

By Edwin Handcock



*Edwin S. Handcock*

# FINGAL

## The Peeler's Away With Me Daughter

The Peeler's away with me Daughter, no these are not the dramatic words of a distraught father to the local Sergeant, but the rather apt title of an Irish jig, played to pPipes) in days of yore, when there were accomplished pipers in the ranks of both the Royal Irish Constabulary and An Garda Síochána. These distinctly Irish form of bagpipes circa 1700, are comprised of bag, bellows, chanter, drones and regulators. The bellows which supplies air to the bag is operated by the action of the musicians elbow, hence the name uilleann derived from the gaeilge uille meaning elbow. Now where did that saying more power to your elbow come from?

Uilleann piping reached it's zenith in the pre-famine period in Ireland, in the days when the travelling Dancing Master used to visit the villages of rural Ireland, teaching dancing skills to the young folk. It's popularity declined by the end of the 19th century and like the harp, skilled pipers, tutors and pipe makers became few and far between. The tradition survived amongst a dwindling few, it wasn't until the late 1950's when a slow resurgence began, and today they have regained their rightful place in Irish music, and strengthened by the establishment of Na Piobairi Uilleann in 1968, who now have their



Aeridheacht poster 1928

magnificent headquarters at 15 Henrietta Street, Dublin. Members of the Garda feature prominently in the history of uilleann piping and their survival.



Diagram of uilleann pipes



Full set of uilleann pipes

It is not an easy instrument to learn, the old pipers used to say "It took 21 years to make a piper – 7 years of learning – 7 years of practicing and 7 years of playing". The Uilleann Pipes, in keeping with the psychology of the Celtic race, are mysterious, stubborn and difficult to master. The tone of these pipes is sweeter and mellower than that of the Irish war pipes or Highland bagpipes, their music has been described as "beautiful, complex, ancient, mystical, haunting and a hive of honeyed sound" or as Seamus Heaney the poet once said of the Uilleann Pipes "The pipes call and raise the spirit – They also quieten and open up the daydream part of people".

In circa 1925 the Garda Ceilidhe Band was formed in the Depot, and played at Garda functions in the Depot and around the city, it also gave recitals on Radio Éireann, it survived until the 1960's. The Dublin Metropolitan Garda Ceilidhe Band which included Uilleann Pipes was a popular part of Dublin life until it was disbanded in the 1950's. In 1937, e.g., during the summer months, it drew huge crowds at the



Statue of Edmund Keating Hyland the blind piper in Cahir

East Pier in Dun Laoghaire, the Town Hall and in Bray, in August it was booked for five days at the Horse Show. On 2nd February 1938 Colonel Broy, Garda Commissioner attended at the Garda Feis Tighe held at Coláiste Charmain in Gorey. This was a broadcast programme attended by over 600. The Dublin Metropolitan Garda Ceilidhe Band which included Garda Seán O'Leary on Uilleann pipes, played for both the broadcast and the dance which followed. Another uilleann piper in the band was a Garda Mangan. The Band also made records for the HMV recording company which were in great demand by the public.



Dublin Metropolitan Garda Ceilidhe Band 1937



Píper John Geoghegan at Inverin in the 1930's

John Hannen, uilleann piper from South Tipperary served in the R.I.C. from 1875 to 1900, service number 41171 and was stationed in Co. Down, Armagh, Depot, Louth and Tyrone. On his retirement as a Sergeant he went to live in Portaferry, where it was said by a local man in 1988, "He used to sit at the end of the seat in the gallery at mass and always stood back to let you in. He was well liked and a very pleasant man – too nice a man you would have thought to be a policeman". When he died in 1925, his pipes were left to the local Veterinary Surgeon.

Liam O'Flynn, uilleann piper who joined Planxty in 1972 was born into a musical family, mother played the piano and father played the fiddle. His father's good friend was Sergeant Tom Armstrong of the Kildare Garda, who was a regular visitor to the O'Flynn home bringing his uilleann pipes with him. Tom Armstrong was born in Annagh, Drumboylan, Co. Roscommon, where he was reared by his uncle following his father's death at a young age. He was educated by the Presentation Brothers in Carrick-on-Shannon, at this stage he was already an accomplished traditional fiddler.



Matt Kiernan with piping presentation



John Hannon RIC

who used to judge the piping competitions at the annual Garda Aeridheacht held in the Depot in the 1920's and entertained the crowd with the Leo Rowsome Quartet featuring four uilleann pipers.



Gold Medal introduced in 1928 to be awarded for 1st prize in Garda Feis Competition

He joined An Garda Síochána in 1924, registered number 5746, serving in Oranmore, Leixlip, Clane, Newbridge and Donadea as Sergeant i/c. While stationed in different parts of Kildare, he was active in the GAA playing both hurling and football for Kildare in the 1920's and 1930's. He retired in 1965 and went to live in Oughterard; he died in 1970 and is buried in the New Cemetery in Galway City.

It was while he was stationed in Leixlip that Tom learned to play the uilleann pipes; his teacher was the famous piper Leo Rowsome,

The best chanters were made from ebony or African blackwood, which were very difficult to obtain. Leo Rowsome, who was also a noted uilleann pipe maker, was constantly on the lookout for old policeman's truncheons or should I say old police truncheons. "They were just right for making chanters – if they were not split with use". In those days a truncheon did its job with one skelp, unlike today's "recipient friendly" version which wouldn't crack a walnut at Halloween, let alone be adapted on a lathe to produce sweet music.

John Geoghegan, another noted Garda uilleann piper was born in Durrow in 1908, and while still at school was proficient with both tin whistle and flute, playing at céilís in the area. In 1931 he joined An Garda Síochána registered number 8016; his first station was Recess in Co. Galway. One day while stationed in Inveran he went out to the rear yard of a public house to use the "Gents", in an old shed he found a set of uilleann pipes, covered in feathers and hen droppings, the lady publican gave him the pipes.

He bought a set of pipes from Leo Rowsome and played regularly with famous pipers of the day, e.g. Seamus Ennis, Johnny Doran, Willie Reynolds, Gerry Lee and Tommy Coen, at céilís in Galway. He also played on Radio Éireann a few times. He married in 1937 and was transferred to Clifton; he also served in Inveran, Salthill,

Waterville, and finally to Templemore in 1951. He died in 1960 at the age of 52.

It would take a book to do justice to the contribution that Matt Kiernan, uilleann piper, pipe maker, tutor and member of An Garda Síochána, made to uilleann piping in Ireland. Matt was born in Coolronan, Ballivor, Co. Meath on 17th June 1898. With his occupation given as farmer and standing at 6 ft tall, he joined the R.I.C. on 15th March, 1920, service number 70683, but resigned six months later on 1st September upon the insistence of his parents. He served 190 days in the National Army and then on 4th December 1922 he joined An Garda Síochána, registered number 2748, he was stationed in Ballincargy, Ballydangan, Elphin, Kiltoom, The Depot, Store Street, Villerstown and finally returning to Store Street in 1943. he retired on 19th January 1953, having completed 30 years and 47 days of exemplary service.

Matt developed his love of the pipes on a day in 1905, when at the age of 7, he went to the fair in Athboy and was fascinated by an uilleann piper playing the pipes on the street while standing upright with the aid of a piper's forked stick. He lived at 19 Offaly Road, Cabra in Dublin, where he had a workshop in which he made and repaired uilleann pipes. There was a constant stream of pipers to his home seeking repairs, pipes for sale or pipes to be made, advice, instruction, a few tunes or just a chat. This was very much an open house, where "his teapot was never cold". In one of the many glowing tributes at his funeral in 1986, it was said "He placed little monetary value on his products, if a youngster was short of money – he got the pipes just the same; his pipes were affordable to all". He is regarded as being one of the saviours of the uilleann piping tradition.

His favourite tunes were, "The Stack of Wheat", "The Grouse in the Bog" and "The Jolly



The Seamus Ennis Centre and coffee shop in The Naul, Co Dublin

Tinker". Today, Matt's pipes are being played all over the world, as far away as the U.S., Australia and New Zealand.

The pipes have featured in recent block-buster films. In Titanic, Leonardo di Capri and Kate Winslet dance with wild abandon to the music of the uilleann pipes, before tragedy struck. In Braveheart, based on the life of William Wallace, the film begins with roaming views of the rugged highlands of Scotland with the haunting lamentation of pipes in the background, but listen carefully; these are not highland bagpipes – but Irish uilleann pipes as preferred by the director, and feature in other scenes, notwithstanding the fact that Wallace died 500 years before their invention, a classic example of poetic licence – Hollywood style.

Many uilleann pipers emigrated to America in the years following the famine, which led to the development of the traditional Irish music scene in cities like Chicago, where e.g., a Captain Francis O'Neill the police chief, employed Irish musicians in the force, and is reputed to have released musical miscreants from custody, if they could play a tune to his satisfaction. Now there is a novel solution to overcrowding in our prisons.

Acknowledgements to Terry Moylan, Archivist of Na Piobairi Uilleann for his valuable assistance and encouragement in researching this article, for supplying and granting permission to publish photographs of John Hannen, Tom Armstrong, John Geoghegan and Matt Kiernan.