

Breathnach, Breandán

by William Murphy

Breathnach, Breandán (1912–85), author, collector, and musician, was born 1 April 1912 in Hamilton St., Dublin, elder of two sons and three daughters of Patrick Walsh (d. 1980), silk weaver, and Julia Walsh (née Parker) (d. 1927). Educated at Francis St. national school, he obtained a Dublin corporation scholarship to attend Synge St. CBS, Dublin, where he completed the leaving certificate. After brief spells in other jobs he joined the civil service, spending time in the departments of agriculture, finance, posts and telegraphs, and education.

An interest in music was fostered by his father and his uncle Joe Breathnach. The uilleann pipes were his instrument of choice and he was a founder and first chairman (1968–85) of Na Piobairí Uilleann. He was a close friend of the pipers Séamus Ennis (qv) and Willie Clancy (qv), becoming heavily involved in the Willie Clancy summer school. In 1970 he was a founder of the Folk Music Society of Ireland. Always unafraid of voicing criticism, he had become disaffected from Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. Most renowned as a music writer and collector, he founded (1963) and edited the journal *Ceol*, which appeared sporadically till 1986. He was also for a time editor of *An Piobaire* and coeditor of the *Folk Music Journal*. He wrote *Folk music and dances of Ireland* (1971), and his magnificent collection *Ceol rince na hÉireann* (1963) was followed by supplementary volumes (1976, 1985). In 1964 he joined the Department of Education, becoming a professional collector of traditional music. After much agitation on his part a national archive of Irish folk music was set up under the auspices of the department in 1972. Two years later the archive was transferred to the department of Irish folklore at UCD, where he became director of Irish folk music, a position he held until retiring (1977). During a busy retirement he lectured in TCD and was appointed to the Arts Council. He died in Dublin 6 November 1985.

He married (1943) Lena Donnellan, civil servant, of Tullagh, Co. Clare. They had five daughters: the second, Niamh, was minister for education 1992–7. His papers are at the Irish Traditional Music Archive, 63 Merrion Square, Dublin 2. His *Ceol agus rince na hÉireann* (1989) was published posthumously.

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Thomas Ó Canainn, *Traditional music in Ireland* (1978); John Fry and Eamonn Ó Catháin, *Irish folk guide* (1981); *Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Press*, *Ir. Times*, 7 Nov. 1985; H. E. Shields, obit., *Gazette*, *Trinity College Dublin*, 21 Nov. 1985; Nicholas Carolan, 'Brendán Breathnach 1912–1985', *Ceol*, viii (1986), 3–10; McRedmond; information from Éadaoin Bhreathnach (daughter) and Diarmuid Breathnach

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