

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Ryan's Mammoth Collection

By most measures *Ryan's Mammoth Collection: 1050 Reels and Jigs*, printed in 1883 in Boston, Massachusetts, by publisher Elias Howe, is a remarkable volume of music. It contains skeleton versions of old English, Irish and Scots reels, jigs, hornpipes and clogs, strathspeys and flings, "Ethiopian melodies," "straight jigs," newly-composed tunes with topical titles, and regionally popular or significant instrumental melodies. Musicologist Charles Wolfe dubbed it (referring to its almost identical but more recent incarnation as *Cole's 1,000 Fiddle Tunes*) in 1986 "the most popular fiddle book in American history," a status scarcely diminished in the beginning of the 21st century. In his article "The Fiddler's Bible: A Brief History" ("From the Fiddling Archives," *The Devil's Box*, No. 21, vol. 4, Winter 1987, pp. 37-47), Wolfe established the collection's importance, citing numerous contemporary prominent fiddlers who either currently played tunes from the volume or had learned repertoire from it. These included John Hartford (identified as an authority on the book and its history), Buddy Spicher, Paul Anatasio, "Big Howdy" Forrester, Georgia Slim Rutland, Mark O'Connor, and James Bryan. Tunes from the volume were part of the standard repertoire at New England dances and contests in the 20th century, contended the author, as they were in the Midwest, "especially northern Missouri and Nebraska...where fiddlers there still use tunes from it in their repertoire, and talk about its authors."

Furthermore, maintained Wolfe, *Ryan's Mammoth* was influential well beyond the borders of the United States, especially in the Canadian Maritime Provinces, as evidenced by recordings of Cape Breton fiddlers Angus Chisholm and Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald, and Nova Scotia/Boston fiddler Tom Doucet. Overseas the volume also was significant. A Scottish publication, *Kerr's Merry Melodies*, published in four volumes, contains a great many of the *Ryan* melodies, often note-for-note. Other *Kerr* tune versions are only slightly altered from those that appear in *Ryan*, perhaps, for example, by a change of key. What seems clear, however, is that publisher Kerr was trying to imitate on the other side of the Atlantic the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, and that the Scottish volumes

(albeit printed without a date) were published after *Ryan's*. Irish guitarist Paul de Grae, a student of Sliabh Luachra, County Kerry, music, has found the *Ryan* volume was known in southern Ireland, and influenced musical repertoire in that region.

Wolfe cautions that the influence of *Ryan's Mammoth* has not been universal among fiddlers, even in America. One had to have the ability to sight read, for one thing, and written music was little utilized in areas where aural transmission was the mode of learning. The Upland South in the United States is an example of an area in which the volume seems to have made little lasting impact on fiddling repertoire, he finds. Apart from the pockets of isolated traditions and archaic-based fiddler repertoire, *Ryan's Mammoth* had more to do with shaping both the reality of what we now consider "traditional" fiddling, and our perception of what traditional fiddling was and is, than any other volume printed in North America.

It is helpful at this point to understand where the volume came from, and who compiled and published it. Fortunately, Elias Howe has been ably researched by Wolfe, and uilleann piper and folksinger Pat Sky (who edited modern reprints of *Howe's 1000 Jigs and Reels* and *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* for publisher Mel Bay and who wrote well-researched and extensive forwards to the editions) has more recently investigated both Howe and William Bradbury Ryan. The following is culled from both their researches.

Music publisher Elias Howe was born in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1820, the last of five children. Although he found his first employment with a neighbor as a plowboy, Howe obtained a violin tutor and found time to learn and play the fiddle as a teenager. Moreover, he began to collect tunes from other fiddlers in the area and copied them into music commonplace books, a standard practice at a time when printed music collections were relatively rare. "His music commonplace book became very popular," writes Sky; "local musicians and friends constantly borrowed it to use as a source book for tunes to play at local dances." Quick to recognize a marketable opportunity, Howe convinced a Boston publisher to print the manuscript, offering to "work his legs off to make the book successful" in lieu of payment up front. His *Musician's Companion* was published in 1840, printed cheaply and crowded with melodies, and Howe indeed sold it door-to-door until he was able to purchase the plates himself. With those in hand he opened his first business in 1842, in Providence, Rhode Island.

President Garfield's

The image shows the musical notation for the fiddle tune "President Garfield's". It is written on three staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff contains measures 1 through 5, ending with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3'. The second staff contains measures 6 through 11, featuring first and second endings marked with '1' and '2'. The third staff contains measures 12 through 17, also featuring first and second endings marked with '1' and '2'. The melody is primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplet figures.

For a hundred years, from 1750 or so, on both sides of the Atlantic, music publishing, music retailing, and musical instrument sales and repairs were generally handled under one roof, as a diversity of services was required to capture enough trade to float the business. Howe's establishment was in the same mold (he also advertised umbrella repair!). He continued to publish in his successful niche, adding to his catalogue of publications by adapting his original tune collections from Framingham and freely adding to this core pool by scouring earlier printed publications for material. In 1845 he merged businesses with a Boston publisher and for the next five years continued to expand his music publishing empire. In 1850, however, Howe sold much of his catalogue of publications to the larger Oliver Ditson Company, and bought an estate in his home town of Framingham. The contract with Oliver Ditson prohibited Howe from publishing for a period of ten years, which he seems to have largely honored, although he continued to collect and compile material in preparation for the future. In fact, Wolfe finds, Howe did issue important volumes in the late 1850s through other publishers, including a precursor to *Ryan's Mammoth* called *The Leviathan Collection of Instrumental Music* (J. H. Mellor, Pittsburgh, 1858), containing 500 dance melodies — the first of Howe's huge one-volume collections.

In 1860 Howe returned to publishing under his own name, and re-established himself in Boston just at the start of the American Civil War. In addition to publishing, he manufactured drums for the Union Army and sold fifes to the numerous newly-forming martial organizations. Declining a government offer to serve as Director of Bands (which came with a rank of Lt. Colonel), Howe concentrated on supplying the government all he could sell with regard to musical instruments and publications. Some of the most popular of the latter items were his fife tutors (e.g. *Army and Navy Fife Instructor*, 1861), understandably in demand for training new military musicians. Ironically, finds Sky, "Howe discovered after the war that the majority of the books were distributed to the Rebel armies," probably through a Kentucky firm.

It was around the end of the conflict that William Bradbury Ryan came to work for Howe in Boston. Ryan remained with Howe for some thirty years, until the latter's death in 1895 (Ryan's own obituary was printed by the *Boston Globe* in 1910, notes Sky). Ryan was a musician as well, and the leader of at least one band operating from the firm's Boston address in the 1860s. In fact, numerous bands either operated out of or were booked from Elias Howe's shop at 103 Court Street, including some of the most influential musical groups in the

city: Christie's Quadrille Band, Gilmore's Band, The Metropolitan Brass Band, Rowell's Quadrille Band and Edmond's Quadrille Band, along with [W.B.] Ryan's Band. These organizations, writes Sky, were of two general types — brass bands and quadrille bands, the latter employing a variety of instruments for dancing, fronted by violins, cornets and clarinets. Howe and Ryan sold music for all of them, including completely orchestrated music for the quadrille bands. The firm published two huge collections of music at this time: *The Musician's Omnibus* (c. 1864) and *Howe's One Thousand Jigs and Reels* (c. 1867), both economically printed and relatively affordable. Wolfe points out the latter was probably the first tune book to use the word breakdown to describe a fiddle tune.

It was in 1882 that Ryan and Howe published the last of the firm's huge omnibus collections, a volume initially entitled *William Bradbury Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, although the work was copyrighted in 1883 with the title simplified as *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*. It contained many of the Howe catalogue of tunes that had been garnered over the years from European and American sources, many reprinted numerous times in earlier Howe publications. The music is dance music — fiddle music, or de facto fiddle music (if not written specifically for the instrument) — the airs and slower melodies that made up large sections of Howe's earlier works having been discarded. Moreover, an important element of new material is contained in the volume — newly-culled music from other publications, band music from the mid-19th century, newly-composed melodies with topical titles, and a sampling of tunes that were either currently popular or had currency in the years following the Civil War. The result is that melodies that were sometimes a hundred and fifty years older were interspersed with then-modern, topical melodies. In fact, much of this latter material can be associated with specific trends, fads, personages, structures, entertainers, novels, and other and varied aspects of the 1870s and early 1880s, especially in the Eastern-seaboard centers and particularly in Boston and New York.

Why is this important to us? First, *Ryan's* contains a wonderful selection of English, Irish, and Scottish dance music — a summary, really, because the tunes chosen for inclusion were some of the most popular and enduring of the preceding century-and-a-half; the cream that rose to the top. This was the music of social dancing in group format — the round (circle) and square dances, and longways (contra) dances — dances that were indicative of a mode of entertainment that emphasized the community, not the individual. They flourished in a pre-industrial, largely rural and agrarian base where group cooperation

President Grant's Hornpipe

The image displays the musical notation for 'President Grant's Hornpipe'. It consists of three staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature, followed by a key signature change to G major. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff starts with a measure number '6' and continues the melody. The third staff starts with a measure number '12' and concludes the piece with a double bar line and repeat dots. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings.

(as, for example, to get the community fields plowed or the harvest in) was desirable and necessary. In the 1880s the industrial revolution was in full swing — several generations old in some areas — but America was still largely rural and agrarian, and still had a continental frontier to develop. Group social dancing was still popular in many areas of the country, although it was fading fast, especially in urban areas, but in 1880 it was still actively in demand. By the next generation — the turn of the 20th century — music for these dances would already be characterized in advertisements as “old fashioned tunes...as danced by our fathers” and square dancing seen as a “revival” activity in many areas. The selection of this older music appearing in *Ryan’s* is admirable, and one may deduce from the number of truly exceptional and deserved old melodies included that a skilled and knowledgeable ear was involved. Moreover, it was one (Howe’s? Ryan’s?) that was thoroughly familiar with both musical repertoire and with group dancing (frequently, for example, dance directions are outlined below older tunes). Notably absent from the collection are ballroom dances (i.e. couple dances), such as waltzes, polkas, schottisches, two-steps, etc.

The second great significance of *Ryan’s Mammoth* is as a snapshot of popular instrumental music and culture in the eastern United States at the beginning of the 8th decade of the 19th century, a formative period for American traditional fiddle music — “old time” fiddling. These *Ryan* titles and music referenced art, entertainment, technology, politics, public works, and dance fashions of the era. As a broad generalization, most collected volumes of music of interest to fiddle players reflect the decade or two previous to the publication of the volume, for it takes time to collect, select, edit, transcribe and print a collection’s worth of music. This places the time of the gathering of the modern, regional melodies in *Ryan’s* during the 1870s, or perhaps from the end of the Civil War (it cannot be coincidence that this corresponds with the time Ryan was first employed by Howe!). Historically, this coincides with the Reconstruction period following the American Civil War (1866-1877); or, the presidencies of Andrew Johnson (1865-1869), Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877), and the post-Reconstruction Presidencies of Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881) and James Garfield (1881).

In fact, among the “political” melodies in *Ryan’s* are two hornpipes named for period presidents, “President Grant” and “President Garfield,” the latter dispatched at the hands of a disgruntled low-level bureaucrat who had been spurned for a position in the year prior to the initial publication of the volume. Both were composed by the elusive Harry Carleton, about whom nothing to date is known (it may have been a pen name). Carleton contributed a number of tunes to the collection, as did his counterpart Frank Livingston (“...apparently a New York songwriter who either performed or wrote fiddle tunes,” notes Wolfe). Several of Carleton’s tunes belied Northern or Union themes, while Livingston’s titles generally were associated with Southern themes. The juxtaposition of the two writers seems very deliberate — an attempt at balance, and an appeal to those of either sympathy. Carleton penned a reel entitled “General Sheridan,” while on the preceding page we find Livingston’s “General Longstreet’s.” All of the above were named for men who played prominent roles in the Civil War, yet *Ryan’s* is remarkably free of references to the great conflict.

When viewed in context of the “modern” *Ryan* titles one understands that the reference to the men is as to contemporary Reconstruction figures, and only secondarily as wartime heroes. Tellingly, Grant’s title is president, not general. James Longstreet, Robert E. Lee’s trusted second in command in the Confederate Army, became a public figure after the war and was befriended by Grant, who appointed him U.S. Minister to Turkey in 1880 (Longstreet also became a commissioner for the Pacific Railroad and a U.S. Marshall for the District of Geor-

gia). Phil Sheridan was a fighting cavalry general in the Union Army during the Civil War, but had a subsequent famous career “pacifying” the Native American tribes on the Western Plains; later an administrator and senior officer, he retired in 1883 with a rare fourth star. Wade Hampton, whose name is attached to another of Livingston’s hornpipes, was a famous and successful Confederate cavalry commander who reinvented himself after the war and became governor of South Carolina. At the time of *Ryan’s* publication, Hampton had moved on to serve in Congress as a United States senator from his state. Ben Butler (“Ben Butler’s Reel”) was a politician who was appointed a general in the Union army and served (with some controversy) in the Mississippi theater of the war. Afterwards he reverted to pol, and, at the time of *Ryan’s* publication in 1882 had just been elected governor of the state of Massachusetts.

Other *Ryan* tunes with martial titles have more to do with 19th century politics than any great conflict. The “7th Regiment Reel” references neither a be-gloried Civil War unit, nor Custer’s famous but doomed cavalry regiment of Indian fighting days. Rather, it was composed (as Don Meade has found) in honor of the 7th Regiment of the New York National Guard, an upper-crust unit formed decades before the war, headquartered in the old armory at the foot of 3rd Ave. The 7th saw active duty in 1861 for several months, then returned home, their original commitment to the Federal government having been fulfilled (hardly the stuff of glory, although they did see “action” in 1863 during the huge New York city draft riots, when they were called out to help quell the disturbance — in fairness, however, many from the 7th transferred to active duty regiments and saw hard service). A period song poked fun at them (to the tune of the “Star Spangled Banner”):

*’Tis true for our country they went for to fight,
And offered their service in proud manly manner,
They went for a month or longer to stay,
But soon they got home-sick, and had to surrender...*

The “7th” is better-known among Irish fiddlers as a hornpipe variant called “The Flowing Tide,” and also carries the titles “Picnic Reel” and (in *O’Neill’s Music of Ireland*, 1903) “Higgins’ Best” (presumably because it was composed by another elusive character, Conn. Higgins, to whom it is attributed in *Ryan’s*).

The “Pulaski Guards Reel” was named for one of the premier militia units of Boston, founded in the mid-1830s. The unit catered to the city’s society, and, in the years before the war paraded for picnics with other elite units and the area’s premier brass bands, including the Ned Kendall’s Boston Brass Band (see “Oh, Ned,” *Fiddle Tune History, Fiddler Magazine*, vol. 10, No 4) and the Brigade Band of Boston, with cornet virtuoso John Bartlett.

Two other *Ryan* titles bear special mention in the “political” category, the “De Golyer Hornpipe” and the “Tammany Ring Clog.” The former is apparently a joke, for the melody is attributed to “Garfield” by Ryan, a play on the scandal that involved him in his pre-presidential days. Garfield, a Republican congressman at the time, prepared briefs regarding the merit of a certain pavement, and presented them before a congressional committee. When later a scandal broke having to do with the paving contract with the government, his political opponents tried to make much of his involvement, although it is unlikely he actually did anything wrong. “Tammany Ring” is named for the associates of the infamous political machine in New York City in the 1870s, led by “Boss” Tweed, head of the Tammany Hall Democratic Party.

“President Garfield’s” has been recorded by Wild Asparagus and Natalie MacMaster, and has entered repertoire on the other side of the Atlantic through recordings of the Boys of the Lough, Brendan Begley, Paul O’Shaughnessey and Paul McGratten. “President Grant’s” can be heard on albums by New Hampshire stalwarts Bob McQuillen and Rodney Miller, and by Charlie Walden and Robin Bullock. Texas and Midwest fiddlers have picked up “General Longstreet’s,” which appears on recordings by Tony Ludiker, Dale Morris, Ed Carnes, and by Cape Breton fiddler Jerry Holland. “Wade Hampton’s” hornpipe has even entered Northumbrian pipers’ repertoire, probably through its inclusion in a *Kerr’s* volume, subsequently picked up in Northumbrian collections.

There is so much more of importance and interest to explore in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*. Future Fiddle Tune History articles will explore other aspects of the volume.


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 [Thanks to Don Meade for generously sharing his research notes on *Ryan’s Mammoth*, and for welcome encouragement; and to Pat Sky, for his spontaneous gifts.]

[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.ibiblio.org/fiddlers>). When not researching tunes, he spends as much time as possible playing in Irish music sessions.]

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General Longstreet’s

Wade Hampton’s Hornpipe