

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Mason's (Extraordinary, Extended) Family

One of the best-known, most well-traveled, reels in the traditional fiddling repertoire of Britain and Ireland is "The Mason's Apron," a venerable war-horse that still trots like a colt in skilled hands. It is not a difficult tune to play in its stripped-down, un-ornamented, binary version, and zips along quite easily in the key of A, where it often dwells, although there are some mighty versions in the key of G. Fiddlers like the key of A for it, as they can take advantage of open string drones, easy arpeggios, and lots of stepwise motion. Its strengths are its evenly-matched, distinct, and memorable two strains, and the opening octave leap that seems to demand one jump out of one's seat to join a dance set.

The reel unquestionably has a Scottish provenance. Versions first appeared in print in the latter 19th century in three publications issued in the same six-year period, albeit with three different tune titles (only one of which included the word "Mason"). Robert Ross printed it in his *Choice Collection of Scots Reels or Country Dances and Strathspeys* (Edinburgh, 1780) as "The Mason Laddie," while Edinburgh bandleader and violinist Alexander McGlashan (1740-1797) bestowed two different titles in separate collections: "Braes of Glenorchy" in his *Collection of Strathspey Reels, with a bass for the Violoncello or Harpsichord* (c. 1780/81), and "The Isla Reel" in his (second) *Collection of Reels, consisting chiefly of Strathspeys, Athole Reels &c.* (1786). One might conclude, by whatever title, that the new reel was quite popular, particularly since McGlashan's was the premier dance band in Edinburgh at the time. Since he saw fit to print the tune twice in dance collections, it can be surmised that he valued it as a vehicle for his band's repertoire and played it often. At least one

researcher, Mary Ann Alburger, thinks it's possible McGlashan composed the reel; although none of the tunes in his collection appear with his name attached to them (his name appears only in the title page), it is thought that some of the contents were original with him.

The reel did not acquire the well-known "Mason's Apron" title until it was printed in the the Gow family's *Complete Repository Part 2*, published in Edinburgh in 1800 by the firm of Gow and Shepherd. Family scion Niel Gow (1727-1807) was an elderly man by the time the collection was issued, and the compilation is usually attributed to his son Nathaniel (1763-1831). It was not unusual for tunes to have musical variants and different titles for a variety of reasons, including the vicissitudes of aural transmission (of the music) and oral relay of the title. Mishearings and mistakes happen, sometimes to the detriment or augmentation of tune or title, or an absent title was filled in simply because tunes in printed collections require titles. When a title cannot be found one simply invents one; or, in the case of McGlashan, invents two! A change in title could also be deliberate, to obscure origins and obfuscate copyright (or what passed for copyright in those days).

The Gows were no strangers to McGlashan, known as "King" McGlashan for his commanding presence and his penchant for sporting extravagant apparel; he was a successful showman. The eldest of Niel's sons, William Gow (1755-1791) took over McGlashan's dance band on the latter's retirement, and Nathaniel himself was tutored by McGlashan in Edinburgh and served his musical apprenticeship as cellist in his band. When William died, Nathaniel stepped up to become leader of McGlashan's band. Thus, there is a record that the Gows were familiar with the whole of the popular dance band's repertoire of the latter 18th century, and (if the assumption that the "Mason" was a popular tune is true) they surely were thoroughly familiar with the reel.

Interesting is the similarity in the titles of the Gows' "Mason's Apron" and Ross's "Mason Laddie." Whether or not either of these names is associated with a trade or with Freemasonry is

Braes of Glenorchy

The image displays the musical notation for the fiddle tune "Braes of Glenorchy." It consists of four staves of music, each beginning with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff starts with a common time signature (C) and contains the first strain of the tune. The second staff begins with a measure number '5' and contains the second strain. The third staff begins with a measure number '9' and contains the third strain. The fourth staff begins with a measure number '14' and contains the fourth strain. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and bar lines.

unknown, although it is generally assumed the “Mason’s Apron” does refer to the fraternal organization (the white-silk apron being the badge of a Freemason). The Grand Lodge was formed in Scotland in 1736 and Scottish Freemasonry became a powerful and politically influential movement in latter 19th century Scotland, whose members included nobility and government officials attracted by the “esoteric” knowledge of a craft-based allegory and a forum free from more public conventions or political debates. Not incidentally, Masonic lodges also sponsored social events, and it may have behooved the Gows, whatever their personal connection with Freemasonry might have been, to associate the tune with the organization. It would have been advantageous for a musician to have the title on a program at an annual Masonic ball. Fiddler Duncan McKerracher (1796-1873), known as the “Dunkeld Paganini” for the excellence of his playing, definitely associated the tune with the Lodge, and played “The Mason’s Apron” as his usual encore, for which he dressed in his Masonic apron. [Family lore has it that McKerracher once danced on a table to the playing of Niel Gow. If so, it would have been a very old Gow and very young McKerracher, but they were both from the Dunkeld area.]

The reel was known by a few other titles in the few decades after its initial publication. Early in the 19th century Irish uilleann piper O’Farrell (whose first name is lost to us) published four volumes of his *Pocket Companion for the Irish or Union Pipes*. He was then performing in London on the stage and concertizing, and had acquired an eclectic repertory that included tunes from all over Ireland and Great Britain. The fourth volume of his *Companion*, c. 1810, contains “Miss Hope’s Favourite—Scotch,” which reveals itself upon playing to be a version of “Mason’s Apron.” He credits the provenance, but his title is idiosyncratic and appears nowhere else for this melody.

Of more significance and curiosity is the group of titles going variously as “Carton’s Reel,” “Miss Carbery’s Reel” and “Lady Carbury” which presumably are variants of one another. The tune they represent is unquestionably “Mason’s Apron,” but the origin

of the “Carbury” titles is obscure; they seem to exist in isolation, and, while we can surmise a common ancestor or source, one has not been found. “Carton’s Reel” is named by researcher Brendan Breathnach as an alternate title for “Mason’s Apron,” albeit without further explanation (also citing a similarly un-sourced alternate title for the tune, “Gallagher’s Reel”). “Lady Carbury” was obtained by Irish historian, writer, and music collector P.W. Joyce (1827-1914) from Mr. M. Flanagan, “of the Hibernian Military School, Phoenix Park, Dublin, a good player of the Union pipes.” Flanagan learned to play the pipes in North Kildare, and perhaps “Lady Carbury” was part of the local repertoire, but that is speculation. How curious that a version of Joyce’s tune appears as “Miss Carberry’s Reel” in the music manuscript collection of ship’s fiddler William Litten, dating to his sea voyage to the East Indies during the years 1800 to 1802. There is very little known about Litten, his origins, or his playing, but his manuscript (like O’Farrell’s) contains an eclectic mix of tunes from Ireland, England, and Scotland. The handwritten collection was obtained by an American whaler who brought it back with him to his home on the Massachusetts island of Martha’s Vineyard. What was the intersection of Joyce’s “Lady Carbury” and Litten’s “Miss Carberry”? An unanswered question for now, however, the “Carbury” titles as a group do suggest that Irish musicians may have absorbed the melody independent of published collections and that it was in aural transmission on the island. Influential Piper Séamus Ennis (1919-1982) recorded the reel in 1948 as “Lady Carbury,” and, while his source is unidentified, he probably retrieved it from Joyce’s collection.

In the next issue we’ll take a deeper look at the reel in Ireland and see what happened to it in North America.

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

Lady Carbury