

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Surprise du Québec, Part Two

In the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine* we began to look at adaptations by French Canadian fiddlers of tunes from European sources, similar to the “folk processing” of older tunes by American old time fiddlers, as when, for example, the Irish reel “Over the Moor to Maggie” was transformed into the American “Waynesburgh,” and the Scottish “Mrs. McLeod’s Reel” developed into the tune called “Wild Horse” or “Stony Point.” We noted how fiddlers in the Québécois tradition adapted Scottish fiddler John Lowe’s (1797-1866) “Archie Menzie’s Reel” into the wonderfully “crooked” “Le rêve de Quéteurs Tremblay” (“Beggars Tremblay’s Dream”). In this issue I would like to continue to examine how some older tunes were absorbed into the tradition and altered by the traditional dictums of that tradition.

It should be understood that recognizable adaptations of European tunes are by far the exception in both French-Canadian and old time traditions. The vast majority of tunes in the general repertoire are original, and arose from the inventiveness and inspiration of fiddlers embedded in the culture, following only the musical parameters of regional tradition. However, as happens with language, influences from outside the primary culture were accommodated and absorbed into the core. Tune assimilation is carried out in degrees, and can be broken down into general groups (keeping in mind there is considerable fluidity and overlap between categories). The first group consists of tunes with traceable ancestors from outside the tradition, but which have been stylistically transformed and “altered with significance” in the new tradition. The assimilative process has been deeply transformative. Last issue’s Tune History examples, “Archie Menzies” and “Le rêve de Quéteurs Tremblay,” would certainly belong to this cohort.

A second group (cohort) includes traditional tunes that have no direct tune antecedents; however, they would sound recognizably different than tunes from the dominant culture and generally recognized by musicians as sounding like imports. In other words, experienced listeners of the tune might remark that it “sounds Irish/Scottish/American/Canadian,” even knowing it came from indigenous repertoire, due to perceiving bits of phrasing, melodic material, cadences, contour, timing, syncopation, ornaments, and other stylistic clues. They would conclude that aspects of an other-than-indigenous style had been employed by the fiddler, but no one would be able to recognize a specific ancestral tune coming from outside the tradition.

An example of this group would be tunes like “Uncle Paddy,” from the Shannon-Valcartier region, northeast of Québec City. This region produced a sub-repertoire of original Québécois tunes that merge Irish, British, and French influences, most famously from the Corrigan family (see Keith Corrigan & Jimmy Kelly’s *L’Irlande au Québec*, with an extremely well-documented booklet about the regional tradition). The region received an influx of Scots-Irish, English, and New England immigrants in the 19th century who, of course, brought with them their music, and were absorbed into an older French tradition. Valcartier fiddler Eric Corrigan (b. 1931) adapted a jig from the lilt of his Uncle Paddy, and called it after him.

“Uncle Paddy” has no direct Irish antecedents that I have found thus far, but it has many of the stylistic components of a modal Irish jig. In fact, it was accepted as such in my local Irish session...until I played the slightly “crooked” second part and the extra beat was immediately perceived as non-Irish, as “crooked” tunes in Irish tradition are exceedingly rare (with the exception of set dances and airs). In fact, the second strain was immediately determined by the group to be French-Canadian, so strong an identifier is the stylistic element of the internal added beat, although a few members struggled (unsuccessfully) with identifying the first strain from Irish repertoire. “Uncle Paddy” qualifies

Uncle Paddy

as a good example of our second cohort of tunes, with its strong adopted Irish styling.

The third cohort of tunes involves the other end of the assimilation spectrum; one might say they are least “deep” in the process. These pieces have been absorbed relatively intact, with only minor differences, from one genre to another. Every fiddle tradition has examples of these, and it can be fun (and fodder for countless session discussions) to track down the more obscure ones. Many fiddlers, despite being ensconced in regional tradition, find that a good tune, no matter where it comes from, is a joy to play, and I can think of no better reason for adopting “foreign” tunes into an indigenous tradition. If one surveys similar cohorts across genres (for example, the many Scottish tunes found in Irish fiddle repertoire), then one finds that tunes that are so adopted, relatively wholesale, are simply “good tunes.” They suit the instrument well, are well-crafted and pleasing to the ear...and, importantly, they are not too far removed from the core style.

A French-Canadian tune of this type is Gaspésie fiddler Yvon Mimeault’s “Gigue du Bonhomme,” recorded on his CD *Y’était temps!* (It’s about time!), perhaps a reference to the fact that he recorded the 1998 album, his first, at age seventy. Yvon learned his repertoire from his father Odilon, relatives, and musician friends, although he discovered his father played the fiddle only after Yvon himself had mastered the basics of the instrument — his father having hidden his own fiddle away the day he married lest it become a bad influence on his children. Yvon learned the tune from his father, for whom it was his favorite jig, leading Yvon to call it “Gigue du Bonhomme” (“My old man’s tune”). Many fiddlers will instantly recognize it as “Off She Goes,” a late 18th century composition of uncertain British/Irish provenance, but a popular tune that has long been part of the core country dance repertoire. The tune was also recorded as “La Danse des Sutins” on a 78 RPM disc by Québec musicians Henri and Clement Houde.

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A sub-category of this cohort would be tunes that have single strains adopted from outside the regional repertory, married to indigenous second strains. Another jig, probably Irish in origin (although found in Britain as well) fits more-or-less this

Gigue du Bonhomme

Chord progression: D G D G D A

Chord progression: D G D D Em A D

Chord progression: D G D A D

Chord progression: G D Em 1A D 2A D

D.S. §

sub-category, the earliest printing of which is to be found under the title "Riding on a Handcar" in William Bradbury Ryan's *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* (1883). One might expect the handcar title to have been awarded some currency in the Age of Railroads (the American transcontinental railway had only been completed some fourteen years earlier), and, considering that many of America's 19th century railroads were constructed with a majority Irish labor force, one might assume connections of the melody with Ireland. The Irish connection was consolidated by Capt. Francis O'Neill in his first compendium, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland* (1903), although his title for the jig was "The Eaves Dropper" (sic). O'Neill did not attribute his source, and he may have ob-

tained it from *Ryan's Mammoth*. In any case, it has proved to be a durable jig, surviving with relatively little variation in either title or melody since O'Neill's printing, propelled by the gravity of a distinctive descending stepwise melodic contour, high to low, in the second strain.

The jig got into the hands of Québec fiddler Joseph Allard (1873-1947), who transformed it into "Gigue de la Débauche" ("The Debauchery Jig," or less literally but more accurately, "The Rake-Hell's Jig") and recorded it on a Bluebird 78 RPM recording released in Canada in the early 1940s. Allard, while born and raised in Canada (although he is also reported to have been born

Gigue de la Débauche

Musical score for "Gigue de la Débauche" in G major, 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff starts at measure 5. The third staff starts at measure 9 and includes a repeat sign at the beginning. The fourth staff starts at measure 14 and also includes a repeat sign at the end.


The Eavesdropper

Musical score for "The Eavesdropper" in G major, 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff starts at measure 5 and includes two first endings, labeled '1' and '2'. The third staff starts at measure 10 and includes a second ending, labeled '2'. The fourth staff starts at measure 15 and includes two first endings, labeled '1' and '2'.

in Woodland, Maine), spent much of his later adolescence and early adulthood in New England, where he performed and competed in fiddlers' contests—at the same time plying his trade as a commercial fisherman. In his travels he came into contact with American musicians who played Scottish and Irish repertory from whom he possibly may have acquired this tune. Around the year 1917 (when he was in his early forties) he returned to Montréal to live. There, Allard recorded nearly one hundred 78 RPM sides from 1928 to 1946, but, like many such recording pioneer performers, he failed to realize any significant financial gain, and he often lived in poverty.

The first strains of “Gigue de la Débauche” and “The Eavesdropper” are nearly identical, although the contour differs in one important respect. Allard begins his jig on the high tonic note, while the Irish tune begins on the dominant note below the tonic. Since each phrase is repeated twice in the first strain, Allard has to shape his fourth measure to climb upwards to reach the high tonic downbeat of the fifth measure, giving it a distinctive lift, as contrasted with the lilt of “The Eavesdropper.” The second strains of the tunes begin quite differently, with the first phrase (second part) of the Irish melody beginning on the high tonic and descending to the second degree note (and the dominant chord), then repeating the phrase but ending the final time on the tonic note. Allard introduces new melodic material in the first phrase (second part) of “Gigue de la Débauche,” before returning to the same downward stepping melody shared with “The Eavesdropper.” Allard’s new material in the second strain heightens the melodic tension inherent in the tune. Once heard, the last phrase of the second strain is predictable, and repeating it only serves to gild the lily, but Allard chooses to play with us a bit and keep us guessing before the resolution of the last phrase. Both are good tunes, but I know which I’d rather dance and listen to.

Another version of the “Eavesdropper” jig is to be found in the repertoire of Northumbrian fiddler Adam Gray under the title “The Roman Wall,” from whom Peter Kennedy recorded it in 1954. The jig was either claimed by him or attributed to him (it has also erroneously been attributed to Borders fiddler Willie Taylor). Gray was a policeman and fiddler from Haydon Bridge in the remote reaches of the Tyne Valley. This jig is in phrase form aa’aa’bb’ba’, which is another and rather traditional solution to simply repeating the second strain in its entirety. Gray returns to the melodic material of the first strain as his way of ending the second strain, a device that is very familiar to students of traditional British folk song.



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[The author would like to acknowledge and thank Steve Fry for his excellent transcriptions of “Uncle Paddy” and “Gigue du Bonhomme” (among many others), and for his enthusiasm in, and dedication to, our local “Q” session.]

[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.]

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