

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Dancers

The violin is to sing, the fiddle to dance.

The relationship between fiddling and dancing is undoubtedly as old as the instrument itself. Throughout the several-centuries scope of fiddle music literature and tradition that relationship has been cemented in honors to dancers that can be found in tune titles named for famous performers. Indeed, some are decidedly obscure and all-but-forgotten, although some are well remembered, even down through the centuries. The performances that inspired the titles have passed into the smoke of ages, but one might conjure up some of the spirit of their skill through a bit of research and a good dose of imagination.

Previous “Tune History” articles have discussed some famous dancers who have had tunes named for them: John Durang (see *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 2004), Jackie Layton (*Fiddler Magazine*, Fall 2002), and Kitty O’Neill (Don Meade’s premier “Tune History” article in *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 2001). However, many more dancers have been honored in every fiddle tradition, and, while there are numerous examples to choose from, I’ve picked out a few whose names are associated with interesting tunes that are heard occasionally today.

A number of renowned dancers of the 18th century had tunes that were either written for or associated with them that have survived in fiddle literature, and indeed, one finds relatively many references to famous dancers from that era. The reason has to do with the rise of the musical stage and the more permeable relationship of “art” or theatre music with “folk” or popular music. While there were examples of ballad-operas prior to John Gay’s famous *Beggar’s Opera* of 1728, it was that work that engendered a fashion in England and the colonies for musical theatre that wove theatrics with popular or traditional songs and airs. The development of the press, with ballad and news sheets being relatively available, and the rise of literacy allowed a “star” system to emerge in which actors and actresses achieved widespread fame. Also, it should be noted that stage players of the time exercised a wide range of skills, including dramatic and comic acting, singing and dancing, as well as mime and acrobatic skills. Thus, John Durang’s (“Durang’s Hornpipe”) career included engagements that required all those skills at various times, including circus clowning!

One of the first dancers of the ballad-opera era to be celebrated in fiddle literature was Nancy Dawson (c. 1730-1767). One version of her story has it that she burst upon the stage in one of the first instances of every understudy’s dream — she replaced one of the principal dancers who had become ill in a revival performance of *The Beggars Opera* at London’s Covent Garden theater in October, 1759. However, according to musicologist Frank Kidson, it appears that Dawson already had a measure of renown from her



dancing at Sadler’s Gardens, a London pleasure-garden, prior to getting a contract for Covent Garden. There is no doubt that after that she immediately became the toast of the town, so stunningly did she perform her dance, a featured entertainment inserted between acts of plays. A period publication called the *Dramatic History of Master Edward, Miss Ann and Others* (quoted by Chappell, 1859), states she was “extremely agreeable in her figure, and grew to be a great favorite of the town...she became vastly celebrated, admired, imitated and followed by everybody.” It is also said she was a charitable person, admired for her good qualities as much as for her performances. A ballad-sheet sang her praises:

*Of all the girls in our town,
The black, the fair, the red, the brown,
That dance and prance it up and down,
There’s none like Nancy Dawson.
Her easy mien, her shape so neat,
She foots, she trips, she looks so sweet,
Her every motion’s so complete,
I die for Nancy Dawson.*

It was recorded that Nancy danced the hornpipe for the *Beggar’s Opera*, although at the time “hornpipes” and “jigs” were likely to be used as generic terms to describe a solo dance. The tune Nancy actually danced to was not in duple-time but in 6/8, and is well-known even to us today, although when she first started dancing to it, it was a country dance tune with the rather earthy title of “Piss on the Grass.” The melody was first published under that title around 1744 in *Walsh’s Caledonian Country Dances*, presumably indicating Scottish origins. However, the title was soon recast as “Nancy Dawson’s Hornpipe,” by which it appears in many published collections and fiddlers’ manuscripts, although it is best known to us today as the melody for the children’s rhyme “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush” and the Yuletide song “I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In.” At a later period Thompson published other airs used by Miss Dawson, under the titles “Miss Dawson’s New Hornpipe” and “Miss Dawson’s Fancy,” but none attained

the popularity of the original “hornpipe” bearing her name. American appearances of the tune may be found in a number of manuscripts, including Giles Gibbs’ wife manuscript made in New Windsor, Connecticut, in 1777. Greenland, New Hampshire, native Clement Weeks copied directions for a dance to the tune in his 1783 manuscript collection of dances.

Nancy died May 27, 1767, and was buried in the churchyard of St. George’s-in-the-Fields, and a verse from the famous song about her was cut into her tombstone. The story goes that the Vicar did not approve, however, and had part of it removed, leaving only the stark phrase “Here lies Nancy Dawson” that begs for the completing couplet.

Emmerson (*Rantin’ Pipe and Trembling String*, 1971) explains that toward the end of the 18th century a genre of tunes gained popularity as vehicles for stage hornpipes “performed by the numerous ent’racte dancers then so much in fashion.” The name of the next hornpipe derives in all probability from the dancer for whom it was composed, Robert Aldridge, whom Chambers describes as “a famous pantomimist and dancing master.” A doggerel poem in *Gentleman’s Magazine* (January, 1772) describes him as “a dancer of ease.” The Irish-born Aldridge was a familiar performer in the theaters of London and Dublin in the 1760s and 1770s, and even seems to have resided in Edinburgh for a time at the end of the 1770s, where he is recorded to have co-founded the Boar Club (a popular gentlemen’s club, where porcine terminology and nicknames were used in honor of the landlord, Mr. Hogg). His Edinburgh connections are reinforced by the several notations that tunes were “danc’d by Aldridge” in Alexander “King” McGlashan’s 1781 *Collection of Scots Measures, Hornpipes, Jigs, Allemands, etc.* Tunes bearing Aldridge’s name can be found in several other 18th and 19th century Scottish collections, and even in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection/Cole’s 1000 Fiddle Tunes*.

Dancers sometimes went to great lengths to display their skill to audiences. As noted in a previous issue, John Durang and others performed “hornpipes” while riding bareback on a horse circling around a ring, the centrifugal force helping them maintain balance. Another oddly famous dancer of the same era was a man named Richer, who is said to have had some celebrity during his heyday. Richer was a rope and circus dancer on the popular stage at a time when the character-based (usually nautical) solo hornpipe was in vogue. William Hazlett, in his essay “The Indian Juglers” from *Table Talk* (1828), wrote:

It is a great many years since I saw Richer, the famous rope-dancer, perform at Sadler’s Wells. He was matchless in his art, and added to his extraordinary skill exquisite ease, and unaffected natural grace. I was at that time employed in copying a half-length picture of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s; and it put me out of conceit with it. How ill this part was made out in the drawing! How heavy, how slovenly this other was painted! I could not help saying to myself, “If the rope-dancer had performed his task in this manner, leaving so many gaps and botches in his work, he would have broke his neck long ago; I should never have seen that vigorous elasticity of nerve and precision of movement!” – Is it then so easy an undertaking (comparatively) to dance on a tight-rope? Let any one, who thinks so, get up and try.

The tune that bears Richer’s name (sometimes given as “Riker”) dates to around 1798 and has a first strain that hints at the more famous “Rickett’s Hornpipe.” It survives in *Ryan’s/Cole’s* and in O’Neill’s *Waifs and Strays of Gaelic Melody*.

It was a mark of status of the 18th and 19th centuries to elevate a performer by inserting an honorific in front of their names — Miss, Mister, and Mrs. not being in use for the common individual — upgraded perhaps by the added flair of a Continental appellation, such as Madame or Monsieur. Madame del Caro, whose first name was Maria, was a famous stage dancer of the late 18th, early 19th centuries, who is credited in ballet circles with being one of the first to wear slippers made expressly for dancing. The tune that bears her name was the first published composition of a very young John Field (1782-1837), an Irish pianist and composer and a pupil of Clementi, who spent much of his mature life working in Russia. “Del Caro’s Hornpipe” was written when he was aged fifteen and was published by London publisher Broderip in 1797 (as “Del Caro’s Hornpipe with Variations”). It entered fiddling tradition in England and can be found in the William Mittell (1799) and Joseph Kershaw manuscripts (Kershaw was a fiddle player who lived in the remote area of Slackcote, Saddleworth, North West England, who compiled his manuscript from 1820 onwards).

The great Scottish strathspey composer William Marshall (1748-1833) re-named one of his tunes for Madam(e) Frederick, a celebrated dancer of the Edinburgh Opera House who often danced at Gordon Castle, where Marshall was employed. His first title had been “The Recovery” (sometimes “The Royal Recovery”) but because it was Madam Frederick’s favorite tune to dance to, he later changed the title in her honor. Emmerson (1972) says the danseuse had been appearing at the Edinburgh Theatre Royal in 1797 dancing to one of Marshall’s strathspeys, and suggests that it was the one called after her. “The Recovery” was first published by the Gows in 1791 (*2nd Repository*) — with no credit to Marshall — but appears first with the “Madam Frederick” title in Abraham Mackintosh’s *2nd Collection*. In Robert Petrie’s *2nd Collection* it appears under the title “Miss Rose, Blackhall,” illustrating how fluid both copyright and titles could be in those days.



John Field

Dick Sands (1840-1900) was a celebrated stage performer of clog and step dancing in the United States during the mid-to-latter half of the 19th century. Although he was a native of Berstal, Yorkshire, England, part of his act was to do "Irish character" performances and sing in dialect. He first appeared on stage in January, 1859, with Bryant's Minstrels in New York. A publication by J.F. Finn (New York, 1879/1880) bears his name: *Dick Sands' Irish Jig, Clog and Dance Book*, being "a history of the personal, political and professional sentiments and peregrinations of Dick Sands with complete and practical instructions in the art of clog-dancing." It was the first tutor for clog dancing to be published. The tune that bears his name was printed by Howe in the 1860s and reprinted by Captain Francis O'Neill in his *Dance Music of Ireland* (1907), perhaps because of the connection with the Irish stage character. There is no evidence to suspect it is an Irish tune, however, and rather more that it is American in origin, as Howe himself picked it up from a musician named Jimmy Norton, the "Boss Jig Player," whose heyday was in the mid-19th century and who was probably a bandleader or principal soloist in the Massachusetts area.

"Big John McNeil" (also MacNeil, McNeill, MacNeill) was the hot reel to learn a few decades ago in contra dance circles, well worth the effort of nailing the "A" notes with the pinky finger in the coarse part for fluid bowing. We thought then it was vaguely Canadian, and, indeed it has long been popular with Canadian fiddlers, especially by the influential "Down-East" recordings of Graham Townsend, Ward Allen, and Don Messer (who recorded it in 1942). Ken Perlman (1996) notes that it is a well-known tune on Prince Edward Island, and a favorite vehicle for stepdancing in Prince County, PEI, on the eastern part of the island. Cyrill Stinnet, a fiddler who epitomized the "North Missouri Hornpipe Style" of fiddling learned it along with other Canadian favorites apparently from listening to Canadian fiddlers on radio broadcasts that reached down to his state. Irish fiddlers have their version of the tune as well. "Lord Ramsay's Reel" is a closely related Irish adaptation, while Donegal names for the melody include "Betty's Fancy" and "John McNeilis" (the latter is a Donegal adaptation of the name McNeil). "Big John" is Scottish, though, composed by the brilliant fiddler Peter Milne (1824-1908), one of the self-styled "Strathspey King" J. Scott Skinner's teachers and early playing

Nancy Dawson's Hornpipe

From an 18th c. publication by Walsh & Thompson, London.

The musical notation for "Nancy Dawson's Hornpipe" is presented in three staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 6/8. The melody is written in treble clef. The first staff contains the first six measures, the second staff contains the next six measures, and the third staff contains the final six measures, ending with a repeat sign.

Aldridge's Hornpipe

Kerr's Merry Melodies, vol. II (c. 1886)

The musical notation for "Aldridge's Hornpipe" is presented in three staves. The key signature is two sharps (D major), and the time signature is 2/4. The melody is written in treble clef. The first staff contains the first six measures, the second staff contains the next six measures, and the third staff contains the final six measures, ending with a repeat sign.

partners, although the appellation "Big" seems to have been a Canadian addition. Milne earned his living playing the theatre circuit until his opium addiction (he abused the opiate laudanum, originally medically prescribed for rheumatism) reduced him to busking on ferry-boats crossing the Firth of Forth. He died in unpleasant circumstances in a mental institution, but not before composing over two score excellent melodies that survive and meanwhile astounding his contemporaries with his improvisational skills. Skinner himself wrote a tune honoring the dancer, called "John McNeill's Highland Fling." It is sometimes overlooked that, in addition to being a renowned fiddler and composer, Skinner was a dancing master in his youth, working first in the Strathdon area as a dancing teacher and even giving instruction on Queen Victoria's Highland estate. In 1862 at a Highland Gathering at Bray near Dublin he won several prizes for dancing, including first prize for the Highland Fling where he beat the famous dancer, John McNeil of Edinburgh, so perhaps his composition was something of a consolation for their relationship. McNeil had a modest but solid claim to fame as a dancer by the end of the 19th century. Donald R. Mackenzie, Professor of Dancing, Stirling, wrote in 1910 that some of the best Highland step-dancers of his time were John MacNeil and William MacLennan (a dancer, but better known today for his reputation as a premier Great Highland Bagpiper and composer of pipe tunes), saying: "The characteristic dancing styles of these two gentlemen were truly Highland, artistic, and without any affectation." Mackenzie admired them enough to describe some of their reel steps, Highland Fling and Claymore Sword dance steps in his book *National Dances of Scotland*.

Some dancers live on in fiddle literature who have little or no claim to fame whatsoever, but who have been remembered, if only locally, simply for the joy they took in their exercise. When the Donegal band Altan burst on the scene some twenty years ago one of their first "hit" tunes was "Dinkie Dorrian's," often called simply "Dinkie's." It was a great tune and much emulated, becoming a staple of the Irish session scene in the following years. "Dinkie's" was composed and locally popularized by Donegal fiddler Francie Dearg Byrne of Cashel, Kilcar, southwest Donegal, in honor of a friend, Hughie "Dinkie" Dorrian. Dorrian was from nearby Killibegs and was, according to Donegal fiddle researcher Caoimhin



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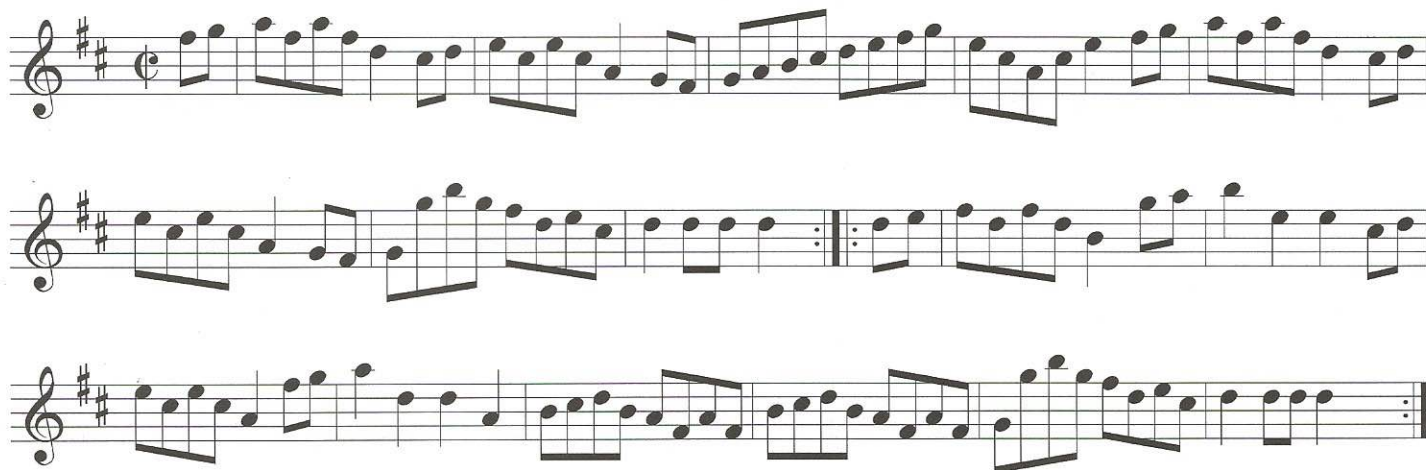
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Mac Aoidh, a gaelic footballer and regionally renowned step dancer (although sometimes he is identified as a butcher-fiddler). Supposedly this was Dorrian's favorite tune to step dance to. Francie Dearg (*dearg* is Irish Gaelic for red-haired) had a brother, Mickey Ban (*ban* = fair-haired), who also played the tune. Paul Cranford notes that the tune was introduced to Cape Breton fiddlers by visiting Irish fiddler Dermot McLaughlin, of Derry, who learned it directly from Byrne.

Richer's Hornpipe

Wilson's Companion to the Ballroom (1816)



Dick Sands' Hornpipe

*O'Neill's Dance Music
of Ireland (1907)*

Musical notation for Dick Sands' Hornpipe, consisting of three staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The first staff contains two measures with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3'. The second staff contains two measures with a repeat sign. The third staff contains four measures with triplets of eighth notes marked with '3'.

Big John McNeil

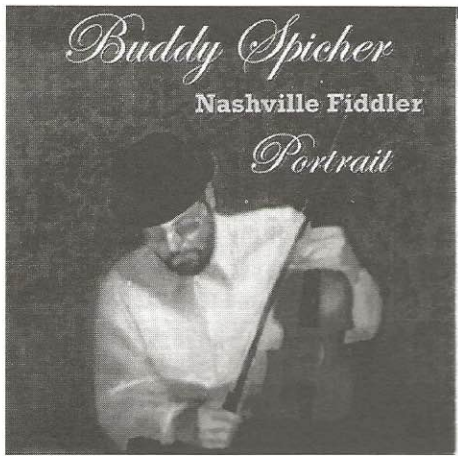
*Composed by Peter Milne (d. 1908)
(without the "Big" in the title)*

Musical notation for Big John McNeil, consisting of three staves. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C). The first staff contains two measures. The second staff contains two measures with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3'. The third staff contains two measures with first and second endings marked '1.' and '2.'.

Dinkie's

*Also "Dinkie Dorrian's";
arrangement by Juergen Gier*

Musical notation for Dinkie's, consisting of three staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The first staff contains two measures with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '2'. The second staff contains two measures with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3'. The third staff contains two measures with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3'.



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The last tune is a relatively modern composition by musician and caller Dudley Laufman, of Canterbury, New Hampshire, in memory of a young dancer aged seventeen who lived in Ringe, N.H. Laufman explains that Towle loved to dance, was a regular at local dances and enjoyed it so much he sometimes traveled distances to attend others. Before he tragically succumbed to leukemia he mentioned that he would like to have a dance held at his memorial service, and soon after his death Laufman and 100 others held a dance in his memory at a farmhouse converted into a temporary

ballroom in Dublin, New Hampshire. Donna Hebert notes that the tune was used in New England for the contra dance Market Lass.

[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/FChomepage/htm>). When not researching tunes, he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions.]

Glenn Towle

By Dudley Laufman

