

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Lord MacDonald's Descendants Part Two: Québec

In the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine* we took a look at Sir Alexander MacDonald's famous composition "Lord MacDonald's Reel," which journeyed from the Isle of Skye, MacDonald's seat, to Québec, via immigrants to the province primarily from Great Britain. We took a look at the tune as played by Jean Carignan, perhaps the most famous Québec fiddler of the 20th century, for whom it was a favorite. Carignan played in several styles, and his recorded versions of "Lord MacDonald's Reel" owe more to the Irish styling of Michael Cole-

man (a Carignan hero) than to the stylings of Québec that he also played so masterfully. With the core tune in the original Scottish version thus in mind, along with Carignan's virtuosic Irish-influenced version, it's time to see how MacDonald's composition fared with other Québec fiddlers.

Just as American fiddlers transformed "Lord MacDonald's Reel" into "Leather Breeches" variants, so also Québec fiddlers transformed the reel and made it their own, modifying it in ingenious ways to fit their vernacular. Strains from "MacDonald's" were combined with newly composed strains or strains borrowed from other tunes (composite melodies), and melodic material from "MacDonald's" could be altered or distorted, while still remaining recognizably derivative. New titles were created, sometimes reflecting the ancestral melody ("MacDonald's Reel," "Reel McDonnell"), or the name of an associated dance ("Sets Canadiens No. 4," "Le reel à quatre," "Virginia Reel, Part 1"), or totally new ("Celestin à Jos," "Reel de l'enfant," "Gigue à Ti-Zoune," "Le petit bûcheux," "Reel à Pataud," "Reel d'Amqui"). It is

Virginia Reel, Part 1

Transcribed by Andrew Kuntz as played by Arthur-Joseph "A.J." Boulay

The musical score for "Virginia Reel, Part 1" is presented in eight staves of treble clef notation. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The second staff is marked with a '5' above the staff, the third with a '9', the fourth with a '13' and a 5/4 time signature change, the fifth with an '18', the sixth with a '22', the seventh with a '26', and the eighth with a '30' and a 2/4 time signature change. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and repeat signs. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

the same processing of source material that led Appalachian fiddlers to fashion "Leather Britches" from the same "Lord MacDonald's" reel.

"Virginia Reel, Part 1" was one of the first "MacDonald's" variants to be recorded in Québec. The title "Virginia Reel" for "Lord MacDonald's Reel" was considerably older than the recording, however. The reel had been issued in a single-sheet printing under the title "Virginia; or Lord MacDonald's Reel" in Boston by George P. Reel in 1812, proving that only 20 years after its original composition, Sir Alexander's reel had been associated with the dance The Virginia Reel. It is also no surprise that the dance Virginia Reel would be known in Québec, for the principal cities of the province hosted nu-

merous dancing masters in the latter 18th and early 19th centuries, teaching the same country dances, quadrilles, and cotillions popular in fashionable assemblies in other countries.

Arthur-Joseph "A.J." Boulay's recording of "Virginia Reel, Part 1," coming at the dawn of the 78-RPM era, in 1923, is an early 20th century example of this process – the name of the associated dance was retained in his title, but the melody is clearly derivative of "Lord MacDonald's." There are decided similarities between the two tunes: there are four parts (as in "Lord MacDonald's") of eight measures each, with one part (repeated later an octave apart) that is instantly recognizable as the main melodic "weaving" theme of "Lord Mac-

MacDonald's Reel

Transcribed by Andrew Kuntz as played by Louis Boudreault

1
5
9
13
17
21
25
29
33

Donald's." But there are some significant injections of regional style that transformed Boulay's tune into the French-Canadian vernacular. There is a measure of 5/4 time inserted in the second strain of "Virginia Reel, Part 1" and an extra beat at the end of the fourth strain that negates its use for the kind of country dancing that would have been taught in urban assembly. Instead, it is a dance tune that was meant to accompany a different kind of social dance that was independent of squared measures, whose dancers would not be confused by application of irregular measures. Not that Boulay's "Virginia Reel" is irregular at whim: it is a "setting," and the parts, irregular measures and all, are repeated the same each time throughout the recording.

A version of "Virginia Reel, Part 1" was later recorded as "Le petit bûcheux" (The Little Lumberjack) by the Québec group La Bottine souriante (*Chic & Swell*, 1983), whose source for their version of the reel was the highly influential St-Basile-de-Pontneuf fiddler André Alain (1931-2000). Brothers Aldor and Oscar Morin released a similar version featuring the harmonica in the mid-20th century under the title "Reel à Pataud," while another harmonica player, Cyrice Dufor, recorded the tune as "Reel d'Amqui."

Another "Lord MacDonald's Reel" variant was recorded by fiddler Louis "Pitou" Boudreault (1905-1988) of Chicoutimi, Québec, whose title for the tune, "MacDonald's Reel," retained its connection with the original source. Boudreault learned to play from his father and great-uncle, famous fiddlers of the Saguenay-Lac St. Jean region, and from other regional fiddlers, and was himself in demand for weddings and social events in his younger years. As musical fashion changed in the region, Boudreault continued to play for his own enjoyment until his playing and storytelling were "rediscovered" in the 1970s and became available to a larger audience through recordings, festival appearances, and two films.

Boudreault's "MacDonald's Reel" is a similar, yet more distanced version of Boulay's "Virginia Reel, Part 1." It is also in four parts, and, like Boulay's version, parts two and four are repeated and contain irregular measures. Boudreault also emphasized other stylistic features of French-Canadian fiddling as well, including bowed triplets and "ghost" notes (bowed but barely audible notes).

Fiddler Erskine Morris (1913-1997), of Douglstown, Gaspé, Québec, played the tune in the key of D major instead of the usual G, and his version only had three parts, and although still more distanced from Boulay's "Virginia Reel, Part 1," it is still recognizably the same tune. Like Boudreault, Morris retained the Scottish name, and called his version "Lord MacDonald's Reel"; it is not the Scottish tune, however, but one of the family of Québec tunes that first came to attention with Boulay's 1923 recording. Although not as heavily ornamented as is Boudreault's version, Morris's "Lord MacDonald's Reel" has "ghost" notes and one irregular measure in the third strain.

A comparison of the two principal melodic strains of the Scottish "Lord MacDonald's Reel" with these French-Canadian versions demonstrates how the strains have fared over time and distance from the original Scottish tune. In some Québec versions, the order of the parts has changed, some are melodically closer to the original, and others show to a greater degree the characteristics of the Québec genre.

[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.]

Lord MacDonald's Reel

Transcribed by Andrew Kuntz as played by Gaspé fiddler Erskine Morris