

THE ISLAND FIDDLER



Joseph "Joe Placide" Arsenault of St. Chrysostome, Prince County, in 1899.
(From the collection of Sister Antoinette DesRoches).

Newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society
No. 4, October 1980.

Fiddlers Notes

The July/August issue of "Atlantic Insight" included an article on the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers Society..... The Montague-area fiddlers have regular practices on Tuesday nights at the Legion, where they have been getting good turn-outs. Everyone is welcome to drop in. They were recently special guest performers at a Sackville, N.S. fiddle contest.Margaret MacKinnon passed along a report from the American Academy of Dermatologists about a skin condition called "Fiddler's Neck": "Prolonged violin or viola playing may irritate the skin of the neck, where the base of the instrument touches, producing a swollen lump and discoloration often mistaken for a tumor, reports Dr. Jere B. Stern of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Washington, D.C. He has found that a major cause of this is the tendency for the player to let the end of the instrument droop so that the base digs into the neck. Dr. Stern reports noting improvement in the condition when players make an effort to keep their instruments in a horizontal position during practice." Dedicated fiddlers take heed!....That's what you call a Stern warning....Two programs with fiddling content are now on television: 'Barley Bree,' featuring Irish fiddler P.V.O'Donnell, and 'The John Allan Cameron Show' with the ever-popular Cape Breton Symphony.... The local CBC station did some recording at the Rollo Bay concert. Selections were broadcast on radio the following week, and a half-hour TV special is said to be in the works.Elmer Briand and Joey Beaton have published new books of their own tunes....'Atlantic Fiddling' is a fine new record containing performances by The Chaisson Brothers, Buddy MacMaster and Winnie Chafe, Emile Benoit (Newfoundland), Eddie Poirier (New Brunswick) and Jack Greenough (Dartmouth). The introduction and notes on the tunes are by Jim Hornby. Unfortunately, as far as we know, the record is available only from CBC Merchandizing, Box 500, Terminal A, Toronto M5W 1E6. You will hear selections from it on some of the mainland stations....The Glendale '79 record is finally out. It includes a jig medley by our Society (with 'Alan's Jig' by Bill MacDonald) as well as some of us playing in the finales (our participation here being uncredited). A quick reaction is that the sound is a bit fuller than on the '77 record, but the cover photo is not nearly as nice....Just before this issue was put together, members of our Society recorded at Steele Hall, UPEI, for the Caledonian Club. The LP is promised to be out well in time for Christmas gift-giving.

OBITUARY: We wish to extend our deepest sympathy to the family and friends of Earl Hughes. Earl was a charter member of our Society, a great fiddler, and a friend who will be missed.

RADIO: An addition to our previously-published list of Celtic programs is "The Tartan Hour" on 680 CFDR in Dartmouth every Saturday from 11:05 to 12 noon. It has a variety of Celtic music, with the accent on Scottish.

BISHOP FABER'S JIG. BY W. MAC DONALD.

The first piece, "BISHOP FABER'S JIG" by W. Mac Donald, is written in G major (one sharp) and 8/8 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 8/8. The melody is characterized by a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplet-like patterns. The second staff continues the melody, featuring a repeat sign with first and second endings. The third staff concludes the piece with a final double bar line.

CAPTAIN CARSWELL march

The second piece, "CAPTAIN CARSWELL march", is written in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of seven staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 2/4. The melody is a lively march characterized by frequent sixteenth-note patterns and eighth-note runs. The piece concludes with a final double bar line on the seventh staff.

Interview with Father Morris

In July of this year Father Eugene Morris came over from Cape Breton to conduct a week-long class in step-dancing at Mount Stewart. Live music was provided by Reuben Smith, Frank O'Connor and Joe MacDonald. During this time Father Morris kindly consented to be interviewed for our newsletter.--J.W.

THE ISLAND FIDDLER: Are there any basic differences between the step-dancing here and in Cape Breton?

FATHER MORRIS: Well, to compare the dancers I would say that we in Cape Breton always start off with a strathspey and then go into a reel or hornpipe. Here I've noticed that they don't dance the strathspey any more, and I say "any more" because I've been told that they used to dance it at one time. Also, the jig is not danced here.

There are basic reel steps that are danced here the same as in Cape Breton, but there are more tap-dancing steps here. In Cape Breton we try to dance without the hand movement, and we try not to move around too much as this is generally frowned upon.

THE ISLAND FIDDLER: What do you hope to accomplish with the classes you've been conducting here?

FATHER MORRIS: The class that we have here is only for five days, but I'm very impressed at how quickly the students are picking up the jig and strathspey steps. These are established dancers, and it's much different than starting with a new class. They pick up the steps almost as soon as you show them. I believe that now they'll have to work out their own programs to include the new strathspey and jig steps, and they should watch that their program flows smoothly from one step to another with no break in the dancing. I would like to see each dancer arrange a personal program. Each dancer should try to be a little different. I think dancing is like fiddling, you make it your own.

There are a lot of step-dancing teachers in this class, and if I could just leave something new with them, I would hope the teachers will carry it on. As a matter of fact I would like to spend a little more time with them. In Cape Breton we have regular clinics where we can talk about problems teaching dancing, and share steps back and forth. This is so very important.

THE ISLAND FIDDLER: How do you see the role of the fiddler?

FATHER MORRIS: Well, in order to really learn these new steps the dancers are going to have to get help from the fiddlers. I believe the fiddlers here will have to brush up on their strathspey playing, and I don't think they'll find that difficult, it's just that they are not doing it very much.

THE ISLAND FIDDLER: What should we be doing to bring the two together?

FATHER MORRIS: Maybe at the fiddlers gatherings it could be mentioned that a lot of the dancers are working on their strathspey steps, and maybe the fiddlers could be encouraged to put a little more time on that.

THE ISLAND FIDDLER: You've mentioned the unfamiliar steps, did you find any problems with the reel steps?

FATHER MORRIS: As far as the reel goes, I've told the students to dance their reel to any reel, rather than asking the fiddler to play the same tune over and over again. All reels have the same time, it's just that some have a little more music in them than others.

Fiddlers play an important role in step-dancing, especially to the strathspey. We are lucky in Cape Breton to have some great dance strathspey players like Donald Angus Beaton, and a few great jig players like Buddy MacMaster. You know, in jig dancing you do a lot of footwork and it keeps your fiddler sharp. If he's lagging behind, the dancers will soon let him know. So the dancers can help develop good fiddlers, and the fiddlers can help keep the dancers going. There is a great wedding between the two.

One other thing I would like to see here on Prince Edward Island is for the stepdancer to acknowledge the fiddler more. When they finish dancing they should turn to the fiddler and the piano player. I've noticed in many cases here that the players are not recognized. I really think that's kind of important, because the dancer can't dance unless he or she has the music. A dancer should never leave the stage without giving credit to the fiddler and the piano player. I'm going to mention that to the dancers here tonight.

LUTHER ON MUSIC

While some of the followers of Martin Luther (1483-1546), the founder of Protestantism, have over the years discouraged musical activity except in a strictly sacred context, here's what Luther himself had to say in Colloquia Mensalia:

'I always loved music,' said Luther. 'Who hath skill in this art, the same is of good kind, fitted for all things.... Musick is a fair gift of God, and near allied to divinity. I would not for a great matter,' said Luther, 'be destitute of the small skill in musick which I have. The youth ought to be brought up and accustomed in this art, for it maketh fine and expert people.' --J.H.

A Canadian Fiddler 1883

(This excerpt--about the fun at a wedding reception--is from an article entitled "A Winter in Canada" in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, February, 1884. It doesn't say which area is described.)

. . .the Canadian fiddler is the most striking fellow of the dance. The one at this entertainment was a tall, powerful fellow in a red flannel shirt glowing beneath his black shaggy head. He is a national, historic character, having acquired his artistic skill, his manner, his repertoire, from a long line of fiddlers. As a matter of fact, he is a stamping machine with a fiddle attachment. He generally holds his violin against his chest, while he sits at the very edge of his chair leaning far back to keep his balance, and devotes his strength to stamping with both feet, which he raises clear of the floor from two to six inches. And all the while he throws his head back and regards the ceiling, or droops his ear toward his distant instrument with a hopeless fondness. His fervor often contorts him into agonizing positions, when he turns his head toward a far-off ideal with a wonderfully yearning stretch of his neck. And all these affecting gestures reflect the movements of the artist's by no means invisible role, for the musical phrases . . . are frequently drowned by deafening crescendos of leather.

The fiddler's heels thus become the real centre of the entire performance. In one of the jigs a couple who were engaged determined to monopolize the dance for some time. But soon another girl came onto the floor and, bowing off the first, took her place. At the next change of figure, another man dismissed the first in the same manner, and thus cleared the floor of the devoted pair. But these returned in the same manner at the next change, and so the contest went on for over an hour. The company were now quite excited over the endurance of the first dancers, the mischief of the meddlers, and, more than all, over the efforts of the poor fiddler. He stamped and stamped 'til the perspiration flowed and the fiddle gave but feeble signs of life, while one contortion succeeded another with tragic force. But at last muscle and nerve began to flag, he lost all sense of artistic contrast, and settled down to a monotonous, hard pounding of the floor. Then the bystanders came to the rescue with eager encouragement. "Give it to 'em, Louis! That's it; look at 'em--the lovers are at it again! Send 'em along, now." And his frantic feet leaped high again, as high as ever.

At midnight the old women began to yawn pitifully; a crusty old fellow lying on the floor behind the stove had fewer jokes to send up at the girls as they passed. One of the grooms in his shirt sleeves settled in a chair tipped back in the doorway of the dark room, and played a Jew's-harp to the weakening performance of the fiddler. Even the smoke and laughter diminished in the farther shadowy end of the room. The carioles were soon brought to the door, and the company went off like bundles of robes down the road.

--J.H.

Record Review

Joseph Cormier Rounder Records 7001

This record, issued in 1974 by Rounder Records from the Boston area, was the first of several very fine Canadian fiddle records from this company. Since it came out, the market has been flooded (by fiddle record standards) with new records and reissues, some excellent, some hardly average.

However, there is nothing average about this record, for Joe Cormier is a brilliant fiddler. He plays the complex Scottish music with such ease and control that it's really a listener's delight.

His playing is reminiscent of the legendary Scotty Fitzgerald, and indeed both Fitzgerald and Angus Chisholm had a profound effect on Cormier's musical development.

In this, his first album, he is accompanied by Eddie Irwin (piano), and Edmond Boudreau (bass), who complement him very well throughout.

Cormier plays a number of Scott Skinner compositions, such as the beautiful strathspey "Mrs Scott Skinner," "The Iron Man" and "The Bonnie Lass of Bon Accord" (the opening bars of which are on Skinners' headstone).

The selections of tunes and arrangements are very good and tastefully done. However, I did find his move from the fine tune "The Smith's a gallant fireman" into "Andy's Reel" somewhat abrupt. Cormier attacks the first notes of the tunes quite aggressively, and in most cases this approach adds to his playing.

Cormier is such an accomplished fiddler that he can do what he wants with the music, but it's always done with a great deal of taste, and a feel for the music is never lost.

The recording quality is excellent. The gatefold album jacket has extensive and informative notes on Cormier and his home village of Cheticamp. From the picture of Cormier on the cover, to the notes, to the wonderful music therein, this is an all-round great buy. Highly recommended. --J.W.

A 'SCRATCHY' FIDDLE

In the 17th century, when Scottish fiddle music was reaching its distinctive form, Scotland was seen by the English as an unclean, rather primitive place. Among them, by the year 1700, the Scots had a widespread reputation of being carriers of the itch (or "scabies"). An outcome of this was the introduction into popular speech of the term "the Scotch fiddle" (for the itch) and the phrase "to play the Scotch fiddle" (for scratching it). If you rub the inside of your left arm with your right hand, you can see how much the motion resembles fiddling. Has anyone heard it used this way on the Island? Of course, the Scots claimed that the disease was acquired by shaking hands with the English. (Let us know of any expressions that have to do with fiddling.)--J.H.

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