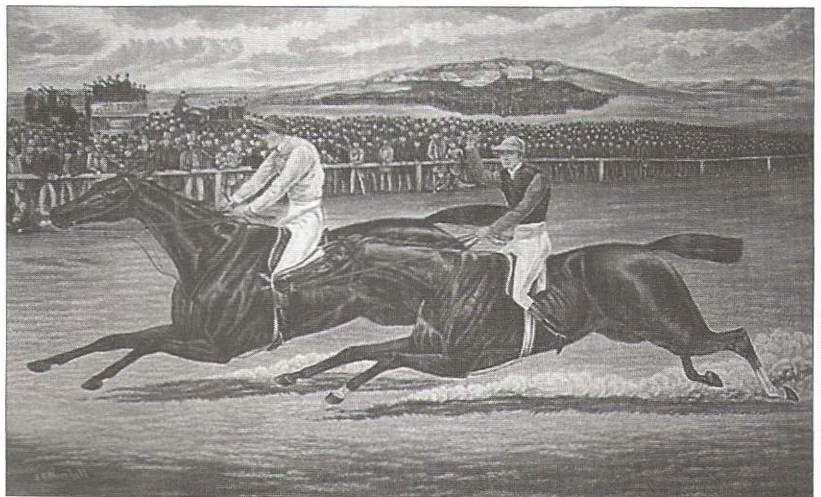
Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Fiddle Tunes at the Races, Part II: Playing the Ponies


Derby, 1886

Irish and American horseracing developed along lines both similar to and uniquely different from British horseracing (discussed in the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine*), which had consequences for the interplay of fiddlers and fiddling with horseracing in those countries.

The Irish affinity for the horse and horseracing is well-known and stems from ancient association. When the pirates of Newgrange migrated west some 4,000 years ago, legend has it, they went in search of the Burren, a geological feature in County Clare, guided by their prophet, Mara. They eventually came to Galway where they invented horseracing to amuse the Fianna (a warrior band established to protect the high king of Ireland), who in turn gave them hurley sticks. Some date Irish horseracing back to the third century A.D., when chariot races were held at the *cuireach,* the Irish Gaelic word meaning "place of the running horse," or a racecourse. A racecourse at the County Kildare location exists today under the name The Curragh, and is the headquarters of flat racing in Ireland. Formally organized racing in Ireland is under the auspices of the Turf Club, founded in 1790, which directly evolved from an organization called the Sportsmen of the Curragh, formed in the Rose and Bottle in Dublin's Dame Street in November, 1749, to oversee the racing that had resumed at Curragh regularly in 1741. Today, the Turf Club oversees both flat and national hunt racing, as well as point-to-point racing on the island. The Turf Club is also the proprietor of the Curragh Racecourse, which it administers.

Prior to the Battle of the Boyne, there had been a long history of horseracing in Ireland, usually match races, where two owners pitted their horses against one another. One such race was recorded at the Curragh in 1634, when the Earl of Ormond's horse beat Lord Digby's horse over a four-mile course. In 1665 Lord Deputy Essex presided over a match race at Sandymount, Dublin, attended by 5,000 spectators, where he awarded a valuable plate to the victor. Charles II, the "Merry Monarch," did much for Irish racing, as he had done for British racing. He granted a Royal Charter in 1685 to Down Royal racecourse "to encourage racing and breeding" in the country. In the year 1690 the prize of a silver bell was won at Down Royal (Downpatrick) by a brown charger named the Byerley Turk, so called because he had been captured in 1688 in Hungary at the siege of Buda against Turkish forces by Captain Robert Byerley of the 6th Dragoon Guards, who served under William of Orange. The Byerley Turk then went on to fight with Byerley at the Boyne with the Williamite forces, and in the subsequent Irish Wars.

Throughout the next, 18th, century Irish racing and breed-lines continued to develop. There were series of races at Curragh called "King's Plates" races — often a dozen each season — run for a prize worth 100 guineas, and these were the highlight of Irish racing at the time. The first steeplechase race took place in County Cork in 1752, a match race over countryside, literally from steeple to steeple.

However, the typical Irishman's association with races and horses was severely curtailed, in contrast to his English or Scottish cousin. First, following the Williamite victory came the Penal Laws, meant to suppress the nationalist urging of the Irish and to consolidate British and Protestant rule throughout the country. Included in the Penal laws were restrictions on the ownership of land and horses by the native Catholic Irish. The breeding of thoroughbred horses and the preparation of horses for racing was a time-consuming and very costly operation. With diminished financial resources, curtailed and restricted land use, and discriminatory legal proceedings, the Catholic Irish gentry found horseracing increasingly closed to them, and thus horseracing came to be the provenance of Protestant gentry of English extraction. Even as a spectator sport, thoroughbred horseracing was increasingly closed to the Irish Catholic population, who loved the sport as much as any. When they attended races in large numbers, in the growing enthusiasm for the developing sport in Ireland, the powers that governed the island perceived them a potential threat. For example, the crowds of Irish who attended the races held at the village of Crumlin, just outside Dublin, were accused of indulging in assemblies which led to "dissipation, club-law and tumult," according to the *Freeman's Journal,* a periodical that demanded the legal suppression of such meetings. In 1791 horseracing in the vicinity of the ruling city of Dublin was prohibited. When the Irish did revolt against English rule in 1798 the Curragh races were cancelled altogether, "owing to the disturbed state of the country."

In the 19th century, after the suppression of the United Irishmen, racing continued to develop, principally in the venues of Down Royal, Curragh, Cork Park, Galway, and Bellewstown. The latter, a course in County Meath, had its first race under formal Turf Club rules in 1805, with the prize of a King's Plate of 100 Guineas being added in 1808. The track was well-situated on the plateau of Crockafotha, with views of the sea, the Mountains of Mourne, and the town of Drogheda. It was a popular draw for gentry and commoners alike. King George IV visited Curragh in 1821 to great fanfare and presented the Royal Whip, a trophy whose handle was decorated with gold shamrocks, to encourage horse

breeding in Ireland. In the late 1840s, however, the Great Famine gripped Ireland, with the result that starvation, a severely depleted economy, and depopulation set back the sport of horseracing in Ireland for some time to come. It was not until the waning years of the 19th century that Irish thoroughbred racing recovered, largely through the efforts of Richard Eyre "Boss" Croker, an Irish-American who had fought his way up the mean streets of New York to power in Tammany Hall. He returned to Ireland to establish a successful stud, and, against long odds, his horse Orby won the exclusive Epsom Derby in England, to the joy of Ireland. His manager was accosted by a Dublin shawlie sometime later, who gushed, "Thank God and you, sir, that we have lived to see a Catholic horse win the Derby!"

Horseracing in America was scarcely less old than in Britain and Ireland. In fact, only fourteen years after John Playford celebrated the return of music and dancing in England with the Restoration of Charles II with the publication of his *English Dancing Master* in 1651, a racecourse was laid out on Long Island by British settlers. However, for well over the next two centuries horseracing remained a local pastime, following the pattern of match races and adjunct entertainments at local fairs and celebrations that characterized the rural areas of Ireland, England, and Scotland. It was not until after the American Civil War that racing in America was organized on a national level, ushering in an era of huge success. In fact, during the "Gilded Age" years the rapid rise of industrialization, an economy infused by ready capital, and interest in speculation and gambling resulted in an explosion of interest in the sport. By 1890 some 314 race tracks operated throughout the country. It was not until 1894, however, that the most prominent track and stable owners met in New York to form an American Jockey Club, the counterpart to the English organization, which, like its parent overseas, codified the various rules and regulations regarding the different tracks and races, and helped organize and develop the sport along codified lines.

The Jockey Club in America also helped mitigate organized crime which had corrupted various tracks in the absence of a central governing authority. Ultimately, however, it was neither the criminal element nor corruption — except obliquely — that led to a near-extinction of horseracing in America. Rather it was the wave of anti-gambling sentiment in America in the early 1900s that led many states to ban bookmaking. Some twenty years after the heyday of 1890, in 1908, there were only twenty-five tracks still operating. It was state interest in sharing in the lucrative funds of gambling that returned horseracing to the mainstream of sporting America, when legislature after legislature determined that pari-mutual betting was not only more secure, but it allowed the state to share in the proceeds of monies wagered. By the end of World War I prosperity had returned to the country, and crowds had been energized by such magnificent animals as Man o' War, so that spectating as well as gambling was of interest.

Surprisingly, there are relatively few pieces in Irish or American fiddling tradition named for specific horseracing courses. Especially when compared to English and Scottish traditions, the Irish tradition has been relatively silent with regard to the more elite aspects of the sport. While there are over twenty-five tunes composed by musicians — fiddlers, mostly — in honor of racecourses in Britain, there are only a very few that are directly associated with Irish courses, and none titled for American tracks. Perhaps this is attributable to timing, for well-established racecourses were relatively late fixtures in the sporting world, and the accompanying social scene to the racing season was more diffuse. The situation probably afforded fewer opportunities for employment for American fiddlers than the British venues of the late 18th century, but at any rate, the brass band had supplanted the fiddler as the prominent musical accompaniment to 19th century events. As the 18th century wore well into the 19th, it was as interested consumers that horseracing made the biggest impact on fiddlers. Given that popular culture always intrudes upon and influences

Curragh Races

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traditional art, it wasn't long before melodies and titles began to commemorate aspects of the sport apart from patronage or venue seeking, out of personal interest or investment in the sport, or simply plain enthusiasm. These tunes were composed and disseminated in the same anonymous process of most traditional fiddle tunes, rather than printed for publication for a specific audience.

For example, three tunes in the Irish repertoire can be assumed to have been inspired simply by love of racing, or the eager anticipation of an event. "Off to the Races" is a jig, apparently of no great antiquity, collected independently by Brendan Breathnach and Bernard Flaherty from the playing of fiddlers from County Sligo. It presumably expresses the feelings of one setting off on a racing holiday to a favorite track. The quaintly-titled "Little Grey Mare of the Branches" is a duple-time air collected by P.W. Joyce in 1846 from the fiddling of Hugh O'Beirne, a professional fiddler from Ballinamore, County Leitrim, from whom other Irish collectors also gleaned material. He was described as "a man of exceptional musical taste and culture," and he can be credited with rescuing many Irish tunes from oblivion through his contact with Joyce and his colleagues. Joyce reveals the title's connection with horseracing with the brief note "i.e. that won the races." The hornpipe "Horse and Jockey" appears in O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland* (1907), and the Captain evidently thought enough of it to reprint it in his smaller 1915 publication, *O'Neill's Irish Music*.

Scotland, too, celebrated the modest delights associated with racing, as well as the elite (discussed in the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine*). An old Scottish jig, "John Paterson's Mare," probably originating from Ayrshire — Robert Burns' country — was (according to Chambers, 1862) the air to a song that was "a rough ballad descriptive of the confused horse-race which used to take place at all country bridals long ago, between the home of the bride's father and that of her husband." Under the title "The Black and the Brown" the jig was transformed into a showcase piece by Northumbrian smallpipers, early among them professional piper John Peacock (1754-1817, the last of the Newcastle Waits, or musical watchmen), who published the melody with the characteristic numerous variation sets in his c. 1800 publication. Both titles are captured in the beginning lines of the song:

The black and the brown
Cam nearest the town,
But Paterson's mare she came foremost;
The dun and the gray
Kept farthest away,
But Paterson's mare she came foremost.
Fy, whip her in, whip her out,
Six shillings in a clout,
O'er the kirk-style and away wi' her!

A previous title for the tune was, according to Hogg, "She's yours, she's yours, she's nae mair ours," who says it was always played at the taking away of the bride. Similarly, Henderson Berwick (1856, 106), indicates it was a bridal tune and gives the lines:

She's yours! She's yours!
She's nae mair ours—
Owre the Kirk-style
And away wi' her!

the last lines of which, having appeared in the racing song at a bridal event, confuse the issue between the eager escape of the bridal couple from the party, and the fury of the horserace! The

New Market

(John Paterson's Mare Goes Foremost)

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Gows printed "John Paterson's Mare" in their *Complete Repository,* book 2 (1802), albeit under the title "New Market." Their re-titling of older tunes was a fairly common occurrence in their publications, but this one seems unfortunate as it retains only the horseracing associations (as Newmarket was the premier English racecourse of the day), and distances it from the rich character of the country wedding.

The melodic motifs contained in "John Paterson's Mare" have been around for quite some time. As Cowdery (1990) points out, the jig is a (loose) adaptation of the reel "The Cameronian Rant," and, in fact, it has been noticed by several writers that some versions of the melodic motif straddle meters. On the island of Whalsey in the Shetlands, for example, the jig is rendered back into a reel called "The Black and the Brown," played in cross tuning (AEAE) by fiddler John Irvine, for the "bedding of the bride" ceremony at the end of the 19th century. Influential Shetland fiddler John Stickle (1875-1957, descendent of a shipwrecked German sailor) resident of Unst, one of the northernmost islands in the chain, played it in the key of G. Cooke (1986) found the "Paterson" rhyme still in tradition in the Shetlands in the 1970s:

> *The black and the brown gaed oot o the town,*
> *And John Paterson's mare gaed foremost.*

The amount of variation among what can loosely be described as a tune family is not surprising — versions of the melody have appeared for centuries in the English, Scottish, and Irish traditions of several instruments: fiddle, Highland bagpipe, Northumbrian smallpipes, etc.

It must have been pure enthusiasm that led to the occasional celebration of racehorses themselves in traditional music. Perhaps it was an appreciation of the complex, and quite genealogical, process of breeding thoroughbred racehorses; perhaps simply an affinity for the magnificent animals; or perhaps the desire to honor a prized champion. That certainly was the case with another Northumbrian melody called variously "Fenwick o' Bywell," "Horse and Away to Newmarket," "Newmarket Races" (in John Peacock's collection) or — and my favorite — "Galloping Ower the Cow Hill" (from Robert Bewick's old manuscript collection). The two former of these titles, relates Bruce and Stokoe (1882), "refer to a ballad once sung to the tune, celebrating a match at Newmarket between a mare called Duchess, belonging to the then Fenwick of Bywell, and a celebrated Newmarket racehorse. Tradition states that the north country horse won the race (which was run in heats), but with nothing to spare. We have heard the ballad sung by an old jockey about forty years ago (c. 1840), but it is now lost, and we can only recall to memory the first two lines:

> *Fenwick o' Bywell's off to Newmarket,*
> *He'll be there or we get started."*

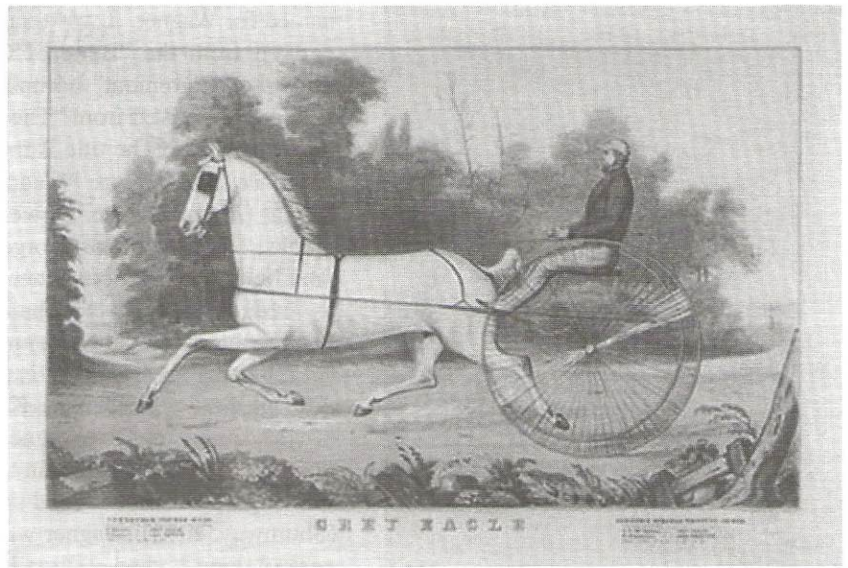
The authors point out the melody's similarity to the familiar Irish jig "Garryowen," but declare that it has sufficient "independence of character" to be included in their collection.

What Stokoe and Bruce described as "local traditional memory" about the racehorse is actually fact. Duchess was owned by William Fenwick of Bywell, a descendent of a horse-breeding, landed family in Northumberland who produced generations of fine thoroughbreds. Duchess had been bred by Newmarket trainer Thomas Panton and sold to Fenwick as a youngster. She was an outstanding race mare, and won the Great Subscription Purse at both York and Hambleton, and numerous King's Plates at Hambleton, Lincoln, Newmarket, and other venues. When her racing days were over, she herself birthed many good runners for the Fenwick family, who competed them in the 1760s.

Northumbrian fascination with racing, at least in traditional

Bee's Wing

played regularly with Bob Taylor when the latter ran for Governor of the state in the late 1800s. Harris moved to western North Carolina in the 1920s and influenced a generation of fiddlers there. Guntown, Mississippi, fiddler W.E. Claunch recorded a version in the key of G for the Library of Congress in 1939, and Sam Bayard noted G versions from Pennsylvania fiddlers. One of the things that Professor Bayard found surprising about "Grey Eagle" was the tenacity of the title in the face of so many disparate versions.



How old is it? Charles Wolfe (1982) first suggested in print that it was possibly named for a famous Kentucky racehorse of the 1830s. Writing in the now-defunct occasional periodical *The Devil's Box,* the late John Hartford expanded on this and found that the "Grey Eagle" title became attached to the tune following the famous race between horses known as "Grey Eagle" (1835-1863) and his opponent, "Wagner." The race has been documented and took place in the Oakland Racetrack in Louisville in 1838 where "Grey Eagle," a beautiful and talented Kentucky horse, set an American record for two mile heats in the sweepstakes that year. He was described as "a magnificent horse nearly sixteen hands in height, said to be of almost perfect symmetry, although scarcely equal in his quarters to his forehand, which is described as sumptuous. His color, as his name indicates, was a fine silvery gray." Soon after the event a tune folio celebrating both racehorses appeared (a copy of which is in the possession of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro). Hartford, along with other writers noted the similarities between "Grey Eagle" and a popular older Scottish tune called "The Miller of Drone," with the conclusion that the former is closely linked and derivative.

The association with the Louisville race of 1838 also helps date the companion tune "Wagoner" (the horse was named "Wagner," but the tune title has numerous spelling variants). This American melody in the key of C major is as well-disseminated in the United States as "Grey Eagle." "Wagoner" (along with "Wagoner in B-Flat") was recorded for the Library of Congress by musicologist/folklorist Vance Randolph from the playing of Ozark Mountain fiddlers in the early 1940s, and is a Midwest standard. It was in the repertoire of Jimmy Thompson (1848-1931), a fiddler originally from Texas and it was supposed to have been the first tune Uncle Jimmy played on Nashville's WSM in November, 1923, in what was to become the very beginning of the Grand Ole Opry (Wolfe, 1997). Early field recordings of it were made by Herbert Halpert in 1939 from the playing of Lee County, Mississippi, fiddler W.E. Claunch. "Wagoner" was Kentucky fiddler John M. Salyer's (1882-1952) favorite tune, according to his son Grover.

Similar to "Grey Eagle," there are antecedents for the melody

Grey Eagle

named for Wagner. It was thought by Bayard (1981) and Christeson (1973) to have been derived from the "Belle of Claremont Hornpipe," although Bayard, digging deeper, finds the "Claremont" hornpipe had origins in Scottish repertoire — the second strain he thought derived from "The Gaberlunzie-Man," a piece in Thompson's *Orpheus Caledonius* of 1725. The title is to be found in a number of variations, usually with a different place name before "Wagoner," such as "Tennessee Wagoner," "Georgia Wagoner," "Texas Wagoner," etc. However, it also appears under non-Wagoner titles as, for example, "The Hero" in George P. Knauff's 1839 publication *Virginia Reels,* volume II (Baltimore), and in some later mid-nineteenth century publications where it can be found as "Miss Brown's Reel." The John Lusk Band (a black string band from the Cumberland Plateau region of Kentucky) played it under the title "Rolling River."

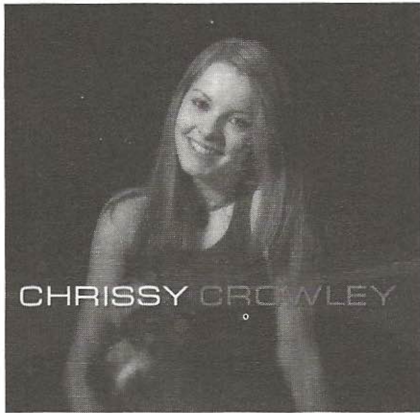
Arizona fiddler Kenner C. Kartchner was convinced that it was written "in honor of (Texas cattleman) Dan Wagner years earlier, maybe one hundred years ago," an assumption that led him to maintain that the "Texas" appellation to the title was the correct one (although he acknowledged that "some call it 'Tennessee Wagoner,' reason not known" (Shumway, 1990). Wagner was a racehorse, however, and a famous one at that; a long-necked, long-bodied stallion having muscular arms and wide hips and chestnut in color with a white blaze on his face. He was also called Egbert's Wagner, and, although of Virginia stock, he stood with some note in Tennessee (if you're counting, then the "Virginia" or "Tennessee" Wagner title is then best applied to the tune). Grey Eagle set records in 1838, but it was Wagner's year in 1839, when he won the same Louisville sweepstakes. The match race between Wagner and Grey Eagle in 1839 was a direct precursor to today's Kentucky Derby, and drew some 10,000 spectators. Not only did Wagner win in Louisville that day, but he beat Grey Eagle in another match a few days later. In all, Wagner contested in twenty races, winning fourteen. The great 1839 race was described in rather heated prose by William T. Porter for the Turf Register of 1840:

> *By the most extraordinary exertions Wagner got up neck and neck with "the gallant grey," as they swung round the turn into the quarter stretch. The feelings of the assembled thousands were wrought up by a pitch absolutely painful—silence the most profound reigned over that vast assembly, as these noble animals sped on as if life and death called forth their utmost energies. Both jockeys had their whiphands at work, and at every stroke, each spur, with a desperate stab, was buried to the rowel-head. Grey Eagle, for the first hundred yards, was clearly gaining; but in another instant Wagner was even with him. Both were out and doing their best. It was anybody's race yet! Now Wagner, now Grey Eagle, has the advantage. It will be a dead heat? "See! Grey Eagle's got him!" "No, Wagner's ahead!" A moment ensues—the people shout—hearts throb—ladies faint—a thrill of emotion, and the race is over! Wagner wins by a neck, in 7.44, the best race ever run south of the Potomac...*

Wagner was ridden by a black jockey name Cato (nicknamed Kate) — a slave. Cato gained his freedom that day, and his master claimed the $14,000 purse (although Cato too was given a "satchel full of the prize money" along with his manumition). Grey Eagle was ridden by a white jockey, Stephen Welch. The prize money was dwarfed by the betting action stretching from New York to New Orleans, and the race became notorious because "more money, Negroes and horses were wagered and lost" than in any other race in the country.

Both animals became sires of other thoroughbreds in the course of time. Grey Eagle was put to stud at the farm of J.B. Poyntz, near Maysville. Robert E. Lee's horse, Traveller, the most famous horse of the Civil War, was the son of Grey Eagle and was born in Mason County, Kentucky, in 1856. Today, nearly all modern American Saddlebreds trace their ancestry to Grey Eagle.

[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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