

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Stranger in Paradise

As the second son of a Scottish baronet, William Drummond Stewart's future was somewhat limited. Entailed estates such as those of his father, Sir George Stewart, 17th Laird of Grandtully, 5th Baronet of Murthly and of Blair, went to the eldest son, with younger siblings required to subsist on the relatively small sums generally allotted to them, or to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Some second and third sons entered the clergy, a few went into politics, but most sought advancement through service in the navy and army. So it was with the teenage William, who prevailed upon his father to purchase him entry into the officer corps in the form of a cornetcy in the 6th Dragoon Guards, a heavy cavalry unit. A cornet was equivalent to an ensign, or junior lieutenant, and the lowest-ranked officer in the army. It was an *entrée*, however, and William showed aptitude and worked hard at conditioning himself after his appointment was confirmed on April 15, 1813, when he was age seventeen.

England needed soldiers at the time, for it had been at war with Napoleonic France off and on for more than a decade, and the armed forces were a socially-sanctioned, honorable and even fashionable place for a young man to be. It was, after all, the age of Beau Brummell and the dandies of Regency fashion, and, far from being austere, the army seemed to tolerate a rather extravagant expression in officers' dress uniform, particularly in cavalry units. The hussars, dragoons, lancers, and other troops were havens of fashion whose officers sported uniforms that exalted in gold braid, epaulettes, buttons, and dashing colors. In fact, young Cornet William Drummond Stewart only spent six months with the dragoons before again persuading his father to upgrade his prospects by purchasing for him a lieutenantcy in the 15th King's Hussars, a first class light-cavalry unit with considerable cachet, fashionable in their black braided jackets and bearskins with the scarlet plume. In February, 1814, the new lieutenant joined the regiment in Spain, fighting with Wellington in the Peninsular Campaign, although by the time Stewart got there the French were in retreat and he saw only a few months' hard action before Napoleon capitulated.

Napoleon escaped from his island exile on Elba the next year, and rallied his veterans and new recruits for the culminating battle of Waterloo. Stewart was with the 15th during the Waterloo campaign, but apparently the troop did not participate in the great battle itself, in part, it is thought, because Wellington declined to rely on units whose cadre of fashionable officers had purchased their commissions. Still, Stewart and the 15th were well-regarded troops, and, as with every soldier involved in the several battles of the Waterloo campaign, he received a valued commemorative medal for his service from a grateful nation.

With the defeat of the French, the army inevitably downsized, and most officers and men were retired on half-pay. Anticipating this, in 1820, Stewart managed through his family connections (a



neighboring Scottish Lord) to secure a promotion to Captain just under the wire, which not only guaranteed more pay in retirement, but afforded him an important bump in prestige, especially in his later adventures.

The young, recently-discharged nobleman moved to London and took up the life of a Regency dandy, although if he had excesses, they were kept well-hidden. He went on the *de rigueur* Continental tour, although, perhaps untypical, he chose the countries of the eastern Mediterranean as his main itinerary, rather the northern route. He returned with a life-long admiration of eastern culture, and decorated the family estate with Persian carpets and other objects from the East. By that time his father had died and the primary residence of Murthly Castle, on the River Tay near Birnam, Perthshire, as well as the title of Baronet, went to William's older brother John, who built a new castle in the style of a Jacobean palace in 1827-32 (the interior of which was never fully completed, in part because John overextended himself financially). William returned to the family residence long enough to father a son by a servant maid, Christian Marie Battersby. The boy was born out of wedlock in 1831, and named William "Will" George Drummond Stewart, after his father and grandfather. Mother and baby were shipped away to Edinburgh; William never married her, nor did he even live with her or correspond with her. He did, however, perhaps atypically, prove responsible, for he set them up in a residence in the city and faithfully paid their living expenses over the years as well as for son Will's education. Later in life he formally recognized the boy as his heir.

America was on the Scottish mind at the time. Accounts of the American frontier were published, and the virtues of a land of opportunity, where egalitarian treatment and the chance of advancement and even fortune were extolled. For a young, landless ex-soldier, the lure of adventure in frontier America was powerful, and unique in the world. William Drummond Stewart heeded the call in 1832 (propelled by a serious argument with his brother) and made his way to St. Louis, Missouri, the jumping-off point for the lightly-explored wilderness of the Mountain Men, Native American tribes, danger and adventure. He brought letters of introduction to some of the more prominent citizens of the town, and arranged to accompany Robert Campbell on a pack trip to

the 1833 Horse Creek Rendezvous in the Green River Valley of Wyoming. Campbell (1804-1879), a native of County Tyrone, was to become one of the most famous Mountain Men himself, and a successful trader, explorer, and businessman, who, upon his death, was reputed to have assessed a fortune of 10 million dollars.

Stewart came well-equipped. He brought with him two state-of-the-art hunting rifles, fine equipment, good horses, and luxury items such as canned meats and sardines, plum pudding, preserved fruits, coffee, fine tobacco, cheeses, and a selection of brandies, whisky and wines. He dressed in trousers made of the Stewart family hunting plaid (green, royal blue, red, and yellow), fashioned by a London tailor, and was attended by servants. Nothing like it had been seen on the frontier, and his appearance was the source of much astonishment and amusement among both the white trappers and Indians. After a long journey through the wilderness, Stewart arrived at the Rendezvous and met the likes of such legendary figures as Jim Bridger, Benjamin Bonneville, and Thomas Fitzpatrick. Eventually Stewart's journeys led him to the Big Horn Mountains and down to Taos, New Mexico, where he wintered, and to the Ham's Fork, Green River, Rendezvous the next year. He trekked to the Pacific Ocean at Fort Vancouver, Washington. In 1835 he participated in yet another Rendezvous at the mouth of the New Fork River on the Green, and finally returned to St. Louis.

There he found his finances depleted, and, knowing he must do something to stave off debt, he journeyed to New Orleans, where he successfully speculated in the cotton trade and wintered in Cuba; then back to the frontier. He repeated this round trip again the next winter. On his 1837 return trip Stewart hired a promising American artist whom he met in New Orleans, Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874), to accompany him into the wild and to produce sketches and watercolors of the journey. The products of this helped to secure both artist and employer's reputation in Europe and America, for Miller's work was startling and bold, and the subject matter fascinating. His final paintings, transferred to large canvases, themselves helped to approximate the vastness of the frontier for an eager audience.

Stewart may have stayed in America, for he obviously quite enjoyed his life there, save that, in 1838, his brother John died, childless. Thus William found himself the inheritor not only of the family estates, but the title of 7th Baronet of Murthly as well. He returned to Scotland to claim his inheritance, and there he took delivery of Miller's finished paintings, masterworks of Indian life, mountain men, Rendezvous, and frontier scenes, much admired today for their authenticity and detail. These large works he displayed at the Murthly estate. Miller stayed on as artist-in-residence at the castle, producing more oils from the sketches and watercolors of the trip. Also accompanying Stewart were two members of the Sioux tribe, who were quartered in outbuildings on the grounds, and the beginnings of a herd of American bison, or Buffalo. [The animals were spied by a rather surprised Queen Victoria, on her honeymoon with Prince Albert in Scotland, who remarked in her diary on seeing "those strange hump-backed creatures from America." The Indians were cautiously received by the Perthshire neighbors of Murthly, until they made a display through the quiet streets of Dunkeld with a rowboat to which they had attached wheels, whooping and screaming through the town,

in traditional costume, of course. Some accounts have them harnessing two of the buffalo to Stewart's carriage, driving drunkenly at great speed through the nearby town of Perth.]

At this point we have a picture of a resourceful, energetic, bold, curious, cosmopolitan, handsome, rugged, reliable individual who was demonstrably valorous, vigorous, and intelligent. He had come into what remained of the family wealth and estates, and had ascended to the titled nobility of his country. By all measures he had lived a heroic and successful life. However, there is another dimension to the man, which makes these accomplishments at once more complicated and profound. According to William Benemann, in his book *Men in Eden*, and implied in Stewart's own writing, the Baronet had a homosexual orientation, and, at least for a portion of his life, found relief from Victorian repression and in what probably was a homosexual lifestyle.

In fact, not only had he returned to Scotland in 1839 with mementos, Native Americans, a painter, and bison in tow, but Sir William had also brought his partner Antoine Clement, a hunter whom he had met at one of the Rendezvous, and who was to remain with Stewart for a decade. Stewart tried to be as discreet as he could, and explained Clement's presence by at first referring to him as his valet, then as his footman (butler). Clement was restless and unhappy in Scotland, however, with the result that the couple spent long months abroad traveling, including a trip to the Middle East.

The Baronet had always planned to return to America, though, even as it took him longer than he planned to put his affairs in order. He departed in 1843 upon his second great sojourn to the American frontier, returning with Clement and the two Indians (much to the relief of Dunkeld, no doubt). After spending some time in the Eastern states corresponding and visiting friends (and commissioning another two paintings from Miller), Stewart headed West. The great Rendezvous of the Mountain Men were already a thing of the past—the last one had been held in 1840—but Stewart conceived to host one more, invitation-only, gathering. To this end he assembled a company that included a few seasoned veterans of the mountains, such as William Sublette and Antoine Clement, but also a physician, four botanists, and thirty or more "young gentlemen" along with their servants. In addition, another thirty or thirty-five young men were brought along as hired hands, or general help. On the journey into the wild, the inexperience of many of the young men began to tell, and tensions arose, but by the first part of August, Stewart's group reached their destination—a lake in the Wind River Range where they were joined by a group of thirty to forty Shoshone Indians.

Stewart apparently conceived that this gathering of young gentlemen in the wilderness would be a grand party of sorts, and he had contrived to bring in the baggage train all manner of Renaissance costumes, goods, and accoutrements; the lake camp became, as Benemann writes, a "rollicking medieval market faire magically transported to the American West," complete with pennants and banners hanging from colorful tents. It seems to have been a riotous event, and it did not go unobserved. Friedrich Armand Strubberg, a German who had spent several years hunting and trapping in the West, saw the smoke from the lake camp and rode with his small party to investigate. Climbing a nearby butte to cautiously

overlook the terrain, he was stunned to spy the revelry going on below. After announcing himself and his companions with some gunshots into the air, he galloped below, to find:

Many young dandies from the [East and from Europe who] had followed their fantasies in the choice of their clothing and appeared in the old chivalrous costumes with large plumed hats with rolled-up brims, jerkins with slit sleeves, leather leggings, tall riding boots with enormous spurs, large gauntlets, and they had girded on their ancestral swords; others had preferred the old Spanish costume and had draped themselves with broad violet-blue and May-green velvet greatcoats, while the head of an Italian brigand captain with red cock's feathers held their long perfumed locks, and their wide shirt collar fell over their shoulders. Open sleeves showed the fine linen of the shirts, wide white baggy breeches were forced by tight red bindings into long boots, on which large-wheeled spurs clinked, and a pair of long, silver-laid, beautifully decorated pistols alongside a dagger decorated their belts. Yet others had read [James Fenimore] Cooper and chosen his heroes as a model: clothed in leather from head to foot, with wide-brimmed grey hats, a long, heavy hunting knife at the side and with an enormous rifle, they stood there and appeared to envy me as their ideal in my worn-out clothes stiff with blood, while their suits, barely come from the hands of the tailor, were not yet dirtied by any spots. Still others had remained true to the appearance of the gentleman from Broadway in New York, replacing the top hat with a wide-brimmed one, and went around the fire in comfortable slippers, smoking their Havana cigars.

[quoted in Benemann, p. 13]

Nothing like it had ever been seen in the West, and it did not end well. Stewart's party split into two rancorous factions following some sort of incident, and they broke camp to head back to St. Louis, each group traveling parallel but at a distance from the other, until they reached the city. What happened to cause the split was never recorded, but the result was that it seemed to drive Stewart home, as he rather hastily made his way back to Scotland, never to return to America.

Compared to his early life, Stewart's remaining years (he died in 1871 of pneumonia) seem quiet, perhaps lonely, and depressed. He reestablished connection with his son and heir, William George Drummond Stewart, who like his father sought a career in the military. He was rather more successful than his father as a soldier, and was renowned for his bravery and coolness under fire as an officer with the 93rd Highlanders in the Crimean War. The young man won England's highest military honor, the Victoria Cross, in 1857 for bravery during the Indian Mutiny when he led a charge against deadly artillery. Almost incomprehensibly, William George predeceased his father when he attempted a sword-swallowing trick that went tragically awry. He died a few days afterwards of internal injuries.

The reel "Murthly Castle" is an able composition by Aberdeenshire fiddler and composer Alexander Walker, whose patron and employer was Sir Charles Forbes of Newe. Walker worked as a gardener on the Forbes estates, but many of his tunes were written for visitors to Castle Newe or Forbes' family connections. What, if any, association Sir Charles and Sir William Drummond Stewart may have had is unknown—Walker's tunes generally were composed for people and places within the confines of Aberdeenshire, and Murthly is in Perthshire. However, like Stewart, Walker was drawn to America, and emigrated there a few years after publishing his collection in 1866. The fiddler-composer is thought to have settled in the Williamstown, Mass., area, where he maintained a prosperous farm.

References:

William Benemann, *Men in Eden: William Drummond Stewart and Same-Sex Desire in the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade*. University of Nebraska Press. 2012.

[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.]

Murthly Castle

reel

Alexander Walker