

The Island Fiddler



Jim Beairsto of Kensington

Newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society
No. 11, January 1985

Fiddlers Notes

- Some recent anniversaries include Mr. & Mrs. Harry Wood (50th) Mr. & Mrs. Vernon Denis (50th) and Mr. & Mrs. Carl Webster (25th).

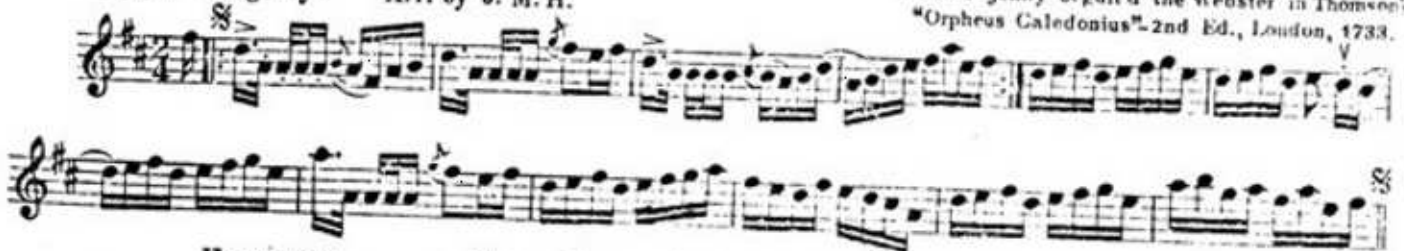
- The second annual Scottish Concert held at Holy Redeemer by the P.E.I. Scottish Country Dancers on November 18 was a major success. The big crowd enjoyed Scottish music from all over the Island.

- Here is the story behind Jenny Dang the Weaver, as recounted in W.L. Manson's The Highland Bagpipe (1901):
Rev. Mr. Gardner, minister of the parish of Birse, in Aberdeenshire, was well known for his musical talents and his wit. One Saturday he was arranging his ideas for next day's service in his study, which overlooked the courtyard of his manse. Outside his wife was beetling potatoes for supper. To unbend his mind a little, Mr. Gardner took up his fiddle and began to run over the notes of an air he had previously jotted down, when suddenly an altercation arose between Mrs. [Jenny] Gardner and Jock, the minister's man, an idle sort of weaver fellow from the neighbouring village of Marywell, who had lately been engaged as man of all work about the manse. "Here, Jock," cried the mistress as Jock came in from the labours of the field, "gae wipe the minister's shoon [shoes]." "Na," said Jock, "I'll dae nae sich thing. I came here to be yir ploo'man, but no yir flunkey, and I'll nae wipe the minister's shoon." "De'il confound yir impudence," said the enraged Mrs. Gardner, and she sprang at him with a heavy culinary implement, and giving him a hearty beating, compelled him to perform the menial duties required of him. The minister, who viewed the scene from his window, was hugely diverted, and gave the air he had just completed the title of "Jenny Dang the Weaver." This is supposed to have occurred in 1746. There is a well-known Gaelic song entitled "Trousers for meagre shanks, and bonnets for the bald," sung to the air.

Jenny dang the Weaver.

Reel. Brightly. Arr. by J. M. H.

Called "Jenny beguil'd the Webster" in Thomson's "Orpheus Caledonius"-2nd Ed., London, 1733.

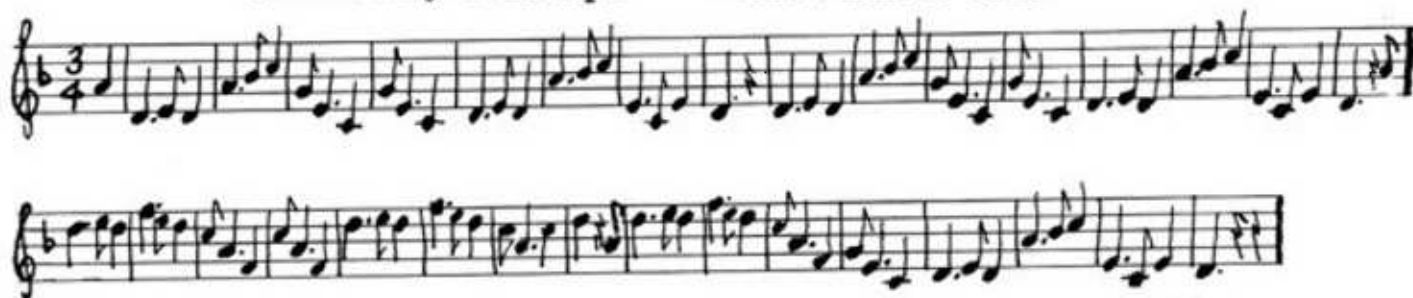


However, the above information published with the tune in The Flowers of Scottish Melody (1935) giving an earlier name and date suggests that Manson's story is just a story.

Tunes To Try

As played by Jim Beairsto, Kensington, PEI. Collected and transcribed by Jim Hornby. These were played singly by J.B., but may be played as a medley.

Queen Mary's Escape --slow march time



Joe Roach

--"an old quadrille piece" (?polka)
learned from aunt Isabel Woodside



Harry Large

--Prince County fiddlers learned it
from the jigging of Harry Large



McNeil's Reel

--composed by and learned from
blind Amos McNeil



PORTRAIT OF A FIDDLER: JIM BEAIRSTO

Jim Beairsto is one of the few older representatives of Irish fiddling tradition on the Island. A true 20th century man, Jimmy was born during a snowstorm in late 1900; he was small at birth and the doctor felt he might not last very long but Jim showed him! He has lived most of his life near Kensington, in an area whose Irish character is reflected in nearby place-names Irishtown and Kerrytown Road (Kerrytown being an earlier name for Clinton).

Jim bought a farm in 1931, the year before he married Hattie, and he farmed for 50 years. Having apprenticed as a barber years earlier, cutting hair and shaving with the straight razor, Jim set up his barber shop in the centre of Kensington in 1964, and kept up this trade for 20 years until retirement last January. "Jim's Barber Shop" also served (as has happened with other fiddling barbers like Bill Weatherbie and Ervan Sonier) as a place where you could drop in for a chat and hear, or play, a few tunes. Here Jim did most of his repair work on fiddles, including finishing with a 50/50 mixture of spar varnish and turpentine.

Jim grew up in a musical family where "we had music every night." His father Duncan had many old tunes, and he learned also from his uncle Charlie Beairsto and cousin Charlie Woodside, as well as from such visiting Prince County musicians as fiddler Orville Dalton and blind pianist Amos McNeil. Although Jim never learned to read music, several members of his family did, and they had written music including the "thousand tune book." The last of 10 children, he learned by ear tunes that the others played on the fiddle or family pump organ. (His version of the Irish reel "Blackberry Blossom" may have been indirectly learned from the thousand tune book in this way.)

Like most old-timers, he plays many key of A tunes in "high bass and counter" (AEAE), such as Johnny Campbell (a great 3-part reel), the Picnic Reel, Big John MacNeil, Timour the Tartar (he calls Miller's Drone) and, in recent years, newer tunes like Sandy MacIntyre's Trip to Boston. His high-bass tunes seem to be all Scottish, as is his version of the old pipe tune the Miramichi Fire, which includes two variations making four parts in all. He had a 3-part wedding reel from his father that he has not been able to remember.

Years ago when Jim played frequently for dances he knew 15 tunes (3 sets of 5 tunes) for the Lancers, but he has forgotten most of them. Another old dance reflected in Jim's repertoire is the 8-hand reel; he has several tunes from his father that he calls 'eights' because they were used in that dance.



Among the tunes that have been taped from Jim's playing-- which was still vigorous at 80, and at 84 has his granddaughter complaining that he plays too fast for her stepdancing--are some rare older tunes, including some unfamiliar tunes with familiar names (Pigeon on the Gate, Larry O'Gaff). As with most fiddlers, reels are Jim's favorite tunes, and he seems to know more Irish reels than most Island fiddlers--ex., the Mason's Apron, Miss Johnston's, and the Silver Spire (or Bennett's Favorite in Cole's 1000). He plays Sweet Molly in Dm, while most printed sets are in Em.

He remembers learning three tunes from Orville Dalton, including Walker Street Reel, that he still plays more than 70 years later. Blind Amos McNeil from Waterford, Lot 1, was another welcome visitor who could play tunes as well as skillful accompaniments on the piano and organ. Jim still plays his tune "McNeil's Reel" (see notes).

Jim is known for his good humour, modesty, and generosity in sharing his music. These qualities are found in the following incident from his school days, when he was 13 or 14. Here it is in his own words:

At school recess we used to play the mouth organ. And the teacher boarded near the school you see, and she went home for dinner hour. And most of the kids stayed for dinner there at noon hour. So I used to play the mouth organ, and they'd get up and dance, square dance. And so, I guess the teacher got wind of it. We wasn't doing any harm--we thought we were I guess. One day the teacher came back, and all of a sudden somebody said, "here's the teacher!" And everyone just went like that see (makes a scattering motion). I put my mouth organ in my pocket and she walks right in and she says, "It's awful quiet all at once," she says. She looked right at me and she said "Jimmy, where's that mouth organ?" I was terrified see that we were all going to get a lickin'. "C'mon" she says, "you never lied to me before now, c'mon." So I had to pull the mouth organ out of my pocket. "Now," she says, "play it and we'll all dance."

We'll All Go To Jenny's House And Have A Cup of Tea

--learned from aunt Isabel Woodside



--J. H.

CROSSING TO IRELAND

Arguments over whether a given tune or type of tune is Scotch or Irish have raged for many years among authorities in fiddle music. While there are some distinct differences between the music of the two countries, it is not surprising, with their common ethnic and linguistic background, that there has been a lot of exchange over the centuries.

It is believed that the jig is Irish in origin, and instrumentally derives from marches and song airs speeded up for dancing. The reel and the related strathspey (originally "strathspey reel") are originally Scottish. Of course, many reels have been made in Ireland, and a smaller number of jigs composed in Scotland.

Some individual tunes remain in dispute. Captain O'Neill, for example, contended that the tune known in Scotland and worldwide as "The Campbells are Coming" is from Ireland, and was circulated by Irish minstrels. But most authorities say it was originally a Scotch song air.

Undoubtedly, the Scots have contributed many reels popular in Ireland and elsewhere. Examples are: Miss MacLeod's Reel, Lord McDonald's, John McNeil's (known in Canada as Big John MacNeil), Stirling Castle, Lucy Campbell, Moneymusk and the Flogging Reel. Sometimes in "Crossing to Ireland" a tune was altered slightly and picked up a new name. The Bonnie Lass of Fisherrow (Daniel Dow) becomes Bonnie Kate; Caber Feidh becomes Rakish Paddy; the Braes of Mar becomes Lasses of Donnybrook (and the air to Love/Johnny Will You Marry Me); the Perthshire Hunt becomes the Boyne Hunt; Timour the Tartar becomes Peter Street; Paddy on the Turnpike becomes The Bunch of Keys (with an added third turn of no great merit). The northern Irish county Donegal seems to have had the most Scottish influence, with Highland bagpipes much in evidence, marches and strathspeys played, and a "Highland" dance with appropriate Scotch fling tunes. Of course much can also be said on the other side.

An interesting musical contrast is given below between Scotch and Irish versions of a tune known simply hereabouts as "the Marquis of Huntly" although that name properly belongs to another tune (Bb). This one, "The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling", is said to be composed by George Jenkins, a Scotch dancing master who died in London in 1806. I happened to hear the Irish version my first night in Dublin during a music session at the headquarters of the national tradition music society CCE (Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann) at Monkstown. I immediately offered the strathspey version for comparison. The Irish rendition is based on jigtime rather than the strathspey's 4/4 --which reflects the national musical character of the two separate but related traditions. The Irish 12/8 tunes, called slides, are most popular in southwestern county Kerry; they are played as jigs but with a slight emphasis on the first triplet in each bar.

These notes illustrate the difficulty in proclaiming a tune as Scottish or Irish on the basis of how it sounds. The Irish version (Dennis Murphy's--I have also seen it as Julia Clifford's) changes the order of turns to put the low turn first, its usual place in fiddle tunes.

--J.H.

MARQUIS OF HUNTLY'S HIGHLAND FLING.

STRATHSPEY.



DENIS MURPHY'S



HOW TO TEST A BOW

One way of testing the strength and **cambre** of a bow is to screw it up a turn or two until the hair is straightened out, and is just free of the stick. Then press the thumb on the hair at the nut as far down as it will go, watching in the meantime the movement of the stick from beyond the middle to the end. If it loses the curve very much, or goes out to either side, it is not likely to be a good bow. This, however, is a pretty severe test, and any stick will yield to it if the hair is sufficiently tightened. Another way is to screw the hair up until the stick has lost its backward curve, and to watch if it gives to either side. This is the fairer way to judge an ordinary bow. The best bows will, however, all stand the former test. Besides the ordinary backward curve, a maker who knows his business gives a little side as well. That is, he slightly **cambres** the stick to the left, looking from the nut outwards, so as to resist the tendency to the right, which proper bowing always gives. In examining finely tempered bows, this should be remembered, otherwise a very knowing person might fancy a stick which was just a little off the straight.

-from The Fiddle Fancier's Guide (1892)

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