

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## Maggie in the Woods

It sometimes happens that the simplest blossoms have the deepest roots. A prime example is a popular but modest little polka, "Maggie in the Woods," which became a past session regular in modern times, propelled by recordings by the Chieftains (*Chieftains 8*, 1974) and flute player Eddie Cahill (*Ah, Surely*, 1974), but also recorded by Sligo-born fiddler Michael Gorman and banjo player Margaret Barry, stalwarts of the London session scene in the mid-20th century. "Maggie" is considered a beginner's tune nowadays, a fine introduction to playing Irish polkas, and is often printed in tutors and instructional material; it has since lost some of its luster for session play, but everyone familiar with Irish traditional music seems to know it. The Chieftains sang a stanza to the melody, credited to their founder, uilleann piper Paddy Moloney:

*If I had Maggie in the woods,      If I had Maggie in the woods  
I'd do her all the good I could;      I'd keep her there till morning.*

As the story goes, Moloney wrote them in response to an unfortunate remark disparaging the Irish uttered by Princess Margaret, the sister of Queen Elizabeth, who was president of the English Folk Dance and Song Society in the mid-20th century. The lines are vaguely either mischievous or menacing (depending on your point of view), as is a similar version that is sometimes sung:

*If I had Maggie in the wood      Nothing else would do her good  
I know she would, I know she could;      So early in the morning.*

Few remember, however, that "Maggie in the Woods" (without words) predated both the piper and the princess and was originally recorded in the 78 RPM era, not once but twice, by flute player Tom Morrison (1889-1958), "the Dunmore Flash," originally from Glenamaddy, in the Dunmore area of Co. Galway. He

first waxed it in 1925 for New Republic Records and again for Columbia in 1928. In both recordings "Maggie in the Woods" is the second tune in the medley, but the Columbia recording is also notable as one of the first sound recordings of bodhran accompaniment (an instrument listed on the record label as a "tambourine"). The name for Morrison's medley on the label was "Maggie in the Woods," and it is not clear what each tune's individual name might have been, or whether the title was Morrison's or simply a record company artifact or shorthand. However, the title does not predate Morrison's recordings. Boston button accordion player and music teacher Jerry O'Brien printed "Maggie in the Woods" in his *Accordion Instructor* (1948), helping to cement the polka in session repertoire, but at the same time introducing it to New England musicians who picked it up as a vehicle for contra dancing.

Many polkas were adapted from metrically similar forms, such as marches, song airs, and country dance tunes. The melody for "Maggie in the Woods" already had a history as the music for a *sean nós* song called "An bhfaca tú mo Shéamaisín" with a chorus that goes:

*Buachaill deas mo Shéamaisín,      (Have you seen my little James  
Buachaill deas mo Shéamaisín,      My little boy, my little James  
Buachaill deas mo Shéamaisín –      Have you seen my little James  
Is gearr go mbeidh sé pósta!      Going west along the road?)*

It is a popular schoolchildren's and Irish language-learners' song in the past and today, although it has occasionally been dismissed just for those reasons. A more recent song set to the tune is "Mussels in the Corner," considered by some to be the quintessential Newfoundland tune, but actually only dating to the latter half of the 20th century in use on the island.

A march form of the tune is to be found in a 1914 volume by folklorists Arthur Darley and Patrick McCall, called the *Feis Ceóil Collection of Irish Airs*, where it is called "Nancy Wants Her Own Share," collected from farm laborer and flutist John Ferguson Rathangan, Co. Wexford. It was claimed (in a 1914 edition of

## Maggie in the Woods



the periodical *Musical Times*) that it was employed as a marching tune in the uprising of the Irish Volunteers in 1798. In any case, Patrick McCall had been familiar with “Nancy Wants Her Own Share” for 20 years, as he specified it as the indicated air for his song “Over the Hills to Mary” in his book of verse, *Irish Nónínús* (daisies). Its antiquity can be traced at least to the first part of the 19th century, for “Nancy” is mentioned in the travel writings of Mary Banim, who wrote a series of pieces in a column called “Here and There through Ireland” for the *Weekly Freeman* in the 1880s. She came across an elderly woman named Mrs. Clampett in County Wexford, who had been “a sprightly little maiden” in the year of the rebellion, who recalled some sad events but who brightened when the subject of dancing came up, and the remembrance of crossroads dances: “The light of other days really and truly seemed to come on the old face—in one instant she was another woman.”

*Dance! Only my feet are gone I'd dance this minute if there was a piper or fiddler to humour the “double” [i.e. dance tune] I liked most of all – “Nancy wants her own share.” Even as it is, I can't hear a fiddle, but my feet humour the tune. Ah, then, when I look back! The bright, glad young thing I was – the very ground couldn't hold me as I went about my work, or went of a Sunday evening to the dance at the crossroads of Taghmon. I can see myself in my striped wool petticoat, spun by my own hands; a short jacket over it, shoes and blue stockings, and a large straw bonnet I plaited and made myself. Where's the girls now that can dance!*

Whether or not the tune was employed as a marching air in 1798, or by what title is still to be determined, but there is no question that a tune by that title was known not long afterwards.

Observant readers will note that Banin's informant, Mrs. Clampett, called her favorite tune a “double,” and while we don't know exactly her intended use of the term, a “double” most commonly refers to a double jig (6/8 time). A couple of years before “Nancy...” was published by Darley & McCall, the tune had been printed by Irish collector Frank Roche as a single jig called “Echoes of Killarney,” which he also used for the third figure of his “Orange and Green Quadrille.” Played in the metrically related slide setting (12/8 rather than 6/8 time), the tune was in the repertoire of Sliabh Luachra (County Cork/Kerry) musicians; fiddler Dennis Murphy (1912-1974) called it “Art O’Keeffe’s,” the name of his source for the tune, Gneeveguilla fiddler and tin whistle player Art O’Keeffe. 20th century collector and music historian Brendan Breathnach pointed out there is a similarity between the first strain of another Munster slide, “An Chearc ar fad is an tAnraith,” with the “Echoes of Killarney”/“Maggie in the Woods” tunes (although the second strains tend to diverge).

## Dancing in County Clare

It is Sunday night.  
The pub is shaped  
like a horseshoe magnet.  
A fiddle and concertina  
play at one end, their music rough  
like the broken end of a whetstone.  
A dance is in progress  
where the current moves both ways.  
The girls are mini-skirted,  
white as gulls.  
The men are in church clothes,  
dark as ravens.  
They rise, glide and dip,  
slanting in, slapping  
their feet on the cement  
like surf under the  
cliffs at Dereen.

— Dudley Laufman

*[Dudley Laufman and his wife Jacqueline live on the edge of the woods in Canterbury, New Hampshire. They play fiddles and melodeons for old time New Hampshire dancing. Visit [laufman.org](http://laufman.org) for more information.]*

## Nancy Wants Her Own Share



“An Chearc ar fad is an tAnraith” translates as the lovely title “The Whole Chicken in the Soup,” and the slide under that name was also in Denis Murphy’s repertory. In fact, Murphy was the source for the tune when Breathnach printed it in his *Folk Dances and Music of Ireland* (1976). In his remarks on the tune, Breathnach wrote the “Whole Chicken...” was related to “Nancy Wants Her Own Share,” which he identified was a County Tipperary title. Breathnach also wrote that it was related to a tune called “I Know What Nancy Wants” (sometimes “Well I Know What Kitty Wants”), although he thought these last tunes were more directly related to “Maggie in the Woods” than to “An Chearc ar fad is an tAnraith.” Breathnach was building the tune family.

Although Denis Murphy supplied the tune for Breathnach, he did not supply the name the folklorist used, for the fiddler called it “Charming Lovely Nancy,” from a song set to it. The first stanza goes:

“I am a maiden going for milk,”  
Says Nancy, says Nancy,  
“I am a maiden going for milk,”  
Says charming lovely Nancy,  
“And what would you do if I followed you?”  
Says Jimmy, says Jimmy,  
“What would you do if I followed you?”  
Says lazy lingering Jimmy.

Taken in the context of the rest of the song, the opening lines would seem to be fairly innocent; out of context it might suggest a stalking. The title that Breathnach used, “Chearc ar fad,” is also a title taken from an Irish song set to the tune.

*Gheobha' mé síos dtí Cill na Mac*  
*Gheobha' mé im is uibhe na gcearc*  
*Cúl na bulóige chur le m'ais*  
*An chearc ar fad 's a' t-anraith.*  
*Nín aon oíche dhéanaim cleas,*  
*Ná faighimse im is uibhe na gcearc,*  
*An chúlóg mhór do chur le m'ais*  
*An chearc ar fad 's a' t-anraith.*

Literally translated as:

*I'll get down to Cill na Mac*  
*I'll get butter and hens' eggs*  
*The heel of the loaf behind my back*  
*The whole chicken in the soup.*  
*Not one night when I do a trick*  
*But I get butter and hens' eggs,*  
*The big batch behind my back*  
*The whole chicken in the soup.*

As if to underscore the relationship with our larger tune family, “Chearc ar fad” is called “Maggie” in Peter Kennedy’s *Fiddler’s Tune Book*, vol. 2 (1954), the slim, fiddle-case sized publication that was one of a handful of traditional music collections available at the time. While the music to Kennedy’s “Maggie” is related to “Maggie in the Woods,” Kennedy’s “Maggie” has nothing to do with that title; instead, he set it as a polka from source Maggie Dirrane, Aranmore, Aran Islands, Co. Galway, who remembered the following lines that were sung to it:

*I know (well) what Maggie wants –*  
*Maggie wants a squeezer.*

Before we leave all mention of poultry and music, there is one final member of our branching tune family, a single jig called “The Hen and All Her Broth,” printed in volume two of Frank Roche’s *Collection of Irish Traditional Music* (1912).

We seem to have come full circle in describing a tune family that includes a core binary melody variously set as an air, march, polka, single jig, and slide, primarily from the south of Ireland, that has a history in that country probably dating from at least the end of the 18th century. But is that the end of the story?

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, *The Fiddler’s Companion* ([www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers](http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers)) and his current project *The Traditional Tune Archive* ([www.tunearch.org](http://www.tunearch.org)). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

## An Chearc ar fad