

O'Leary, John ('Johnny') (Johnny Leary)

by Ríonach úí Ógáin

O'Leary, John ('Johnny') (Johnny Leary) (1923–2004), musician, better known as 'Johnny Leary', was born 6 June 1923 in Meall Uí Chíobháin (Maulykeavane), Co. Kerry, between Gníomh go Leith (Gneevguilla) and Killarney. He was brought up by his maternal grandparents, Paddy O'Leary and his wife Julia (née Sheehan). He became a leading exponent of the button accordion and of what is termed the 'Sliabh Luachra style'.

At the age of five he began playing the melodeon and proceeded to play at local events in his early teenage years. He acquired most of his tunes locally and his playing style on the button accordion reflected both the repertoire and style of his native district. Nonetheless, his playing was highly individual and dancers and listeners could recognise his playing without difficulty. His music is regarded as being essentially for dancers and dancing.

For more than twenty years, O'Leary was a key player in providing music for dancers in Dan Connell's public house in Cnoc na Graí (Knocknagree). He played regularly at house dances and his repertoire appeared endless. He once recorded forty tunes for the National Folklore Collection, UCD, in the space of an hour and a half. Séamus Ennis recorded him for Radio Éireann in 1947. For decades, he played with the Gníomh go Leith fiddle player Denis Murphy (d. 1974). A regular contributor to the annual music festival at the Willie Clancy Summer School in Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare, O'Leary entertained thousands of visitors in Hennessy's public house over the years. Breandán Breathnach (qv) described O'Leary's style in some detail noting that O'Leary had 'retained the push#and#draw method of the old#fashioned melodeon and he uses that system with fine effect to articulate the music. Some triplets are executed as tight as any piper's and melodic embellishments which subtly affect the rhythm are deftly and tastefully introduced into the tunes. To satisfy the dancers in Kerry, the music must be played fast and strongly and speed and vigour are features of Johnny's playing. But he is always in control and the sustained pulse and forward thrust which are noticeable in his dance music make dancing compulsive for his listeners' (Breathnach, 14). At the time of Breathnach's death in 1985, he was working towards publishing recordings of Johnny O'Leary, who had played in Dublin at the Folk Music Society of Ireland and also at Na Píobairí Uilleann; both performances were recorded. Terry Moylan took over and completed the project. The result was the publication of 348 of O'Leary's tunes.

Most musicians have favourite tunes and O'Leary was no exception. His love of polkas and slides was evident. He did not play them at excessive speed but communicated their vibrancy and rhythm. In addition, he played reels, jigs and hornpipes and he always seemed to have more tunes to offer. Frequently, he named

tunes after the person from whom he acquired them. He inherited music while at the same time making his own of music he acquired from legendary characters such as Pádraig O'Keeffe (qv) and then passed this music on to younger musicians. In this regard, he was custodian of a particular music tradition and an active link in the chain of inheritance. Musicians who have been influenced by O'Leary include accordion players Jackie Daly, Jimmy Doyle, Breannán Ó Beaglaoich, Con Fada Ó Drisceoil and Paudie O'Connor. Music groups such as Dé Danann and The Chieftains also acquired tunes from O'Leary's repertoire and adapted them to their own style.

In addition to his renown as accordion player, he was held in high esteem as a storyteller and raconteur *par excellence*. He married Elizabeth (Lil) Kelly, from Gullane, Gníomh go Leith, a cousin of the seanchaí Éamon Kelly (qv); they lived in Rathmore, where Johnny worked in Cadbury's chocolate factory for thirty years until his retirement in 1983. The couple had three children: Ellen, Maureen and Seán. He died in Killarney on 9 February 2004.

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*Music for the sets*, recorded July 1976 and April 1977 (Topic LP, 1977; remastered, Ossian CD25, 2002); Breannán Breathnach, *Ceol*, v, no. 1 (July 1981); *An Calmfhear: the trooper* (Gael Linn CEFC 132, 1989); Terry Moylan (ed.), *Johnny O'Leary of Sliabh Luachra: dance music from the Cork–Kerry border* (1994); F. Valley, *The companion to Irish traditional music* (1999); Donal Hickey, *Stone mad for music: the Sliabh Luachra story* (1999); *Johnny O'Leary of Sliabh Luachra* (CRCD 01 Claddagh, 2003); *Ir. Times*, 10, 21 Feb. 2004