

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

A Question of Provenance

A few months ago I engaged in some delightful correspondence with Mrs. Mary Sander, who wrote to me soliciting information about some tunes that her thirteen year old daughter Lydia was to play on the Celtic harp in an upcoming Scottish music competition at the Ohio Scottish games in Wellington, Ohio. I remembered my own feelings as an anxious parent at my own children's musical endeavors, and Mary's questions were so sincerely presented that I was moved to try to help in any way I might. She explained that in Celtic harp competitions, at least the one her daughter was to perform in, participants are required to explain the history or lore of the melody before playing, in particular as it related to the Scottish origins of the music.

I was unfamiliar with this custom, but certainly intrigued, as I have devoted many years to trying to understand the history and context of traditional music in order to enhance performance; such contextual knowledge helps me to celebrate the tradition in performance. I was somewhat surprised to learn that the harping community had codified similar conclusions for performance competition—I'm not familiar with any such expectations for fiddlers' contests, although I know plenty of fiddlers who value contextual information.

I was also intrigued about Lydia's choice of tunes for the competition, and in general surprised that they represented fiddling repertory more than they did harp repertory, at least in my opinion, although I did not voice this thought to Mary. "Turnabout is fair play," I thought, for fiddlers have been mining the older harp repertory for centuries, successfully adapting the best melodies for the instrument that harpers must believe is woefully under-represented with strings. O'Carolan, for example, seems to be as well esteemed among fiddlers as he is among harpers, and his melodies are frequently played in sessions today; some of the Welsh harp repertoire has been similarly appropriated. So, when Mary told me that Lydia was to play "Huntingtone Castle" and "The Belfast Hornpipe," I thought them excellent choices despite my understanding them as fine fiddle tunes.

Mary was concerned about whether the chosen melodies were "Scottish" enough to pass muster for the competition, and one of her primary queries was whether they could be settled in Scottish tradition. She pointed out that her research had revealed several "Huntington" Castles, variously in England, Ireland, and Wales, but none in Scotland. How could the tune be placed in Scottish tradition with such an Anglo-Saxon name? "The Belfast Hornpipe" speaks for itself, referencing the city in Ulster—could it be tied to Scotland?

I wrote to her first about "Huntingtone Castle," a beautiful minor mode composition that can be played as a slow air as well as more briskly.

"Huntingtone Castle" first appears in print in John Bowie's *Col-*



lection of Strathspey Reels & Country Dances, printed in Edinburgh in 1789. Bowie was a musician and music seller originally from Tibber More, near Perth in central Scotland, who lived from c. 1759 to 1815, dying in his fifty-fourth year. He had a brother, Peter, also a musician with whom he partnered on various ventures. He lived during the hey-day of Scottish country dancing, and was a contemporary of famous Scots fiddler-composers such as Nathaniel Gow, William Marshall and Alexander McGlashan, among several others. Making a full-time living as a musician entailed a number of different skill sets and numerous ventures, and possible only in an urban setting, so it is not surprising that John Bowie is recorded as publishing mu-

sic of his own compositions in collections and on single-sheets, of giving music lessons, tuning keyboard instruments, and, in 1803, opening a music shop on George Street in Edinburgh. John and Peter also gave concerts and balls to the Edinburgh gentry, as shown in one example from March 16th, 1807, where they advertise: "J. and P. Bowie's Annual Ball on Thursday the 26th current. Tickets 3s [shillings] each from Mr. Thomas Hill, stationer, George Street." Thomas Hill was a bookseller and stationer who had a shop right next to Bowie's music shop, and they were partners in the music shop enterprise, Bowie exercising his musical talent, knowledge and skills, and Hill supplying the publishing and music selling expertise. In fact, Hill carried on the music shop after Bowie's death.

Bowie seems to have maintained affection for his native Perthshire for many of his compositions are named for people, places, or things in the county. For example, a single-sheet publication of his issued in 1801 contained a strathspey entitled "The Perthshire Yeomanry" (a local militia unit raised for home defense in the war with Napoleon), while another of his more famous compositions, "Miss Murray of Ochertyre's Strathspey," referenced the beautiful niece of the Laird of Ochertyre (an estate in Perthshire), who was also the inspiration for one of poet Robert Burns' famous verses. This is the context for your air, "Huntingtone Castle," which I very much believe Bowie named after Huntingtower Castle, located a few miles north of Perth, built in the 15th century by the Ruthven family. The castle is located in Tibbermore parish, which you will note from above is Bowie's birthplace. "Huntingtone" is likely a spelling perceived by the printer, who misread or misinterpreted the scrawled or blotted title that must have been in Bowie's manuscript copy given him. I wonder how many tune titles exist now that are the result of similar mis-hearings or mis-interpretations? Your daughter might be interested in knowing that Huntingtower Castle features its own famous ghost, Lady Greensleeves, a young woman who fell tragically in love "below her station" in days when that mattered a great deal.

I hope this was helpful. If you google the Wikipedia article on "Huntingtower Castle" you'll find much more information that may be of interest to you and your daughter. A good ghost tale in her introduction is bound to ensure the introduction points — the Scots seem to love their spirits! (och—a pun).

I'll get back to you soon about the "Belfast Hornpipe."
Regards, Andrew

The “Scottishness” of the tune is well established, and, while not strictly a Highland composition, its Perthshire roots seem undeniable and certain to meet the criteria for “Scottishness.” A week or two later I got back to Mary about the other tune—a harder “sell” in terms of provenance.

Hi Mary,

I hope you’ve had fun finding out more about Huntingtower Castle and its ghost. I’ve finally got some time, so on to the “Belfast Hornpipe”! Unfortunately, unlike the air your daughter selected, “The Belfast Hornpipe” is probably not Scottish in origin, at least not indisputably. On the other hand, it’s not Irish, either, although it might be English in provenance. Rather, it’s one of those second-half-of-the-19th century tunes that became popular rather quickly and was widely circulated. Thus, it appears in English, Scottish, and Irish publications within twenty years or so of each other. Whatever its national origin, however, it certainly was popular in Scotland in its time, and, in fact, it may originally have been composed in the Borders region of England and Scotland.

There are really four titles that one must consider with the “Belfast Hornpipe” tune (for the melody itself is substantially the same under all four titles): “The Belfast Hornpipe,” “The Sweep’s Hornpipe,” “The Great Western,” and “Millicent’s Hornpipe.”

I’ll start with the earliest published (which does not necessarily mean the earliest composed, but rather the one we have the earliest historical date of). “The Great Western” appears in a volume printed in 1883 by Boston, MA., publisher Elias Howe, although it was compiled by one William Bradbury Ryan, and bears his name, *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*. Nothing is known of Ryan, but Elias Howe published music volumes in Massachusetts throughout the 19th century and was one of the leading music publishers of his time. As the title of the volume suggests, “mammoth”—superlative—ventures of one kind or another were in vogue and had some cache with the public (why buy smaller collections when you can have a “mammoth” one for just a little more money?). This is the social undercurrent that perhaps belies the title of the hornpipe, for “The Great Western” is the name of the first of a

huge class of steamships built in England by engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, built for the transatlantic trade. Brunel did not confine his genius to steamships but was famous as well for his tunnels, bridges, and railways. It is possible Brunel was his own inspiration when he named his super-vessel “The Great Western” (a name that also harks to the primary function it was built for—to transport cargo and passengers west to the Americas), for earlier he had constructed one of England’s early railway lines, calling it the “Great Western” (which ran west from London to Bristol), a project begun in 1833 with the first London-to-Maidenhead broad-gauge section opening in 1838. The greatly expanded railway line is still in existence.

The next title for the same tune you will be glad to know is Scottish — “Millicent’s Hornpipe” (sometimes given as “Millicen’s Hornpipe”), which appears in three Scottish publications of the latter 19th century: Adam Craig’s *The Empire Collection of Hornpipes* (c. 1890s), William Honeyman’s *Strathpsey, Reel and Hornpipe Tutor* (1898) and James Kerr’s *Merry Melodies*. There is no date of publication for the Kerr volume, but he published four volumes of *Merry Melodies*, and the later ones date very likely to the 1880s, although his first one may have been published around 1875 (which would then make it older than *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* and establish a Scottish publication as the earliest). Like Elias Howe, Kerr’s publishing house was a major music publisher. William Honeyman, who published the tutor, was a remarkable violinist and teacher who sought to raise the level of national playing and to establish Scottish music among the world’s great music, even vying with classical music. The number of Scottish publications argues that “Millicent’s Hornpipe” was not only popular in Scotland in the last decades of the 1890s but probably had strong associations with the lowlands/Border region, if not provenance from the region. Who was Millicent? We’ll never know...

“The Sweep’s Hornpipe” was the title that Captain Francis O’Neill used for the tune in his great compendium *Music of Ireland* (Chicago, 1903). O’Neill was a Chicago police captain (in the days when this country was anxious about “anarchists”) but was originally from County Cork in Ireland, a flute player, and a devotee

Huntingtong Castle

of Irish music. He obtained the tune from his assistant on his first great compilation, a subordinate on the police force by the name of Sergeant James O'Neill (no relation), who happened to be a fiddler from County Down in northern Ireland. James contributed a huge amount of tunes to the work, some of which he collected or noted from others, and some of which he already had in his extensive repertoire. It may be that he had "The Sweep's Hornpipe" from his roots in Northern Ireland, and we should note that the magnet city of Belfast (c.f. "Belfast Hornpipe") is just across the border, in County Antrim. The title may refer to the chimney sweep, which by the late 19th century was still a necessary trade, but one increasingly romanticized. Despite this, it remained a dirty, underpaid, and dangerous occupation that killed many of its practitioners from falls and the toxic effects of the wastes.

The name "Belfast Hornpipe" for the melody does not appear in the historical record until a generation later, in the 1920s, when it was included in a volume called *Allan's Irish Fiddler* by publisher Mozart Allan in Northern Ireland. There is no date of publication, but the 1920s is the usual estimate for the volume. The hornpipe was picked up by that title in subsequent publications. Another title for the tune, "The Royal Belfast," is probably an unknown publisher's adjectival enhancement.

Today the melody is known usually as "The Belfast Hornpipe," "Millicent's," and "The Sweep's," while the other titles seem to have fallen by the wayside, with Irish players tending to learn it as "Belfast" and English and Scots players by the "Sweep's" or "Millicent's" title.

Stylistically, it fits very well into the late 19th century hornpipe style that was coming from extreme northern England and very southern Scotland, centering on the Newcastle/Gateshead/Tyneside region. In fact, one of the foremost hornpipe composers of the era, James Hill, was born in Scotland, but moved across the river to work and compose in Newcastle. "The Sweep's/Belfast/Millicent's" is sometimes attributed to him, based on the similarity of style, but there is no evidence that he did compose it.

It's a lot of information, and I'm sure you'll pare it down to what you need for the introduction. Hope this helps.
Regards, Andrew

Mary wrote a very nice thank you back, and said that Lydia was well-prepared for her first competition, and that her new harp, made by Ben Dunham (Dunham Harps, Westerville, Ohio) had come just in time for her to get used to it for the event.

How did the young harper fare? I thought of her the weekend she was due to compete, and hoped it would go well for her. Her mother was kind enough to drop me a note a week later to report that they all were well-pleased with Lydia's second place finish, and that they were already looking forward to proceeding to the national-level competition in October.

[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.]

The Belfast Hornpipe

Millicent's Hornpipe

Musical score for Millicent's Hornpipe, consisting of five staves of music in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The piece is in 2/4 time. The first staff contains measures 1-5. The second staff contains measures 6-11. The third staff contains measures 12-17. The fourth staff contains measures 18-22, featuring several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above the notes). The fifth staff contains measures 23-27, also featuring triplet markings.

The Sweep's Hornpipe

Musical score for The Sweep's Hornpipe, consisting of six staves of music in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The piece is in 2/4 time. The first staff contains measures 1-4. The second staff contains measures 5-8. The third staff contains measures 9-13. The fourth staff contains measures 14-17. The fifth staff contains measures 18-22, featuring several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above the notes). The sixth staff contains measures 23-27, also featuring triplet markings.