

### 3.16.4 Jim McIntosh

Trevor Stewart

I met Jim McIntosh early in 2006 through a fiddler friend of mine, Ernie Swain and his wife Sheelagh Calvert. Sheila worked in a community centre at Ballyboley, near Newtown-ards. Jim, who lived in Donaghadee, had been attending painting classes there and he told her he wanted to sell his pipes to someone who would play them. Ernie told me about Jim and we arranged to meet and to see the pipes, which turned out to be a full set made by O'Mealy. I bought the pipes on, as it turned out, his 91st birthday, and we became great friends from then on. I visited him regularly and one stipulation of the visits was that I brought the pipes along and played them for him. Jim loved music and played an electric organ in his later years. However, when the pipes were sold he went out and bought a fiddle, which he had always wanted to try.



Early in 2007 I brought along fiddler Martin Dowling<sup>1</sup> to Jim's house and we played for him. Only a few weeks after that get-together Jim was taken into the Ulster Hospital where he died.



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<sup>1</sup> Martin Dowling is a fiddle player and lecturer in Irish traditional music in Queen's University Belfast.

Jim McIntosh was born and reared in Battenberg Street on Belfast's Shankill Road. When he was young there were many pipe bands on the road, and he played in a number of them, the first being the Shankill Amateurs. During his time in the bands he got to know piper William (Billy) Hope<sup>2</sup> and his son Frankie, who was a similar age to Jim. Billy had a draper's shop near Agnes Street on the Shankill and taught pipes and supplied equipment to the bands. However, he was also an Uilleann piper, and this is possibly where Jim's love of these pipes began.

Jim began work on the Belfast trams where he was a conductor for many years. He recalled an inspector on the trams who played the Uilleann pipes but couldn't remember his name.

However, it was possibly Billy Hope who told Jim of pipemaker Frank McFadden because that's where he got his first Uilleann pipes. While visiting Frank he would have met other pipers, including Belfast man Jack O'Rourke<sup>3</sup>, who became a long-time friend of Jim's. Jack may have told him about Richard Lewis O'Mealy in the 1940s because that was Jim's next port of call.

O'Mealy was living at 45 Rugby Avenue, Belfast, and it's there that Jim met the great man and ordered a boxwood set. Mr. O'Mealy also taught Jim, using a tin whistle. He never heard O'Mealy play his pipes as he was not in the best of health in his later years.



Jim's other love was fishing and the two hobbies competed with each other for the rest of his life. During one of the piping lessons Mr O'Mealy told him: "You need to spend more time on the pipes and less time on fishing, Jim."

R.L. O'Mealy died in 1947 and Jim and Jack O'Rourke were among a small number of mourners who attended the funeral in Belfast.

After this Jim decided to have a go at making pipes and bought O'Mealy's lathe and other accessories from his wife. Included in the extras was a flat set of pipes and an unfinished concert chanter which Jim believed was made by O'Mealy. He later passed the flat set on to his pal Jack O'Rourke.

<sup>2</sup> See "3.16.6 William Hope" elsewhere in this journal.

<sup>3</sup> See "3.16.1 Jack O'Rourke" elsewhere in this journal.





Jim didn't buy the set of pipes I now have from Mr. O'Mealy. He was walking through the Smithfield area of Belfast one day – possibly after O'Mealy's death – and spotted them in the window of a second-hand shop.

O'Mealy made a number of BBC radio broadcasts when he lived in Belfast and after he died Jim was invited to play on a number of programmes in the late 1940s and early 50s. Jim got married late in life and eventually, as he said himself, it was the wife or the lathe had to go as they were now living in a small house on the Donegall Road. The lathe went to Jack O'Rourke, who lived nearby in the Broadway area of Belfast. They kept in contact but when Jack died Jim played his pipes less and less. Jim and his wife moved to Millisle and when his wife died he moved to Donaghadee.

In 1984 Robbie Hannan made an RTE radio programme on the life of R. L. O'Mealy and interviewed Jim, he being one of the few people left in the north who had known him. Other pipers Jim got to know over the years were William Hoey and Cecil Colville, both from Kells, near Ballymena. Jim used to visit William Hoey when he was on one of his many fishing trips. William, who had been a teacher at Maxwell's Walls Primary School near Kells, died a number of years ago and as far as I know his wife Elizabeth donated his pipes to the Ulster Folk Museum.



It's sad to see Jim gone but it was great to have met him and to have spent many happy hours in his company.

And as a final tribute to a real gentleman, I played his pipes at his funeral service at Donaghadee Parish Church last year [2007].

**Trevor Stewart**