The Last of the Travelling Pipers

Felix Doran

1 Air: **Mary of Murroe**/Reel: **The Green Gates**
2 Air: **The Dear Irish Boy**/Reel: **The Primrose Lass**
3 Reel: **Rakish Paddy**
4 Air: **Rolandstown Churchyard**
5 Reel: **The Ash Plant**
6 Jig: **The Lark in the Morning**
7 **The Fox Hunt**
8 Reels: **George White's Favourite**/**The Ivy Leaf**
9 Air: **The Coolin**
10 Reel: **Boys of the Lough**
11 Reels: **Pigeon on the Gate**/**Miss Monaghan**

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Notes by Sean Reid
Sleeve Design by Tony Engle
Photography by Brian Shuel



Biographical Notes

This short account of the personal recollections of one man can be no substitute for proper biographies of both Felix Doran and his brother Johnny which should now be compiled as a matter of urgency. They were the last of a great and illustrious line of travelling pipers, and the end of an era; it is unlikely that we shall ever see their likes again. Felix was a great-grandson of John Cash of Wexford (b.1832) who maintained the standard of piping in south Leinster and the Midlands for over 50 years in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

I lived in Dublin for a year in 1934-35 and followed Felix around Moore Street enchanted by his piping. I recall him vividly as he then was - a handsome, well built young fellow of 18 or 20 in a blue, double-breasted suit, very clean and tidy and wearing in his coat lapel the badge of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association. I was living in Ennis, County Clare when in the course of his journeyings around Ireland he turned up there in 1938. I had now a pipes of my own and Felix was a frequent and welcome visitor at my home. Living in a comfortable horse-drawn caravan with his pretty young wife and a few small children he plied his business of horse-dealing and general trading while playing the pipes at fairs, markets and country dances all over the country. He was a pleasant-mannered, cheery young man who talked freely about himself and his life and adventures. He was gifted with a vivid imagination and never thought any harm to improve a good story! I was able to supply him with a few good Rowsome chanter reeds from time to time.

He moved on again after a few months and the next time we met was at the Galway Races in 1944. He looked bronzed, relaxed and happy as, surrounded by an appreciative and generous audience, he filled sun-lit Eyre Square with the thrilling sound of his pipes.

He returned again to Clare for the last time in the late autumn of 1950 and this time he had a large, white Austin van and was collecting old car-batteries and also old feather mattresses (ticks) which, he explained, were to be used in the manufacture of pound notes. He always had a good head for business and habitually kept a £50 note in his pocket. By this time he was coming up in the world and beginning to fill out and put on a little weight while his handsome leonine head and face was becoming more and more reminiscent of his famous great-grandfather, John Cash. Unfortunately he had also become an alcoholic and was going on periodic bouts of heavy drinking which had a disastrous effect on his normally pleasant temperament. On one memorable occasion we (the Tulla Ceili Band, with Joe Cooley) brought him along to a dance at Kilkee where he brought the house down with “The Fox Chase”. After a few weeks he moved on again. The next time I saw him he was in his coffin.

In 1963 he won first prize on the pipes at Fleadh Ceoil na hEireann in Mullingar. Subsequently he settled down in Manchester where he became a wealthy haulage contractor with a great fleet of lorries. He engaged a skilled German mechanic to fashion him an all-silver pipes, a marvel of craftsmanship that must have cost a small fortune. In the middle 60s he was recorded and broadcast repeatedly on television and radio.

He died in 1972 in Manchester after a long illness and his funeral cortege from Dublin to Wicklow was the largest I ever saw, with the possible exception of Leo Rowsome's and Willie Clancy's. He was buried in Rathnew graveyard, some distance from Johnny. Two pipers, one of them his son, Michael, the other Nial Mulligan, played at his graveside. I estimated the pile of wreaths as being 9 feet long, 6 feet wide and 4 feet high. He was present at the last Fleadh Ceoil na hEireann before his death.

If tributes count for anything then Felix died the uncrowned king of the travelling people. During his too short lifetime he gave a tremendous lift to Irish music, and especially to the uilleann pipes. He had something unique to contribute and is assured of a permanent and honourable place in the annals of Irish minstrels and musicians. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam (May his soul be at God's right hand).

I wish to avail myself of this opportunity to thank my good friend Breandan Breathnach, Director of the Folk Music Division, University College, Dublin, and chairman of Na Piobaire Uilleann (NPU) for the pains he has taken in reading my notes for Classics of Irish Piping Vols.1 and 2 and the present record, and for his invaluable assistance and advice.

Air: **Mary of Murroe**
Murroe (Maigh Rua, the Red Plain) is a village 10 miles east of Limerick City in the foothills of the Slieve Felim Mountains, looking across at the Ballyhoura Hills, homeplace of PW Joyce, the great antiquarian and traditional music collector. In the vicissitudes of time the words of **Mary of Murroe** may have been lost but the name at least survives in the beautiful air so well rendered here by Felix Doran. It is obviously a variant of the famous air *The Buachaillin Donn* (see Classics of Irish Piping Vol. 2) and is immediately apparent that here we have a master piper with a fine instrument in superb tune.

Reel: **The Green Gates**
This reel is practically note for note with No. 764 in O'Neill's "Dance Music of Ireland". Here is the authentic sound of a great travelling piper who in his lifetime charmed thousands, often with fingers numbed by the cold. The steady, leisurely rhythm is most impressive.

Air: **The Dear Irish Boy**
This is an individual interpretation of the famous air but while the setting is beautiful it need not necessarily be adopted in preference to the one now in general use. As is the fashion among traditional musicians, Doran breaks from the slow, measured phrases of the air into the gay tempo of a reel, in this case **The Primrose Lass**. He lets the melody flow out freely in the Leinster style, getting the traditional syncopation effect where necessary by skilful use of the regulators. His setting is the one favoured by pipers for at least the last 40 years and is rather superior to No. 733 in O'Neills "Dance Music of Ireland" under the same name.

Reel: **Rakish Paddy**
This is quite definitely one of the great reels and originated in Scotland where it is called *Caber Fey* or *The Deer's Horns*. It was his brother Johnny's favourite, but whereas Johnny was a genius who performed with wild abandon Felix was always solid and predictable and here he serves up a standard setting with a virtuoso display of piping technique.

Air: **Rolandstown Churchyard**
If the words of this song survive I have failed to locate them. The air as played by Felix is a traditional setting of *An Drimin Donn Dilis*, a well known and popular patriotic song in which Ireland is equated with the Drimin Donn (Brown Cow) (see Classics of Irish Piping, Vol. 2).

Reel: **The Ash Plant**
This is an old Sligo/Leitrim reel, first brought into general favour some 40 years ago by a 78 rpm record (Regal/ Zonophone IZ 864) made by the Belhavel Trio, one of whom was Ned Gorman, the piper. It was published for the first time in Breandan Breathnach's "Ceol Rince na hEireann" (1963). Here Felix does his part in handing on a rare gem of our musical heritage.

Jig: **The Lark in the Morning**
Also known as *An Buachaillin Bui* this beautiful jig was published for the first time in its present form in "Ceol Rince na hEireann", the contributor being Tommy Potts, fiddler, son of John Potts, piper. It is well suited to the pipes and as rendered here in style by Felix loses nothing of its charm.

The Fox Hunt
Records, all different, of this famous descriptive piece have already been made by Leo Rowsome, piper, and John Doherty, fiddler, while Seamus Ennis has his own setting. Felix Doran now takes his place in this distinguished company and while his air may not excel his rendering of the animal sounds it is undoubtedly the most colourful and exciting. Knowing Felix's background one can readily imagine that he did have first-hand experience of frightened hens and ganders.

Reel: **George White's Favourite**
In this excellent Sligo/Leitrim reel Felix is at his best. Flawless, crisp fingering, regulators used tastefully, drones sweet and perfect and the whole pipes beautifully balanced. His setting is the standard one for pipes or fiddles as distinct from Sonny Brogan's fine chromatic accordion setting in "Ceol Rince na hEireann" where it was first published.

Reel: **The Ivy Leaf**
Felix makes an agreeable and facile change into the popular reel which is thought to be a variant of **The Green Groves of Erin**. He does the A C A triplets delightfully and uses a triplet instead of the conventional "crann" on E. In fact neither Johnny nor Felix ever used the "crann". (Breathnach describes "cranning" as using "groups of two, three and four grace notes...to decorate the bottom and second notes of the chanter".)

Air: **The Coolin**
This is the most famous and beautiful of all Irish airs. It has been recorded by many famous musicians, including the late Tom Ennis, piper. Felix seems to follow an old 78 of Neilus Cronin of Cork on the concert (or timber) flute which was slightly flawed by the introduction of an extra beat into the first bar of the second part (BAGFGABC instead of BAGABC), a mistake which he copies. Felix puts his whole heart and all his piping skill into this rendition which is a worthwhile contribution to the fame of this great composition.

Reel: **Boys of the Lough**
This fine reel was probably first put into circulation when recorded some 50 years ago, first by Edward Reevy and later by Michael Coleman under the name of Denis Molloy. It was first published in "Ceol Rince na hEireann" as noted from the playing of Tommy Potts. Doran follows Reevy's setting fairly closely, adapting it skilfully to suit the pipes.

Reel: **Pigeon on the Gate**
This is undoubtedly another of the great reels. In O'Neill's "Dance Music of Ireland" it is noted in G while later in "Waifs and Strays" he gives Patsy Tuohy's setting in D. The latter is easier on the fiddle as it avoids the high C and is now the more popular and is the one used by Felix. He follows with **Miss Monaghan**, another great reel which, like so many others, was first published by O' Neill. Felix's playing of these two reels is that of a master piper whose skill was acquired over many years of constant playing in all sorts of adverse conditions and who learned to charm the most diverse and unlikely audiences.

Sean Reid, Ennis
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