

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Dunkeld Bridge War

As long as the world shall last there will be wrongs, and if no man objected and no man rebelled, those wrongs would last forever. – Clarence Darrow

Pete Clark has long been one of my favorite Scottish fiddlers, not only for his exquisite tone and command of his instrument, but for his efforts to recreate and promote the music of 18th century fiddler-composer Niel Gow (1727-1807). Clark has even gone so far as to create an ensemble that recreates the sounds heard in a latter 18th century ballroom, such as those once produced by the Edinburgh Assembly Orchestra, led by Niel's son William Gow (1751-1791) and his successor and brother, Nathaniel Gow (1763-1831). At times Clark is able to lead six fiddles, two cellos, viola and piano, in the music of the family. Clark also lives in Perthshire, near the hamlet of Inver, where Niel, William, and Nathaniel were born (and where Niel died), and runs the Niel Gow festival, as well as the annual Dunkeld Bridge Fiddle Week where the venue overlooks the River Tay and Dunkeld Bridge. He has even recorded an album of music (*Even Now*, Smiddymade Records SMD615) playing Niel Gow's fiddle, an instrument that has been preserved at Blair Castle. One of the cuts, a straight-ahead medley of reels that includes "Dunkeld Bridge," "Loch Earn," "The Perthshire Assembly," and "Miss Dundas of Arniston," I enjoyed so much that I aspired to work it into my own repertoire as a great vehicle for Scottish country or contra dancing. Not only that, but I found a great story in it!

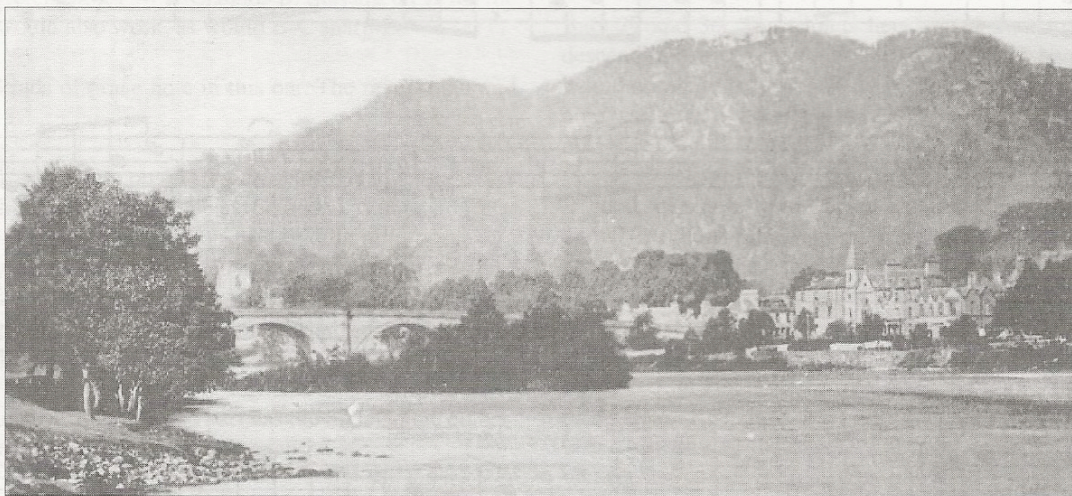
The first tune, "Dunkeld Bridge," originally published in the Gows' *Fifth Collection of Strathspey Reels* (1809), has interesting associations and background, but it is not its composer, the great Niel Gow, whom I will remember as I play the tune, but rather an altogether different Dunkeld resident, whose acts of civil disobedience nearly resulted in tragedy but ultimately prevailed against a far stronger power than he. It should be mentioned, before we

leave Niel, that son Nathaniel recorded that "Dunkeld Bridge" was the very last composition of his elderly father (who died at age eighty). There is no reason to question this assertion, for the bridge at Dunkeld (which is just a stone's throw downstream—and across the river—from Inver) was begun in 1805 and completed in 1808, and Niel passed away in March of 1807, a year and a half before the work was finally finished and the structure opened to traffic. Although Niel never saw the completed bridge, there probably had been construction enough to have made a large impression.

The need for the bridge was great, and it was not the first time that one had been constructed on or near the site. Dunkeld occupies an historic strategic position, as the name, from the Scots Gaelic *Dùn Chailleann*, or "Fort of the Caledonians," implies. It is here that the River Tay descends from the Highlands on its way to the broad arable Lowland areas. At Dunkeld, however, the valley narrows due to a geologic phenomenon, for a dense band of rock lies along the Highland Fault Line south of the town. This causes the River Tay, which is Scotland's longest river and has the largest watershed area, to rush as it flows down from the Highlands, and, while the river is a route to the lands of the north, it is also a formidable impediment to cross. Although there are lower crossing points (such as at Perth), it is at Dunkeld that the most logical route for crossing the Tay for the north is located. It was so noted by the Romans, who built a bridge at nearby Scone, and by Bishop Gavin Douglas in the 16th century, who also built a bridge near the site. However these and other nearby bridges across the river were made of wood, and sooner or later they were swept away by spring floodwaters generated by the Highland snow melts.

The Tay was not the only impediment for travelers, and in fact, transportation prior to the 19th century in the whole of northern Scotland was exceedingly difficult and frequently perilous, as is recorded in Samuel Smiles' *The Life of Thomas Telford* (1867):

The country lying to the west of the Great Glen was absolutely without a road of any kind. The only district through which travelers passed was that penetrated by the great Highland road by Badenoch, between Perth and Inverness; and for a considerable time after the suppression of the rebellion



Dunkeld from the river

of 1745, it was infested by gangs of desperate robbers. So unsafe was the route across the Grampians, that persons who had occasion to travel it usually made their wills before setting out. Garrons, or little Highland ponies, were then used by the gentry as well as the peasantry. Inns were few and bad; and even when postchaises were introduced at Inverness, the expense of hiring one was thought of for weeks, perhaps months, and arrangements were usually made for sharing it among as many individuals as it would contain. If the harness and springs of the vehicle held together, travelers thought themselves fortunate in reaching Edinburgh, jaded and weary, but safe in purse and limb, on the eighth day after leaving Inverness.

Jurist Henry Cockburn held the position of Advocate Deputy between 1807 and 1810, which necessitated his traveling extensively in the Highlands riding circuits, in order to manage matters needing adjudication. He recorded in his book *Memorials of His Time* (published posthumously in 1854) that, "North of Inverness matters were if possible still worse. There was no bridge over the Beauly or the Conan. The drovers coming south swam the rivers with their cattle. There being no roads there was little use for carts. In the whole county of Caithness there was scarcely a farmer who owned a wheel cart. Burdens were conveyed usually on the backs of ponies but quite as often on the backs of women."

Clearly, if Scotland were to progress as a country then bridges and roads would have to be repaired, improved, and constructed. Fortunately, Scotland produced a man whose genius was equal to the task, Thomas Telford (1757–1834), born the son of a humble shepherd and raised in poverty in Eskdalemuir, in the south of the country, who was initially trained as a mason. By 1800, however, Telford had become a master stonemason and a skilled surveyor, and had an established career as an engineer, canal- and bridge-builder who often used the new material of iron for his constructions. For his many works he earned the punning nickname Colossus of Roads. In 1802 Telford was requested by the Lords of the Treasury to make a survey of the interior of the Scottish Highlands, and to make recommendations to Parliament. He finished the following year, upon which the body responded with a timed series of legislation to address the improvements Telford outlined. Funds for the proposed improvement projects were to be raised



Thomas Telford

in partnership with government and local landowners (who often had to shoulder much of the cost).

A lasting bridge at Dunkeld was one of Telford's important recommendations. When completed it would be an engineering marvel, built not as a hunchbacked span that was based on a circle describing the arches, but rather upon portions of an arc. This would allow a relatively flat road grade and a much more aesthetically pleasing bridge. Work began in late 1803 with stone from a nearby quarry being initially dressed and made ready by early 1804. The start of construction was formally marked with a ceremony in April of 1805. To make sure the bridge withstood the spring floods, Telford diverted the course of the river in order to firmly anchor the foundations on dry land. Massive wooden pillars were driven through some twelve feet of gravel and sand to reach bedrock, upon which piers were built and finally the bridge proper. Work was completed in 1808, and traffic began to flow in November of that year. Telford's bridge at Dunkeld is handsome by all accounts, and features five river and two land arches for a length of 685 feet and a width of 28 feet 6 inches. In the end, not only was the bridge built, but Dunkeld itself was transformed,

Dunkeld Bridge



with the main axis of the town changing from its parallel with the banks of the Tay, to one oriented around the approach road to the bridge, and a variety of new businesses and establishments were erected to serve the traffic.

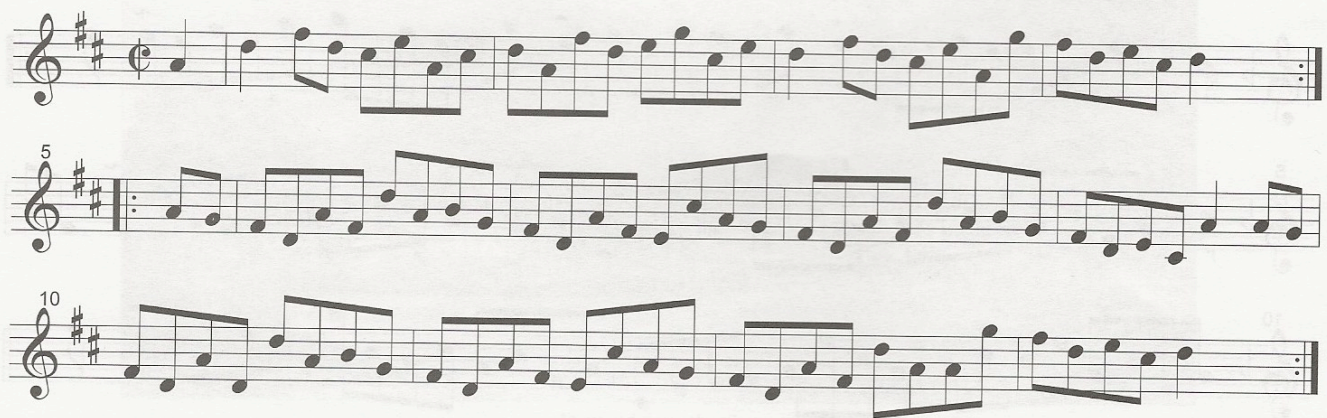
The cost was great. When first estimated, it was to be no more than £15,000, of which the government agreed to put up £7,500, with John Murray (1755-1830), 4th Duke of Atholl (the land owner and powerful Lord-Lieutenant of Perthshire), shouldering the remainder. However, as the complicated construction resulted in cost overruns (imagine that!) the government refused to increase their commitment, leaving the Duke to scramble as best he could to come up with the remainder for the increasingly expensive bridge. At the end, the bridge cost around £40,000, more than double the original estimate. This necessitated heavy borrowing by the Duke to finance it, and some of the loans had been arranged on the security of the expected tolls to be charged for crossing—similar to “futures” trading on the stock market. Thus, as soon as it was complete, tolls were established on the bridge, setting the stage for the “wars.”

In order to increase the revenue, Duke John declared the bridge the sole means of portage over the Tay, and abolished the river ferries that had been the livelihood of many of the local residents. No pedestrian or vehicle was allowed to pass without paying portage dues to the Duke, who had been appointed the sole trustee, without any provision for auditing the accounts. Friends, servants, and employees of the Duke were the only ones allowed to pass for free; otherwise, pedestrians were charged 1/2d. for a foot crossing, 8d. for a cart going both ways, and 1s. 3d. for larger vehicles, and gates and sentry boxes were erected to make sure no one passed without paying. The original provision for the tolls was meant to be time-limited, for “a few years,” until the money for the loans could be recouped. It was an unfortunate vagueness in the language regarding the time span for the tolls, and, since the Duke was the sole trustee, no one could ever be sure exactly when the money to repay the loans had been fully recovered. As early as 1830 the Duke of Breadalbane generously offered to pay off the remainder of the debt, if indeed it could be shown, which was perhaps a safe bet, although he did not believe that even at that time any debt yet remained.

Dunkeld, and indeed, all Perthshire grew increasingly restive. “The tolls were felt to be a great oppression, poor people sometimes being detained for hours before they could raise enough money to go across; and it was a common occurrence for the toll-keeper to take the hats, coats, or pocket-knives from tramps who desired to go over but had no money.” Meanwhile John, the 4th Duke, died and was succeeded by his son, also John, the 5th Duke, who himself died in 1846, to be succeeded by his son, George, who died in 1864—the tolls continued under each. When the Dunkeld and Perth railway opened in 1856 the grievance was more keenly felt than ever, for poor planning resulted in the railway station being erected some distance from Dunkeld...on the opposite side of the river! Thus, to travel on a railway journey the populace on the other side of the Tay first had to pay the bridge toll before remitting their railway fare. The citizens of Dunkeld grumbled that they were held to ridicule, and that it was a common joke that those who dwelt in Dunkeld were closed within gates when “curfew rang,” for the gatekeeper retired from his sentry box and had to be summoned with a bell to open the gate and get his bawbee (shilling).

There were other attempts to ascertain the status of the debt, with an aim to having the tolls abolished, but none took root until, in 1867, one stalwart resident had finally had enough. Alexander Robertson of Dundonochie was “a gigantic Highlander, of prodigious strength,” and also appears to have been possessed of a singular will, a canny intelligence, and a belief in his cause. He began a lawsuit to compel the Duke to open the books on the bridge and force the Duke to refund £50,000 in excess tolls collected. As the lawsuit ground through the courts, Robertson was advised to walk across the bridge several times and refuse to pay the toll, which he did, in a public act of civil disobedience (supported by the fact that he was so large no toll-keeper could or would stop him!). The Duke blundered when he took Robertson to court to prevent the Highlander from ignoring the toll again—perhaps not realizing that, if the civil disobedience grew and others acted similarly, then he would be required to institute similar legal action against each one, with the court costs rising to countless times more than the tolls he would ever collect from such actions. The status quo dragged on for another eleven years, with the Duke seemingly content to let the matter of the suit languish in the courts.

Jerry Hayes



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In 1878 Robertson had enough. Despite the injunction (which was still in force) he walked the bridge once again—several times, in fact—without paying the toll, which was reported to the Duke straightway. A squad of officers was dispatched to Robertson's residence, armed with revolvers and cudgels and the Highlander was arrested for the Duke's suit of 2 1/2d. (about 5 cents in American money at the time). The authorities transported him to Edinburgh, where he was incarcerated, and the next day he was arraigned in court. Robertson used the appearance to his advantage, making the most of his chance to state his case, and held the Duke up to ridicule:

He [suggested] to the court that, if the case were reversed, and he was suing a Duke for 5 cents, the Duke would be in no danger of being thrown into prison. He enlarged upon the enormity of taking a Highlander from his native hills and locking him up where he could not even procure the first necessity of life—good Scotch whisky.

Robertson seems to have enjoyed his jest, perhaps more so because the Duke was summoned from London to give testimony, and, although Robertson was not allowed to question him, he probably had the satisfaction of inconveniencing his nemesis. At any rate, he was released on his own recognizance, and the matter was dropped.

In short time, as the suits continued to languish, Robertson decided to up the ante once more. One morning he hefted his axe and

strode to the toll booth, whereupon he shoved the toll-collector aside and proceeded to demolish the barrier. He was again arrested and a fine levied, which, of course he refused to pay, but the Duke, perhaps remembering the humiliation at Edinburgh, chose not to press the matter. The toll barrier was rebuilt. By this time, however, Robertson's stand had attracted a good deal of public support, and others mimicked his vigilante exploits. Another strong Highlander destroyed the next toll barrier, taking "gates, supports, posts and all, and threw them into the river, leaving the toll-gatherer with nothing but his little box of a house." Warrants were issued for the arrest of this man, who fled into the hills. Once again the Duke immediately made preparations to rebuild the gate, and lumber for the project was left on the bridge. Robertson and his supporters raided the cache, and hurled the material into the Tay. Yet again the Duke managed to rebuild the gate, and this time a different band of local men destroyed it, throwing it into the river in the manner of the first, all the while cheered on by a number of young noblemen out for a lark, who helpfully supplied the group with spirits. This group of vigilantes was arrested and, after two trials, the men were sentenced to jail for terms of three to five months. As public opinion gathered against the Duke, some of the nobility had pause to consider, and Lord Kinnaird, then Lord-Lieutenant of the county, attempted to have the sentences remitted, without success.

The Duke held firm. This time he erected not a wooden gate, but an iron one, complete with protective plates. Iron, while strong,

(Continued on page 51.)

Fiddle Tune History (continued from page 37):

is also brittle, and once again Robertson and his followers took sledges and reduced it to a heap of shards. Now it was the Duke who had had enough, and he responded not by arresting the men, but by calling out the 42nd Highlanders, elite Highland troops, to protect the bridge. It was a moment when things might have turned very ugly, for by now the populace was aroused:

Several hundred men were prepared to make a fresh attack upon the bridge, notwithstanding the presence of the troops. But the Sheriff, seeing that a conflict was probable, gave assurances in the Duke's name that the accounts should be made public, and the insurgents dispersed.

The Duke of Atholl had blinked.


The civil court proceedings were quickly concluded, and found that the Duke had over-collected some £43,000, which he was ordered to repay into the public coffers. He was reprimanded by Scottish Members of Parliament, and the following year Parliament, in consequence of the Dunkeld Bridge incident, acted on legislation that abolished tolls on every bridge in Scotland.

"Dunkeld Bridge" appears in Capt. Francis O'Neill's great compendium *Music of Ireland* (1903), albeit under the title "Jerry Hayes." O'Neill lists himself as the source for the tune, and nowhere does he mention where he collected it from or who Jerry Hayes might have been.

[All quotes are from a *New York Times* article dated December 15, 1879, entitled "The Dunkeld Bridge War: History of an Old Highland Feud," based on an interview with Mr. Robertson, who was in America to arrange for a colony of Scottish farmers to be brought to Manitoba.]

Surprise du Québec, Part II (Spring 2011 issue) — **A follow-up:** Philippe Varlet, Irish-style fiddler, composer, and musicologist, corresponds to identify Irish antecedents for the Québécois tunes "Uncle Paddy" and "Gigue de la Débauche." The first strain of "Uncle Paddy," Philippe says, is similar to "Langstrom Pony" (save for the final cadence), which he points out is one of the older tunes in the Irish repertoire, having been printed by the Neals in Dublin in the first half of the 18th century. Philippe also believes a closer melodic relative to "Gigue de la Débauche" than "The Eavesdropper" is the jig "Larry O' Gaff," which was printed in the U.S. in several collections, and was recorded by John J. "Dutch" Kimmel, a Brooklyn accordion player whose recordings Philippe says were known to have been quite influential in Québec music. A comparison of the tunes reveals that Philippe's observations are correct, and his correspondence is appreciated.

[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 Fiddlers' Companion" (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]



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