

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

In *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, the Ghost of Christmas Past conveys Ebenezer back to Fezziwig's Yule celebration, where he sees himself as a young clerk once again. Dickens' description is delightful, and goes in part:

*There were more dances, and there were forfeits, and more dances, and there was cake, and there was negus, and there was a great piece of Cold Roast, and there was a great piece of Cold Boiled, and there were mince-pies and plenty of beer. But the great effect of the evening came after the Roast and Boiled, when a fiddler (an artful dog, mind — the sort who knew his business better than you or I could have told it him!) struck up "Sir Roger de Coverley." Then old Fezziwig stood out to dance with Mrs. Fezziwig. Top couple too, with a good stiff piece of work cut out for them; three or four and twenty pair of partners; people who were not to be trifled with; people who would dance, and had no notion of walking.*

The old Hollywood film version of the familiar tale, starring Alastair Sim, is unexpectedly "authentic" in that the fiddler actually plays a rather quick and creditable version of the 9/8 time tune, and the dance itself is reasonably correctly rendered. Dickens mentions it by name because it had already been an enormously popular country dance and tune for well over a hundred and fifty years, although even by his time its origins may have begun to be obscure.

It may have been remembered in Dickens' era that Sir Roger de Coverley had been the name of a rakish character in popular literature in the early 18th century. He was supposedly a country squire from Worcestershire, and a member of a small club that ran a popular satirical newspaper called *The Spectator* that appeared daily from 1711 to 1712, and his grandfather was said to have invented the dance that went by his name. In fact, save for the existence and popularity of *The Spectator*, Sir Roger, his club, and all were a fiction by Joseph Addison, one of the principal contributors to the paper. What is revealing is that "Sir Roger" was considered an old dance at the time the paper was published, with a name recognizable and familiar enough to be the basis of satire. So, exactly how old is it?

The earliest dance versions of the tune were printed by Playford in his *Dancing Master* (1669) and *Division Violin* (1685), although William Chappell (*Popular Music of the Olden Times*, 1859) says the tune is "at

least as early as the reign of Charles I," and that the ballad was printed as early as 1648. It has been suggested that it originated in the north of England, called simply "Roger of Coverly" sans "Sir" and the French preposition. Lending weight to that provenance were statements by Chappell that he had in his possession a manuscript copy of the tune called "Old Roger of Coverlay for evermore, a Lancashire Hornpipe." He further remarked that he had seen a manuscript (in the British Museum) called *The First and Second Division Violin*, attributed to John Eccles, 1705, that gave the tune as "Roger of Coverly the true Cheisere way." Kidson pointed out that the Calverley family, from whose ancestors the tune is said to derive its name, have been ancient inhabitants of the Yorkshire village that bears the family name. Although it is not known if there was an actual Roger Calverley, Kidson suggested that the name derived from associations with the English Civil War, concluded not long before the Playford publications.

In that conflict, men on the Royalist side were often referred to with the sobriquet "Roger," much as in the American Civil War combatants were known as "Billy Yank" and "Johnny Reb." In the same vein, "Coverly" may have been a corruption of the word "Cavalier," another term denoting Royalist forces. Thus the title "Roger of Coverly" may originally have been "Roger the Cavalier." Indeed, a manuscript exists with the inscription *For the violin, Patrick Cumming his Book: Edinburgh, 1723*, that includes a tune in scordatura tuning with the title "The Maltman, or Roger the Cavalier."

Cumming's entry, "The Maltman," is a Scottish name for the "Sir Roger" tune and comes from a song sung to it called "The Maltman comes on Monday," inserted in the first volume of Allen Ramsey's *Tea Table Miscellany* (1724). Scots also knew the tune as "The Haymakers." Both the dance and tune were imported to the United States, where they were called by the same titles they were in the British Isles, plus some that were home-grown, like "My Aunt Margery." Increasingly, however, the name "Virginia Reel" for both the tune and the dance took hold, and in fact it was traditionally the last dance of the evening in many places, including New England. Inversely proportional to this trend was the use of the original 9/8 tune, which fell out of favor and was replaced by a variety of other tunes as the vehicle for the dance, with the result that many "Virginia Reel" tunes can now be found in the literature.

[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 Fiddler's Companion" (<http://www.ceolas.org/tunes/fc>). Currently he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions, when not researching fiddle tunes.]

## Sir Roger de Coverly

MacDonald –  
Skye Collection

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the fiddle tune "Sir Roger de Coverly". The music is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 9/8 time signature. The first staff contains the first line of the melody, ending with a repeat sign. The second staff continues the melody, also ending with a repeat sign and a fingering of 0 4. The third staff continues the melody, ending with a repeat sign and a fingering of 0 4.