

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

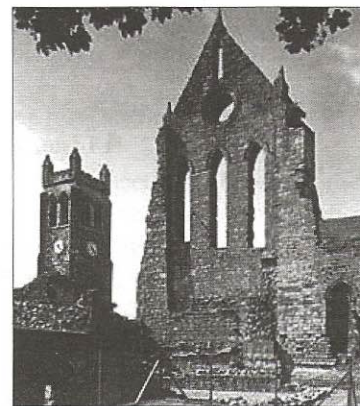
The Life and Times of Hugh Gilmour

Occasionally, we see old publications or musicians' manuscripts containing one or more tunes with obscure attributions attached to them, denoting the composition to be the work of some fiddler or another, often a musician whose identity is adrift in the mists of time. One imagines that many of these may have been friends or acquaintances of the book's editor or compiler, or perhaps there was some other personal connection, however tenuous, that led to attaching the composer's name to these isolated fiddle tunes. Every so often, pursuing a seemingly isolated composer attribution is rewarded with some interesting information about a talent or character that we might rescue, if only temporarily, from his or her slumber.

Such is the case with Scottish fiddler Hugh Gilmour (also spelled Gilmore), whose name appears as composer in a very few 19th-century tune collections, beginning with just one appearance in Edinburgh fiddler-composer, bandleader, and music publisher Nathaniel Gow's *Fifth Collection of Strathspey Reels* (1809). Gilmour's tune is entitled "Hugh Gilmour's Lament for Niel Gow" and no clearer composer attribution could be made! The melody is a minor-mode slow air to the memory of Nathaniel's father, the recently deceased, renowned, and much-mourned Dunkeld, Perthshire, fiddler Niel Gow (1727-1807). It was the only melody by Gilmour ever printed by the Gow family publishing concerns, and is also the only tune that was published in Gilmour's lifetime.

I have found six tunes altogether that have been attributed to Gilmour in published literature. A few of the latter 19th century large fiddle tune publications contain one of Gilmour's tunes, along with the composer's name: "Earl of Eglinton's Birthday" can be found in James Stewart-Robertson's *Athole Collection* (1884), "Kilwinning's Steeple" in *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* (Boston, 1883) and "The Queen's Triumph" in *Köhler's Violin Repository, Book Two* (1881-1885). As it turns out, all of these (with exception of the aforementioned lament for Gow) are reprints from an earlier Scottish publication, *Hamilton's Universal Tune Book*

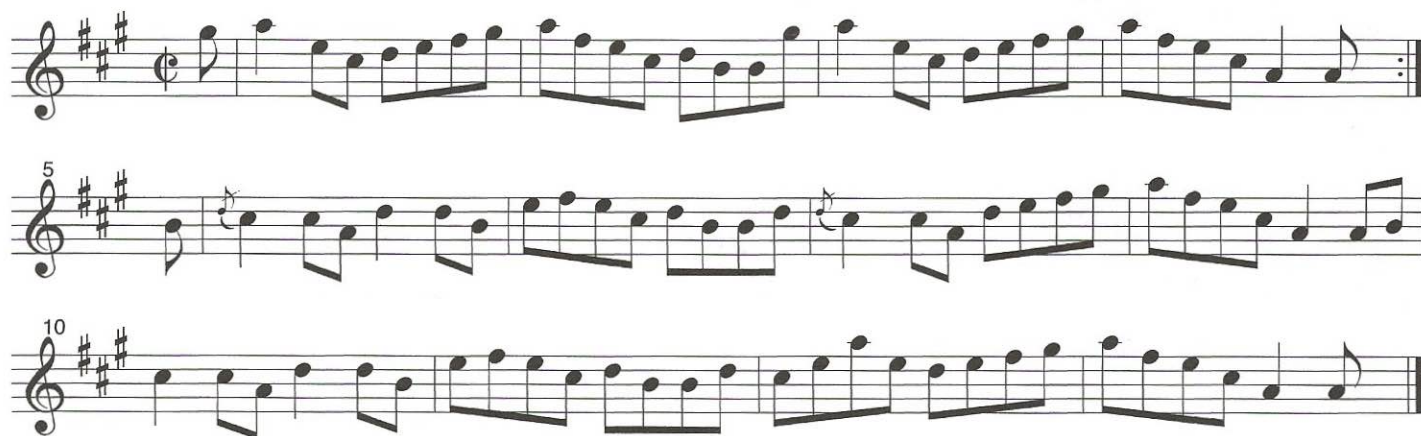
(Edinburgh, 1847), edited by James Manson, a compilation containing a variety of dance tunes, popular song airs, light classical pieces, and older traditional music. Gilmour's melodies all are published with the notation "by the late Hugh Gilmour, published for the first time." The Gilmour pieces in *Hamilton's Universal Tune Book* include reels ("Kilwinning Steeple," "Auchincruive House," "The Queen's Triumph"), a strathspey ("Earl of Eglinton's Birthday"), and a jig ("The Queen"). Clearly, editor Manson had access to some of Gilmour's original repertoire, but the connection between the fiddler and the editor is unknown. Manson noted that the Gilmour pieces were "published for the first time," which may indicate they were in general circulation among fiddlers, or perhaps the editor had gained access to a manuscript from which he drew the musical pieces. It is the single source for the majority of Gilmour tunes, and, together with the Gow lament, we have a small but respectable sampling of Gilmour's compositional art.



Kilwinning Abbey, steeple at left.

The most popular and lasting of his melodies has been the reel he called "Kilwinning Steeple," although some think it perhaps derivative of a late 18th-century song air called "There's Nae Luck Aboot the Hoose." It was named for a famous church steeple in the village of Kilwinning, Ayrshire, that had been part of a monastery dedicated to St. Winning, established in 1140. The religious structure was largely destroyed in 1560 during the Reformation by Alexander, Earl of Glencairn, and the only parts of the monastery remaining in Gilmour's time were the steeple and a gable. These were repaired toward the end of the fiddler's lifetime by the Earl of Eglinton. It was from this steeple that competing archers annually targeted the prize called the Poppingoe. The poppingoe is a bird known in heraldry, but for the archery event it was cut out in wood and affixed to a pole placed 120 feet high on the steeple. The archer whose skill allowed him to down this mark was honored with the title of "Captain of the Poppingoe" and had the honor to be master of the ceremonies of the succeeding year, sending cards of invitation to the ladies, hosting a ball and supper,

Kilwinning Steeple



and in turn passing on a medal, with suitable devices, appended to a silver arrow. The poppingoe story is colorful and quaint, but curiously returned to fiddle repertory via a “mondegreen” (i.e. a garbled title) whereby Gilmour’s “Kilwinning Steeple” tune, with its “poppingoe” associations, acquired the name “The Pope’s Toe.”

The old steeple collapsed on the 2nd of August, 1814, but was rebuilt on the same site, with the improvement of a clock with four faces observable from a distance. This led to another title for Gilmour’s “Kilwinning” tune, that of “The Clock in the Steeple.” Actually the tune is printed twice in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* (1883), once under each name. As “The Clock in the Steeple,” the tune was appropriated by Irish-American collector Francis O’Neill (1848-1936) and included in his grand *Music of Ireland* (1903) and *Dance Music of Ireland* (1907). O’Neill dressed it up with the title translated into Irish, but the tune’s fundamental “Irish-ness” must have been in doubt to the musical community, for it is one of O’Neill’s tunes that has not generally entered Irish traditional repertory.

What of Gilmour the man? We know very little, but perhaps enough to give some substance to the man behind the music. He lived all his life in the community of Stevenston, an ancient town and parish in North Ayrshire, Scotland, on the east coast of the Firth of Clyde. He was blinded when but an infant, and found in music a livelihood (as did many lacking sight) as well as a solace. He was born around 1758, and thus was a contemporary of Niel Gow’s sons. Gilmour married and had a family, and after his death at age 64 in April 1822, he was so well regarded by his loved ones that a memorial in the local church was installed by his son Robert. He was survived by his wife, Mary Purdie, who outlived him by 15 years.

Hugh Gilmour is mentioned by editor James Patterson in his introduction to *The Ballads and Songs of Ayrshire* (1846, pp. v-vi) in a passage that remembered the influential musicians of the county in the latter 18th century. Among them was Mathew Hall or Ha’ of Newton-on-Ayr, a cellist who died in 1847 at the age of 87. “Mr Hall mentions that he was 45 years in the habit of frequenting Coilsfield and Eglinton Castle in his capacity as musician. His chief co-adjutor was James M’Lachlan, a Highlander, who came to Ayrshire in a fencible [militia] regiment, and was

patronized by Lord Eglinton (Hugh Montgomerie, himself an accomplished amateur violinist and composer). At concerts at the Castle, the late Earl generally took a part on the violincello or the harp, and amongst other professional players on the violin, blind Gilmour from Stevenston was usually present. ‘O thae war the days for music!’ involuntarily exclaims old Hall...”

Gilmour was remembered not only for his musical skill, but for his vocal opinions as well. John Kelso Hunter (in *Life Studies of Character*, 1871, p. 121) tells the tale of a Tory candidate who at one time sought to become a Member of Parliament for Ayrshire:

He had heard that a man named Gilmour, a blind fiddler in Stevenston, was in the habit of making Radical speeches; and the said Gilmour had been much respected by the old Earl of Eglinton. This Tory candidate said one day to Eglinton: “My Lord, that old man Gilmour is a dangerous politician, and should not be encouraged.” “Well, Blair, you must have a pitiful opinion of the British Constitution when you think that it can be upset by the opinions of a blind fiddler.”

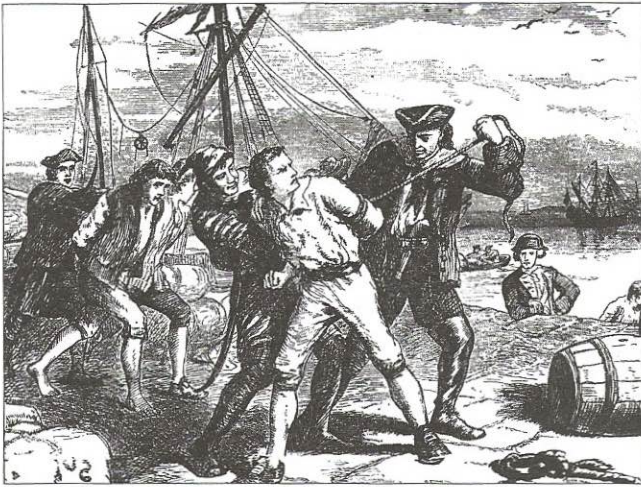
The respect must have been mutual for Gilmour honored Eglinton by composing a birthday strathspey.

We may “know” the character of the fiddler most by the following tale, printed in the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* of December 29, 1860, written by “R.D.” The author heard the story from his grandfather and noted it had been much repeated in the area. Some 80 years prior to the article’s publication (around 1780) it was the local custom for the men who built the ships in the local shipyard to celebrate their work when a new boat was launched with a dinner and dance. By 11 o’clock at one such celebration the festivities were well along, and the company convivial and lively:

On a platform elevated about three feet from the floor sat an old blind man with a fiddle, who showed great dexterity in handling the bow. In one part of the room sat a loving pair talking to each other in the most confidential manner..., seemingly unconscious of what was going on around them. In another part sat some half-dozen of the fair sex eagerly discussing the merits of some sweetmeats and oranges that had been left them by their admirers as a parting gift, while they had betaken themselves for a short time to another room to enjoy a few minutes chit-chat and

Auchincruive House

The musical score for 'Auchincruive House' is presented in three staves of music. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The first staff contains measures 1 through 10, with a first ending bracketed over measures 9 and 10, and a second ending bracketed over measures 11 and 12. The second staff contains measures 6 through 10. The third staff contains measures 11 through 15. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 15.



"Press-gangs" captured and forced to sea able-bodied men to meet the labor demands of the Royal Navy

a comfortable smoke. In the centre of the floor about fifteen couples tripped it most gracefully on the light fantastic toe; and in another part of the room one might be seen who appeared not to be quite sure whether he should trip in on the crown of his head or the soles of his feet; however in the midst of his reverie his foot caught in the folds of a lady's gown, and he fell flat on the floor to the small amusement of the dancers, as he lay howling out at the full pitch of his voice, "Britannia rules the waves."

It was not to last. The military authorities had been tipped off to the whereabouts of the dance, and proceeded to form one of the scourges of the era, the press gang. The Royal Navy was constantly short of able-bodied men to man their far-reaching fleets of ships, which were, in the days of sail, labor intensive and complex. Skilled workers, such as the ships' carpenters at the dance, were much in demand, but the conditions were so poor aboard Royal Navy vessels that volunteers were few. Thus the press gangs were formed to capture, detain, and force to sea able-bodied men to meet the labor demands of British naval hegemony.

Back at the dance the celebrants were alerted to the press gang forming in the distance, who held off on the inevitable physical clash with the shipbuilders and awaited reinforcements to counter the anticipated stout defense from the carpenters, whom they knew would not be carried off without a fight.

The quadrille was now stopped when only half finished, and the male dancers stood eyeing each other in the most melancholy aspect; each looking upon his neighbour as able to give some directions as to the course they ought to pursue for the purpose of effecting their escape. At this critical juncture the fiddler, out of all patience at the seeming irregularity of the company, in an authoritative voice ordered them to proceed with the dance, as he "didna come here tae fiddle tae folk that could dae naething but talk blethers." A few words from one that now approached the fiddler soon made him aware of what was going on outside, who at the same time told him he might stop his fiddling for the present.

High Gilmour (for that was the fiddler's name), after thinking for a minute, suddenly snatched up his fiddle again, and began to play upon it most vigorously, as if nothing of any consequence had occurred. All eyes were now directed to Gilmour at this sudden outburst of the music again, and one in rather an angry tone

demanded what he meant? Gilmour, on hearing this, made a motion with his head for the man to advance closer to him, which being done—"Frien," said Gilmour, addressing the speaker, "whatever chance there may be in gettin aff clear, depend on't your chance is no worth a fig if the fiddlin and noise should stop. Let the women carry on the dance wi as much noise as possible, and you, gang your wa's back tae the rest o' your companions an think owre matters as fast as ye can. They'll never jalouse outside that ye ken they're there. Noo awa', an whatere ye ha' tae dae or sae, dae it quickly, and mind ye slip the bar in the door cannily. Noo hoogh! hurrah! on wi the dance."

The group kept up the pretext of continuing the dance, Gilmour playing with abandon and the women making a show of dancing, stamping and shouting; meanwhile the men huddled to plan their next move. Every plan they could come up with seemed doomed, and the thought of 21 years aboard His Majesty's ships led to despair. It was a woman who thought of the way to save them.

...the young ladies now began to strip off as much of their own clothing as they could decently want, and as would properly disguise their respective sweethearts. The dressing of the men was no easy task, and, of course, it had to be performed by the women who were better acquainted with the garments than the men. One woman, of the name of L____, having two brothers and a sweetheart at the ball, and being anxious, if possible, to effect their escape, so disposed of her own clothing that she managed completely to mask the whole three. During this time the dancing never ceased, the women relieving each other by turns as necessity required. All things being now completed, after many a joke and laugh given by both parties, the men, after repeated instructions from the women as to how they should walk, &c., now ventured to open the door, and now for the first time they seemed to notice the gang outside. Of course they had to go through the form of turning back and conveying the sad news in as distressing a manner as they possibly could to those inside so as to set the gang off their guard. As to their presence being now made known, they (the gang) did now care a straw, as they had every way of egress completely guarded. After waiting some considerable time in the hall, the same party issued out, and with counterfeit tears and sobs succeeding in eluding the vigilance of the watch outside, and so passed the whole file, without any remarks, further than that "they were a lot o' lang-legged jades."

Still the press gang hesitated, certain the men remained inside to await the final showdown. At the end of an hour, as there seemed to be no end to the dance, the gang at last forced the door of the hall and poured in, clubs to the ready.

The horrified looks of the head of the gang may well be conceived when he found no other persons in the room except Mr. Porter, the shipyard owner; the fiddler, and some 30 young women. It was evident, now, when too late, who the "lang-legged jades" were. [The leader] began to curse this one's eyes, and left the hall in a towering rage, cursing his own stupidity, remarking as he left the room, that they might well laugh at him and his men this time, but they would not do it the next.

[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.]