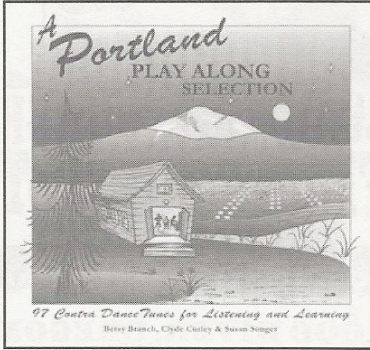


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Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Military Mysteries, Part One

Of-times tracking down information on favorite tunes and the history behind them with any hope of accuracy seems an impossible task, due to the paucity of clues. I wondered off-and-on for some time about two of my favorite tunes, one I learned from the playing of Cape Breton fiddler Jerry Holland (on his 1987 album *Lively Steps*), and the other from a reissue recording of Sligo fiddle master Michael Coleman from 1925. Both presented some nice surprises when the pieces finally fell into place, but I present them mostly as examples of protracted frustrations on my part, solved only serendipitously.

The first melody, a reel in the mode of A dorian (one sharp) called “Major Molle,” has been recorded a few times by Cape Breton fiddlers. Kendra MacGillivray (*Over the Waves*) and Sandy MacIntyre (*Island Treasure*, vol. 1) have also recorded it. However, the tune is Scottish in origin and first appears in the Gow family’s *Fifth Collection of Strathspey Reels*, published in Edinburgh in 1809. Unfortunately, this was the last collection in which I found it, and it made all the difference. I previously found printings of “Major Molle” in Kerr’s *Merry Melodies* (c. 1880s), and Honeyman’s *Strathspey, Reel and Hornpipe Tutor* (1898) under the title “Major Mole”—which attracted my attention as it seemed such a Kenneth Grahame — *Wind in the Willows* — kind of title (was there also a “Captain Rat” or a “Colonel Badger”?). James Stewart-Robertson’s *Athole Collection* (1884) and *The Glen Collection*, vol. 2 (1895) had the “Molle” title, however, as did Jerry Holland’s own first tune book, and that seems to have been the usual name...with one other exception.

“Major Malley’s Reel” was penned in the manuscript book of the Thomas Hardy family of Dorset, England. Hardy (1840-1928), famous as a novelist (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Return of the Native*), came from a musical family — his father and uncle played fiddle, and his grandfather the cello — and the writer himself played accordion and fiddle. Hardy even mentions a dance of the same name in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874):

However, the occurrence seemed to have become known to few, for it had not interrupted a fiddler who had lately begun playing by the door of the tent, nor the four bowed old men with grim countenances and walking sticks in hand, who were dancing “Major Malley’s Reel” to the tune.

These title variations seem to have derived from hearing the name Molle pronounced in different ways: maul, molly, malley, mole, etc.

“Major Molle” has a rhythmically varied history as well. The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society gives that a strathspey setting of the tune can be used as an alternate vehicle for the dance Tullochgorm. Kerr prints two versions: first, as a heavily syncopated Highland Schottische in vol. 1 of the *Merry Melodies* series, then, set as a reel in vol. 2. Gow’s original version has “reel” in the title, yet contains as many syncopations as other tunes in the collection that are labeled as strathspeys, and it is indicated that it could be played “slow” (i.e. as a strathspey). Yet, most printed versions through the years have been straight-ahead reel settings. In modern times “Major Molle” has been rendered as a march. Guitarist and fiddler Ged Foley, then a member of Scotland’s Battlefield Band, apparently found the melody in the Hardy family manuscripts, and playing through it, decided it would make a good march. The Battlefield Band subsequently released “Major Malley’s March and Reel” on their album *Home is Where the Van Is* (1981), and noted that the band turned the march tune Ged brought them into a reel (in effect, back into a reel). They wrote that although the tune was “supposed to be from Devon, we harbour the suspicion it might originally be Breton.”

At this point I knew the provenance to be Scottish, due to the preponderance of printings from that country, although I had no idea how it made its way south to England to the Hardy family. I still had no clue as to who the Major was, or why a tune might be named after him.

This was cleared up when I finally obtained a copy of the original printing in the Gows' *Fifth Collection*. At the time of the volume's issue in 1809 the Gow family was still at the height of their composing and publishing powers. Although father Niel (1727-1807) had started the business, it was son Nathaniel (1763-1831) who quickly became the driving musical and economic force of the family. The Gow music publishers had even expanded with a branch in London founded by sons Andrew and John (with an address in 1803 on the same Carnaby Street that would become a fashionable byword of the 1960s mod era). However, in the first decade of the 19th century the family suffered the loss of scion Niel (d. 1807) and brother Andrew (d. 1803). An older brother, William, had died in 1791. In addition to businessmen, they were musicians and composers whose melodies appear in various family publications. The *Fifth Collection* was the first the family produced after Niel's death, and included "Major Molle," composed "by the late Andrew Gow." Important to me, the title included a parenthetical clue (omitted in all other collections) as to the person of the major, for it reads: "Major Molle's (of the 9th Regt. of Foot) Reel."

Aha! With Molle's regiment identified it was relatively easy to trace his career. I began with his regiment. The 9th Regiment of Foot was old by the time our major got to it, formed for the Williamite wars in Ireland at the end of the 17th century. It was one of the units that surrendered with "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne at the Battle of Saratoga during the American Revolution. The regiment earned the nickname "The Holy Boys" supposedly from the fact that an ill-informed Spaniard, seeing Britannia on the Regiment's Colors during the Peninsular War, considered it to be a figure of the Virgin Mary such as is carried on banners in Roman Catholic countries during church processions.

Next the man — who turnout to be George Molle (1773-1823), of Mains, Berwickshire. Nothing is known of his early life, but he began his military career at the age of twenty with the 94th regiment of foot in 1793, rising to Captain by 1795. He was stationed in India and Egypt where he was an Aide-de-Camp to General Sir Douglas Baird and was wounded at the Battle of Seringapatam. In 1803 he returned to England with dispatches from Marques Wellesley, and, in 1804, he transferred to the 9th Regiment of Foot. He served with the 9th for four years before being promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1808. By this time the British had long been engaged in countering Napoleon, and were pressuring France by action in Spain and Portugal, with the 9th ordered to support the effort. Molle was severely wounded at the Battle of Roleia (1808). Again, he invalided to England, but as soon as he recovered he was back with his unit and in action near Oporto. By this time the 9th had been battered by illness, disease, and battle losses, and was pulled from action in 1809 to rest, recruit, and recover. It was not a good time for Molle. His wife gave birth to a son in Sicily, but the infant died at Molle's very next service station, Gibraltar. George soldiered on and found a new opportunity in another transfer of unit, becoming, in 1813, Lieutenant Colonel of the 46th Foot. The next year he was brevetted to Colonel (i.e. the commanding officer) of the regiment.

Napoleon at this time had been defeated and exiled to Elba, and the 46th, instead of being warehoused was sent to protect British interests in Australia, leaving in 1813 for the long voyage to the South Pacific. British Australia was still largely a penal colony then, with some immigration supplementing the many who chose to stay after release. Molle was aware that the governor of the island was an old comrade in arms and dining companion, Lachlan Maquarie, with whom he had served on Baird's staff in India. He must have looked forward to meeting again, for he named a son, born on shipboard during the voyage, William Maquarie. The Colonel arrived in 1814 and took the oath of office of Lieutenant Governor. The Molles were active in Australian public life, military and non-military, and were patrons of the Female Orphan School and members of the committee for the Civilization,

Major Molle

Played at approx. 130 bpm.

Care, and Education of Aborigines. A Freemason, Molle undertook to establish a Lodge in the country. A tract of 500 acres was granted to the Molles in 1817, which he named "Catherine Field" and he set about developing the estate. George served as Magistrate for the region, and ran the court from his home.

Still, it was not a successful station for Molle. He and his officers complained of high prices and asked Governor Macquarie for higher pay. Further, Molle resisted the integration of emancipists (convicts who had received conditional or absolute pardons) into the free society of the community, crossing Macquarie, who had the foresight to see that an integration of society was not only the most realistic course, it would build hope for a future in the convict population. Relations between Macquarie and Molle continued to sour, helped along by publication of a lampoon of Molle in 1816 that infuriated him and led to accusations between him and leading citizens. Macquarie (who is now known as "the Father of Australia") had no recourse but to ask for the 46th to be relieved, although, fortunately for him, the 48th Regiment arrived in August, 1817, as scheduled, and the 46th Foot left Australia for Madras, India. It was there that Molle died in September of 1823

at Belgaum. He is remembered in the region by the Molle Islands, in the Whitsundays, a part of the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Queensland. Today it is a playground of the rich and a prime resort area.

When did this man, who spent scant time in England after entering the service, come into contact with Andrew Gow? It could only have been the year that Andrew died, 1803, when Molle returned from India with dispatches. We know Molle joined the 9th in 1804, so the melody could only have been composed at the very end of Andrew's life, but after Molle had news of the transfer. Perhaps there was a brief acquaintance between the two and the melody was a gift at the news of the promotion. Molle is mentioned only one other time by the Gows when they note that the melody "Miss Welch (Welsh)" was communicated by the Major.

[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.]

In Memoriam: James Byrne

By Caoimhín Mac Aoidh

James Byrne was born on the outskirts of the village of Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencomcille) in southwest County Donegal, Ireland, on January 4th, 1946. At that time Gleann Cholm Cille was home to one of the most isolated communities in Western Europe. While restricted to subsistence farming and fishing it had the reverse fortune of being one of the most culturally rich areas in Western Europe. The Irish (Gaelic) language was the native tongue and a vast store of folklore assembled over centuries could be directly accessed within the community. In the absence of television and with poor radio reception, fiddle playing was the entertainment of choice of the people.

The generation preceding James was rich in fiddlers and their skill levels had been carefully honed over generations. Their repertoire, due to isolation, was typically local in constitution though tunes sourced by migrant workers from the community undertaking seasonal work in Scotland had been absorbed. Tunes and compositions of the legendary John "Mhosai" McGinley and his siblings were routinely performed by James. Near neighbours who had an influence on James at this time were Jimmy Bhídi Mhici McGinley and Padai Híuidai Byrne. The greatest influence on James' early playing was that of his father, John, while his mother Cassie, was also musical.

Field recordings of James as a young teenager in duet with his father confirm that even at this early stage he had achieved a prodigious standard. Despite his youth the recognition of his prowess resulted in his own community bestowing the nickname on him of "An Beirneach" — "The Byrne" — a title long reserved solely for a clan chieftain in the Gaelic traditions of Ireland and Scotland. He would be referred to by this title throughout his life.

In his pursuit of fiddling, James associated with the older generation of players and sought out others from nearby villages to learn new tunes and consider their techniques. Three individuals who were significant in this regard were Frank Cassidy, Francie Dearg O Beirn, and John Doherty — all of whom are afforded iconic status in the Donegal tradition.

As a young man, James' early playing was fast, with a great spirit of attack. He developed complex versions of tunes deeply rooted in the local style, sometimes incorporating piping influences such as sustained double stopped droning. By his early twenties he had met and befriended a number of Donegal fiddlers from outside his area. Two persons of significance in this regard are the renowned Danny Meehan and Tommy Peoples. James was influenced by both of these players and in turn had a lasting impact on their playing and repertoire.

By the late 1970s he formed an important playing partnership with Con Cassidy of nearby Teelin and many younger players in the Donegal style began to seek James both for tunes and stylistic guidance. Around this time James re-evaluated his playing and began to develop a more slow, lyrical style of playing and concentrated on developing long bowing which laid the foundation of his characteristic powerful performance. Following a cycling accident which affected the little finger of his left hand, other adjustments were made in his playing.

A shy and complete gentleman by nature, James perceived himself solely as a fiddler for many years. Following his exploratory involvement in teaching at various summer schools in Gleann Cholm Cille, he rapidly discovered both a love and a gift for teaching. James was a natural. While venturing out little into the world, he let the world of fiddling come to him. It was a regular event for people from the far flung corners of the globe to arrive in remote southwest Donegal, enter a pub and ask, "Do you know where I can find James Byrne?"

James Byrne's legacy is the passing on of a rare store of local traditional Irish music in a highly crafted local style developed unbroken over generations. He brought the music of his locality to its pinnacle. He has also ensured the future of that tradition by bringing on scores of young fiddlers, including his wife Connie and their children, steeped in his stylistic approach. Shortly after returning from playing in one of his favourite venues, the Highlands Hotel in Glenties, James died suddenly and all too young on November 7th, 2008. Following a funeral Mass attended by a vast host of fiddlers and other musicians from all over Ireland, James was buried in his native Gleann Cholm Cille. A graveside lament was performed by Danny Meehan. An Beirneach will be deeply missed by his loving family and all lovers of passionate, spirited fiddle playing.