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Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Legends of Petticoat Loose

The petticoat was firmly established in fashion by the end of the 16th century, as a fashion that enabled the wearing to best advantage of large overskirts, while retaining the impression of a small waist (whether one had it or not). It was not really an undergarment for it was meant to be seen, and they were often elaborately embroidered and decorated. Still, in the sense that something was worn over it, it was an undergarment and thus had some “polite” innuendo attached to it. For example, a gossiping scandal in American President Andrew Jackson’s cabinet from 1829 to 1831 centered on the morals of Peggy Eaton, wife of Secretary of War John Eaton, and divided the wives of the cabinet members. Although the Eatons had Jackson’s support, the “Petticoat affair” as it was called, was only resolved with the resignation of the entire cabinet. Jackson said: “To the next Cabinet, may they all be bachelors or leave their wives at home.”

The Petticoat affair was not the first time that the garment had been linked with scandal about morals, however, for it seems to have been established by the beginning of the 18th century. George I of England was invited to assume the throne of England from his native Hanover, Germany, and brought with him an entourage of German-born gentry who were fair game for the satires of the opposing Jacobites. One such satire, called “Petticoats Loose” played on the immoralities of Madame Schulemberg, Duchess of Kendal, and Madame Kilmansegge, Countess of Platen, with Frederick, Prince of Wales and Sir Robert Walpole. In the old song (collected in Charles Mackay’s *Jacobite Songs and Ballads of Scotland* (1861), they are called respectively “Kenny,” “Killy,” “Freddy,” and “Robin.” One verse goes:

*It's Fredy maun strap, and Robin maun string,
And Killy may wince, and fidge, and fling,
For Kenny has loos'd her petticoat string,
Gae tie't again, gaie tie't again.*

Chorus:

*It's Hanover, Hanover, fast as you can over,
Hey gudeman, away gudeman;
It's Hanover, Hanover, fast as you can over,
Bide na here till day gudeman.*

By the mid-18th century the phrase “petticoat loose” had taken on a meaning of its own and developed offshoots—in English slang a “petticoat-monger” was a purveyor, but not of women’s clothing!

As has been long noted, aspects of popular society are to be found in tune titles and, in the 18th century, risqué, suggestive and even bawdy titles, were not uncommon. Thus we have our first example of the musical “Petticoat Loose,” an English jig and country dance printed in several mid-18th century dance collections, beginning with two published in London in the same year, 1748: John Johnson’s *Choice Collection of 200 Favourite Country Dances, vol. 4* and John Walsh Jr.’s *Country Dances Selected, Part 1* (also called *Caledonian Country Dances*—the Walshes, Sr. and Jr., published so many volumes with similar contents and names that an accurate bibliography is a suggestion rather than a fact). A decade later Charles and Samuel Thompson published it in their 1757 *200 Favourite Country Dances* collection, and again in their 1758 tutor for the hautboy (oboe). The Thompsons printed the tune on the same page with another jig, “Breeches Loose,” at one and the same time equalizing the sexes and cementing the salacious connotation.

The French, no strangers to the risqué, and increasingly taken with English country dances, enjoyed the two “Loose” tunes and dances (“Breeches” and “Petticoat”) in Benoit Andrez’s *Recueil de Contredances Angloises* (Liege, 1780). They may also have been struck by a curious turn of the French language, as were John Stainer and William Barrett in their *Stainer and Barrett’s Dictionary of Musical Terms* (1885). The name *cotillon*, had, since the reign of Louis XIV, referred to a lively type of square dance for four couples. Cotillon, however, literally means “under-petticoat” (Old French, from *cote*). The authors conclude that “it is not at all improbable that the tune ‘Petticoat loose’ ...furnished the title to the cotillon.” The earliest English-published “Petticoat Loose” tune we know of appeared thirty years after the death of the French monarch, so it is more likely the

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cotillion/"Petticoat Loose" connection is incidental, but it does not preclude an earlier, unknown, tune by that name.

Lest one think the dances were exclusively for the elite, the hoi polloi found them enjoyable as well, and not only for dancing. For example, "Petticoat Loose" was entered into the c. 1776-1778 music copybook of military fife player Thomas Nixon Jr. (1762-1842), of Framingham, Connecticut, and likely employed by him as a march. (One wonders if the risqué nature of the title did not at least momentarily quicken the military pace.) Nixon was a 13-year-old when hostilities with the mother country broke out, and he accompanied his father to the battles of Lexington and Concord. He stayed on in the Continental army and participated in engagements in and around New York until 1780, at which time the center of conflict in the war moved to the southern colonies. Nixon returned to Framingham to build a house in the town, which survives today.

The English jig picked up some alternate and variant titles in its publishing history, including the similar "My Petticoat's Loose" and "My Petticoats lowse," but also "Captain's Lady" and "Come try't again," however, it was the original "Petticoat Loose" title that was firmly cemented in tradition. John Walsh gave a curious alternate title, "The Curickle," although what a "curickle" is remains unknown.

Music antiquarian John Glen, in his *Early Scottish Melodies* (1900), suggested a Scottish provenance for "Petticoat Loose," evidently on the basis of the tune's inclusion in Walsh's *Caledonian* volume, and says: "Walsh's version of the tune is better and more Scottish in character than that given by [the Thompsons]. The tune has long been known as a Scottish Jig." The question of provenance aside, the jig has a long history in Scotland as well as in England, for it was published by the Scottish publishing powerhouse of the Gow family in Edinburgh toward the end of the 18th century, but on the whole, evidence seems wanting as to Scottish origins. Glasgow publisher James S. Kerr printed the tune a bit less than a century after the Gows, and identified the tune as Irish, although with what evidence is unknown, and at any rate, the "English" melody does not appear in Irish sources.

Perhaps Kerr was confusing it with other "Petticoat Loose" jigs that were decidedly Irish in character and provenance, and the suggestions allows us a segue to two popular, melodically different, Irish jigs called "Petticoat Loose." Irish lore takes us far from suggestive Anglo-Saxon wordplay, however.

The first Irish "Petticoat Loose" jig is also called "Strop the Razor," first printed by Francis O'Neill in his *Waifs and Strays of Gaelic Melody*, supplied from the manuscripts in the possession of Chicago Police Sergeant James O'Neill, a fiddler originally from County Down—many were from the playing of his father, although Capt. O'Neill does not specify where exactly James obtained the tune. The first sound recording of the jig with the "Petticoat Loose" title was relatively recent, by the Boys of the Lough on their 1983 Topic album *Open Road*. The jig was also known as "Petticoat Loose" to Miltown Malbay, County Clare, uilleann piper Willie Clancy (1918-1973), who may have helped popularize it.

The second "Petticoat Loose" jig goes by several less popular alternate titles, no threat to the main title at this time. It is also called "The Banks of Glenoe" (a river in County Antrim) by 19th century collector P.W. Joyce (1827-1914), and "The Rooms of Dooagh" (or Dooagh), a title that refers to a cave system in the hills between Maghera and Tulla, in East Clare. It also has been called by source names: "Con Carthy's" (by Sliabh Luachra accordion great Johnny Leary, 1923-2004), and "Pat/Paddy Canny's Jig" (Pat was County Clare fiddler Paddy Canny's father). Chief O'Neill also printed this "Petticoat Loose" tune in his *Music of Ireland* (1903), some two decades earlier than the aforementioned version. On the whole the jig seems related to (and possibly a derived from) "Bryan O'Lynn" and "The Maiden that Jigs it in Style."

A dorian mode reel from the playing of Donegal fiddler John Doherty is called "Petticoat Loop," also known as "John Doherty's" and "The Humours of Bally Heigue." The title "Petticoat Loop" is attributed not to Doherty, but to Dublin fiddler John Kelly and his son James. It is musically unrelated to the "Petticoat Loose" jigs, but the title is so tantalizingly similar.

Irish "Petticoat Loose" names seem to be associated not with

Petticoat Loose

Francis O'Neill

dancing, however, but with a peculiar legend associated with Lake Baylough, high in the Knockmealdown Mountains of southern County Tipperary. The Knockmealdown range looks down on ancient routes of passage, while the word itself means "hill of the honey fort." Petticoat Loose was the nickname for one Mary Hannigan, of the townland of Colligan, not far from the picturesque village of Clogeen. Mary (who is often said to have lived in

the early 19th century) was the only child of a farming family and was described as a strong, strapping lass, well able to shoulder the workload of the family farm. Far from making her clumsy, however, she maintained a gift for dancing and was locally renowned for her prowess. Unfortunately, an incident at a dance at a nearby wedding led to her mocking sobriquet. Mary was partial to drinking as much as she was to dancing (in some versions of the tale

Petticoat Loose (The Curickle)

John Walsh

Petticoat Loose

Sgt. James O'Neill

she is a bartender), and as the celebration proceeded into the early hours of the morning, Mary danced with more and more abandon. Finally, in her whirling she snagged her skirt upon a nail, the buttons burst off, and the skirt fell to the floor, exposing her to the jeers and laughter of the company. Embarrassment triggered her violent temper, and Mary cemented her nickname by flailing into the crowd, causing a near riot. Ever after she was "Petticoat Loose" to the neighborhood.

When she married it was to the one young man in the area who could come close to matching her steps on the dance floor. Unfortunately, her new husband died after only a year of marriage under mysterious circumstances. Mary was accused of hindering and intimidating a servant who had heard the man's cries from the fields and sought to help, and despite a search, her husband's body never was found. He had just gone away, maintained Mary, but would come back to her. The locals, however, saw it more sinisterly and were convinced that Mary had taken a neighboring hedge-schoolmaster as a lover, and that the two of them had plotted and carried out the murder. The reputation of her temper apparently kept questioning to a minimum, and there was never a trial.

Mary continued with her dissolute ways after that. Some time afterward she accompanied a group of workmen to the local pub, where drinking challenges ensued with Mary at the center of the combat. The stakes increased until a half-gallon of ale was placed before her, and Mary drank it down without pause. It was her swan song, for her system had accumulated enough alcohol that, as she turned back to the crowd she suddenly keeled over, not only dead-drunk, but quite dead. "Petticoat Loose" had died without benefit of last rites, and although her wake was a grand affair attended from far and wide, a priest was not in attendance, even for the burial.

After seven years Petticoat Loose was all but forgotten, but this was to change. It was at another dance in Colligan that a man, fatigued and overheated from dancing, at the midnight hour sauntered outside to take the air and cool himself. He speedily returned inside, obviously frightened out of his wits, and breathlessly related that he had just spied Mary sitting on a wall near the dance hall. No one else dared venture outside until morning. Soon Mary's spirit was revealed to others. A man in a cart offered a lift at night to a woman standing beside the road; she hopped into the back, and as the man twitched the reins, the horse dropped dead in his tracks (c.f. the "Driving Mary Home" ghost tales). Mary sightings grew exponentially and the populace armed themselves with folk and religious wards just in case of a chance meeting.

There are more stories on the subject, usually involving common elements of drunkenness and criminality. It may be that the term "Petticoat Loose" was used euphemistically, applied to women whose morals were questionable. Thus there may have been many individuals who were tagged with the nickname "Petticoat Loose."

For a scholarly discussion of the legend of Petticoat Loose, see Anne O'Connor's excellent *The Blessed and the Damned: Sinful Women and Unbaptised Children in Irish Folklore* (2005).

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



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