

### 3.16.3 Miles Delap

Lucy Delap and Mick Delap<sup>1</sup>

Miles Delap was born in Strabane in 1905, and grew up in Strabane and Lifford, until his widowed mother moved to a house in Donegal, on the shores of Lough Swilly, when Miles was twenty. His father was a Church of Ireland rector, from a Donegal family. There must have been plenty of Protestant church music around in his childhood, but



Miles' son Mick cannot remember any reference being made to Irish music being present in the day-to-day life of the family. Certainly, none of Miles' seven brothers and sisters showed much musical ability, or interest in traditional music. But Miles made Irish tunes on the tin whistle and marches on the Scottish pipes a major part of his own family's growing up. By Mick's reckoning, Miles was "an accomplished player of both penny whistle and Scottish pipes, with a nice touch in grace notes, and a driving sense of rhythm". Mick remembers him chiefly playing marches and slow airs – all learned mainly by ear – with the occasional jig or reel.

So how did this son of a Church of Ireland manse acquire this lifelong passion for Irish traditional music? So deep that, in his cash-strapped twenties, he approached Richard O'Mealy about acquiring, and learning to play, a set of Uilleann pipes. These were the pipes he eventually acquired in the early to mid 1930s, when he was a newly married Air Force Officer with the first of his four children.

Looking first at beginnings, his son Mick believes one clue lies in his early days in Strabane. By all accounts, the family were happiest ranging the hills and rivers around the town, and holidaying at Inver, on the north side of Donegal Bay. The young Miles, with his independent streak and his ability to strike warm acquaintanceship with all he met, went on long fishing and walking expeditions in the hills of the North West. And it was here that he must have first been exposed to the traditional culture of rural Tyrone and Donegal – including its music. The second clue lies in Belfast. Miles attended secondary school in Belfast, as a boarder at Campbell College. The school had already established a strong piping tradition of its own, in the form of a highly regarded Scottish pipe band. Miles took to the Highland pipes with great enthusiasm. He was coached by Mr ("Da") Hope<sup>2</sup> - still involved when Mick joined the Campbell band in the 1950's.

<sup>1</sup> Lucy is Miles' granddaughter and her uncle Mick is Miles' third son.

<sup>2</sup> See "3.16.6 William Hope" by Ken McLeod for more information on Hope.

And it was here that the real foundations of Miles' music making were laid, and where he acquired the majority of his own musical repertoire.

After attending Oxford University, Miles returned to Campbell College in 1930, as a member of staff. He was still passionate about Irish music, and it was at this juncture that he met Richard O'Mealy in Belfast. In that same year, Miles purchased a chanter, bag and bellows, though he had already left Ulster to pursue his other passion – flying (then in its early days). O'Mealy posted the chanter, with a letter stating 'I have great pleasure in sending you one of the best chanters in existence'. Miles had paid £13 for his practice set. O'Mealy sent him detailed instructions on care and maintenance of the chanter, with essential points underlined in red pencil. He also sent the notation for two tunes, "The Little House Under the Hill", and "The Harp that Once Thro' Tara's Halls". Miles was by this time pursuing a service life with the Royal Air Force, in mainland Britain, and overseas. He didn't give up – yet – on his dream of learning the Uilleann pipes. He stayed in touch with the O'Mealy's, and in 1936 finally took possession of the rest of his boxwood and ivory single regulator set, in C#. Richard O'Mealy estimated that it was worth £20 for the purposes of postal insurance, and Miles had been paying him in instalments of £1-3 for some years.



O'Mealy clearly recognised the demanding nature of the instrument, and how hard it would be to learn to play in the relative isolation of 1930s England. But in spite of his letters of warm encouragement to Miles, the demands of wartime flying and a growing family inevitably pushed music-making into the background.

There are other insights into piping cultures in Belfast of the 1930s from the letters O'Mealy wrote to Miles.<sup>3</sup> One is O'Mealy's assumption that a piper might be of either gender – he wrote to Betty Delap that '...the player straps to his or her size'. He also wrote poignantly of his own playing career; in September 1936 he noted despondently:

'I did a little Broadcast for Empire on the 10<sup>th</sup> inst., I don't know whether it went to your part... I should get a better fee than 2 Guineas for Empire stunt. Yet, only for odd engagements from the BBC, I would not be able to stay here at all. In other towns and cities, authorities do something for fellows like me, but our authorities – local – are terribly hampered for want of brains, and where the brains exist with them Paranoia has set in. For any help I shall always be most grateful for the pipes' sake.'

The following month, he commented 'I have not even one playing engagement at present. Nothing from the BBC.' Somewhat territorially, he continued: 'Pipers from Dublin are

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<sup>3</sup> To view the letters, see article "3.13 A Method for Miles"

trying to get engagements here.' He requested that Miles or Betty drop a line to the BBC, asking for more Irish piping played by himself to be broadcast.

Miles served with distinction in the Royal Air Force through the Second World War. He had married a Hampshire girl, Betty, in 1934, and it was in Hampshire that he settled after the war. He died, aged 94, in 1999.

His pipes were by then being played by his granddaughter, Lucy Delap, who had learnt from London pipers and in Miltown Malbay. Right to the end of his life, Miles was deeply responsive to Irish music, whether on fiddle, Uilleann pipes or whistle, though he had had little or no contact with other Irish musicians for most of his adult life. He was unmoved by any other music – pop or classical - and never developed much of a habit of listening to recorded music. In the period before he died, he was confined to a wheelchair, with a limited attention span. But if Lucy struck up on the fiddle, he would start tapping the ground enthusiastically with his stick, and try to stagger to his feet to take a few steps.



Although he never mastered the Uilleann pipes, Miles remained fiercely attached to Irish traditional music. Amidst the conventional pressures of service life, and then of suburban Southern England, he played his own set of Highland pipes, when he could. And for the rest of his life he was never happier than with a tin whistle in hand. Looking back at the role music played in his father's life, Mick Delap sees much cause for celebration – but also a sense of musical potential never fully realised.