

3.16.2 Netta Jane Nicholl (Miss) Johnston (1878-1952)¹

Wilbert Garvin

With the opening of the Antrim coast road in the early part of the 20th century small villages grew up and with them many small businesses. Carnlough was no exception. Miss Netta Jane Johnston, who was born on the 11th of July 1878, was the eldest in a family of three girls and two boys. She was known as Jane by her closest friends and she inherited the shop operated by her mother's family, the Nicholls, which then became a general store owned by the Johnstons. It was typical of the time, being half hardware and half grocery. She also stocked powder and shot for muzzle loaders. At the 'back' of the shop she had a funeral furnishing business and she produced sewn shrouds for the deceased, apparently in dark brown for Catholics and in black for Protestants! This was probably a tradition at the time.

The building was originally a dwelling place designed and built by John Langtree, who was the land-steward for Lady Londonderry from 1843 to 1850. Part of the ground floor was then converted into a shop operated by the Nicholl family. The building was known as Seaview House. When Jane gave up the shop in her latter days it became a café operated by the Harrison sisters. There is some confusion

regarding Jane also having a tea-shop – perhaps the Harrison café is what was being referred to. As you can see from the photographs below, the building has remained virtually unchanged over the years and is at present Killough's pharmacy.



Photo courtesy of Miss Johnson's niece

¹ An updated and expanded version of the article published in *An Píobaire* Vol.3 Issue 29, 1997.



The shop, with a shop assistant standing at the door, was taken around 1917.²



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² The early photograph of the shop was provided by Des Quail and is taken from *Old Antrim Coast*, by Sandy Watson. Published by Stenlake Publishing, Catrine, Ayrshire, Scotland, 2004; ISBN 1 84033286 7. Grateful thanks to Stenlake Publishing for giving permission to use this photograph.

Jane had considerable strength of character. Refined, cultured and dignified, she was nevertheless somewhat of an eccentric (I use this term very much in the complimentary sense). She was well known as a 'night owl', being often seen walking around Carnlough in the wee small hours. When approached about the possible dangers associated with such an activity she would demonstrate her method of protection – her long walking cane was in fact a sword-cane! She would produce this long blade (which she kept sharpened like a razor) from the cane with a flourish and dared anyone to try her on. There is no doubt that she would have used it if and when necessary. Apparently she was also proficient in judo and was purported to have a loaded shotgun under her bed. She was certainly not a lady to tackle lightly and I often wonder about the shock some of the young jobs of today would have had if they had tried to rob her! I'm sorry however that I didn't have the opportunity to meet her.

Jane loved music and her interests in it were wide and varied. She tried whenever possible to instil a love of proper music in many of the young people of Carnlough and surrounding districts. She played and taught classical violin, being much in demand as a music teacher; she was also competent on the piano, flute and pipe organ.

Jane belonged to St. Mary's Parish Church at Ardclinis, Carnlough and was the organist there for many years. Regarding her organ-playing she apparently had a running argument with the local rector because of her habit of practising the organ at Ardclinis Church between three and four in the middle of the night!³ She was eventually banned from playing the church organ since no agreement could be arrived at. Anyhow, she wasn't overly perturbed, since she tended to distance herself from the established church, believing that the churches, and in particular the rectors, ministers and priests, were some of the main causes of division in society.

As an interesting but relevant aside⁴, when Ken McLeod was young, his family often went on holidays during the summer to Glenarm⁵. They stayed in one half of a large semi-detached house owned by Lily Robinson (1911-1979), who was a great-aunt of piper John Hughes. Lily lived in the other half. Lily, like Jane Johnston, was the organist of the local Parish church.⁶ Lily would have been twenty or more years younger than Jane but they must have been contemporary as church organists for years in the neighbouring villages.⁷ Lily, just like Jane, also kept a few chickens 'at the back'. These were of course an excellent source of free-range eggs, and when they had finished laying they made a good plate of broth. Once when Ken and his sister Anne were visiting Lily she gave them a banty (bantam) each.

³ This may be doubtful as, if there was no electricity then, she would have required a helper to blow the organ bellows.

⁴ Thanks to Ken McLeod for this information.

⁵ Glenarm is a few miles round the bay from Carnlough on the Antrim coast.

⁶ As well as being organist in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland (parish of Tickmacrevin), Lily was organist in the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Glenarm.

⁷ John Hughes: I would be very surprised indeed if Lily hadn't personally known Miss Johnston. Another connection would have been the undertaking business. James Robinson, Lily's father and my great grandfather, ran a joinery & cabinetmaking business in Glenarm where he made, among other things, Coffins. My grandmother, Annie Hughes (nee Robinson) referred to him often making coffins. As children she and her brothers and sister (Lily) were forbidden to use (or play with?) the scissors he kept for cutting coffin cloth.

Unfortunately, Ken's banty died a year later but they eventually took the other one, which they had called Joey, home with them to Belfast where it lived for about 16 years!

Here's a photograph of Ken's sister Anne nursing 'Joey the Banty' with Ken beside her, his brother Gerry behind and cousin Jim back right. Ken was eight years old when this photograph was taken on the steps of the house they stayed at in Glenarm.



Ken McLeod

Getting back to Jane, I was invited in 2007 to play the pipes at a flower festival in St. Mary's Church. There wasn't much

room at the front of the church and so I had to play sitting on the organ seat that Jane must have sat on for many years. I also had a go at the little pipe organ – a beautiful sounding instrument which is kept in good working order. I must say that it was a moving experience.

After playing I was putting my pipes into the car when an elderly (actually not much older than me) gentleman approached and told me that he knew Miss Johnston when he was young. His name was Bobby Gaston, and I arranged to go to his home outside Carnlough since I wanted to learn more. Bobby also seemed very keen to talk to me and to hear me playing the pipes. In due course I visited Bobby and we had a good afternoon's chat about Miss Johnston. The photograph below is of Bobby holding my pipes.⁸ He wanted to put them on since they brought back so many memories of Miss Johnston when he was young, and he thoroughly enjoyed listening to the pipes again.



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He had first met Miss Johnston when, as a youngster of about 12 years of age, he had called into her shop to buy things – that would have been in the early 1940s. Miss Johnston often asked him to help her to shift something,

⁸ Photograph by the author taken during his visit to Bobby in 2008. The pipes are made by James Williamson of Belfast *circa* 1900.

for example a heavy bag of bolts out of a cupboard or a bag of meal that needed moved, since she was by now in her 60s. One day after helping her she took out her pipes and played for him. Bobby was fascinated by the sight and sound of the pipes and after that, she played for him on a number of occasions. She talked to Bobby about making reeds for the pipes and asked him to help her out by scraping bits of cane with a 'bit of glass'. She also got him to wax dark brown hemp, which she hooked over a nail. When playing she emphasised that you don't play the chanter with the tips of the fingers – the fingers must be out straight. She didn't teach anyone the pipes, just piano and violin/fiddle. Her fiddle was made by Pat McKay, a local maker from Carnlough. It is interesting to note that in O'Mealy's black box⁹ there is a bag pattern and a bellows leather pattern with the name McKay written on them. Was Pat McKay also fascinated with the pipes? Did he manage to obtain a set of pipes which needed refurbished – perhaps being a fiddle-maker he was hopefully putting them together himself, with the leather parts supplied by R. L.? Was Jane going to teach him?

Jane always wore a wrap-round apron and she carried her hair in a bun with a comb. Bobby told me that you always had to call her Miss Johnston – if you called her Jane that was you finished! She was very single-minded with very strong opinions and contrary to what many people thought, Bobby said that she had a good sense of humour.

Her efforts at bringing people together was tackled in a very practical way – she formed what she appropriately called the 'Carnlough Non-Sectarian Flute Band' which ran for many years in the 1920s and 1930s. She wanted people to 'band' together as it were. Apparently this flute band was very successful, no doubt due to Miss Johnston being such a kind and considerate person, and practises were held in a hut to the rear of Seaview House. She was also well known as a 'formidable task-mistress' as one past member of the band I had the opportunity to speak to a number of years ago put it. No harm in that – it gets results.

With respect to her Uilleann piping, it was very unusual to find a lady piper, particularly in the earlier part of the 20th century in a small village like Carnlough on the Antrim coast. At a meeting in Cushendall on the 28th February, 1904, it was decided to hold a Feis. F.J.Bigger was elected Treasurer, while Roger Casement and Miss Johnston (only 26 years of age) were also elected, together with others, to the organising committee. The first Feis of the Glens was held in the summer of that year and it is likely that it was F.J.Bigger who invited R.L.O'Mealy to be the music adjudicator and one of the performers at the evening concert.

This is probably where Miss Johnston may have first come across the pipes and R. L. O'Mealy, and been fascinated by both. She also knew that R. L. made pipes since Neil McCurdy from Rathlin Island won the piping competition on war pipes at the *Feis*, and believe it or not, his prize was a set of Uilleann pipes by O'Mealy.¹⁰

She travelled regularly to Belfast for lessons with R.L. usually on a Wednesday afternoon when the shop shut early. Being a reasonably accomplished, determined and versatile musician she bought a set from him and progressed quite rapidly. She played the pipes at the *Feis* in Ballymena in the 1930s. The Ballymena *Feis* is still held today, and it has always had

⁹ See Article 3.13 The O'Mealy Black Box

¹⁰ From a report in the *Ballymena Weekly Telegraph*, 9th July, 1904.

a traditional music section. I remember that when I first came to the Ballymena area in the late 60s, I entered the *Feis* so that people would have an opportunity to hear the pipes. Unfortunately the only class that I could enter was the ‘miscellaneous instrument class’, to the chagrin of the adjudicator, none other than the redoubtable Breandán Breathnach, who of course couldn’t resist making a few pertinent remarks! Breandán came regularly for a number of years to adjudicate at the Ballymena *Feis*.

When Jane died, her brother James Lyons Nicholl Johnston of 30 Sharman Road, Belfast,



was granted permission to handle her estate. Apparently she instructed that her pipes be donated to the Ulster Museum.

They are a 15” boxwood set (pitched at C sharp) with brass ferrules – O’Mealy’s favourite materials. They have four drones – the tenor and bass I nominally call in D

and the baritone in A, while the fourth is a blank, and a single baritone regulator. The chanter seems to have had a G# key added in addition to the usual keys, using metal pillars, after it had been made for her, no doubt because she wanted to be able to play many of the tunes that she had learned on the piano or violin.



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The Rev. Violet Johnson with her aunt's pipes.

During recent extensive renovations to the Ulster Museum Miss Johnston’s pipes were put into storage. Through the auspices of Helen McAlister, who has shown a keen interest in Miss Johnston, contact was made with her niece, the Rev. Violet Johnson, who intimated that she would love to see her aunt’s pipes.

In due course contact was made with Vivienne Pollock, the Curator of History at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum near Cultra, Co. Down. She located the pipes and arranged to have them at the museum for us to view.

On the 8th July, 2010 the Rev. Violet, Helen and myself turned up at the museum and had a good time examining the pipes. They were in a black wooden, and unusually tapered, box – probably made by Miss Johnston’s coffin maker, and



wrapped in an elaborately embroidered cloth. The Rev. Violet was visibly touched by the experience of holding her aunt's pipes.

I had a go at the pipes to find out what condition they were in. With a little work it should be possible to get them going well – the bellows valve had dried out and the drone key was stuck. I didn't want to start taking them apart, but I did check and found a reed in the chanter. Amazingly, after all this time, the bag and bellows leathers appeared to be sound.

Helen summed up the whole experience with the following touching words :

In Reverence

She cradles the pipes, her eyes, warm with memories of childhood. Her fingers slowly stroke along their old familiarity.
A smile purrs around his lips. Soft eyed, dressed in those pipes, his fingers caress tuners and butt pieces; his elbow breathes gently to waken the bellows. They wheeze into a re-birth though the enchantress "hauls her wheesht"¹¹, but binds her spell with waxy hemp, no doubt.

Jane Johnston died at Seaview House, Carnlough on the 30th of March 1952, aged 74, and is buried in the family plot at St. Mary's Church, Ardclinis. Her grave is one of six surrounded by an iron railing just behind the wall, beside the entrance gate at the church. Her two sisters and one of her brothers are also buried there, while James, her second brother, is buried in Knockbreda Cemetery, Belfast, the same one as R.L. O'Mealy.



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¹¹ 'Hauls her Wheesht' – Ulster dialect meaning 'Holds her tongue'

Typical of Jane however, she caused controversy not only right to the end, but even after. Since she had a funeral business she was somewhat fussy about her own funeral arrangements, and with respect to these she had informed a number of her friends of her wishes. In her attic she had a special coffin constructed which had a glass lid. On occasions she would invite a visitor to the attic, when she would climb into this coffin and lie with her arms folded. She then explained that when she died it was her wish that this coffin, containing her good self, was to be put into an upright position so that everyone could see her as she was paraded around the village, led by an Uilleann piper playing 'Let Erin Remember'. In the event her funeral turned out to be a conventional one no doubt due to the many differences of opinion she had had with the local rector¹².



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¹² Much of the information about Miss Johnston was given to me by John Montgomery of Carnlough. His grandmother was friendly with Jane and they had attended the same school. I would also like to thank Helen McAlister and Brian McLaughlin for further information, and their efforts to obtain photographs of Miss Johnston.