

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Air Apparent

This issue I present three beautiful old laments, which, although they're from different genres of traditional music, all have interesting backgrounds that make them all the more poignant.

Hector the Hero

Renowned Scottish fiddler-composer James Scott Skinner (1847-1928) wrote at least two pieces of music in honor of Major-General Sir Hector MacDonald (1857-1903), one of the most famous latter Victorian-era British military figures and a much admired figure in Scotland. MacDonald was born on Scotland's Black Isle, the son of a poor crofter. He was a draper's assistant until he ran away at the age of eighteen and enlisted in the 92nd Gordon Highlanders. Coming up through the ranks, he served as a colour-sergeant for most of the Second Afghan War until he was given a battlefield commission as 2nd Lieutenant toward the end of those hostilities. MacDonald was then transferred to South Africa, where he was mentioned in dispatches in the 1st Boer War. During the battle of Majuba Hill he was taken prisoner by the Boers after having lost nearly all his men, fighting on until he was overpowered. By the mid-1890s MacDonald had served for over a decade in the Sudan, taking part in several battles, winning awards for bravery and service, and rising steadily in rank (no easy task for a man of humble beginnings, not to mention one who began his military career as an enlisted man). In 1898, when his commander-in-chief, Horatio Kitchener, ordered an advance against the Dervish tribesmen in Khartoum, MacDonald was a general officer in command of a battalion of black Sudanese and Egyptian soldiers, some of whom he had trained himself. Nearing Omdurman in the Sudan, Kitchener unwittingly exposed his flanks to the entire Dervish army, and was only saved from disaster by the quick-thinking and brave MacDonald, and the steadiness of his native troops. MacDonald swung his men by companies in an arc as the Dervishes charged and by skillful manoeuvring held his ground, saving Kitchener and the rest of the army from certain doom. It was a near thing. When the fight was over MacDonald's troops had an average of only two rounds left per man, but thanks to the "ranker" in command of native troops, Kitchener won the Battle of Omdurman and received a Lordship.

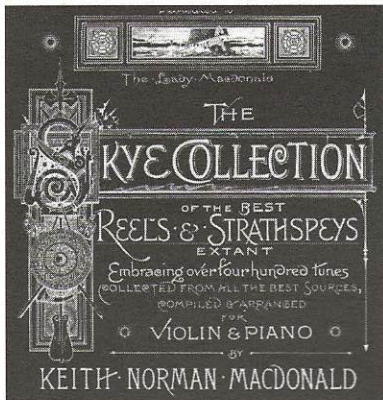
MacDonald subsequently served as the Aide de Camp to Queen Victoria and as a Major General with the Highland Brigade in South Africa during the Boer War at the end of the 19th century. In 1901 he was knighted and the next year was stationed as Major General commanding British forces in Ceylon. However, in 1903 he was accused of being a practising homosexual. He returned to London to defend himself, but was ordered back to Ceylon to face charges there. The crofter's son started back and got as far as Paris when he took his own life in a hotel room; able to happily endure physical peril, but not disgrace. Although the charge of homosexuality may possibly have been true, it was popularly believed by all levels of society in Scotland at the time that MacDonald had been framed by the English military establishment. Soon after the incident King Edward VII made his first visit to Scotland and found the atmosphere there decidedly chilly. Composer James Scott Skinner himself was incensed. A handwritten note on his original manuscript for the tune reads: "Play in the Kirk on Sunday & get the Minister to announce as this is a national Calamity - my eyes are full - B & F will publish at once - & include maybe in H&C - ." B & F refers to his music publishers, Bayley and Ferguson, while H&C is his famous *Harp and Claymore* collection, published in 1904.

Skinner was just in time to get his lament into the collection. The piece is a true lament, although sometimes (unfortunately, I think) played as a waltz, and is based on a poem by Thomas MacWilliam. Although the words scan to Skinner's melody, it has, to my

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knowledge, not been recorded as a song. Rather, it has proved popular as a slow air in modern times, recorded by Irish fiddler Tommy Peoples, the Bothy Band (1975), the late Johnny Cunningham, Dougie MacDonald, and others. MacWilliam's lyric begins:

*Lament him, ye mountains of Ross-shire;
Your tears be the dew and the rain;
Ye forests and straths, let the sobbing winds
Unburden your grief and pain.
Lament him, ye warm-hearted clansmen,
And mourn for a kinsman so true
The pride of the Highlands, the valiant MacDonald
Will never come back to you.*

*O, wail for the mighty in battle,
Loud lift ye the Coronach strain;
For Hector, the Hero, of deathless fame,
Will never come back again.*

Queen of the Earth and Child of the Skies

This melody was recorded by West Virginia fiddler Edden Hammons (1874-1955) for visiting folklore professor Louis Watson Chappell in 1947. Hammons was a member of a family of backwoodsmen, who, in addition to being adept at living off the land (their pursuits included poaching and moonshining), were also musically talented. Edden learned to play on a home-made gourd fiddle and, still a boy, acquired a manufactured instrument as a gift from a musician. He became an accomplished fiddler, and according to local lore, did little else. His first marriage failed because of this, but his second, to a more compatible (and tolerant) spouse, lasted over fifty years.

"Queen of the Earth and Child of the Skies" is one of the few slower, cross-tuned and slightly "crooked" pieces of the fifty-one that Hammons recorded for Chappell, over three recording sessions. Alan Jabbour (in his 1984 notes to the *Edden Hammons Collection*, vol. 1) identifies the melody as a piece called "The Blackbird," one of the most famous and enduring airs in the British Isles. Several versions were collected in southwestern Pennsylvania, but the generally agreed upon function was that the tune was a "dead march," i.e. one to be played at funerals. The Irish versions of the "Blackbird" are Jacobite in nature whose lyrics indicate loyalty to the cause of the Stewarts, and Bayard says the song, referencing Bonnie Prince Charlie, was still being sung in southwestern Pennsylvania in the early 1930s. Although most Pennsylvania fiddlers seemed to know the melody by the "Blackbird" title, other titles existed: Bayard himself heard it called the "Lady's Lamentation" by an Indiana County (Pa.) fifer in 1951 — the title of the original broadside printed in London in 1651.

How it came to be known by Hammons, and how it acquired the title he knew it by, is a mystery. The line "Queen of the Earth and Child of the Skies," however, is known to be from American shape-note singing (popularized so recently in the film "Cold Mountain"). It is similar to a line from a shape-note hymn called "Star of Columbia" (also called simply "Columbia"), found in the *Social Harp* (1855) and other hymnodies, which begins:

*Columbia! Columbia! to glory arise,
The queen of the world and the child of the skies;
Thy genius commands thee with raptures behold,
While ages on ages thy splendors unfold:
Thy reign is the last and the noblest of time,
Most fruitful thy soil, most inviting thy clime;
Let crimes of the east ne're encrimson thy name,
Be freedom and science and virtue thy fame.*

Words are credited to "Dr. Dwight" and music to "Miss M.T. Durham" (although the melody employed is a traditional fiddle tune called "Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine"). Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) was one of the "Hartford Wits," a group of Connecticut men associated with literary work during and after the American Revolution. Dwight would go on to become president of Yale College, but he was a young man when he wrote his lyric "Columbia" in 1778, when he was a chaplain in George Washington's Continental Army. Dwight's song suggests that America would be the seat of God's kingdom and Americans its saints, and it was popular for a long time. So popular, in fact that some of the lines were incorporated into another shape-note hymn, "Murillo's Lesson," which can be found in the 1844 *Sacred Harp* and the 1848 *Sacred Melodeon*. It begins:

*As down a lone valley with cedars o'erspread,
From war's dread confusion I pensively strayed,
The gloom from the face of fair heaven retired,
The winds hushed their murmurs, the thunders expired.
Perfumes as of Eden flowed sweetly along,
A voice as of angels enchantingly sung,
Columbia, Columbia to glory arise,
The queen of the world and the child of the skies.*

Later generations of the Hammons family played the tune somewhat differently, with Burl Hammons calling the piece "Old Man in the Woods" (which is also the name of an edible mushroom in the eastern U.S. pinelands, one of the names for a Green Man or Jack-in-the-Woods, and the Native American term for a black bear). Sherman Hammons called it "Star of Bethlehem," echoing the shape-note origins of the older title.

Amhrán na Leabhar (The Song of the Books)

The song to this air was written by Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1785-1848), a poet and musician from Iveragh (Uibh Ráitheach) or Derrynane, County Kerry. Irish musicologist Brendan Breathnach, writing in the periodical *An Piobaire* in 1983, identifies Ó Súilleabháin as not only a poet, but also a schoolteacher, fiddler and dancing master. Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin (in *A Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, 1998) gives that Tomás Rua worked as a hedge schoolmaster on the Iveragh peninsula in West Kerry, and "was one of the first poets to extol the greatness of (Irish politician) Daniel O'Connell, whom he saw as an heir to the Jacobite cause." He had been acting-schoolmaster at Caherdaniel and was forced to transfer to Portmagee when another schoolmaster was appointed to the permanent position. As he was leaving he placed his belongings, including a treasured library of leather-bound books, for transport on a boat going from the harbor at Derrynane to Goleen (Goilin, Valentia Harbor), while he himself travelled by

road. The boat struck a rock and capsized, and all cargo was lost, tragically along with the priceless collection of books. Coincidentally, on that same night, Ó Súilleabháin's clothing was accidentally burnt while he was sleeping, delaying his journey the next day until a tailor could be found to make a new suit for him. When he arrived at his destination and learned of the loss of his literary treasures, he was struck down ill, and on his recovery he was prompted to seek solace in song, composing "Amhrán na Leabhar." Tomas Ó Canainn's translation of the Irish Gaelic lyric begins:

*By Valentia harbour I happened once
Near sweet Goleen Dairbhre
To be the master in Portmagee
Where ships set sail for the ocean deep.
Soon all had the sorrowful story then
Of the sturdy craft, lost at Owen Finn,
Sad was my heart for the ship that failed;
Better this land had it survived the gale.*

Hector the Hero

Musical notation for 'Hector the Hero' in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The piece consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff continues the melody with a repeat sign. The third staff concludes the piece with a double bar line.

Queen of the Earth and Child of the Skies

Tuning:

Note: Fiddle is tuned DDAD, but play as if in standard tuning.

A diagram showing the fiddle tuning DDAD. It consists of a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are D (open string), D (first fret), A (second fret), and D (third fret).

Musical notation for 'Queen of the Earth and Child of the Skies' in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). The piece consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff continues the melody. The third staff continues the melody. The fourth staff continues the melody. The fifth staff concludes the piece with a double bar line.

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The melody has been very popular as a slow air with pipers (especially after Seamus Ennis recorded it), and is also known by the titles “Cuan Bhéal Inse,” and “Valentia Harbor” or “Valentia Lament,” the latter titles referencing the harbour of Valentia, County Kerry. Both 3/4 and 4/4 time versions exist, although as with “Hector the Hero,” this tune deserves not to be reduced to a waltz.

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called Ragged But Right (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia, “The Fiddler’s Companion” (<http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/FChomepage/htm>). When not researching tunes, he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions.]

Amhrán na Leabhar (The Song of the Books)

