

3.16.1 Jack O'Rourke. 1916 - 1981.

Ken McLeod

Jack was born in Ballinamore County Leitrim and began piping with the Great Highland Pipe. He played with the St. Bridget's War Pipe Band, probably until he left home to try to make a better living in London in about 1934/35. He took ill when there and told his daughter Frances that he knew it was December 1936 because he could remember hearing the abdication speech of King Edward VIII on the radio in the hospital ward. He was suffering from pleurisy at the time.



This picture of St. Bridget's War Pipe Band, Ballinamore with Jack standing on the far right, was re-published in the Leitrim Observer in 1984 (See list of the members in the appendix).

Jack lived at 17 Broadway, near the Falls Road in Belfast. This was not very far from Seán McAloon¹ whom he visited almost every day. He was a painter of houses and suchlike. I remember him telling me, at Seán's prompting, about the house he was re-decorating on the Antrim coast road when he sat down a blow-torch and forgot about it. The house was burnt down. He was fond of horse racing and betting shops and always had a funny story to tell. He insisted, in a false but serious manner, that pigs could see the wind and that it was red!

Jack played on BBC radio most probably during O'Mealy's lifetime because I remember one evening when Seán McAloon said to Jack, "I'll never forget that night you played on the BBC, you had just got the double-bass [*sic*] regulator from O'Mealy and when you hit it, it sounded like a ship going down the Lough."

¹ Seán McAloon (1923-1998), County Fermanagh piper, fiddler and reed-maker whose house at 52 St. James' Road near the Falls Road was a focal point for piping.

A good example of the bits of information he would drop, is when RL asked him to come to his house to carry his pipes on foot to St. Mary's hall in the middle of town because he didn't want them shaken up on the tram.

Jack was convinced that O'Mealy was not as poor as he pretended and he would say that he collected gold sovereigns and kept them in a box under his bed.

After O'Mealy died, Jim McIntosh² bought his tools and lathe. He also got a lot of papers with designs, measurements and other details concerning pipes and pipers. When Jim got married his wife found the house too small and Jack arranged for Seán Reid to buy all the O'Mealy bits and pieces, including the lathe. The papers ended up with Wilbert Garvin and the lathe with myself. We both gave what we had to Na Piobairí Uilleann where it all now resides in the O'Mealy room and archive.



This picture of Jack working on scaffolding was taken around 1975 or 6. He was working with a company called Corrosion Control who were restoring the Victorian iron and glass Palm House in Botanic Gardens, Belfast after a nearby Provisional IRA bomb had seriously damaged the building.

Jack had a set of O'Mealy pipes of the Taylor appearance which he passed on to Seán McAloon. They are now in Fermanagh and being played by Seán's nephew or grand-nephew, I am not sure which. Seán's sister Rose told me that he left instructions before his death that all the other pipes and stuff could be sold but not the O'Mealy set, which he called 'the yellow set'.

² Jim McIntosh was another of O'Mealy's pupils. For more information see Jim's obituary (article 3.16.4) written by Trevor Stewart, elsewhere in this journal.

The last set of pipes that Jack owned came indirectly from O’Mealy through Jim McIntosh and was one of those sets which R.L. had made up from surviving bits of classic pipes. It was known as a ‘Coyne’ set but this was just part of the case. The regulators are Maurice Coyne, but the stock and drones are Denis Harrington and the chanter, O’Mealy. Unfortunately some incompetent cut off the bass regulator bar and turned it down over the stock using soft solder which is plastered all over the brass. After Jack died his daughter Frances offered the pipes to the Ulster Museums but they rejected her offer. These pipes travelled a bit after Jack passed away but they are now at home with Jack’s daughter Frances.



He also had a practise set which he cherished because the chanter was apparently made from an old R.I.C. baton. He loved the irony of that. This has disappeared.

Jack’s wife, Molly did not like the pipes much, according to himself.

Jack and Jim McIntosh were sadly, the only pipers who attended O’Mealy’s funeral.

Jack died on January 16th 1981. It was most coincidental that his best friend Seán McAloon died on the same day in 1998. Seán missed Jack terribly. I only wished that I had asked Jack more about R.L. and that I had more to offer. That’s life!

With Jack living in a staunchly Republican area and Jim McIntosh in the staunchly Loyalist area of Donegal Road, yet quite near to each other, they remained friends for life.

Jim sent a Christmas card every year to Jack’s daughter Frances after Jack departed this world and when I met her in 2007 she was unaware that Jim had recently passed away and was very saddened indeed.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Frances O’Rourke and Trevor Stewart for filling in some of my missing information.

Appendix.

St Bridget’s War Memorial [*sic*] Pipe Band.

Standing (L-R) Bernie Shortt, Jimmy McTernan, Johnnie McGoohan, David Barrett, Johnnie Maher, Tommy Moran, Joe Gormley, Hughie Turbett, Georgie Gallagher, Eddie Conlon and Jack O’Rourke.

Sitting (L-R) Eugene Kilkeny, Tommy Cosgrove, Jimmy Joe McKiernan, Paddy McKiernan and Tom Creamer.