

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

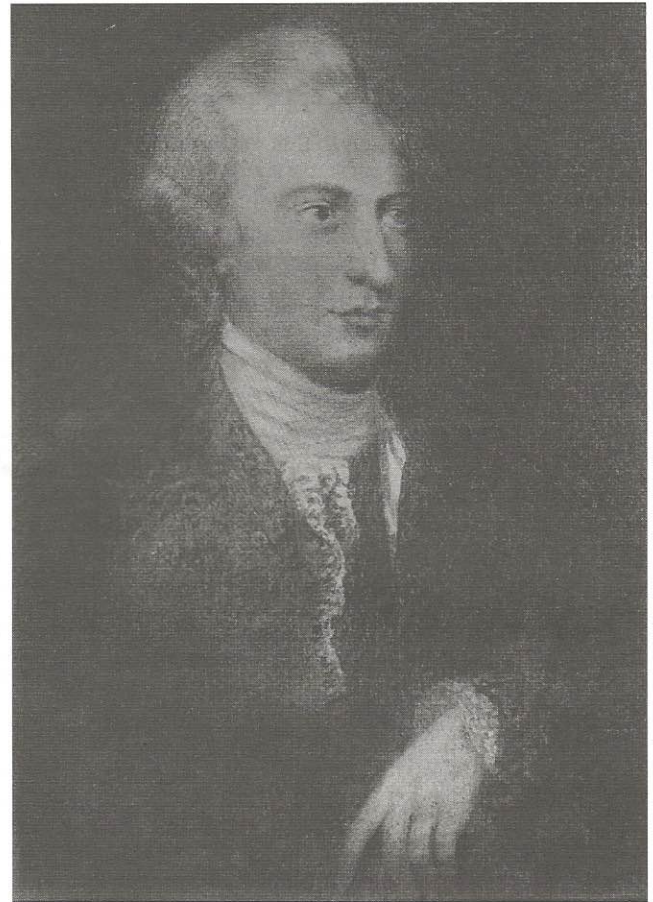
Lord MacDonald's Descendents

Part One: From Skye to Québec

Sir Alexander MacDonald's famous reel, by any name, is one of the most successful and widespread fiddle tunes in the traditional repertoire, with variants throughout Britain and Ireland, North America and beyond. It was composed by MacDonald (1744-1795), 1st Lord MacDonald, "a few days before his death," as legend has it. I suppose these kinds of apocryphal appendages are meant to stimulate interest in a piece (unnecessarily, in this case). In any event, MacDonald's reel was published in the early 1790s, several years before his death.

The composer was born on the island of Skye and was a descendent of the famous "Lord of the Isles." Although his family's title had been attained long before due to their penchant for frequently joining rebellions, in 1776 MacDonald (the 9th Baronet of Sleat), was able to prove himself sufficiently loyal to be awarded the title of Baron Macdonald of Slate in the County of Antrim in the Peerage of Ireland; a pretence, as the territorial designation was Sleat on the Isle of Skye, County Inverness. Thus he was the first in his family in some time to be able to officially assume the designation "Lord." Despite being a Highland "laird," MacDonald's English connections were solid and carefully cultivated. He was educated at Eton and in 1761 obtained a commission as ensign in the Coldstream regiment of Foot Guards. He also served with the Grenadier Guards and was a deputy lieutenant of Inverness-shire and a brigadier general in the Royal Company of Archers. In 1768 Sir Alexander married an English woman, Elizabeth Diana Bosville, the daughter of Godfrey Bosville, of Gunthwaite, county of York, with whom he had seven sons and three daughters.

MacDonald was a highly accomplished scholar and musician, and a very keen politician. He took a considerable interest in literature, and was elected a member of the Society of Antiquaries. His interests led him to others so inclined. A celebrated harper named O'Kane, who traveled in the Highlands in those days, was often entertained by his Lordship, who reportedly was delighted and charmed with his performances. Gunn, in his work on the harp (published in 1805), remarks that "no one was better able to feel and to estimate the superior talents of O'Kane, for I can vouch Lord MacDonald to have been one of our best amateurs on the violin, and one of the best judges of musical talents of that period. There had been for a great length of time in the family a valuable harp key; it was finely ornamented with gold and silver, and with a precious stone. This key is said to have been worth eighty or one hundred guineas, and on this occasion our itinerant harper had the good fortune of being presented by Lord MacDonald with this curious and valuable implement of his profession." He was a friend and dinner partner of Samuel Johnson in London, to whom he had been introduced by James Boswell (Laird of Auchinleck and Johnson's biographer) while on their famous journey to Scotland and the Isles in 1772 (MacDonald presented Johnson with verses written in Latin during the visit to Armadale, Skye).



National Library of Scotland

Sir Alexander MacDonald

He was also friendly with Dunkeld, Perthshire, fiddler-composer Niel Gow. MacDonald himself was also quite musical, and was celebrated as an excellent player of classical music. He also kept a Highland piper on retainer, and composed pieces in the traditional Scottish style, among them "Lord MacDonald's Reel," "The London Highland Society's Strathspey," "Mrs. M'Leod of Rasay's," and "Mrs. M'Kinnon's, Corry," all well regarded in Scottish traditional repertory. A famous Sleat violinist by the name of Iain Ruadh (John Roy) Kennedy, was a great favorite of his and often used to entertain at the family seat at Armadale, in a musical capacity; it is said that on one occasion, at least, his lordship tied Kennedy's arm to a chair, but the result was almost the same as if it had been free.

MacDonald had the particular difficulty of being a lord who straddled two cultures: he was an English-bred chieftain with one foot firmly in London and the other in Skye. He could be out of touch with the people in his homeland. While he could be a generous patron of the arts, he was given to increasing his rents, and was somewhat unpopular with his principal tenants, several of whom combined to keep the lands at the old rents. Many of his subjects felt the hard pressure of the times so keenly that they were forced to emigrate. At the time of Dr. Johnson's visit to Skye, there was an emigrant ship, called the Nestor, in Portree Harbour to carry off the emigrants.

Whether or not he named his most famous composition after himself, or whether it was named descriptively for him, "Lord MacDonald's Reel" was printed in Niel and Nathaniel Gows' *3rd Collection of Niel Gow's Reels* (1792), reprinted by Nathaniel's

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siblings, John and Andrew Gow in their *A Collection of Slow Airs, Strathspeys and Reels* (London, c. 1795). Andrew (1760-1803) and younger brother John (1764-1826) not only inherited the Gow family talent for music, but expanded the family music publishing business to London in 1788, and were the English distributors for the Gows' musical publications. The tune proved popular almost from the time of its first publication and was quickly assimilated throughout Scottish tradition and disseminated wherever the Scots emigrated. One of the oddest appearances of the tune is on the barrel organ from the polar expedition of Admiral Parry of 1810. In place of a ship's fiddler (common in those days), Parry introduced a mechanical barrel organ on board ship to provide entertainment and a vehicle to which the men could exercise (i.e. by dancing). "Lord MacDonald's Reel" was one of eight tunes on barrel no. 5.

"Lord MacDonald's Reel" and derivatives can be found in nearly all North American traditions. In the United States it most famously assumed the title "Leather Britches," and became one of the core tunes of old time repertoire, but that was by no means the extent of its influence or variations. Ken Perlman, who researched the fiddle music of Prince Edward Island, Canada, noted that it was in the old days the most-requested tune of fiddlers by step-dancers throughout much of the island, attesting to its popularity there. He calls it "the most played 'good old tune'" on PEI and stated that it was at one time the benchmark by which fiddlers were measured. Cape Breton fiddler Jerry Holland's version, in A Mixolydian, is a pipe setting learned from his father.

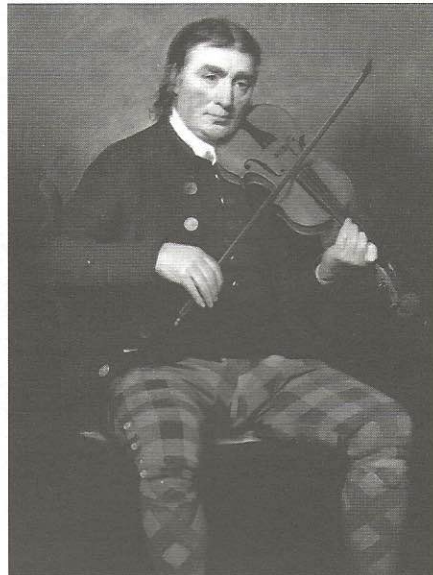
This, and the next Tune History article, however, will focus on the

numerous "Lord MacDonald's Reel" variants among fiddlers in the province of Québec. The traditional fiddle repertoire for dancing in Québec was primarily a solo tradition, much like pre-string band Appalachian fiddle music, and is an amalgam of Anglo-Irish and French music. Distinguishing characteristics of the tradition include frequent double stops on the fiddle, fast tempos, asymmetrical phrase lengths ("crooked tunes"), and highly accented musical phrases. It was common, when long dances or *veillées* (house parties) were held, that one fiddler's place was taken by another when fatigue set in, rotating through the evening or night. As a result, fiddlers were free to improvise and to spontaneously create their own variations. Originality has become a prized quality for Québécois fiddlers. The nature of the dancing often did not require any particular phrase lengths, just a steady beat. This resulted in various rhythmic and melodic eccentricities in the music, to the taste of the individual fiddler, and explains the particularly driving nature of Québec dance music. Augmenting the rhythmic playing of their instruments, fiddlers accompanied themselves by foot clogging, ostensibly developed during *veillées*, where the tight quarters made real step dancing impossible.

The "Lord MacDonald's Reel" melody, so ubiquitous in fiddlers' repertoires, is an excellent base from which to explore the amazing variety and inspiration of the fiddlers of the province. The dazzling variety of Québécois variants can be found under the titles "Lord MacDonald's Reel," "MacDonald's Reel," "McDonnell's Reel," "Le Petit Bûcheux," "Reel à Pataud," "Gigue à Ti-Zoune," "Reel McDonnell," "Reel d'Amqui," "Reel de l'enfant," "Célestin à Jos," and the rather generic names "Sets Canadiens No. 4," "Le reel à quatre," and "Virginia Reel Part 1" (the last

three derive from association with folk dances). Undoubtedly there are others.

We can start a review of Québécois “Lord MacDonald’s Reel” variants with a grounding in the Scottish original, as printed by the Gows in their *Third Collection of Niel Gow’s Reels* (1792) (see below). Notice that it’s in ABAAC form, with the last (C) strain being a repeat of the second strain, played up an octave; thus the four-part tune is essentially made up of two melodic strains. Both strains feature a “weaving” pattern accentuated by passages where the bow “rocks” between adjacent strings – the defining melodic and rhythmic characteristic of the tune, and perfect for dancing.



Niel Gow by Henry Raeburn

Wikimedia Commons

listened attentively to the boy and asked his name, but said nothing else. Jean was told who it was that had been listening to him, and summoned up the courage to inquire of Allard where he lived. The next morning Allard found him on the sidewalk across from his house in Ville St-Pierre, recognized him, and invited him to come inside. Allard became his tutor and mentor, and for 20 years they remained friends and musical companions.

We can contrast it with the version by Montreal cab driver Jean “Ti-Jean” Carignan (1916-1988), the most famous traditional fiddler in Québec in the 20th century. Carignan, born at Lévis, Québec, learned a large core Québécois repertoire from his father and from Montréal fiddler Joseph Allard (1873-1947). As his longtime piano accompanist, Giles Losier, recalled, a 9-year-old Carignan met Allard at a wedding where the youngster was playing with his father. The older fiddler

Carignan was introduced by friends to the 78 rpm recordings of J. Scott Skinner (Scotland) and Michael Coleman (Ireland) and mastered the styles of those fiddle masters as well. When asked to play a tune, he sometimes rejoined, “Which style?” – fully capable of producing Québécois, Irish, and Scottish versions on demand. His “Lord MacDonald’s Reel” is proof; it’s a faithful recreation of County Sligo fiddler Michael Coleman’s medley “Lord McDonald’s/Ballinasloe Fair,” recorded in New York in 1927.

We instantly hear the grace notes, rolls, and phrasing of Irish music. It has, like the Gows’ version, rhythmically “square” eight-

Lord MacDonald’s Reel

From the *Third Collection of Niel Gow’s Reels*

measure strains. The four parts mimic the Gow original, with the second and fourth strains virtually identical; the first and third strains employ similar melodic material. One strain of the Coleman/Carignan tune is essentially a version of an earlier strain, set an octave above. The parts of the Gow and Coleman/Carignan reels are in a different order (AABAAC vs. ABCB); the octave setting occurs in the fourth part of the Gow version, and in the third strain of the Coleman/Carignan version. In the Gows' tune the octave parts are identical; in the Coleman/Carignan version they are not, but are rather a melodic variation.

Is this Québécois fiddling, or an accomplished fiddler from Québec performing in the Irish style? While Carignan's "Lord MacDonald's" does not patently display the characteristics of Québec fiddle tradition (frequent double stops on the fiddle, fast tempos, asymmetrical phrase lengths, highly accented musical phrases), Miles Krassen, in his 1974 article "An Analysis of a Jean Carignan

Record" (*Canadian Folk Music Journal*), suggests a deeper interpretation: "It is only when viewed as perhaps the foremost representative of a branch of French-Canadian traditional music that Carignan can be properly appreciated. Even in his nominally Irish and Scottish selections, there is a French-Canadian sense of phrasing. His beat is never quite the light and subtle rhythms of the fiddlers from Sligo or the intensely restrained and precise patterns of the Scots. In all his playing, the buoyant and exuberant pulse of French Canada comes through."

In the next issue we will see how other fiddlers from Québec interpreted "Sir Alexander's" reel.

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, *The Fiddler's Companion* (ibiblio.org/fiddlers) and his current project *The Traditional Tune Archive* (tunearch.org). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

Lord MacDonald's Reel

As played by Jean Carignan