

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

"The Graf Spee" is an Irish reel fairly frequently recorded in modern times by the likes of Kevin Burke, Paul O'Shaunessy, Bobby Casey and other great Irish fiddlers. Its title is that of a famous German pocket battleship of World War II (named in honor of a German admiral) that was believed to be a considerable threat to the Allies until cornered and scuttled off the coast of Montevideo in 1939. No other tunes in the repertoire are named after modern battleships, and its unique occurrence was odd enough to arouse the interest of researchers such as Brendan Breathnach and Matt Seattle, who managed to ferret out its origins. Association with the famous battleship caused the title "Graf Spee" to "stick" in the minds of fiddlers since the war, although the melody has had similar names in Irish repertoire. The melody was called "The Grand Spee" by New York fiddler Andy McGann, for one, and even "The Grand Spy" on an early 78 RPM disc by an American Irish piper named Martin Beirne (who led the Blackbird Orchestra).



*The Admiral Graf Spee*

It emerges that these titles were in all likelihood corruptions of a still older title, "Grant of Strathspey," sometimes given as "Grant's Strathspey," a tune with a Scottish name that appears in a Northumbrian tune collection, *William Vickers' Great Northern Tune Book*, first published in 1770. The title honors the Grant family, who long had sway over a portion of the River Spey in the Scottish Highlands, and Castle Grant on Speyside was the main residence of the clan from 1693. The original melody predates even Vickers' publication, however, and was originally the composition

## The Graf Spee

Musical score for "The Graf Spee" in treble clef, 2/4 time. The score consists of eight staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature, followed by a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above the notes). The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns. The third staff also continues the melody. The fourth staff features a double bar line with repeat dots, followed by a measure with a '2' above it, indicating a second ending or a specific ornament. The fifth staff continues the melody. The sixth staff features a double bar line with repeat dots, followed by a measure with a '2' above it. The seventh staff continues the melody. The eighth staff features a double bar line with repeat dots, followed by two first endings (labeled '1.' and '2.') and a final measure with a '2' above it.

of Scotsman Robert Bremner (c. 1713-89), who published the earliest collection of specifically Scottish dance music (1757-61). His melody was composed with the characteristics of a rant along with the dotted strathspey rhythm and was called "The Rothiemurchus Rant" (sometimes given as "Rothiemurchies Rant"). It was a great favorite of the Scots national poet, Robert Burns (1759-1796), who wrote in a letter:

*Many of our Strathspeys ancient and modern give me exquisite enjoyment... For instance, I am just now making verses to Rothiemurche's Rant, an air which puts me into raptures; and in fact, unless I be pleased with the tune, I never can make verses to it...*

Burns' song is called "Lassie wi' the lint-white locks," written in 1794, and while the comparison of hair color with lint is perhaps a tad annoying today, it was meant to convey the meaning of flaxen hair. The famous Scots fiddler Niel Gow remarked in his 1799 collection that "Rothiemurchies Rant" may also be played slow, evidently finding it pleasing as an air as well as a dance tune.

There is a connection between Bremner's title and other titles, for the area of Rothiemurchus near Aviemore has also been a stronghold of the Grant family for over four hundred years and is still in the possession of the family. The estate includes a ruined castle some 600 years old that still stands on an island in Loch an Eilein. Although quite picturesque now, it was once the lair of the cruel Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchanan, known as the Wolf of Bedenoch, who used the castle as a stronghold from which he terrorized the countryside. He died after a night playing chess with the devil, legend has it, during a vicious storm. In the morning his men were found lying around the castle, burned and blackened. The Wolf himself was found lifeless in the banqueting hall, and though his body appeared untouched, all the nails were gone from the soles of his shoes.

*[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.ceolas.org/tunes/fc>). Currently he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions, when not researching fiddle tunes.]*

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## Rothiemurchus Rant

The musical notation for "Rothiemurchus Rant" is presented in five staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The melody is characterized by a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, creating a rhythmic pattern typical of strathspey music. The notation includes various note values, rests, and repeat signs, capturing the intricate details of the traditional tune.