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Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Surprise du Québec, Part One

One of the pleasures of the study of fiddle tunes of North America is the surprising, often serendipitous associations one sometimes uncovers with older repertoire, imported from international sources. Occasionally these imports have ancient roots with myriad branches, but still traceable, while at other times the borrowings seem to be almost intact, having sustained relatively little stylistic reworking in the genre adopting them. In past *Fiddler Magazine* Tune History articles we have had examples of each. Some connections require relatively little musical analysis, as the lines of adoption are clear. Fiddlers in the American old time tradition, for example, translated "Over the Moor to Maggie" as "Waynesburgh," "Mrs. McLeod's Reel" as "Wild Horse" or "Stony Point," and "Kitty's Wedding" as "Smith's Reel" or "Belle of Lexington"—all relatively recognizable settings of the originals.

The Franco-Canadian repertoire similarly imported foreign tunes into an existing or "background" repertoire, albeit one anchored in the music the original French settlers brought with them from the Continent. Some of the repertoire, particularly folksong, has been traced to medieval times (see Madeleine Béland and Lorraine Carrier-Aubin's *Chansons de voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers*, 1982, for more). Much instrumental music was also based on the ancient rhythms of French dance. History intervened in the form of the defeat of New France with the victory of Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, and the final Treaty of Paris, 1763, which ceded France's North American colonies to England. England consolidated its gains with waves of immigration, which took place in Canada in ways both similar to and different from America, for the colonists' inexorable westward expansion was accompanied by a "filling in" as well.

The Eastern Townships of southeastern Québec are a good example of the latter phenomenon. The original inhabitants were Abenaki Indians, whose legacy survives in the numerous place-names. French settlement was well established in Québec and land divided into parishes and Seigneuries; however, settlement had primarily taken place to take advantage of navigable rivers and other transportation infrastructures, and much of the interior—even to the east—was largely undeveloped and sparsely settled. Following the American Revolution, some settlers came to the region (some Loyalists, to be sure, but more often than not simply those seeking land). However, most immigration was during the early and mid-19th century, when immigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and America entered the territory. By 1870 the Eastern Townships had an English-speaking majority, although within fifty years French language and culture had again become dominant. My great-great-great-grandfather emigrated in the 1840s from northern Ireland to a small town near Thetford Mines, Québec, developed as Leeds by the English-speaking Scots and Scots-Irish. By my grandfather's time the name of the village had changed to St-Jacques de Leeds, reflecting the shift in dominant culture).

One can imagine the opportunities for musical cross-fertilization in the region, with older French dance music forms—menuets, contredanses, and cotillons—colliding with Scots, English, and Irish jigs and reels. My great-great-uncle was taught to play by a French fiddler, known in family lore as "Jim Pigeon" (probably a Jean Pigeon), who was renowned in the locale for his ability to "step," the percussive foot-tapping that is a core technique of the Franco-Canadian style. However, the tunes taught to

my old uncle by m. Pigeon were not French, but rather familiar melodies of the British Isles—"Mrs. McLeod's," "Fairy Dance," "Soldier's Joy," although undoubtedly Québécois tunes were enjoyed by him as well.

French-Canadian repertoire expanded to take it all in, although the couple dances, like the waltz and polka, followed later, in part because they were discouraged by some of the clergy. One tale is told of an old village fiddler, who had been counseled for years by his good friend, also the local priest, to give up his instrument, as it led only to loose behavior in the community. Over the years the bonds of friendship tugged just enough so that one day, as his friend once again gently chided him, he agreed to consign his fiddle to the firebox if that is what it took to conclude the subject. The priest was astonished, but supportive. He was less pleased when the fiddler dragged in an unused wood stove and used it to store his beloved instrument, taking care to only light the other, usual stove.

Let's take a look at some of the music produced in this cultural collision.

"Archie Menzies Reel" is a composition of a Scottish fiddler and dancing teacher named John Lowe (1797-1866), of Marykirk, Kincardineshire. Lowe composed several famous compositions, including "Rachel Rae" and "Sir David Davidson of Cantry," and he is the father of Joseph Lowe, who published an important collection of Scottish dance music in 1840. Menzies was originally a Norman name, introduced into Scotland in the half-century after the conquest of England by William the Conqueror (the Scots pronounce it "Minghees"). Exactly which Archie Menzies was the real dedicatee is somewhat in question. Lowe may have composed his reel in honor of Archibald Menzies (1754-1842), a Perthshire doctor/surgeon who gained fame as the naturalist attached to a Royal Navy expedition to explore the west coast of America. More likely, the title honors Archibald Menzies, born in Dull, Perthshire, about 1806. Menzies earned a reputation as one of the best strathspey and reel players of his day, taking many prizes at competitions. He played at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, for several years until his death in that city in the year 1856. Or, Lowe may have composed it for (a young) Archie Menzies, also a musician (see his "Miller of Camserney") who eventually became first conductor of the Highland Reel and Strathspey Society in 1889. The tune is very popular among fiddlers in English-speaking Canada, where it is part of fiddling repertory in Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and Ottawa Valley fiddling. Irish musicologist Brendan Breathnach printed it in his *Ceol Rince na hÉireann*, vol. 3 (1985), collected from the playing of fiddler Mick Woods, and gave the title as "Bells of St. Louis." He concluded that it was probably an American composition.

What happened to Lowe's reel when it entered the Québec melting pot? Remarkable things, to be sure. A distanced version of the reel is currently popular among Québécois fiddlers under the title "Le quêteux Tremblay" or "Le rêve de Quêteux Tremblay"

("Beggar Tremblay's Dream"). It derives from the repertoire of André Alain (1931-2000), of St-Basile-de-Portneuf, near Québec City (a region also renowned for its accordion players), who reworked the tune based on his remembrances of one of his mentors, William Tremblay, a master fiddler who would wander from village to village throughout Québec Province, trading his music for room and board. *Quêteux* translates as "beggar," not meant unkindly, but rather identifying the itinerant nature of the trade, and the method of barter for payment—there were other fiddlers with the appellation *quêteux* as well. It is not dissimilar to the lifestyle of other fiddle masters in other countries, such as Sliabh Luachra teacher Pdraig O'Keeffe.

How much of the adaptation is original with Tremblay, and how much can be attributed to Alain's reworking is unknown. "Le quêteux Tremblay" retains "Archie Menzies" original key signature of F major, the key almost universally found in Scottish versions (Irish and other Canadian fiddlers tend to change it to the key of D). The high strain (which is sometimes played first in some Québec renditions) is recognizably close to "Archie Menzies"; however, while the Scottish tune is "square" (i.e. eight bars, repeated, in each strain), the Québec one is "crooked," elongated to five measures (and then repeated). Both the Scottish and Québec versions have first strains in 4/4 time, although the second strain metres diverge. "Le quêteux Tremblay" can be transcribed throughout in 2/4 time for even measures, of course, but is more accurately written in 6/4 to capture the correct phrasing. In fact, as fiddler Lisa Ornstein pointed out some time ago (in her 1982 article "Instrumental Folk Music of Québec: An Introduction," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*), "a predilection for the combination of 6/4 and 4/4 meters seems to be a fairly common phenomenon among Québécois traditional instrumentalists as a whole." She believes this combination of metres to be unique to Québécois music, and not derivative of older European forms based in 3/2 metre.

You can hear "Le rêve de Quêteux Tremblay" on La Bottine Souriante's 1988 CD *Je Voudrais Changer d'Chapeau*, rendered as both a traditional tune and in string quartet arrangement by Lisa Ornstein.

Stay tuned for part two of this article in the spring issue!

[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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Le quêteux Tremblay

Musical score for "Le quêteux Tremblay" in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a 2/4 time signature. The melody begins with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note G4, then a series of eighth and quarter notes. The second staff continues the melody. The third staff has a first ending bracket over measures 14-15 and a second ending bracket over measures 16-17. The fourth staff has a first ending bracket over measures 22-23 and a second ending bracket over measures 24-25. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Archie Menzies Reel

Musical score for "Archie Menzies Reel" in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is a continuous sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The second staff continues the melody. The third staff has a first ending bracket over measures 9-10 and a second ending bracket over measures 11-12. The fourth staff continues the melody and ends with a double bar line.

An Unmoved Audience

"But," said the violinist to his friend, bitterly, "the audience sat through the performance unmoved."
"Not exactly," came the reply. "I saw five or six sneak out."

— From *The Violinist* magazine, January 1910