Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Oh, Dear Mother, My Toes are Sore!

Oh, dear mother, my toes are sore
Dancin' over your sandy floor...
I've danced today, and I'll dance no more...

The idea of dancing as a feat of endurance is likely nearly as old as rhythmic movement itself. Motivations for such actions have been plentiful, from religious and courtship displays, personal challenges to monetary gain. An example of religious motivation for dancing for long periods can be seen in the anciently famous "whirling Dervishes," founded by the great philosopher and writer Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi in the 13th century. A ritual of the Mevlevi sect in the Middle East, the dance is known as the *sema* and is a serious religious ritual performed by Muslim priests in a prayer trance to Allah, during which it is believed that the soul is released from earthly ties, and able to freely and jubilantly commune with the divine. This ritual, witnessed by pilgrims and travelers who told the tales of their adventures on returning home, may have given rise to the Western legends of dancing to exhaustion, as characterized by fairy tales such as "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" and "The Red Shoes." The former has to do with royal lasses who secretly slip away and dance all night long in a grand subterranean hall "to the music of fiddles, trumpets and kettledrums," and who return exhausted at the dawning of day. It has the same supernatural root as do the tales of fairy or trowie music emanating from the ground in Ireland and the Shetlands. Hans Christian Anderson popularized "The Red Shoes" (printed in 1845 and loosely adapted for a famous movie in 1948), a story that tells of the misfortune of a young girl who is captured by animated shoes and cannot stop dancing.

The great Montreal fiddler Jean Carignan accompanied storyteller and singer Alan Mills' recorded version of the "Red Shoes" story that he called "Ti-Jean and the Devil." Ti-Jean is a Québécois fiddler who unfortunately cannot synchronize his step-dancing and playing, and who is thus subject to the derision of his fiddling peers. One day, in frustration he throws down his fiddle and says the Devil can take it, and soon afterwards a bearded stranger appears. He suggests to Ti-Jean that he can perhaps help him become the most famous fiddler in the province, and only asks in return that Ti-Jean come and play for him sometime when he is finished. Ti-Jean quickly takes him up on his offer, and the stranger blows smoke from his pipe into the f-holes of the fiddle and around Ti-Jean's feet. In no time the fiddler is playing and step dancing together in perfect harmony, the likes of which have never been heard! On Saturday, he triumphantly makes his way into town where all are amazed, and a dance is quickly organized in the parish hall, with Ti-Jean performing to great acclaim. As the night progresses, Ti-Jean shows no signs of tiring, however, and the people find they are compelled to dance along without rest. On Sunday morning the parish priest, who has waited in vain for the people to attend Mass, comes to investigate and is astonished to find the dance still in full progress. Knowing full well what was happening and who was behind it, he quickly throws Holy Water on Ti-Jean's feet and admonishes the enchantment to be gone. The music and dancing stop, but in a puff of smoke, Ti-Jean also disappears, presumably to keep his prearranged appointment.

These and similar folk tales are part of the same folk traditions as fiddling. Vestiges of the "dancing as devilment" theme crop up from time to time in real life and demonstrate that the image of the bedevilled dancer was a common one in times past. This vignette was recorded in a manuscript collection of local lore collected by Silas Claiborne Turnbo (1844-1925), a former Confederate soldier and chronicler of life in his native Ozark mountains.

A woodcut from the title page of *Kemp's Nine Daies Wonder Performed in a Daunce from London to Norwich*

George Woods who owned the mill at the Big Spring on East Sugar Loaf Creek below Monarch in Marion County, Arkansas, had a large family of children the majority of which were girls, all the family delighted in the old time dances. Many young people who lived far and near attended these "Ho downs" as they were commonly called. One day Bill Magness son of Joe Magness who lived in the river bottom one mile above the mouth of Big Creek went to mill there. The weather was cold and the river was up also and Sam Magness brother of Bill Magness, assisted him to swim Bill's horse across the river at the side of a canoe. Bill Magness wore a new pair of shoes made of home tanned leather that was not well tanned. When Bill arrived at the mill he received an invitation to remain at a big dance the Woods family were going to have that night and he accepted without having to be persuaded. The fireplace of the Woods dwelling was wide and as the temperature was nearly down to zero the Woodses kept a hot fire all night and the young men and women never stopped dancing during the entire night. The fire was so warm that it had a drawing up effect on Magnesses' (sic) shoes and they hurt his feet so bad that he was compelled to pull them off his feet and danced in his stocking feet. The girls who were very mischievous watched for an opportunity to burn them and getting a chance without Magness observing them they tossed them into the middle of the fire place and stirred the fire with the fire iron until the shoes were covered with live coals, chunks and cinders. When day light come the dance broke up and Magness, wanted to go home but he could not find his shoes. At last he got a hint that when he come there he had on a pair of shoes but he had none now to wear back home and the man had to ride back home in his sock feet and the bottoms of his socks were worn out at the dance. When he got to the river opposite where he lived his brother Sam brought the canoe over to help him across and seeing his brother in his sock feet and his toes frost bitten he says "Bill, you sentimental old rascal, you got your shoes burned off of your feet did you. No matter for you though, for you ought to have come back home and let the dance go to the devil where it belonged!"

Monetary incentives and personal challenges for endurance dancing are probably the most familiar to us today, largely through the phenomenon of the dance marathons that were a phenomenally popular fad during the early decades of the 20th century. Forms survive today as charity events and fund-raisers, usually at college campuses, but in the 1920s and 1930s, these marathons were big businesses that over time saw some 20,000 contestants and show personnel participate to entertain an audience of millions. During the depression the endurance contests, which could go on for days or even weeks at a time (the record stands at 5,148 hours 28.5 minutes), offered young, usually unemployed, people a chance to earn monetary prizes and some small fame, although many danced simply for

the food and shelter. All one had to do was keep one's partner moving, for style did not count.

There are, however, much older examples of endurance dancing for personal gain or fame. The tune "Kemp's Jig" was published by John Playford in the first volume of his great series *The English Dancing Master* (1651). As with several Playford tunes, it is considerably older than its publication date, and it appears to have been composed in the century prior. The title of the tune commemorates the feat of Will Kemp, a member and shareholder with William Shakespeare in the Company of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Globe Theatre, who wagered he could dance a morris jig all the way from London to Norwich (about 125 miles), an astounding feat for the time. Kemp was a fascinating character who was a famous comic actor and clown, and it is likely that Shakespeare wrote some of his early characters with him in mind. He played the part of Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* and is famous for creating the famous Auguste clown character (thought to have been inspired by and descended from the Vice character of medieval mystery plays). Unfortunately, it seems quite possible that he and Shakespeare may have had a falling out due to his penchant for improvising and playing to the crowd, as Kemp drops out of sight from Shakespeare's mid- to later career.

However, if his stage career is somewhat murky, his dancing feat is well documented, principally by himself in his profitable self-published book — an early example of the power of self-promotion. Kemp danced the distance in approximately nine days, spread out over about a month in order that he might rest and recuperate during the journey. A pipe-and-tabor musician provided the accompaniment for his dancing, but more importantly, Kemp arranged for a referee who kept strict watch that he did indeed dance the distance. This was crucial as pre-event betting was heavy, with Kemp putting up a considerable sum on himself to complete the distance, and an unbiased referee would insure that there would be no contesting the result. His feat, really a publicity stunt of sorts, did prove lucrative, for in addition to his book and his gambling winnings, he received a pension from the town of Norwich.

Less than a hundred years later, a similar feat was performed in Ireland that gave rise to one of the world's most popular fiddle tunes. "Jack Latin" has been one of the most published tunes in history and appears variously as "Jacky Lattin," "Jack O'Lattan," "Jockey Latten," "Jackie Layton," and similar names. The earliest publication of the music was in the year 1734, when it appeared in two publications, one in Ireland, Neals' *3rd Collection of Country Dances,* and one in Scotland, David Young's *Drummond Castle Manuscript* (also called the *Duke of Perth Manuscript* after the dedicatee). However, the first mention of "Jack Lattin" in print is in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* of June 1733 where it is advertised that "Jack Latin (will be played) on the Pipes, by two of the best Masters in this Kingdom," indicating it was well-known at the time. It subsequently appeared in a large number of English, Scottish, and Irish country dance manuscripts, although over the next hundred years it seems to have died out as a dance tune in Ireland, only to reappear with renewed vigor in Northumbrian collections around the early 1800s. In fact, today it still retains the reputation as a showcase tune-and-variations for Northumbrian musicians. It is astonishing that the melody was transmitted over such a wide area with such alacrity, especially for the times, and it is no surprise that its provenance has been hotly disputed.

There have been various speculations about the origins of the tune and the personage of Jacky Lattin, some of which are quite erroneous, but the most cogent have pointed to Irish origins. A correspondent of the great collector, Captain Francis O'Neill, was an expatriate Irishman who had removed to South Australia, and claimed the melody was Irish in origin. He related this story that he identified as coming from County Monaghan:

> *This fine old reel is said to have been composed in honor of a young man, John Duffy — better known as "Jack" Duffy — who lived in the townland of Lattan, near (Walter "Piper") Jackson's home in the parish of Aughnamulien. Duffy being a fine, strapping young man, a local Adonis, and an incomparable dancer in those days when dancing was a fine art in Ireland, he won Jackson's friendship and esteem to such a degree, that the great composer immortalized him in the beautiful tune, "Jack o' Lattan."*

A variant story put forward is that Jack Lattin was an Irishman who danced himself to death at the age of twenty-one. Yet another identification has it that Lattin was an accomplished and gifted fiddler and an associate of another famous Irishman immortalized in tune: Larry Grogan, the gentleman piper from Wexford.

These threads of stories and variants were exhaustively explored in a recent investigation by Séan Donnelly, who uncovered the historical John "Jack" Lattin (1711-1731). He was a son of the Roman Catholic Lattin family of the estate of Morristown Lattin in County Kildare, and in fact his gravesite still can be seen on the old family lands, with a weathered dated inscription that still can be read. Older accounts agree on these facts: that young Jack wagered he could dance a distance of many miles, that he performed the feat, and that he died subsequently — perhaps only days after the event. Donnelly concludes that Lattin danced eight miles, from his home in Morristown to Castle Browne, rather than the twenty mile distance from Morristown to Dublin that is often mentioned in later stories. His death, attributed to the strains of his feat, suggests that perhaps he had an underlying health problem or that his exhaustion lowered his resistance to the many fevers endemic in the 18th century; at any rate, even in modern times people have succumbed to such stresses, for two 1930s marathon dance contestants are known to have died on the dance floor. As with Jack Kemp, a wager was the apparent motivation for Lattin's marathon dance, and one assumes that a sum of money was involved. Such wagers among gentlemen were not unusual in the 18th century, and bets on any variety of subjects were a commonplace occurrence, needing only an assertion, a disputation and witnesses.

Jack Lattin also emerges as an interesting character, even given his youth. A member of the minor gentry, Lattin was known to be an excellent fiddler and it is recorded that he and gentleman piper Larry Grogan were in fact friends and musical companions (the same Larry Grogan from Johnstown Castle, County Wexford, who was himself immortalized with the traditional jig bearing his name that is still a popular staple at Irish music sessions). Donnelly has no conclusions about who might have composed the tune, although he thinks it unlikely that Lattin did himself, as some have suggested. The researcher believes it may have originated with someone (probably a fiddler) in the Dublin music society that orbited around the Neals, important performers and publishers of the era.

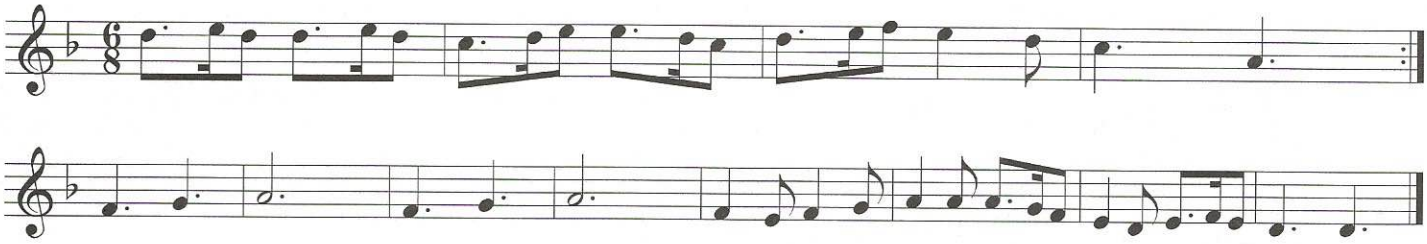
The title? "Oh, Dear Mother, My Toes are Sore" is the name given to several jigs collected from Pennsylvania fiddle and martial tradition by Professor Samuel Bayard, published in his book *Dance to the Fiddle and March to the Fife.* The quote is a fragment of a ditty once sung to the tune, and although the exact words were remembered by the informant dimly, one suspects the memory of aching feet after a dance was much more vivid!

- Donnelly, Séan. "Ecstacy in Eighteenth Century Kildare?: The Strange Fate of John Lattin of Morristown Lattin (1731)." *Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society* xviii, 4 (1998-99), 565-88.
- Mills, Alan & Jean Carignan. "Songs, Fiddle Tunes and a Folk-Tale from Canada." Folkway Records FG 3532. 1961.
- O'Neill, Francis. *Waifs and Strays of Gaelic Melody.* Lyon & Healy, Chicago, 1922.
- Turnbo, Silas Claiborne. *Manuscript Collection.* Springfield-Greene County Library, Springfield, MO.

[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). Currently he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions, when not researching fiddle tunes.]*

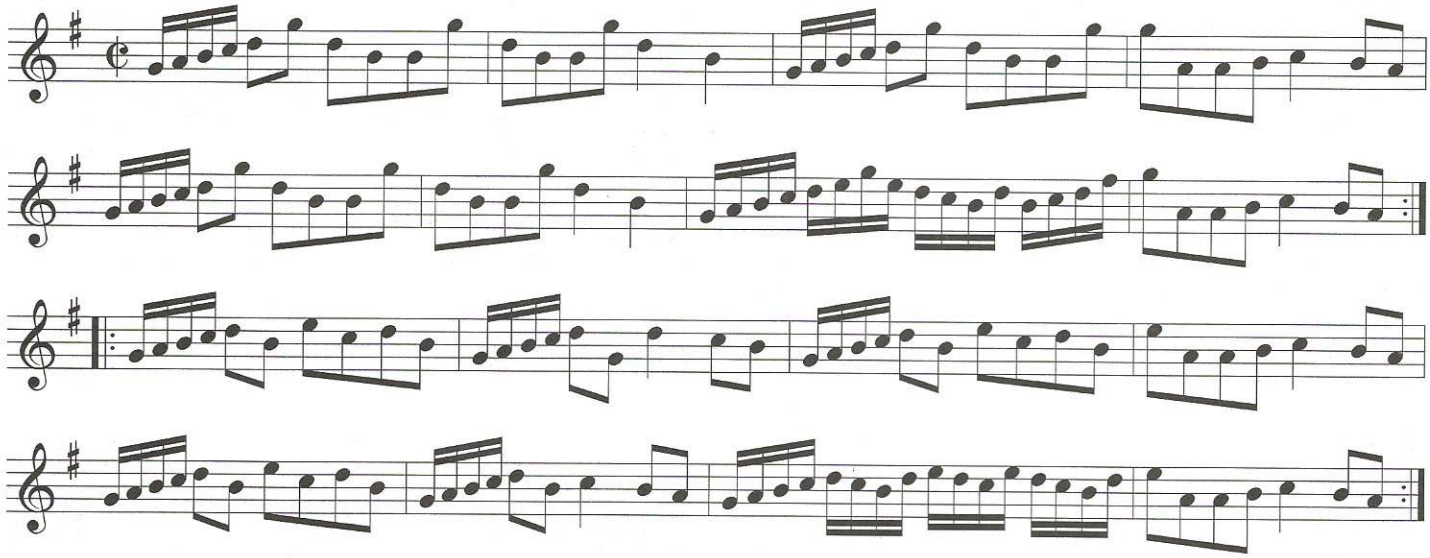
Kemps Jegg

Playford



Jackie Layton

Bruce & Stokoe
Northumbrian Minstrelsy



Jack Lattin with Variations

O'Farrell's National
Irish Music 1797