

3.04 Learning about Richard

Leslie Drew

My two sisters and I were born in Canada, and were raised in a northern suburb of Toronto, Ontario. As part of the North American post-war baby boom generation, many of our friends spent their Saturday mornings at piano lessons or dance classes, but we spent our early childhood years with no exposure to music other than television shows and radio.

The school system we attended had an instrumental music program that began in the 7th grade, all students were streamed into either a strings, woodwinds or vocal course of study based on a test that was completed in Grade 6. I recall that test very clearly - a series of notes or beats were played to us from a box that generated the sound. We were asked to indicate the difference between the tones we heard ... sometimes there was only a discrete difference in pitch but I never had any doubt of my answers. We were asked to



*The 3 sisters with Mom and husbands
(Leslie, Grant, Mom, Paul, Marilyn, Kathy, David)*

count beats and to choose which beat we thought was longer or shorter in relation to another beat. We were asked to listen to a rhythm and clap it back. And so it went.

My sisters and I were all placed in string instrument classes, and this was our first formal exposure to music. My older sister chose to play violin, I chose the viola and my younger sister took up cello. Of us all, I believe my younger sister displayed the strongest musical abilities. She progressed so quickly on cello that I asked one of my “cello” classmates to give her extra coaching, and a few years later when I started to work I paid for her to attend private lessons with a cellist from the Toronto Symphony

Orchestra, I can no longer recall his name. She played for a period of time with a youth orchestra and travelled to England with them; I was quite chuffed that she was such a good player!

In the meantime, my older sister had formed a solid interest in choral music, and I was self taught on both 6 and 12 string guitar as well as ukulele - the ukulele was just a bit of fun really...

And my Irish grandmother would be in the background telling my parents “of course they’re musical....they’s some o’ them O’Malleys”. She didn’t say it often, but I can still hear her saying it....her pronunciation of the name rhymed with the word “alley” when she said it that way. Most of the time she never referred to her family as O’Malley, she only said it in this context when the subject of music came up. She always told us we had inherited the music from her side of the family, that her family in Ireland was musical.

I didn’t have a clue what “...some o them O’Malleys.” was supposed to mean. I knew that my grandmother’s maternal family name was Mealy (pronounced to rhyme with the word “really”) ...I found it a little confusing when sometimes my grandmother would pronounce her Mother’s surname as Melia. But I didn’t think very much about it to be honest. My own conclusion at the time was that Mealy/Melia was likely just some derivative of the O’Malley surname. Images of the warrior queen Grace O’Malley would come to mind every time my grandmother would tell me I was an O’Malley - and that really was the extent of it. I never tried to read more into what she was telling me.

Of course, there was no doubt that other members of my grandmother's family had musical ability, her brother Stephen had a lovely tenor voice, and his three children shared his interest and talents.

But there was never the mention of a piper in our family as we were growing up.

By the time I reached my mid teens, I was possessed with the desire to travel, and I knew my parents would never let me go anywhere far at that age on my own. So when I was seventeen I convinced my grandmother that she needed to take a trip back home to visit her family. And she needed a traveling companion. Someone who would be able to carry her heavy bag for her, someone who would make sure she got to her destination without getting lost, someone who would be able to get a part-time job to save up enough money to cover her own fare!



Stephen Farrar 1956



*Stephen and Louisa, Doncaster,
Yorkshire, 1965*

My grandmother had made her first trip home to see her family in England and Ireland in 1965 after being away from Ireland for 38 years, so it didn't take a lot of pressure from me to convince her to go again. We left in August 1971, just Granny and I. Our first stop was in England to visit with her younger brother Stephen and his family. It was here in Yorkshire that I first heard about a family piper. I recall it was the night before we were leaving to cross over to Ireland that I first heard mention of an Uncle Dick ... one of the English cousins pulled me aside, and told me that we'd once had an uncle who was a famous piper, that there had been recordings made of his music and that he'd once played for the King of England! I recall my reaction very clearly. "Grandma... what's all this?" "Oh", she and Uncle¹ Stephen said almost at the same time. "That would be Uncle Dick, yes, he was a good piper, he was".

And that was the end of the conversation, neither my grandmother nor my Uncle Stephen seemed to want to stay on the subject, they were too busy saying their good-byes to each other. It was the last visit they would ever have.

By the time we arrived in Dublin, my obsession with learning about the family background had kicked into high gear. We were staying for a few days with my Aunt Dolly Farrar before taking the bus out to Mullingar, and Aunt Dolly was an absolute goldmine of information about the Farrar family - even though she was not a Farrar by birth, she had married in. She told me the names of my Farrar ancestors for several generations back, where they had lived and what trades they performed. But she knew



Letitia, Stephen, George, Louisa Farrar & Kate Mealy

exceptionally little about the Mealys. I desperately wanted to know more about the piper, but both Aunt Dolly and my grandmother had little to say about him, except that he was a good piper.

So why had my grandmother never told us about her Uncle Dick? Why could I not find out anything I wanted to know about him from my grandmother while we were traveling together?

¹ I should refer to Stephen and George as my great-uncles, but that's not what we ever called them. It was just Uncle Stephen and Uncle George to us.



Louisa Alice Farrar

My grandmother's life story could be turned into a short novel all on its own. Her mother, Letitia Mealy, had died when Grandma was very young, and she and her two brothers were raised by different members of the family after the death. Her twin brother George went to live with Aunt Kate Mealy in Templecross, while Uncle Stephen was looked after by one of the other aunts until his father remarried. Uncle Stephen then went to live with his Dad and step-mother, growing up with the new family that came along.



Castle Archdale Co. Fermanagh

My grandmother was looked after by Aunt Lizzie Farrar until about age 9 when she went to live and work at the local rectory where she received training as a housemaid.



Woburn House Co. Down

My grandmother later worked at a few of the large houses in the Kilbixy area before leaving at about age 15 to work in the north of Ireland at a place called Castle Archdale. She told me she had ridden a bicycle by night when she left her home in Westmeath, taking cover in hedgerows during the day to avoid being spotted by the Black and Tans, whom she absolutely feared.

By the time my grandmother was 18, employment had been found with a family who lived at Woburn House on the seacoast at Donaghadee, County Down. A letter she wrote to her father at the time of her move explained that she hoped the sea air would help her health improve.

It was in County Down that she met my grandfather Hugh Yeaman, and the two of them left for Canada in 1927. Hugh would die at Toronto of meningitis in April 1929, leaving his 24 year old widow with a young daughter to raise on her own. So although my grandmother maintained correspondence with her family throughout her life, she did not live with her father or brothers from a very early age. It's quite possible that she didn't ever recall hearing Uncle Dick play, and she may have known very little about his life or popularity.



*Louisa Yeaman,
Toronto, 1930's*



After Grandma and I arrived in the Irish midlands, I had someone new to pester for information about the family - my grandmother's twin brother George.

Uncle George was a testy old fellow, and even though he tried hard not to show it, I could tell he was delighted his sister Louisa was home visiting with him.

Twins George and Louisa



August 1971 at Winetown Cottage, Rathowen

L to R: Louisa & George Farrar, Leslie, George Farrar Snr. This was shortly after I first learned of the piper R. L. O'Mealy. My Great-grandfather showed me the Mealy Family Bible the day this picture was taken. The bible had been brought from America by an Olivia Mealy. I do not know who Olivia Mealy was.

The two would sit for hours talking to each other non-stop, neither listening to what the other had to say, or so it seemed. I loved to watch them sitting together talking, because they looked nothing alike except for the tilt of their head...my grandmother would cock her head to one side, pretending to listen intently to what Uncle George was saying (even though she was still talking away herself...). At the same time, Uncle George would cock *his* head to the *other* side, pretending to listen intently to what she was saying (even though he was still talking away himself...). They'd go on for days like that, with heads tilted to opposite sides, chatting incessantly. My own chance to talk with my Uncle came each night after dinner.

Uncle George was living with his adopted daughter in 1971; his health had deteriorated to the point where he couldn't live alone at Templecross anymore. But he still had a few



George & Violet Farrar, Templecross, 1965

cows on a piece of land out that way, not right at Templecross but somewhere near it. He was insistent on being driven to milk his cows each evening immediately after dinner was finished, but his daughter could not take him at the precise moment he always wanted to go. She had two young children to get ready for bed, and the washing up to do after dinner. Uncle George would pace and the tension would build. One night Uncle George decided that I would be the one to drive him to milk the cows. Notwithstanding the fact that I was not yet driving a car even at home in Canada, let alone that I'd never operated a standard transmission nor ever driven on the left hand side of the road. "Never mind... ..let's go!!! Take me to my cows!!!"

And so off we would go each evening, me jack-rabbing the car along a road that narrowed into a two tire track at the very end. Uncle George bellowing at me to keep the car moving whenever we encountered a herd of farm animals on the road... the car stalled more times than you could count. And on the way back home, the bucket of milk sitting on the bonnet of the car would be slopping everywhere! I wondered some nights what the value was of going to get the milk because we returned home each night with precious little of it remaining!

But it was my chance to ask questions. Who were we? Where did we come from? What did our family do?

I must have been so persistent with my questions that one evening Uncle George had me drive him to Templecross before we went to milk the cows. He took me into the burial grounds and we found the family gravestone, where he helped me rub it down with grass so I could decipher what it said and take down the information from it.



Templecross Cottage 1959, with circular boundary of the burial grounds on right

He took me inside the old thatch cottage and showed me the violins on the wall. There were several, I don't remember exactly how many but there were more than a few. I



One of the Mealy fiddles, 2001

recall that one was a baby violin.

"Pick one out and take it home with you" he said.

"No-one here plays these anymore."

I did not pick out a violin. I will forever live to regret it, but I honestly did not know how I would ever have gotten one of those old violins home with me all in one piece. They were very, very old violins, I'd not ever seen any instruments that old.

That was the night I found out that the old cottage used to be full of music, that people would come from everywhere for the music that was played by the Mealys and their friends. But I didn't learn anything specific about Uncle Dick that evening. Instead, I learned that one of the young Mealy girls had been drowned in Lough Iron when she was 12. I learned that another of the young Mealy girls had been killed accidentally a few years after the drowning had occurred. Uncle George didn't tell me the specifics of either death, but it was very clear to me that both deaths had been a horrible tragedy in this family.

I returned to Ireland with my parents again in 1973, and then with a friend in 1975. Although we visited with the family both times, I never learned anything more about Uncle Dick the piper. It simply wasn't a topic of discussion, all that anyone had ever really told me about him was that he'd been a very good piper, and quite well known in his time. It was my grandmother's step-brother Sam that played the pipes now and I had one occasion to hear Uncle Sam play.



George Farrar Junior and Sam Farrar

Uncle Sam is playing his Kenna pipes for my parents, my younger sister and I.

His pipes were very old, he showed me the difference in colour between two of the drones, and I recall him saying the reason why the one drone was darker than the others was that it had been lost in Lough Iron for several years. I suppose everyone assumed that I was familiar with the entire story of the Lough Iron tragedy. But I was not.

I heard the entire story of Isabella Mealy's drowning in Lough Iron for the very first time from a taped copy of a radio program that was aired in Ireland. My Mom's cousin had recorded it and mailed the tape to us in Canada...because she knew I would want to hear it. The tape was of Robbie Hannan's program "The Long Note". From this program I learned more than I'd ever known about Richard L. O'Mealy - and more about my Mealy ancestors than I'd ever heard before from any member of our family. And it was the first time I heard the music of R. L. O'Mealy.

About that same time, the internet was becoming available so every once in a while I would spend my evenings searching the net. As time went on, more and more information appeared in response to my searches on R. L. I saw pictures of O'Mealy pipes and found music written by O'Mealy. There were chat room forums and discussion boards, where I gleaned more and more information about the man.

When I last went back to visit Ireland in 2001, another generation of the family had grown. I suppose by that time I'd also gained a bit of a reputation for being the "expert" on our genealogy - after all, I'd been extremely persistent in my pursuit of the family roots for 30 years by that point. My young second cousin, Jonathan Farrar was playing the pipes now, he gave me a picture of O'Mealy from 1933, and sheet music for two of his tunes which I now play on fiddle - 'A Mother's Lamentation', and 'The Lagan Slashers'.²

Reel The Lagan Slashers

² A version transcribed by J. H. Neill from O'Mealy's playing appears in the Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society vol vii 1909 pp32-4 where it is given the title 'The League and Slashers'.

Jonathan Farrar:

"I think it's quite possible the title O'Mealy intended was "The Legan Slashers" (pronounced Lee-gan). Legan is a village in South Longford, at a guess about 7 or 8 miles from Templecross. 'Slasher' is a word associated with the midlands; Apparently in Cromwellian times there was a local rebel called Myles "the slasher" O'Reilly. It's my guess that people assumed O'Mealy meant Legan Slashers due to his residence in Belfast and the obscurity of Legan. I think it's more likely that a midlands tune might have the word slashers in the title. This could also explain why J. H. O'Neill might have thought he heard the title "League and Slashers". Furthermore, if you look at O'Mealy's handwriting it appears to say 'Legan'."

But a real treasure chest of information was presented to me one morning after breakfast by Uncle George’s daughter Violet, with whom we’d been staying for a few days. She came out of her room that morning with an old tin biscuit box.

“There’s some things in here you might be interested in. I thought you might like to go through this.”

Inside that old tin box was more than I have ever dreamed could have survived the years. Old letters, newspaper clippings, photographs; some of Richard as a young man, others of his parents, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews. Individuals in most of the old photos could be identified; some we still don’t know who they might be.



Some of the contents of Violet Farrar’s biscuit tin

But the most fascinating bits of paper were in my Great Great Grandfather Larry Mealy’s own hand: family information that pre-dates any civil or church records that exist; notes that tell us one of our Mealy ancestors was a hedge row teacher; notes that tell us about the family connection with a place called Horseleap; letters and newspaper clippings and pictures that tell us about life in Templecross as it used to be.³

³ See the associated directory for full versions of all photos and clippings

Old family stories I'd not heard before came to people's minds during that trip - the story of how the Mealy family was said to have safeguarded the Corp Naomh after it was found in the Templecross churchyard, before it was taken in 1873 to the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin; the story of how the old set of Kenna pipes had gone to America with Ned Mealy, and had once been played by him in the New York St. Patrick's Day Parade; the story of how Aunt Kate recovered the pipes from whomever had them after her brother Ned passed away, and brought them to Sam; the story of Isabella Mealy's drowning that day back in 1872, and of the trap accident several years later that had taken her older sister Louisa's life - how Louisa had been found lifeless at the side of the road beside her overturned trap, hours after she was expected to have arrived home from her errands; stories of how my grandmother had been treated poorly at one of her early housekeeping positions in Rath, how she had walked to her father's house in tears, leaving all her belongings behind; and how Uncle Sam had taken the trap to go and pick up her trunk the next day - a large navy trunk with brass fittings, the same navy trunk she brought with her to Canada, the same trunk that has been in my mother's bedroom for many years now.



May 2001: Looking across to a grown-over Loch Iron from Templecross

I spent an entire morning going through the old tin box that contained more than a century and a half of our family's history. Violet told me to take anything I was interested in from the box home with me to Canada. But I did not. It wasn't a hard decision to make, and this time it's a decision I don't regret making. The one reason those documents were there for me to see on that particular morning was because the collection in the tin box had been a part of Templecross - it had always been with the family near Lough Iron.

Post script note:

My older sister Marilyn, her husband Paul, and daughter Janet have all been members of the Toronto Classical Singers for more than a decade. www.torontoclassicalsingers.org

As I became more focused on guitar, I gradually stopped playing viola. And then whilst raising our son and working full-time in a very high-pressured position, I eventually gave up playing guitar as well. About 7 years ago I took up viola once again and now play weekly with a small amateur string orchestra and also with a viola sextet. I am fortunate to have fallen under the tutelage of Marie Peebles and Marsha Moffitt who are both well respected musicians in the Hamilton/Toronto area. At time of writing, I am also playing fiddle with the Oakville Celtic Fiddle Club.

My younger sister Kathy has not played cello for many years. The demands of work and raising a family are the current focus in her life.

[Editor's note: All photographs belong to the O'Mealy or Farrar estates. Photo restorations by Ronan Browne]