

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## The Great Eastern

“The Great Eastern” is a reel that, while not a member of a large tune family, is nonetheless important in several traditions, largely on the merits of its strong, flowing, and well-crafted melody. It has a few names, but essentially they are the same tune, showing little of the variety of musical distance between versions that sometimes develops when tunes weave in and out of various traditions. It can be found in North American tradition as “Bennett’s Favorite” and “The Great Eastern,” in Irish tradition as “John Brennan’s Reel” and especially “The Silver Spire,” and in Québécois tradition as one of the “La Grondeuse” tunes. It has a long recording history, beginning with the duet of Paddy Killoran and Paddy Sweeney in the 1930s and continuing today with versions by Sharon Shannon, Tommy Peoples, John and Phil Cunningham, Natalie MacMaster, and the groups Wild Asparagus and La Bottine Souriante, to name a few.

In Québec, the title “La Grondeuse” — “The Grumbling Woman” — is the title of many tunes, each fiddler seeming to have his or her own version based on a variety of melodies in the key of D. What they have in common is that the G string is tuned up to A (ADAE, or “raised bass” tuning), producing ringing overtones and lending itself to dense droned bowing on the low parts (i.e. “grumbling”). “La Grondeuse” is universally played in the Québec fiddle tradition and is often employed as a vehicle for step dancing. One “La Grondeuse” strain is the “Great Eastern”/“Silver Spire” melody and has made the contra dance rounds for many years, beginning with New Hampshire fiddler and caller Dudley Laufman.

Irish fiddlers know the reel by the titles “Silver Spire” and “John Brennan’s (Reel).” It was famously recorded for the first time in 1931 by the duet of fiddlers Paddy Killoran and Paddy Sweeney (who paired it with “Farrell O’Gara”), both from County Sligo and recent members of the New York

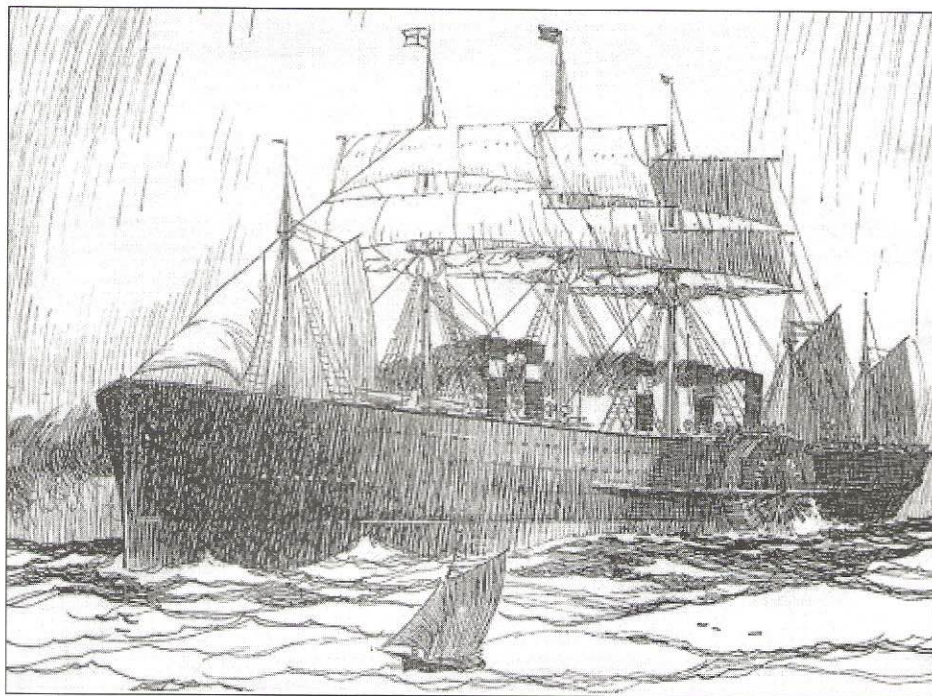
City Irish immigrant community. Since no earlier record of the name “Silver Spire” occurs prior to the 1931 Killoran/Sweeney recording, I believe the original name had become detached, and that Killoran, Sweeney, or someone at the record company decided to call the unnamed reel after the then-current engineering marvels the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building, both newly completed. The buildings dramatically altered the New York City skyline, and the art-deco Chrysler Building even features a silver spire that juts skyward from the top of the building. Through this influential recording, the reel quickly became a staple of the Irish dance tradition and was picked up by such groups as the Ballinakill Ceili Band (who recorded it on a 78 rpm disk, set as a hornpipe). The melody became associated with County Sligo flute player John Brennan in some Irish circles. He was a regular member of Dublin’s Church Street Club, site of a famous long-lasting session that began in the late 1950s, centered around fiddler John Kelly, originally from County Kerry. The Tara Ceili Band and Tommy Peoples/Matt Malloy/Paul Brady, to name a few, have recorded it under the “John Brennan’s” title. It is still a popular tune that is heard occasionally at modern sessions, and because of this, and through Irish recordings, it has re-entered other traditions, creating interesting juxtapositions where it exists simultaneously with other titles.

It is in American tradition, however, that the reel can be traced farthest: to 1883 and *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*. Therein it appears twice, first as “Bennett’s Favorite,” then again as “Great Eastern Reel,” the latter being the only tune credited to Clem Titus (who, like many of the names credited in Ryan’s, was probably a mid-18th century band leader). The “Great Eastern” title is the one that the tune is usually known by, although some fiddlers picked up the “Bennett’s” version by perusing the Ryan collection or its successor, *Cole’s 1000 Fiddle Tunes*. Missouri fiddler Cyril Stinnett’s version is given on page 52. Stinnett probably had his version from Burt County, Nebraska, fiddler Uncle Bob Walters, remarks Bill Shull, and although Stinnett did not read music, Walters did, and often picked up tunes from *Ryan’s/Cole’s*. Natalie MacMaster has also recorded “Bennett’s Favorite.” It is doubtful, especially given the tune’s appearance in the same publication under the “Bennett” title, that it was authored by Titus, about whom nothing is known.

If Titus is unknown, however, his title is certainly not, for it was the name of one of the most famous ships of the mid-19th century and instantly recognizable to anyone living at the time, albeit almost forgotten nowa-

## La Grondeuse





days. *The Great Eastern* was the last of three great transatlantic steamships designed by the colorfully-named Isambard Kingdom Brunel (whose father was an expatriate French-born engineer resident in England after the Revolution, who constructed the first tunnel under the Thames, still in use today as part of the London Underground). The ship was an astounding engineering feat. It was the largest vessel of its age — originally called *The Leviathan* due to its huge size — and six times larger than any ship ever then built. Instead of the usual wood, the *Great Eastern* was made of iron, weighed 19,000 tons and measured 689 feet. In fact, it was so huge it had to be launched sideways, although when the moment came she only managed to shift three feet before stopping. It would be three months before she was finally pushed into water. Unfortunately, her luck did not improve. During her sea trials, a terrible explosion occurred, caused by a stuffed ventilator, and the foremost funnel was launched like a rocket. Members of the crew, scalded by the blast, emerged on deck, and one

agonized sailor threw himself over the side, only to be mangled to death by the huge glade wheels on the side of the ship. Poor Brunel, whose health had suffered during the long construction, had a stroke when he heard the news and he died soon afterward.

The *Great Eastern* was built so large in order to run from Europe to Australia with only one stop for fuel, but she was never employed in that task. Instead, she was assigned the run to New York, although she never was able to attract the number of passengers needed to become profitable. For one reason, she was famous for rolling in the great waves of the Atlantic, producing monumental bouts of seasickness. Her port visits were mismanaged, alienating potential passengers. Even more ominously, during her fourth voyage a storm tore away her rudder, causing eight months of repairs, and on a subsequent passage she struck a rock, tearing a gash in her side 75 feet long (she was saved by her unique double-hull, which

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## Silver Spire





kept her afloat). After a few years of mounting losses, the great ship was taken out of service.

Soon, however, she was resurrected for a task that finally befit her, for the *Great Eastern* became the steamship that laid the first permanent transatlantic cable. Only a ship of her size could carry the enormous amount of cable necessary to span the Atlantic, and she was finally a success. By the mid-1870s, however, her time was passed, and she languished in harbor for twelve more years, more or less as a floating billboard. Finally, in 1888, she was sold for a pittance for scrap, although it took the better part of two years to dismantle her. During this process a skeleton was found

between her double hulls, one of the workmen who was on the original building crew from the 1850s and perished unknown.

[The author wishes to thank Bill Shull for communications and permission to use his transcription of Cyril Stinnett's "Bennett's Reel." Also, thanks to communications from Guy Bouchard.]

[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 Fiddler's Companion" (<http://www.ceolas.org/tunes/fc>). He spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions.]

## Bennett's Reel

Traditional, as played by Cyril Stinnett; transcribed by Bill Shull.

Musical score for "Bennett's Reel" in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 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 2/4 time signature. It features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The melody is characterized by eighth-note patterns and slurs. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

## The Great Eastern Reel

Ryan's Mammoth Collection (1886)

Musical score for "The Great Eastern Reel" in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 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 2/4 time signature. It features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The melody is characterized by eighth-note patterns and slurs. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots. The second and fourth staves include first and second endings, indicated by "1." and "2." above the notes.