient Bardic Costume" and he seems to have also donned this stage outfit for his lectures about pipes and pipe-playing. However, this wearing of "Bardic Costumes" was not appreciated by the revolutionary Eamonn Ceannt, himself a piper. Ceannt was disgusted by what he saw as O'Mealy's garish clothing and said as much in a report of the *Munster Feis* for *An Píobaire III* (1901-2):

"Professor Thompson of Cork, and Mr. Mealy of Belfast, also a professor, played at the evening concerts upon the Union Pipes. Thompson was wretched and Mealy spoiled his playing by the ridiculous costume he wore. It must be borne in mind that the Union Pipes are not much over a century and a half in vogue, that before this period the last relic of Irish national dress had disappeared and then ask your grandfathers and grandmothers if they ever beheld a piper in a long-tailed green coat, yellow knee breeches, blue stockings and buckled shoes, not forgetting a patch near the throat which was covered by a loose cloth resembling a handkerchief. Mr. Mealy also wore spectacles and beard while performing."



NPU Archive. Tint – Ronan Browne



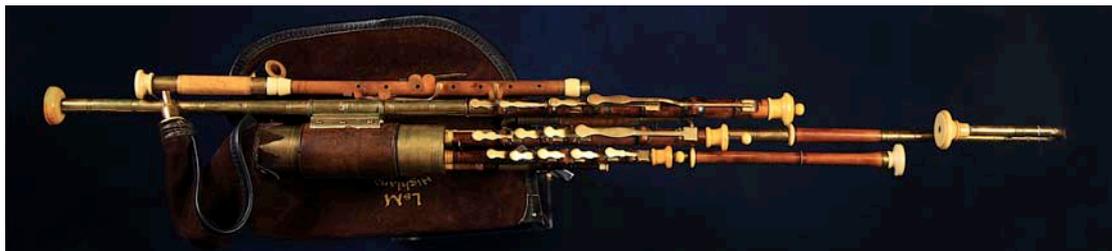
Ulster Museums. Tint – Ronan Browne

Ceannt's last sentence lets him down even further – while Richard might have been happy to shave, wandering around the stage half blind for the benefit of Mr. Ceannt probably wasn't an option! Interestingly, six years later, Éamonn Ceannt piped in the Irish athletes at the 1908 Jubilee Celebrations in Rome, dressed in his own interpretation of 11th century Irish costume with kilts.

On a more serious note, we see here a possible side-effect of O'Mealy's vigorous self promotion; it is quite likely that had Richard been less forward in his publicity material and if he had worn "normal" clothing on stage, he might have been spared the wrath of this fellow piper and Irishman.

It is only when reading Ceannt's description that we realise that our perception of O'Mealy is entirely monotone so I have taken a guess here at how the colours of Richard's costume may have looked.

I mention in article 3.08 that Éamonn Ceannt was guilty of a similar dress-code himself only a few years later.<sup>24</sup> That isn't the only link between R. L. and Ceannt.



NPU / Roman Browne

I have recently (2009) photographed a set of pipes (for *Na Píobairí Uilleann*) said to have belonged to Ceannt. It is quite obviously one of O'Mealy's 're-builds' – the chanter, parts of the bass regulator and sections of the bass and baritone drones are made by Richard while the tenor and baritone regulators, tenor drone and the baritone drone stand are by Timothy Kenna (the regulator end-mounts are classic Coyne). The stock doesn't look to be of Kenna/Coyne vintage and while it may be O'Mealy, I think it unlikely as there are old regulator screw-holes from a previous bass.

It is difficult to know if this is the same set as the one in the photograph on the right (there is another Ceannt set residing at the Curragh Army camp in Kildare). It looks very similar apart from the chanter. The G and D regulator keys match in design and in length of touch. But why the different chanter? Perhaps the picture predates R. L. doing a set of repairs to the set and building a new chanter. Like many details of O'Mealy's life, time may tell.



NPU Archive

Whatever the history of the set, the O'Mealy work is fine, is sympathetic to the earlier elements and the set sits beautifully as a unified whole.



NPU / Roman Browne

<sup>24</sup> Éamonn Ceannt attended the 1908 Jubilee Celebrations in Rome, in honour of Pope Pius X. As the Irish athletes marched into the arena, they were piped in by Ceannt dressed in an 11th century Irish costume with kilts. This was only six years after he had ridiculed O'Mealy for the very same thing!

## **Belfast 1900-1910**

In the letter to Lord Castletown,<sup>25</sup> sourced by Seán Donnelly, we get an indication of the sort of fees R. L. was commanding at the beginning of the 1900s. It isn't easy to know exactly what is in question here but my guess is that Castletown wrote in a rush to O'Mealy who replied immediately by telegram quoting his price; he then wrote this letter in explanation. R. L. is less than satisfied at the possible hiring of "...an ordinary piper from Cork":

### **Letter from O'Mealy to Lord Castletown 1901**

*[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 week's 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 fore fathers 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 Resply  
R. L. O'Mealy  
Lord Castletown / to

PS

Canon Goodman, Skibbereen, & I used to play together.

RL O'M

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<sup>25</sup> Bernard Edward Barnaby FitzPatrick, 2nd Baron Castletown, Upper Ossory (1849-1937) was an Irish soldier and Conservative Member of Parliament. He had a strong interest in both Irish and Scottish piping. Seán Donnelly: "He was involved in Irish-Ireland activities in the early 1900s, and was particularly interested in piping. He lived in Doneraile Court, which he inherited through his wife, and knew Wayland and the Cork Pipers' Club. He encouraged the formation of pipe bands and put up prizes for warpipe competitions and the likes."

Richard's father died in 1903. Nothing is mentioned in family lore and it is many years later that we hear of him returning to play at the Tristernagh *Feis*. Also in 1903, the entry in the street directory changes from "Mealey" to "O'Mealy" and the "O" remains in all subsequent entries while the extra "e" remains until 1926. This could be a mistake made by the person entering the details as Richard always spelled his name "Mealy". He included the "O" in his letter to Lord Castletown in 1901 but was still "Mealy" in the 1899 Cork ad. The newspaper clipping from 1900/01 calls him "Mealey" but talks about his "O'Mealey" ancestors so the change was happening around this time. Interestingly, he adds a qualification after his name in his last will and testament — "...sometimes known as Richard Lewis Mealy" although this may just refer back to his birth certificate.

By this time, O'Mealy seems to have gained a reputation as a pipemaker as is evident in the catalogue of the Linenhall Harp Exhibition 1903 (May 8th - May 16th):<sup>26</sup>

## THE PIPES.

THE PIPES are admitted to have been the proper military music of the Irish shortly before the Treaty of Limerick. In a contemporaneous drawing of the rout of O'Donnell and Tyrone at the Battle of Ballyshannon, in A.D. 1593, one piper is represented as running away with the rest of the troops, and the pipes of another lie on the ground near him. The bag, which is held on the belly and squeezed by the forearm, is inflated from the mouth, and the instrument possesses a chanter and two drones. A more satisfactory representation is found (page 24) in the very characteristic figure of an Irish piper of the same reign, but of an earlier date. The instrument possesses a drone and two chanters, on one of which something resembling a rude representation of keys may be observed. The extremity of the mouthpiece, where inserted into the bag, is bushed with a tassel, and a similar provision is made against the escape of the wind at the insertion of the chanters. The bag is suspended round the neck by a broad belt passing over the right shoulder.

The pipe was used in the sixteenth century, according to Galilei, as an accompaniment to the *caionan* at funerals. "With it they accompany their dead to the grave, making such mournful sounds as to invite, nay almost force, the bystanders to weep."

54.—SET OF IRISH UNION PIPES (Kennedy). [J. N.]

55.—SET OF IRISH UNION PIPES (Egan). [St. C. B.]

56.—SET OF IRISH UNION PIPES. [H. L.]

57.—SET OF PIPES (1902)

Made by R. L. O'Mealy, Belfast.

58.—CHANTER

Made of Mule Shin Bone by R. L. O'Mealy.

59.—SEVERAL SETS OF PIPES

Made by James Williamson, Belfast.

<sup>26</sup> This catalogue was sourced by Wilbert Garvin in the Linenhall Library, Belfast

It is quite possible that O’Mealy was the author of the above piece about the pipes and also that he was the curator who put the collection together. If not, he was almost certainly involved.

In our next report, R. L. is dubbed the ‘Prince of Irish Pipers’:

### ***Feis na nGleann***<sup>27</sup>

*(Ballymena Weekly Telegraph, 9 July 1904)*

At a meeting held in Cushendall on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1904 it was decided to hold a *Feis*. Miss Johnston<sup>28</sup> was elected to the organising committee. Francis Joseph Bigger<sup>29</sup> was elected Treasurer.

The Glens of Antrim *Feis* was first held on Thursday, the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1904, in Cushendall.

There were an amazing 102 competitions – literary, reciting, speech-making, story-telling in Irish, vocal and instrumental (*‘fídl’* and pipe) music, dancing, spinning, knitting, weaving, crocheting, dress-making, ironwork, wood-carving, basket-making, decorative work and designing, toy-making, boat and model boat building and so forth.

The ‘Prince of Irish Pipers’, Richard Lewis O’Mealy of Belfast, and Herbert Hughes were the adjudicators of the singing and music category.

Neil McCurdy, who comes from Rathlin, won on war pipes, and his prize was a fine set of Mr O’Mealy’s Uilleann Pipes. On McCurdy obtaining his prize a great shout went up from the crowd of the Raghery men – men of the sea, and with splendid lungs.

At the concert in the evening, the performers included Mr Owen Lloyd, Dublin (harpist) and Mr. O’Mealy, Belfast (piper).

*Feis na nGleann* continued and recently celebrated 100 years in existence; O’Mealy must have taken part on many other occasions. We find another mention of his presence in 1931 where he was, once again, the judge of the Uilleann piping competition.

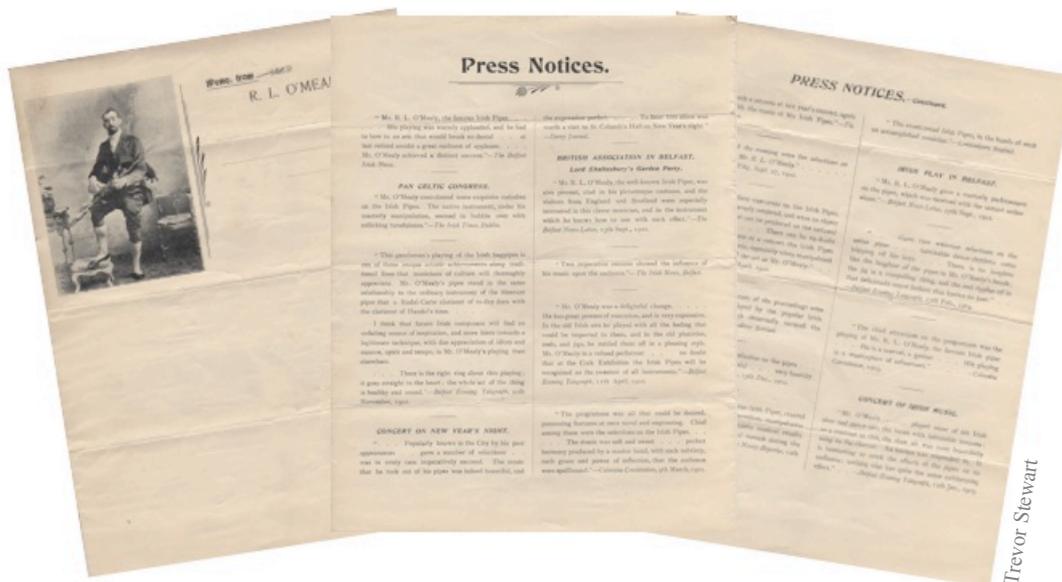
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<sup>27</sup> This clipping and all other mentions of *Feis na nGleann* were sourced by Wilbert Garvin.

<sup>28</sup> See 3.16.2 Netta Jane to read about Miss Johnson

<sup>29</sup> Bigger (1863-1926) was an historian, nationalist M.P. for Belfast and friend of R. L.

Dating from around 1904/05, we are very lucky to have two items of O’Mealy’s own publicity material, both of which include quotes from the media.<sup>30</sup> These “Press Notices” show the high esteem in which O’Mealy was held around the turn of the century, a position he seems to have taken very seriously.



Seán Donnelly:

“R. L. seems to have had little to learn about self-promotion, but he had a worthwhile client; he would have been the only more-than-competent piper in Belfast during his time, and his being a Protestant would have opened doors for him and he would have got to play where many others would not have.”

While this level of self promotion is normal in the present day, these pamphlets show a private individual far ahead of his time in the early twentieth century. If O’Mealy lived now, I am sure he would be making use of all the latest modes of information dissemination.

<sup>30</sup> To see the memo and flyer in more detail and to read the press notices, see “3.08 The O’Mealy Flyer and Memo”

Thanks to Seán Donnelly we know that O’Mealy was included in the surprise entertainment at a musical and dramatic evening to mark the end of the Dublin Castle “season” of 1906. The evening was organised by Lord and Lady Aberdeen:

#### **EVENING PARTY AT DUBLIN CASTLE**

To wind up the Castle season Their Excellencies the Lord Lieutenant and Countess of Aberdeen had a musical and dramatic entertainment last night, for which a large number of invitations had been sent out, but the words Evening Party on the invitation cards gave no clue as to what form of amusement was being provided, and though curiosity was rife on the subject the secret was well preserved till almost the last, and indeed to many the programme eventually presented proved a complete surprise. Being desirous of having an entertainment thoroughly Irish in character, and presented by Irish artists, Lady Aberdeen communicated with Mrs. Milligan Fox, whose name is so closely associated with the Irish Folk Song Society, and whose success in arranging some entertainments in London for the Irish Literary Society brought her prominently before the musical world some years ago, and with her assistance the programme for last night’s entertainment was arranged. The stage utilised on a former occasion was again erected in St. Patrick’s Hall, and when Their Excellencies entered shortly after 10 p.m. the room was packed with guests. A larger party accompanied Their Excellencies. Lord Iveagh brought a number of guests, Lord Grenfell was accompanied by his house party from the Royal Hospital, and many other distinguished guests were present.

The first item on the programme was a “slip jig” on the Irish pipes, played by Mr. R. L. O’Mealy, who showed great dexterity in his fingering and his clever control of an instrument that may be described as anything but easy to master. Later in the evening he again played several selections, the jigs being more popular than the sadder melodies, which are always associated with Celtic music.

A move to supper was made immediately afterwards, the Lord Lieutenant conducting the Marchioness Conyngham, and Her Excellency following, with the Archbishop of Dublin. The general company were entertained at supper in the Picture Gallery, and it was past 1 a.m. when the last of the guests left the castle.

—*Irish Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1906.

From *An Claidheamh Soluis*<sup>31</sup> we have three other mentions of R. L. in 1906:

Co. Antrim, Glenarm branch of the Gaelic League, St Patrick's night, marches on the pipes by Prof. O'Mealy, dances by Feis na nGleann prize winners. *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 7 April 1906.

F. J. Bigger and Herbert Hughes invited Belfast Gaels to Bealtaine Céilidh on May Eve, Owen Lloyd and R.L. O'Mealy supplied music. [Hughes was a collector and arranger of traditional songs and tunes; Lloyd played the harp.] *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 12 May 1906.

South Down, conference of teachers and school managers on teaching of Irish in schools: “*An Máilleach*” came from Belfast with his pipes. *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 1 December 1906.

In 1908, R. L.’s Street Listing entry changes to “O’Mealey, R. L., Musician, 17 Edinburgh Street”. In previous listings back as far as 1903 he has also had the “O” before his name but in the first entry in 1902, he is “Mealey, Richard”.



Ken McLeod

<sup>31</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light) was an Irish nationalist newspaper published in the early 20th century by *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League). Sourced by Seán Donnelly

We have no information for 1908 and '09 but the next time we see Richard's name is in a mention in the *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society* sourced by Wilbert Garvin:

### **Folk Song in County Tyrone**

[Charlotte Milligan Fox<sup>32</sup> Vol. III, Jan.- June, 1910]

“...Spending the spring in Ireland, I met up with Mr. Henry Morris, who was visiting the mountainous district on the border of Tyrone, where he came upon a pair of splendid traditional singers, Eamon and Anne Tracey, resident some nine or ten miles from Omagh. Eamon told us that he had visited Ballinascreen once to sing at a Gaelic concert. He sang three traditional songs on that occasion, and had the pleasure of hearing Mr. R. L. O'Mealy, of Belfast, playing on the Irish pipes. This was a great treat...”

He figures again in 1910 when he performed at the Ferguson Centenary Celebrations:

### **Ferguson's<sup>33</sup> Centenary Celebrations in Belfast**

[Centenary of birth of Sir Samuel Ferguson]

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*, 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 Mor. O'Maille [*sic*] played that evening.’

—*Irish Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1910<sup>34</sup>

### **Eleanor's Illness**

In 1910 things take a turn for the worse in Richard's life. We find out from an anguished letter written to his close friend Joseph Bigger that his wife Eleanor (Nelly) has been very sick almost to the point of death.<sup>35</sup> We aren't told what the illness was but it seems to have been extremely serious. The apparent lack of care given to Nelly has put a huge strain on the relationship between O'Mealy and Bigger although from the letter it appears that if Bigger organised a spot for R. L. in a particular concert he might be persuaded to attend, if only half heartedly:

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte Milligan Fox was Hon. Secretary and on the Publication Committee of the *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society*, London.

<sup>33</sup> Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810-1886) was an Irish poet, barrister, antiquarian, artist and public servant.

<sup>34</sup> Clipping sourced by Seán Donnelly.

<sup>35</sup> This letter was sourced by Wilbert Garvin in the F. J. Bigger collection in the Central Library, Belfast

17 Edinburgh Street  
Belfast  
12 Aug. 1910

Dear Mr. Bigger,

Yours to hand.

It would be nice indeed to be definite at this very moment about the Congress and my heart is almost bursting with desire. But things have made me very unwell and I'm much more upset than I can tell you and just now I am not sure whether I can play a tune at all. However, to play my pipes – if I can play – in some other place than this town wherein the mouth of hell seems to be might help me to live, so with what life there is left I'll do my best. There is not a shadow of doubt Mrs. O'Mealy was badly and improperly treated in the hospital and I do not say so without having proof.

If you only knew Mr. Bigger how we trusted you about the Doctor and all arrangements. We trusted you to the uttermost to do the thing really well and now that we have been so terribly disappointed it makes other things all the harder to bear. We thought more highly of you than you were aware and when she was going to the hospital she made me promise that I would play and do everything you might ask me to do. She comes of one of the best families in the Queens Co. and is a better, kinder and nobler woman than you imagine. You have no idea how good she has been and how much she has done for the pipes and never wanted it known and she was always very good at helping me with my work. You might have known with all your heart that we would see you alright as to any cost of a special arrangement. Of course it was because of such arrangement I looked to you as a friend and I was delighted when you mentioned Dr. Campbell. Patients go to the hospital without influence and the great majority get there through people of no particular influence. Even to say Mrs O'Mealy got proper nourishment considering her case, would be to contradict some of the very best medical men.

There is nothing done these days but can be found out.

Young Crymble performed that 'operation' and had Mrs O'Mealy been a Sandyrow-McDonald Street millgirl things would have been different for there is great care taken by both Doctors and "Nurses" not to cause dissatisfaction in the mills and therefore no improper or bad treatment is accorded.

The way Mrs O'Mealy has had to be treated since proves many things. I told you the truth before she became dangerously ill and I am telling you the truth now. She was not properly dealt with in any way.

I would give a great deal to think of you now as I thought before. Surely you could have called to see her. Will you write now and tell us why we have been disappointed.

Yours faithfully

R. L. O’Mealy

This is a very different Richard to the young confident man in complete control of all aspects of his life and career. It is possible that his sense of hurt and outrage at the workings of the system is felt all the sharper because it brings back the shadow of painful helplessness remembered from his childhood home after the death of three of his siblings. Richard has been brought back down to ground with a sharp bang – we are told that when Nelly died in 1920, it was after a “long illness”; if this is the same illness of which he writes to Bigger it means that it lasted for more than ten years.

### **The 1911 Census**

Thanks to Trevor Stewart we were made aware of Richard and Eleanor’s 1911 census entry showing that they had been married for 12 years and that she was 2 years older than him;<sup>36</sup> Richard stated that he spoke Irish and they were both Episcopalian; under profession was entered “Musician, Maker of Irish Uilean [*sic*] Bagpipes, Artist”.

### **1911 to 1924**

While these two lines of the 1911 census filled in many gaps in our knowledge of those early years in Belfast, we know nothing at all of the next ten years and we have no mention of any performances or public appearances between 1911 and 1924, probably because O’Mealy just worked at Arnotts and tended to his wife. Compounding any health problems Nelly was suffering, everything changed suddenly in 1914 as Europe descended into a war which was to last four years and to leave the world a profoundly different place. Allied to this was a major influenza epidemic which ravaged the world. Equally, R. L. wouldn’t have been immune to the disastrous 1916 Dublin Easter Rising and its brutal aftermath during which his good friend Roger Casement was hanged in London. However good the first decade of the twentieth century may have seemed to Richard, the second ten years swept it all away.

Richard O’Mealy was obviously a very sensitive man. This comes across plainly in his anguished letter to Joseph Bigger. When hurt, he felt it to his core. Another example of this must have been his falling out with Francis McPeake, a split of which we are unlikely to hear more at this stage.

But while R. L. could be hurt deeply, he was also very compassionate as is shown in the following letter kindly furnished by Violet Medforth. He was writing to the widow of a Dr. Badham who must have been the local rector in Kilbixy, County Westmeath; there is great warmth in his words and he stresses that he never forgets a

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<sup>36</sup> See the associated files folder for a copy of this census

kindness. Perhaps at this time he is wondering will he soon become a widower himself:

17 Edinburgh Street  
Belfast  
19 April 1913

Dear Mrs. Badham

Having heard of the death of Doctor Badham, I desire to assure you of my deepest sympathy in your very great bereavement; not only is it a great loss to those whose spiritual welfare he cared for directly but to the whole church.

Impressions remain with me since boyhood days, but I will not trouble you here with things eulogistic of him which I could conscientiously assert. Want of thought and heart is, in my opinion, a conspicuous human weakness of our time, and if there is anyone who knew Doctor Badham personally and feels not fully conscious of this loss by his death it is due to want of thought.

I never forgot your kindness in Mother's case, for mine is not a gratitude that fades with time. How can I thank you now for your great kindness in poor Letitia's case?<sup>37</sup> — I feel profoundly grateful to you, and in this I speak of my people also.

Believe me, dear Mrs. Badham

Yours Sincerely

R. L. Mealy  
(Richard)

Richard's name doesn't appear at all in the 1917 Street Directory and is absent from then until 1926.

Ken McLeod:

“We know Nelly died in Belfast in 1920 so they were living somewhere in the area. Perhaps she went into a nursing home in 1917 and he gave up the house and took digs. We are told that he did not play for several years after she died. So maybe he continued in digs until his new marriage to Letitia.”

This absence from public appearances isn't surprising as it was a custom for people to go through a such a period of mourning.

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<sup>37</sup> I can only presume Richard is not talking about his mother but about his sister Letitia who must have been sick for a time as she died four months after the date of this letter.

## R. L.'s return to public performance

The next mention we have of R. L. is an interesting one. We had previously thought that, while he had broadcast regularly in the 1930s and 40s on the BBC, he had never played for Dublin-based 2RN. Thanks to Seán Donnelly we now have a newspaper radio schedule listing a broadcast, including the names of the tunes played:

*The Irish Times*, 30 September 1924, p. 6.

Dublin (2RN)

'8.45 – R.L O'Mealy (Belfast), pipes. [Selection?] will include — "The Shady Lane" (single ... for the Uillian [*sic*] Pipes by R.L. O'Mealy), "[Wheels?] of the World" (double jig), "The Maid of [?]" (Leinster Love Song), "The Cork [Hornpipe?]"

Also in 1924, R. L. judged the *Tailteann* Games<sup>38</sup> piping competition. Seán Donnelly found the following clipping:

*Irish Independent*, 5 August 1924.

'... There was a considerable delay in in commencing the Uilleann [*sic*] Pipes Competition, and after half-an-hour the audience became restive and protested by stamping their feet in determined fashioned. Another quarter-of-an hour elapsed before the competition commenced.

Uilleann Pipes (7 entries)

1st. J.A. Ennis, Jamestown, Finglas (90 marks). 2nd Denis Nugent, 13 Swords St., N.C.R. (75).

Mr. R. L. O'Mealy, adjudicator, said the standard was very high. In the winner they had a very interesting player. His hornpipe playing was very good. He would like to give the second prize winner every encouragement in his melody playing.'

In 1926 Richard returns to the pages of the Belfast Street Directory. The new entry is: "O'Mealy, Richard, Artist. 109 Rugby Avenue". Note the use of "Artist".



Ken McLeod

<sup>38</sup> The Tailteann Games were an ancient sporting event. They ran from 1829BC to 1180AD when they died out after the Norman invasion of Ireland. Unsuccessful attempts were made to revive them in 1924, 1928 and 1932.

He was to stay at 109 Rugby Avenue from 1926-1930. We do not have any picture of this house as it was knocked down to make way for a modern housing development.

Again thanks to Seán Donnelly we are in possession of a number of BBC Belfast Radio listings from 1926 to 1929. Pieces advertised include: "Irish Jig", "The Copper Lass", "Erin is my Home", "Billy Byrne of Ballymanus", "The Donegall Reel", "O'Mealy Hornpipe", "The Flogging Reel", "The Mother's Lamentation", "Miss Multitude" (reel) (arr. for Ullian [*sic*] Irish Pipes by R.L. O'Mealy), "Billy Byrne of Ballymanus" (March), "The Rose of the Valley" (Leinster Song Tune), "The Honeysuckle" (hornpipe).<sup>39</sup>

From 1927 onwards R. L. went back to Templecross to play at the Tristernagh *Feis* or Sports. This huge one-day gathering had started in 1924 and quickly became hugely popular. Both Dick Melia (as he was known in the area) and the young Leo Rowsome attended almost every year.<sup>40</sup> According to Sam Farrar, Leo was leaning against the wall of Tristernagh Abbey waiting his first chance to hear the famous O'Mealy; when R. L. eventually started playing, Leo threw back his head in amazement and whacked it off the stone wall!

Feis na nGleann:

*The Ballymena Weekly Telegraph*, July 1931:

The Feis, which occupies three days, includes language and literary competitions, native dancing, vocal and instrumental Irish music, Uilleann pipes, flute and fiddle competitions. The judge of the Uilleann pipe competition was Mr. R. L. O'Mealy, Belfast.

Richard's last and final change of address happened in 1931. From then until his death in 1947 the entry is: "O'Mealy, Richard, Musician. 45 Rugby Avenue".



Ken McLeod

It was to this house that Andy Conroy came in the early 40s and where O'Mealy himself described great crowds of people gathering below to hear the sound of the new Delap pipes wafting down from the workshop window. His workshop was on the top floor and he had a string running down to a bell in the kitchen to call for a cup of tea. Left of the door is the parlour window where he met with Cecil Colville and, presumably, all visitors.

When asked if he had ever seen the workshop, Andy Conroy said no, but that he had been up in the attic where R. L. played for him. Whether this means that there were two rooms upstairs or that Andy got it wrong I don't know.

<sup>39</sup> To view the full listings see 3.21 Timeline for the years 1926 to 1929.

<sup>40</sup> The piper Peter Carberry remembers hearing both R. L. And Leo Rowsome at the Tristernagh *Feis*.

By the time he moved into 45 Rugby Avenue, Richard was probably married again. His second wife was called Letitia, and like Eleanor before her, she helped with the pipemaking by stitching and embroidering bag and bellows covers as well as chanter bags. The care of one's O'Mealy set was strongly stressed and it is interesting to see the many extant pipes cases provided by R. L. replete with packed lining and piped trim.



Lucy Delap

From this point on, it would seem that O'Mealy's public appearances happened less and less often; apart from the BBC radio broadcasts, there is a lack of information about concerts. In the 1930s, writing to the Delaps,<sup>41</sup> he laments the amount of work available to him, citing Belfast pipers of indifferent ability and Dublin pipers poaching performance opportunities. He goes as far as pleading with them in 1936 to write to the BBC asking to hear more of him on the radio; he states that without the odd engagement from the BBC he wouldn't be able to carry on living at his present address. Interestingly, he cites the BBC fee as two Guineas – the very same as he was asking of Lord Castletown thirty years previously.

In 1933 O'Mealy was sixty years old and nearing retirement either from Arnotts & Co. or Robinson and Cleavers.<sup>42</sup> The picture below, taken on Bridge Street, dates from around this time.



Ulster Museums

<sup>41</sup> We have gleaned much information from O'Mealy's letters to the Delaps. From them also comes the photograph above of R. L. demonstrating to Miles Delap how best to hold his new set.

<sup>42</sup> Cecil Colville heard (but only third-hand) that O'Mealy worked at Robinson and Cleaver's.

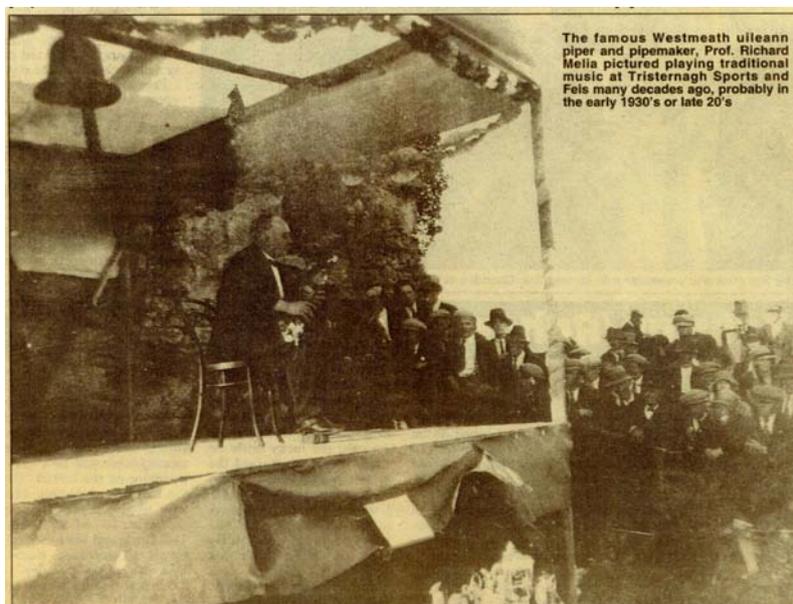
It seems that he had been more involved in making and repairing instruments than playing concerts. Sadly in those same letters to the Delaps, he mentions that he is finding it harder and harder to make the pipes:

“Lathe-work I feel too much for me lately and our corporation never allowed ½ worth of drive power so all must be done by O’Mealy’s feet and legs”

The Tristernagh *Feis* continued to be held on the last weekend in June every year from 1924 to 1946 apart from a two year break between 1935 and ’36. This break coincides with R. L. lamenting the lack of concert opportunities. The annual trip to Tristernagh must have been a huge part of his year and we are told by Victor Mealy and by Sam Farrar that when he arrived, great crowds would gather in Templecross; he would hold forth and might talk on any subject; often the night would pass without a note being played but the next evening he might play all night hardly stopping; sometimes he would play just the whistle. I’d love to have heard him on the whistle!

His concert performances were still remembered strongly in 1983/4 when the interviews for the Long Note radio documentary were conducted by Harry Bradshaw and Robbie Hannan. Jim Dolan, the piper and pipe maker from Colehill who spoke to us of the young Richard being caught playing his father’s pipes once again paints the most beautiful picture of R. L.’s appearance at the *Feis*:

“He had a little small pipes and there was a little hut in the field and no-one knew what was in it. He got up on the stage first anyway, and he played a slow air: “The Valley Lay Smiling Before Me”. All down through the bog ... Tristernagh sports was here and the stage ... and there was a bog all ... he played “The Valley Lay Smiling Before Me” on this little small practice set. Well, after a while then he goes over to this little tent in the field and he took out this pipes, and they were all square ... they weren’t like a pipes at all, all dogged. And he had fingers now, they were like ... they were that long, they were like ... sticks of chalk! And when he started to play and the regulators and all, well he’d put you to sleep ... anything like him, I never heard.”



The above picture is unique in that, apart from the brief video clip from “Devil’s Rock” [see below], it is the only picture we have of R. L. seen from the side. Visible in the picture is a small block of wood under his right foot. This is described by Sam Farrar as being wrapped in paper and tied with twine. It was to bring his regulators up into playing position. Every other R. L. picture we possess is posed and this is the only candid shot of him in performance. Something else mentioned by Sam is missing here – he used to ask for a young lad to work a fan on his right side to cool the air entering the bellows. Ken McLeod heard from Jack O’Rourke of R. L.’s wife Letitia doing the same thing for him in their house in Belfast.

### **Richard’s Later Years**

It seems that R. L. had once again settled into a routine in 45 Rugby Avenue. He went to work during the day and made pipes in the evening and weekends. Al Purcell, Cecil Colville and Sam Murray all said Richard was known as “Squeak O’Mealy” even in his earlier days as he’d often go in and out of his house with a reed in his mouth, trying to get it to crow. I’m sure he was well known by the people in the area and they would hear those squeaks regularly as he worked on pipes up in the workshop.

In 1938, an unusual appearance was made by R. L. in a Richard Hayward film, *Devil’s Rock*, where he played the pipes to accompany Hayward’s singing as the film ended. It shows once more how O’Mealy could adapt brilliantly to any situation. This is the only piece of R. L. on film and, while short, it shows much.<sup>43</sup>

In those later years, he continued to broadcast from time to time on the BBC; he took pupils - or more correctly, he built up relationships with the people who bought his pipes and this led to tuition. From his letters alone, one could publish a full manual on learning to play the Irish pipes, including the care of the instrument and most importantly the making of reeds for it. As R. L. said himself in that letter to Lord Castletown, he gave himself fully and selflessly to piping and he expected no less:

“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.”

His pupils all felt honoured to learn from the great man; they listened closely and did it his way, always. It is no wonder that so many of his instruments survive in perfect order, many of them still in original cases lined by Letitia along with original embroidered chanter, bag and bellows covers.

Interestingly, he thought of moving back to Westmeath during WWII. He wrote to his old pal Joe Kilmurray after the Belfast Blitz in 1941 saying that he would love to get away from it all and move back to Templecross. But it never happened and he continued on in Rugby avenue.

All pipe-makers understand the importance of good workshop practice especially in the area of dust management; modern makers employ complex dust gathering and

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<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Glenn Walsh for providing us with this clip. A link can be found on the site under “3.22 Articles and Analecta”.

extraction equipment but no such systems were in place in O’Mealy’s time and it comes as no surprise to know that in those later years, Richard complained frequently of ill health. Jim McIntosh said that he would sometimes arrive for his lesson and R. L. would be too sick and he would turn away, disappointed. Cecil Colville remembers Richard’s chest being very bad on many occasions.

The winter of 1946/47 is remembered to this day as one of the worst in recorded history. December had been very cold but it was nothing compared to what would happen on the 21st of January as freezing Scandinavian air swept across from the North Sea. In the two following months, wave after wave of bad weather buffeted Belfast. Jim McIntosh remembered R. L. saying:

“If the snow would just go away I might be all right.”

But the snow didn’t go away ... and that was the end.”

Richard Lewis O’Mealy died on the 14th March 1947. He was buried in Knockbreda Parish graveyard three days later, on St. Patrick’s day. It was a small funeral with just family and a few friends. Jack O’Rourke and Jim McIntosh were the only pipers who attended along with his nephew George from Templecross.

NO OF GRAVE	NAME OF DECEASED	ADDRESS	DATE BURIED	AGE	BY WHOM CREMATION PERFORMED	FEE
H. 11	Lison Mc Kewan ✓	146 Malone Ave	11. 3. 47	66	John Conboy	11.00
K 034	Helen Carlisle ✓	11 Delawans St	11. 3. 47	72	Wenham Smith	2.50
L 126	Martha Kettle ✓	7 Donagh St	11. 3. 47	85	R. J. O'Leary	2.50
156, Old	Mary Ferguson ✓	Abermore, Rathlin PK	14. 3. 47	70	W. Finlay Beagrie	2.50
R. 26	Elizabeth McManus ✓	18 Knockree St	17. 3. 47	76	James Quinn	11.00
B 71	Richard L. O'Mealy ✓	45 Raffle Ave	17. 3. 47	78	R. Stone	2.00
K 511	Miss Mc Connell ✓	47 Balfour Ave	17. 3. 47	76	W. Finlay Beagrie	2.50

Knockbreda Burial Register showing O’Mealy’s entry on the 6th line



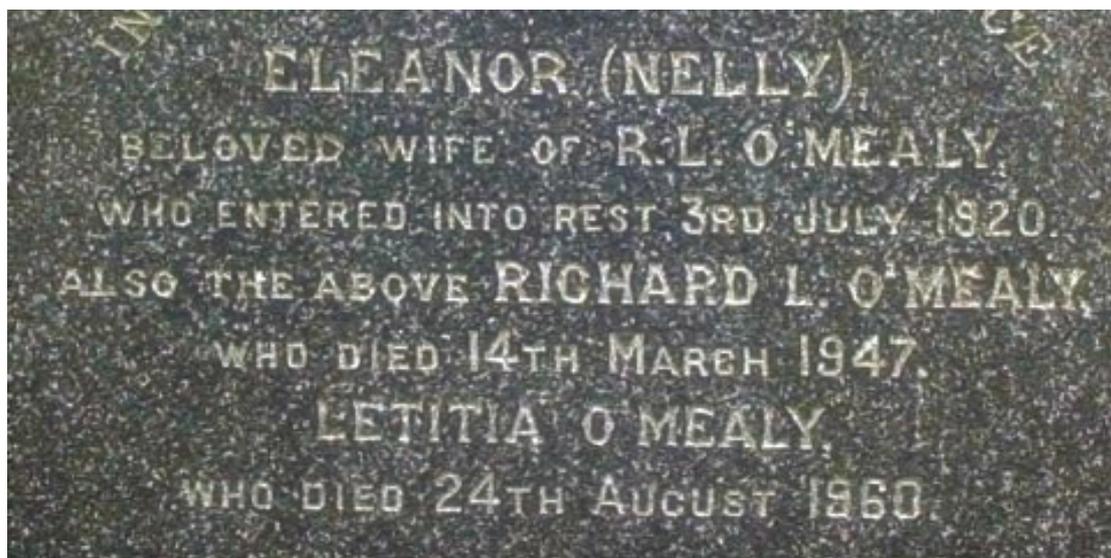
O’Mealy’s grave indicated by white arrow



KenMcLeod & Wilbert Garvin

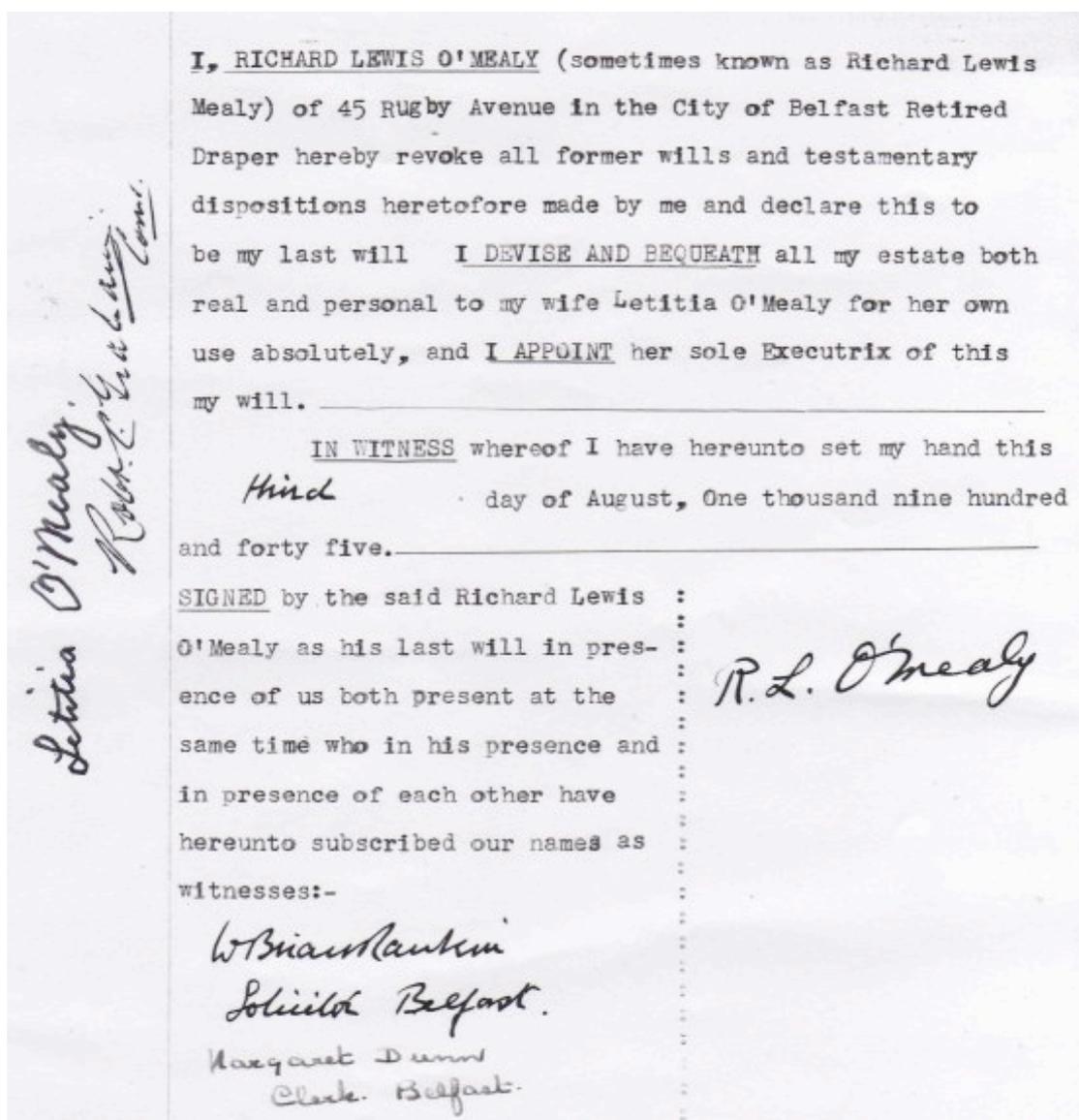
KenMcLeod & Wilbert Garvin

KenMcLeod & Wilbert Garvin



Ken McLeod & Wilbert Garvin

Richard's wife Letitia lived on till 1960 and remained in contact with most of his old friends and pupils. She was named as his sole heir and executrix in his will:



PRONI

It is interesting to note that Richard states that he is "... sometimes known as Richard Lewis Mealy" (without the "O"). I wonder was he worried that he might not exist if he used only the 'new' fifty-year-old version of his name.

I tracked down Alasdair Rankin, the son of the solicitor who witnessed the will; he looked through the firm's records but failed to find any other mention of R. L.

Thanks are due to Ken McLeod and Wilbert Garvin who procured these documents which tell us so much about Richard in death.

Below is R. L.'s certificate of Probate. It shows that at the time of his death he was worth quite an amount of money:

**CERTIFICATE FOR THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND**  
**KING'S BENCH DIVISION (PROBATE).** **THE PRINCIPAL DISTRICT REGISTRY**

Finance Acts, 1894, et seq. File No. *246/47*

IN THE ESTATE OF *Richard Lewis O'Mealy (or Mealy)* deceased,  
 Late of *45 Rugby Avenue, Belfast*  
 WHO died on the *14<sup>th</sup>* day of *March 1947*

I certify the receipt here of an Inland Revenue Affidavit showing that the gross and net values of the Estate of the said deceased and the gross annual value of certain real estate of the said deceased are as follows, viz:—

	Gross	Net
(i) personal estate in Northern Ireland	£ <i>1433 - 12 - 5</i>	£ <i>1417 - 12 - 5</i>
(ii) personal estate in England and Wales	£ —	£ —
(iii) personal estate in Scotland	£ <i>175 - 8 - 9</i>	£ <i>175 - 8 - 9</i>
(iv) estate registered under 54 & 55 Vic. c. 66 (Local Registration of Title (Ireland) Act, 1891)	£ /	£ <i>1593 - 1 - 2</i>
TOTAL	£ <i>1609 - 1 - 2</i>	£ /
and (v) other real estate in Northern Ireland	£	£
and that the gross annual value of the other real estate at (v) is	£ /	£

AND THAT NO ESTATE DUTY IS PAYABLE THEREON.

Date, *27 JUN 1947* *[Signature]*  
Examiner, Estate Duty Office, Lisburn.

FORM A—3(a)N. Wt. 383/41. SM. (2). 5/47. U.G.(A) Ltd. Gp. 113

The Scottish assets are interesting; Jonathan Farrar remembers his grandfather Sam saying that one of Richard's wives was Scottish. Nelly was from Queen's County (County Laois); Wilbert Garvin asked Cecil Colville if Letitia could have been Scottish but he said that there was nothing unusual about her accent and that she sounded "...from here."

The extent of R. L.'s wealth is surprising, as many visitors to the house in later years said that O'Mealy seemed penniless. Seán Reid told Ken McLeod that on one occasion he called and, although the house was cold, there was no fire in the grate. On his departure, Seán went to the local coal merchant and paid for a few bags of coal for O'Mealy. Both Jack O'Rourke and Cecil Colville reported a large stash of gold coins in R. L.'s room which seem never to have seen the light of day in O'Mealy's later years.

So, in 1947 the world was deprived of a giant of piping and pipemaking. He had lived an interesting life fed by his passion for pipes. We can learn much by studying him today and if we are to give him his musical due, there is nobody alive today who could have come up with such an inventive, entertaining and perfect way of playing. He took great care and time over his pupils, indeed it seems, anybody who engaged him in conversation.

Richard had strongly held views and principles and he ran his life by them. An intriguing example of this is the explanation given by Violet Medforth for why O'Mealy refused to be recorded (the story is that the ten extant acetates were secretly made by the BBC while Richard was broadcasting). Violet remembers her father George saying that R. L. felt that if people were able to play a record of him they would be less inclined to attend one of his concerts!

We'll leave the last word to Richard's old friend Mick Kilmurray:

*"He was a grand fella to chat you know. He used to wear a black suit and tails. He never got up on a stage without puttin' on the tails ... and a white front. He used to wear a hard hat sometimes and a black soft hat, he used to.*

*Another thing, he used to smoke a nice little black pipe. He was a grand fella, the grandest fella; ah, he was an educated fella you know, very well educated, he went for a long time to that college over there. He was a grand fella to talk to you ... d'y'know, and a good character. He was typical of what he was. I never found anything bitter in him, in all his life, and he gave credit where credit was due, that was just the kind he was... a Melia.*

*They were a class on their own; that's correct!"*

### **Aknowledgements:**

A special thanks to Violet Medforth and Leslie Drew; they garnered, safeguarded and shared. Without them this celebration of the life of R. L. O'Mealy could never have begun and they have kept me on an even keel throughout.



Ulster Museum, restored by Ronan Browne

***Richard Lewis O'Mealy*** Piper and Pipe-maker, 1873-1947