

# THE ISLAND FIDDLER



Hector MacDonald at home in Bangor, Lot 40, about 1960.

Newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society  
No. 6, February 1982

# Fiddlers Notes

Over the past summer the Queens County chapter formed an Auxiliary to enlist the support of the spouses of Society members, and to involve the whole family in the performance and preservation of Celtic music on the Island. This group has been providing lunches during the break Thursday nights at Southport Community Centre. . . . As a fund-raising venture, the Auxiliary sponsored a lottery on a fiddle. The draw was held during the Rollo Bay Concert, the winner being Diane Acorn of Fortune. Special thanks go out to the members who sold tickets. The Auxiliary is looking for more ideas and more help. Anyone interested in participating, call one of the officers: Arlette Koughan, Marguerite Weatherbie, or Paulette Longaphie.

Recent recordings by Island fiddlers include an LP from Eddy Arsenault (with a fine selection of tunes) and performances by Edward Arsenault and Robert Arsenault on 'Comment ça flippe' an Acadian soiree. Both are issued by Le Festival Acadien. . . . Catgut Your Tongue Dept.: While in Britain last summer, a certain member purchased a set of violin strings in Edinburgh that contained some strange information. The strings are called 'Nogal' and are apparently of Spanish manufacture, as is this English translation on the package--"Thanks to this type of metal strings, it has been possible to achieve both the switness of sound and the softness, to feel that, one can recall the bowel strings of the past, but this type far better than the latter owing to the promptness in emission and the ready and stable tuning." Anyone make anything out of that? The purchaser has been so far reluctant to take these strings from the package, in case they really are, as advertized, "bowel strings." . . . The recent campaign on the mainland to pressure CJFX in Antigonish to play more Celtic music seems to be achieving some success. Perhaps a similar effort should be made to encourage Island stations to begin some programming of this sort. . . . The importance of old-time group dancing being revived along with the music has long been talked about, but little done. Isn't there some way to involve dancers with our music? The occasions when Bruce Crane has called old-time sets at Southport practices were enjoyable, and perhaps some regular activities could be developed with dance groups.

## Obituaries

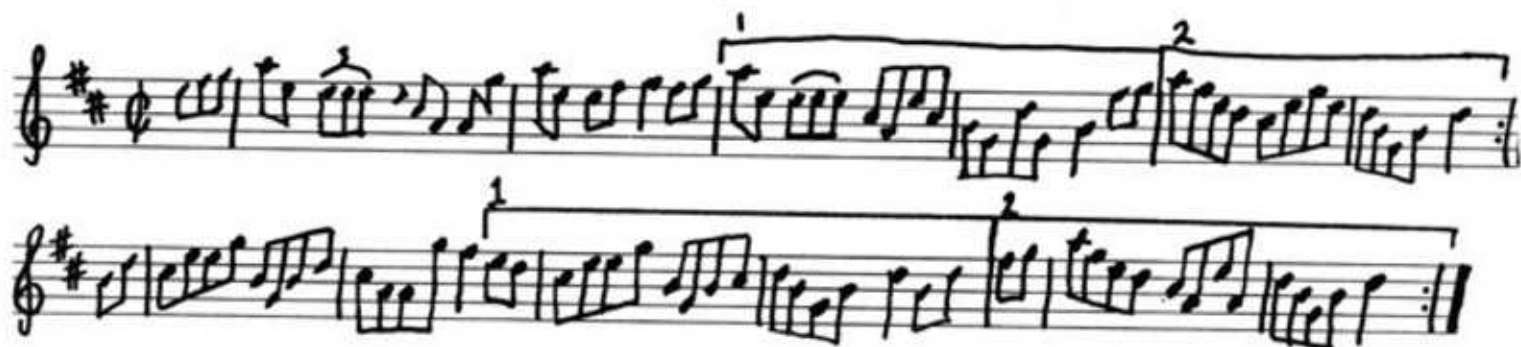
The passing of Joe Chaisson, Bear River, on June 20 of last year was mourned by all who knew him. A large group of fiddlers added to the music of his kin at the funeral in Rollo Bay. Our condolences to Margaret and the whole clan.

The deepest sympathy is extended to Mr. and Mrs. Buddy Dunn, Charlottetown, whose son Ronald J. Dunn died in a tragic highway accident on December 19 last.

# Tunes to Try

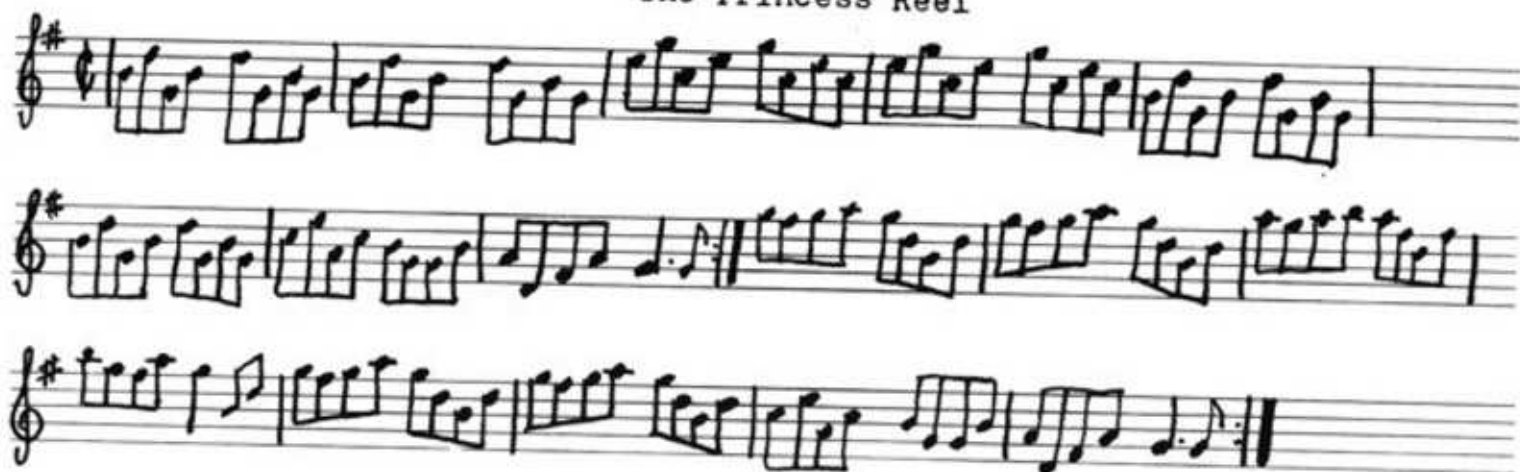
As played by Hector MacDonal

## Little Donald in the Pigpen



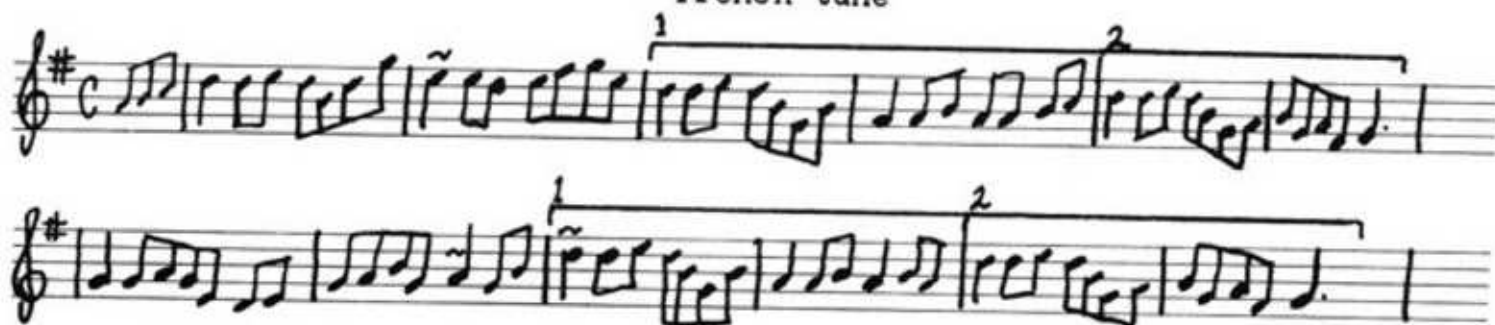
Hector believes that "Little Donald" was a pipe march that came to be played "too fast" as a reel. It somewhat resembles some versions of the Irish reel "The Jolly Tinker" (such as those in Kerr's Merry Melodies for the Pianoforte & Cole's 1000 Fiddle Tunes, p. 14 1st turn). Little Donald's name is explained on page 5.

## The Princess Reel



This reel has long been popular, especially with stepdancers. Hector learned it over 50 years ago from Ervan Bambrick as "The Golden Wedding Reel" and remembers being the first to play the tune over the radio in Charlottetown. Although simple and repetitive on the page, "The Princess Reel" requires strong bowing and some barring of two strings with the 2nd and 3rd fingers in the first turn.

## French tune



This was learned on the mouth-organ from someone who got it in the New Brunswick woods. Hector later transferred it to the fiddle.

--J.H.

## Conversation with a Fiddler : Hector MacDonald

Hector MacDonald is an old-time fiddler from Bangor, Queens county, who has been playing about 60 years. He started at age 8, and recalls, "I loved it from the beginning. I couldn't sleep in a room unless the fiddle was hanging there!" He still plays entirely by ear. Hector and his wife Mary have a large, musical family that includes a fiddler, Allan. Up until the last year or two, Hector, family members, and guests put on a Thursday night dance during the summer at a hall built for the purpose on his property.

Among area fiddlers he remembers were Ward and Jay Crane, Louis MacAulay, Earl and Emmet Hughes, Lem Jay, Ervan Bambrick and Omar Cheverie. He was always impressed with the selection of tunes played by Joe Chaisson and the other Chaisson fiddlers. On record he especially admires Scotty Fitzgerald, Angus Chisholm ("the terrificest bow hand I ever saw"), Hugh A. MacDonald and Bill Lamey. He has learned a number of tunes from records. Like many ear-players, he doesn't have a title for many of his tunes.

Hector first held the fiddle lower, against his chest in the old manner. Later, when the style changed, he moved it up under his chin. In recent years with shoulder soreness plaguing his fine bow hand, he holds it lower again for easier bowing. While the shoulder problem now limits the length of time he can play, Hector still enjoys making music. He used to play for dances and shows all around his home county and parts of Kings, and recalls once playing "Heather on the Hill" for a large group of stepdancers "until I was stupid." Cliff Peters once told him that he had a style of his own. He believes that the Fiddlers' Society is a great development for young fiddlers and wonders why it took so long to come about: "If that hadn't started up, there'd be nobody; the fiddle was dying out."

### Instructions from Ward Crane

"He's the man that trained me. Whatever kick I got in my fingers or anything, it was him that showed me how to do it. Or a slur, or a grace note and all that. I can't tremble me fingers on the strings, but I can put a grace note in and a slur note when it's supposed to go in. So he [Ward] had them all, and he told me, he said, 'Hector,' he said, 'you're coming fast'--he and I used to play together. And he said 'You have everything in that now that you want.' But he said, 'There's one thing I'm gonna tell you. Don't put too many of them in, nor don't leave too many out.' He said, 'You can sit out in a field there with 400 of an audience, and they'll all like your tunes, but if you leave too many of them in or leave any of them out, they'll get tired of your playing.' And that's right, they will."



## Playing on CHCK in the late '20s

"When I was in there [Charlottetown] I stayed at Danny MacEachern's. And I had been playing for Danny, he was a first war veteran. So, they all liked my playing. I had a lot of tunes you know, and I had a good arm, and young. It was nothing to me to play at all. So he wanted me to go down to the [CHCK] studio after dinner and have a talk to Gesner [the station manager]. So I went up and took the violin with me, and we're talking to him in a big room. 'This fella wants to play.' 'Good' he said, 'great' he said, 'what do you play?' I said, 'Just old-time stuff.' He said 'How about this evening, tonight, put a program on for us?' I said 'Fine and dandy.' He said 'I'd like to hear you play though before.' So I took the fiddle up and just sitting like here, I played a lot of tunes for him. He said 'that's good.' 'Come on up,' he said, 'we'll make a program, a half-an-hour program.'

He said 'Who do you want to play with you?' Well, I was wanting to get like these Joseph Allard records. I wanted him to get a juice-harp, and a mouth-organ, and a piano and a guitar. And a mixed program, I wanted to get a song or two in between. And when I was playing I wanted to get the juice-harp to start in the middle of it and then ease off, and the mouth-organ the same. Boy, did we ever put on a dandy program for him that night.

And this [tune] "Little Donald in the Pigpen"; he says to me, 'Hector, how'd that come to get that name?' 'Well,' I said, 'as far as I know, Little Donald was a piper from over here, and he had this tune but he had no name on it. He was a short little fella himself, you know. So he was coming home from a dance one night and he got awful drunk. So, god, he got sleepy, so he jumped over the fence and lay down and he fell asleep. So when he woke up in the morning he looked all around, and he was in a pigpen. So he clapped the pipes on his back and he played this tune, and he christened it Little Donald in the Pigpen. [Gesner] said 'Would you announce that over the air tonight.' I said 'Sure.'

But the funny part of it was after we were playing, he took the mic and pulled it over in front of me and said 'Now this is what you're playing to tonight. And that goes all over Cape Breton, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island and everywhere.' I said 'I don't care.' He said 'That discourages an awful lot of fellas. Good fiddlers will come up here' he said 'and they'll go to put a program on for me. When I pull that [mic] over in front of them and tell them where they're playing, I never see them again.' He said 'You leave your fiddle here--you might not come back.' I said 'I'll be back all right.' So I left the fiddle with him.

. . . So, he says, 'The next tune on the program is what Mr MacDonald calls "Little Donald in the Pigpen."' And he asked the question, 'How'd it get that name?' So I told it right over the mic. Well, my god, I went in the next week, we were playing every week for him, and he called me into the office. 'C'mere' he said. There was a stack of letters honest to god that high [several feet] from everywhere: 'Play it again.' I had to play that tune every night I was in there.

I never got paid, and was paying my way in on the train. He said 'The only way I can make money for you is sell your program for advertizing.' I said 'I'm quitting,' so I never went back. He said 'I'm awful sorry to lose MacDonald on that fiddle' he said. Money was so scarce you couldn't do it at all. I had no money to trot back and forth to Charlottetown."

## Fiddlers at B.C. Heritage Festival

Fourteen members represented our Society at the Canadian Heritage Festival in Vancouver during the first 10 days of August last. Those participating were: Toussaint Arsenault, Kevin Chaisson (piano), Roddie Chaisson, Buddy Dunn, John Gauthier, Ralph Gay, Roland Jay, Bill MacDonald, Francis MacDonald, John Dan MacPherson, Charles Sheehan, Reuben Smith, Ervan Sonier, Stephen Toole, and George Weatherbie.

The group played a total of 14 concerts, beginning August 2. There were eight shows at Robson Square, Vancouver, one at Queen's Park bandshell, New Westminster, one at the Centennial Theatre, North Vancouver, and four shows at the Kitsilano Boat Show, English Bay.

As well as the busy concert schedule, impromptu concerts occurred everywhere the fiddlers went--including airports, and one at 31,000 feet on the way to Vancouver. The Island group was enthusiastically received throughout, and was said to have "stolen the show" on more than one occasion.

--J.W.



## COMMENTARY

At last spring's concert in Summerside hosted by the Prince County group, it was a great pleasure to see the strathspey steps danced by one of our finest dancers and instructors, Jackie Flanagan.

In July of last year Father Eugene Morris conducted a stepdancing class in Mount Stewart. There he re-introduced the strathspey and jig steps, and now these old steps are being taught by Jackie Flanagan, Crossroads [pictured above in Summerside], Libbe Hubley, Kensington, and the MacKinnon Family of Richmond.

The return of a variety of steps is nice to see as many of the older characteristics have been lost by today's dancers; wild arm and leg movements, and modern steps belonging to other dance styles (such as tap) are presently all-too-common among Island dancers. A few, like Gerald Clarkin, still do many of the older Island steps in a traditional style. It is great to see what may be the beginning of a movement back to the older and more authentic steps, and away from the few popular reels that our dancers have limited themselves to in the last couple of generations.

--J.W.



# CBCT Radio 96.9 FM

Enjoy "Island Afternoon"  
with DEB ALLEN

Monday-Friday 4 to 6 pm

Here's two pieces of verse on the subject of fiddling clergymen:

- 1) A young theologian named Fiddle  
Refused to accept his degree  
He said, "It's bad enough being  
called Fiddle,  
Without being called Fiddle, D.D."
- 2) Hey, diddle, diddle!  
A priest who can fiddle  
Is wanted for Brokenhurst, Hants.,  
You clerical fellows,  
With violoncellos,  
Apply, please, at Johnny Morants.

[This was an ad that appeared in the Help Wanted section of the London Guardian.]

--J.H.

Here, as promised at the last annual meeting, is the Scotch march 'The Charlottetown Caledonian Club.' Printed by kind permission of Kerr's Music Corporation Ltd, Glasgow.

## THE CHARLOTTETOWN CALEDONIAN CLUB

The first system of musical notation consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 2/4. The melody in the treble clef starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note G4, then a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass line starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note G2, then a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2, F#2, E2, D2, C2. Chord symbols A, D, A, and Dm are placed below the bass line.

The second system of musical notation continues the piece. The melody in the treble clef starts with a quarter note G4, then a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass line starts with a quarter note G2, then a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2, F#2, E2, D2, C2. Chord symbols A, D, A, G, and A are placed below the bass line.

The third system of musical notation continues the piece. The melody in the treble clef starts with a quarter note G4, then a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass line starts with a quarter note G2, then a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2, F#2, E2, D2, C2. Chord symbols A, Bm, and E7 are placed below the bass line.

The fourth system of musical notation concludes the piece. The melody in the treble clef starts with a quarter note G4, then a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass line starts with a quarter note G2, then a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2, F#2, E2, D2, C2. Chord symbols A, D, A, G, and A are placed below the bass line. The text "Last time Fine" is written above the final measure.

The Island Fiddler is the newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society. Production by Jim Hornby and John Weyman.

1982, The Island Fiddler. Address correspondence to Box 803  
Charlottetown, PEI

Picture credits: Hector MacDonald (p. 1), Susan Hornby (p. 4)  
John Weyman (p. 6).