IRISH CRANNGAL ‘CRAN’ - A PIPER’S TECHNICAL TERM

THOUGH the bagpipe is not an instrument native to Ireland, to judge from the fact that pip/pipa, first found in Middle Irish, is a Romance loanword, it is referred to as early as the eleventh century.¹ By the sixteenth century it had become the military instrument of the Irish (and Highland Scots), filling the role of the drum or trumpet in regular armies. Sixteenth-century illustrations show a common North European type of bagpipe consisting of a bag, blowpipe, chanter, and two drones. This pib mhór, or war-pipe, pettered out around the beginning of the eighteenth century. In the same period first appeared the bagpipe now regarded as being distinctively Irish. Bellows-blown, lower in pitch and volume than the war-pipe and with a range of two octaves (as against the war-pipe’s range of an octave and one note), this newer bagpipe was being described as the Irish bagpipe by the mid-eighteenth century. Later it was called the ‘union pipe’ – ‘uilleann’ was foisted on it only at the beginning of this century² and underwent various modifications before reaching its final form in the early nineteenth century.³

Unlike the Highland bagpipe, where a good deal of Gaelic piping-terminology has survived, albeit much of it no longer understood, only one Irish technical term has survived among pipers. This paucity of Irish piping-terminology is probably due to the piping tradition’s having survived strongest in English-speaking areas of the country, particularly in towns and cities. Many Irish-speaking pipers who were, presumably, trained through the medium of Irish did survive into the twentieth century but they left no pupils behind them. Nor did anyone in contact with them think to note down technical terms etc. from them.⁴

The one term to survive, ‘cran, cranning’, is applied by pipers to a rhythmic ornament performed on the lowest and second lowest notes on the chanter, d⁻ and e⁻. In its simplest form a long note taking up a single beat of a dance tune, usually a dotted crotchet, is divided into three by being ‘cut’ with gracenotes higher in pitch. This produces a drumming effect on the note; and ‘cran’ means not the actual performance of the

³ Breandán Breathnach, Folk music and dances of Ireland (Dublin, 1971), pp. 80-1.
⁴ Lord Walter Fitzgerald noted down the Irish terms for parts of the pipes from John Joyce, a Co. Galway piper, in 1893 (NLI MS 16,157); Séamas Ó Cásáide also gives a list of Irish terms associated with the pipes (NLI MS 8118, 2); and Eamonn Ceannt gives the Irish terms for parts of the pipes and some aspects of the performance of the music (NLI MS 13,069); but none gives any Irish term for ornamentation. Ceannt uses English, and though Ó Cásáide does give the Irish crannghail he quotes Henery as his source and does not explain it.
ornament but the sound produced. The pitch of the gracenotes and the rhythm of the ornament may vary from piper to piper, and from tune to tune within the repertory of a single piper, since some variants suit particular contexts better than others, but in every case the term used is ‘cran’.

The basic ‘cran’ can be further elaborated by adding gracenotes, and there are hints that formerly it was not confined to d’ and e’. In the course of a newspaper correspondence concerning piping-technique in May 1930 two of the leading pipers of the day, Séamas Mac Aonghusa (Jimmy Ennis, father and teacher of the piper Seumas Ennis) and Leo Rowsome, disagreed on whether notes other than d’ and e’ could be ‘cranned’: Ennis insisted that they could, Rowsome that they could not. Though modern practice bears out Rowsome’s contention, recordings of pipers who flourished around the beginning of this century show that ‘cran’-like ornaments were played on most notes on the chanter. However an ornament called a ‘roll’ is now played on these notes, and the ‘cran’ confined to the bottom two notes.

Neither the term ‘cran’ nor the ornament itself appear in the tutors published for the Irish bagpipe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These range from John Geoghegan’s *Compleat tutor for the pastoral or new bagpipe* (London, c. 1746), which depicts an early form of the instrument, through the treatise attached to *O Farrell’s collection of national Irish music for the union pipes* (London, 1804), which is much closer to the surviving tradition, to S. T. Colclough’s *New and complete instructions for the union pipes* (Dublin, c. 1830), which seems to have been directed at amateurs desirous of playing the popular parlour-music of the day. Besides common musical terms and ornaments the three tutors use the term ‘curl’ for combinations of gracenotes peculiar to the bagpipe.

The earliest reference to the term ‘cran’ is in a letter dated 22 August 1792 to Joseph Cooper Walker, author of *Historical memoirs of the Irish bards* (Dublin, 1786), from Sir Gore Ouseley, a native of Co. Limerick then living in India. Interested in Persian and Indian music Ouseley also played the flute and guitar, as well as the Irish bagpipe. (In a letter of 18 August 1792 to his father he regrets that a set of pipes that the latter had despatched to him had not yet arrived.) The letter to Cooper Walker describes a local Indian bagpipe that Ouseley had encountered. Of its music he writes:

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The music bears a very strong similitude to that of our bagpipe in respect to crans, shakes &c;...I am sure were I to play an Irish jig on it, in the next room to you, you could scarce tell the difference.7

‘Shakes’ were common musical ornaments whereby a note was trilled by the note above it, but we cannot be certain that this is the meaning here.

The first man to notate a ‘cran’ as it was actually played was a piper himself – Canon James Goodman (1828-96), professor of Irish at Trinity College, Dublin. He collected nearly five hundred pieces of music from Tom Kennedy, an ‘ex-piper’ from near his native Ventry, Co. Kerry.8 His collection, which contains much music from printed sources and manuscripts besides the music noted from Kennedy, was compiled between 1860 and 1866. In vol. IV (the earliest in date), p. 17, Goodman had copied in the ‘curls on Irish pipe’ given in O Farrell’s treatise. However, in vol. I, p. 18, as a preface to a section containing dance-music from Kennedy, Goodman wrote out eleven ornaments to be used in the succeeding tunes. No. 5 is the ‘cran’ on d’, but Goodman does not call it that. He writes that it was ‘one of the curls in most general use...which is introduced in most of the old jigs to great effect’. Note the emphasis on the sound produced.

A ‘cran’ identical to Goodman’s was noted from Nicholas Markey (1836-1914), a native of Meath, who was instructor to the Dublin Pipers’ Club 1900-14, by Séamas Ó Casaide, a member of the club – though not a piper.9 The secretary of the club, Éamonn Ceannnt (1881-1916), a pupil of Markey’s, compiled a number of disjointed notes towards a tutor, based on Markey’s teaching, about 1905. He does not illustrate a ‘cran’ but says of it: ‘“Cranning” is the name given to a peculiar method of repeating a note, chiefly low D.’10

With the revival of interest in piping at the beginning of the century literature on the subject becomes more plentiful. In the first tutor to appear in nearly eighty years Patsey Touhey (1865-1923), the outstanding piper of the period, described (but did not illustrate) the principal ornaments on the bagpipe. They were ‘the “turn” or “curl” ’, which modern pipers call a ‘roll’, and the “roll” or “cran”, as it was termed.

7. Sir Gore Ouseley, Biographical notices of Persian poets: with critical and explanatory remarks. To which is prefixed a memoir of Sir G. Ouseley by J. Reynolds (London, 1846), xiii, xxv. (I wish to thank Nicholas Carolan for this reference.)
9. NLI MS 8118, 2, Ó Casaidhe papers (unsorted scraps).
10. NLI MS 13,069, Ceannnt papers (miscellaneous papers connected with Ceannnt’s activities in the Dublin Pipers’ Club, the Gaelic League, etc.).
by most of the old time players’, by which he means a ‘cran’. (His claim that ‘roll’ and ‘cran’ were interchangeable is not supported by any other example.) Leo Rowsome defined a ‘cran’ as being ‘a “rally” on a note’ – ‘rally’ is the term used for a step in dancing – and gave illustrations in his *Tutor for the uileann* (sic) *pipes* (Dublin, 1936), p. 10. But in a tutor published the same year, *How to play the Irish uillean* (sic) *pipes* (Cork, 1936), Tadhg Crowley applied the term to ornamental triplets, not to the usual ornament (pp. 14-15). However Crowley is extremely unlikely to have had any authentic precedent for his singular use of ‘cran’. His tutor is an odd production in many ways. Though a maker of both Irish and Highland pipes, Crowley was primarily a Highland piper; in his tutor he sought to impose Highland-pipe ornamentation on the Irish pipe, to which most of it was unsuited.

There are no certain examples of the use of ‘cran’ in a context other than piping. In his book, *English as we speak it in Ireland* (Dublin, 1910), p. 241, P. W. Joyce does give ‘Crans (always in pl.); little tricks or dodges. (Limk.)’, which could be a borrowing into general circulation of ‘cran’, but the word in question here might be another, different one.

There can be no doubt that in origin ‘cran’ must be an Irish word. And the Irish original was in fact used by Dr Richard Henebry, a piper and fiddler himself. (He was, though it is difficult to believe, an even greater crank in matters relating to Irish music than he was in relation to the Irish language.) In an article published on 27 April 1907, the second part of a long disquisition on piping, Henebry wrote:

> The cranghail ... (pronounced kran-eel) may be produced, for instance, by rattling the A and F sharp fingers while the chanter is raised. The effect is peculiar, and seems as if independent of the method of production. It is a very fine ornament and much used in the Connacht style of playing.

By ‘raising the chanter’ Henebry means playing the lowest note d – the piper raises the chanter off his knee to sound this note. ‘The Connacht style of playing’ refers in particular to the piping of Patsey

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12 The word here could be the same as that in the Irish phrase ‘crans do chur ar rud’ ‘to ornament, to adorn something’ given under ‘ornament’ in L. Mc Cionnaith, *Focloir Béarla agus Gaedhilge* (1935). This is a borrowing of an English word ‘crance, corance’ (various spellings) meaning a ‘wreath, garland, chaplet’, now obsolete according to the *OED*.
13 Rev. Richard Henebry PhD, ‘Concerning piping II’, *Sinn Féin* 27 April 1907. There are several drafts among the Ó Casaide papers, NLI MS 8117, 4, 5.
Touhey, mentioned above, who was a native of Galway, though reared and trained in America.\textsuperscript{14}

Dinneen’s \textit{Irish-English Dictionary} (London, 1904; rev. ed., 1927) gives \textit{crannghail} and two related words. It is impossible to say whether Henebry found \textit{crannghail} in Dinneen or in his native dialect of Irish, that of Na Déise, Co. Waterford.)

[1] \textbf{Crannghail}, \ldots strains of music (pipers used to accompany funerals at one time (\ldots strains of music, \textit{esp.} of pipes playing a funeral march, 1927 ed.).


[3] \textbf{Crannadh,} \ldots act of playing certain tunes on the fiddle, bagpipes, etc.

The technical meaning of ‘cran’ is clear in [3]. Since it was a rhythmic ornament its use to mean ‘a step in dancing’ would agree with this meaning. Compare Rowsome’s analogy of ‘cran’ with ‘rally’, a term used in dancing, quoted above. \textit{Cranna ceoil} ‘strains of music’ however may be a ghost-word. Dinneen apparently took it from a poem by Tadhg Gaedhealach Ó Súilleabáin where it appears as ‘cranna na geol’. He translates it as above in the vocabulary; but from the context the phrase might mean simply ‘harps’.\textsuperscript{15}

The precise technical meaning in piping is not clear in [1]; but it is Dinneen who is responsible for obscuring it. An examination of his source shows that he fudged the precise meaning in an attempt to fit it into the usual range of meaning \textit{crannghail} possesses.

The usual meaning of \textit{crannghail}, earlier \textit{cranngal}, is ‘wood, woodwork’. It could be used of any wooden artifact or structure and has a wide range of meanings\textsuperscript{16} (for which see \textit{DIL}). In this concrete sense it could be used of a musical instrument such as the bagpipe,\textsuperscript{17} but that does not explain its abstract use at [1]. Dinneen found this unusual meaning of \textit{cranngal} in \textit{Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge} ii (1884) 286, 319. A query (p. 286) enquired the meaning of \textit{cranngal} in two lines from a poem

\textsuperscript{14} Mitchell and Smalle, \textit{Patsey Touhey}, pp. 1-3. (For Henebry’s ecstatic reaction to Touhey’s piping see p. 10.)

\textsuperscript{15} P. Ua Duinnin, \textit{Amhráin Thaidhg Ghaedhealaigh Uí Shúilleabháin} (Baile Átha Cliath, 1903), lch. 85. Risteárd Ó Foghludha does not comment on this phrase in his edition, \textit{Tadhg Gaedhlaigh} (Baile Átha Cliath, 1929), lch. 55.

\textsuperscript{16} Such is also the case with the Welsh cognate \textit{prennyal}; see J. Loth, ‘Notes étymologiques et lexicographiques’, \textit{RC} xxviii (1917), 164-5.

\textsuperscript{17} William J. Watson, \textit{Bardachd Ghaidhlig} (Inverness, 1918; rep. 1976), p. 356.
entitled *Air bhás Rísteaírd Páoir Baile an Déise* (‘Do chualadh tásag air bhás an tsaoi ghlain’, RIA MS 23 0 15, 238):

Cia sin chughainn aig teacht go fíochmhar
A g-curairgeachtaí air chranaoil aoibhinn?

It was pointed out that Death had used the same expression to Tomás de Róiste in the poem *An t-othar agus an báis*:

Geobhair marcuiugheachtaí árd air cranaoil aoibhinn
Aig dul do’n teampaill i g-cionn de dhaoineadh.

Despite there being no doubt that in both instances *cranagal* means the bier on which the corpse was borne to the churchyard, the query elicited the following response (p. 319) from Domhnall Ó Murchadha, a correspondent who wrote under the pen-name ‘Domhnall na Gréine’:

*Cranagal* . . . “Used now only in the sense of a musical sound — *fuaín ceoil. Do bhuaín sé an-chranaíl as*, is said of a musician in respect of his instrument. Such is its meaning in the following half-stanza—

Seal fé choill na g-craobh, mar a bh-fuighmis ceileabhar cùnladh
Gus cranagal pip dá gleus dúinn, ‘snár bh’e sin an spórt.
Might the cranagal be the caoine itself?”

In support of this last suggestion the editor of *Irishleabhar na Gaedhilge* drew attention to Keating’s notice of the custom whereby pipers accompanied the dead to the grave in seventeenth-century Connacht, a custom, however, not confined to Connacht, and much older than the seventeenth century.

Dinneen accepted the suggestion that the *caoine*, or its instrumental equivalent, with which the dead were accompanied to the grave was in question here. Ignoring the tentativeness of Domhnall na Gréine’s suggestion, he cast it into very definite form in his dictionary, actually quoting the two lines from *An t-othar agus an báis* as an illustration in the 1904 edition. His reasoning appears to have been that *cranagal* ‘bier’ was transferred to the music which accompanied it.

18 I wish to thank Dr Éamonn Ó hOgáin for referring me to Dinneen’s source.


20 Several writers commented on the custom of piping a corpse to the grave in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For what is probably the earliest notice of it see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Foreign connections and domestic politics: Killaloe and the Úi Bhríain in twelfth-century hagiography’, in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick, and David Dumville eds., *Ireland in early medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 217.
As far as I have been able to ascertain no further example of this unusual meaning of *cranngal* is known; nor is it current in spoken Irish. What may be an error for it occurs in a song, ‘Gráig na nGabhar’, attributed to ‘Séamus an Sróin (sic),’ collected by Pádraig Ó Fionnúsa, Reidh na dTeampán, Baile mhic Cairbre, Co. Portlárige, in 1930. One verse reads:

Nach deas do léighfinn nó nach néudta a scríbhfinn,
Nó déinfinn aoihneas nár airigheas fós,
Imreochainn lem’ mhéaraibh ar na tódaibh smaointbh,
Nó as mo phiópa bhainfinn breaduigheal cheoil.²¹

‘Breaduigheal cheoil’ does not appear to make sense. The first word is, presumably, the usual word *bradail* ‘thieving, pilfering’ (of animals ‘trespassing’). Any connection with piping or music appears utterly impossible. Given its context and form it is just possible that *breaduigheal* is a mistake for *cranngal*; the latter would certainly make better sense in the context.

Dinneen’s implied explanation of *cranngal* was apparently accepted by J. Lloyd-Jones, ‘The compounds of *gal*, Féilsgríbhinn Tórna (Cork, 1947), pp. 83-9. He includes this particular meaning without comment under *cranngal* ‘wood, woodwork’ among his examples of the use of *gal* as a collective suffix (p. 86). Myles Dillon, ‘The semantic history of Irish *gal* ‘valour; steam’’, Celtica viii. 196-200, also quotes *cranngal* ‘wood, woodwork’ as an example of *gal* as a collective suffix (p. 198) but says nothing about the particular meaning under discussion.

Rather than *cranngal* ‘an effect or sound in music’ having developed by some kind of transference from *cranngal* ‘wood, woodwork’, I would suggest that these two meanings are independent and represent two distinct stages in the development of *gal*-compounds, with the former, though the less-attested, being the older meaning.

In the study already referred to, Myles Dillon distinguished three stages in the semantic history of *gal*-compounds. To the third and last stage, where *gal*, empty of all lexical content, has become a mere collective suffix, e.g. *broen* ‘drop’ > *broengal* ‘drops’, *carn* ‘heap’ > *carnagal* ‘heaps’ — a development found in both Irish and Welsh — belongs *cranngal* ‘wood, woodwork’ (p. 198). Dillon showed how *gal* lost all trace of its original meaning through being compounded with nouns which themselves expressed force or intensity: ‘*Gal*, when compounded

²¹ Irish Folklore Collection, Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, IFC 85, 362. Lenition accidentally omitted has been supplied. I wish to acknowledge the permission of Professor Bo Almqvist, Head of the Department of Irish Folklore, to publish this extract.
with words within the semantic range of "action, force", loses its own semantic content and becomes a suffix marking the process, and actually develops into a mere collective" (pp. 198-9).

Originally, however, *gal*, preserving the meaning 'to be able', had been compounded with nouns to form nouns of action, e.g. *bonngal* 'trampling', *bratgal* 'thieving'. Breton and Welsh examples imply that this was a development from the Common Celtic period. But many of these early compounds express noise, a point noted by Dillon (p. 197, n. 5): *brattgal* 'flapping of sails', *fëngal* 'rumbling of carts' ('creaking' *DIL*), *fetgal* 'whistling', *glörgal* 'shouting', *gnúisghail* 'grunting', *gothgal* 'calling', *ruchtgal* 'noise', *scemgal* 'clashing, howling', *siangal* 'wailing', *trostgal* 'clashing'. To these Dillon added (in the note already referred to), *ruamgal* "rumbling (of wheels)" . . . and *sessgal* "creaking of oarsmen's benches"'. This again appears to be a Common Celtic development: Breton *coagal* 'to croak', *doc'hal* 'to grunt'; Welsh *gremial* 'to murmur', *sisial* 'to whisper'. (These examples could be further supplemented from Lloyd-Jones's study.)

The process whereby a noun of action is transferred to the noise produced by that activity is perfectly clear and calls for no comment. From words expressing both action and the sound produced by the action like *brattgal* 'flapping of sails, noise of flapping sails', *détgal* 'gnashing of teeth, sound of gnashing teeth', *gal* progressed to being compounded in words that expressed noise only like *sessgal* 'creaking of oarsmen's benches' (the idea of action is, however, never completely absent from many of these later forms).

In the light of Dillon's study I would suggest that *cranngal* 'a sound or effect in music' is a compound of *crann* 'wood' and *gal* 'valour, steam', as indeed is *cranngal* 'woodwork', but that it belongs to the first stage in the development of these compounds, when *gal* had developed the ability to express noise as well as action.

Since it is far older than the first appearance of the bagpipe in Irish society it must have originally been applied to the sound of some other wooden musical instrument - a shawm or flute of some kind. And it should be remembered that the original primary musical instrument of the Goidels was a wind-instrument: Old Irish *airfítiod* 'entertaining with music' is a compound of *sétid* 'blows' and the preposition *ar* 'before' (*Thurn. Gramm.* §§203, 218).

The wooden musical instrument in question could possibly have been the *cuisle* 'a pipe or flute' to which there are copious references in Irish literature. 22 By the sixteenth century, though poets continued to use the names of a variety of musical instruments, outside observers mention the

22 Herbert, 'Ár n-uirisi céoil', ch. 27.
bagpipe and harp only. 

Presumably the bagpipe supplanted the earlier wind-instrument(s), taking over their musical terminology. The form of cranngal still in use among pipers, ‘cran’, must be the same as Dinneen’s crann at [2] above. In origin it must have been extracted from the compound cranngal and then have developed a new verbal noun crannadh.

I wish to acknowledge the permission of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin, to publish the extract from the Goodman MSS quoted above; and to thank Seán Ua Súilleabháin for all his encouragement and help.

Seán Donnelly

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24 An example of a technical term remaining in use among musicians long after it had dropped out of use elsewhere is provided by féchuin gleása, the common pen-test of Irish scribes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was used by harpers in Ireland and Scotland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it was current among Highland pipers as late as the middle of the last century. Seán Donnelly, ‘Feaghan gleasha’, Ceol tíre XXV (February 1984), 5-6, 11-12.

25 The Scottish Gaelic piping-term creanluadh/cruinnluadh, hitherto unexplained, is probably a development of the Irish cranngal. I hope to deal with it, and some other terms, in a future article.