

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

And, Off We Go...

One of the first hornpipes I learned, as did many others I'm sure, was "Off to California," sometimes called "Going to California." In my case, I picked it up by ear from New York's Fennig's All Stars album *Saturday Night in the Provinces*, a wonderful source for contra dance music that still sounds fresh and energetic even after some twenty-five years — I must have learned every tune on the album back then, I was so excited. The hornpipe became rather overplayed to my ear and I dropped it from my active repertoire after a few years, and I seldom heard it in recent times, save at beginners' sessions. It is a classic piece of the repertoire, however, and I had occasion to resurrect it in my own playing when I recently thought to teach it to a small group of novices at a local "slow session" as one of their first introductions to hornpipes. As I like to be able to impart something worthwhile, when I can, regarding the context of the music, I gathered my notes about the hornpipe and had a pleasant time exploring the tune and its relatives, discovering that the rather simple but memorable melody had interesting connections between genres of traditional music as well as being a good illustration of "generations" of a tune. In fact, it's a great example of how a good melody fosters imitation and innovation over time, and a clear example of what typically constitutes a "tune family," even out to distant cousins.

One way to approach tune exploration is to investigate the question of provenance. Where did the tune come from, and where did it originate? To do this one researches the appearance of the melody in print and aural recording sources. The first printed source I had seen (though certainly not the oldest) — probably right around the time I was digesting the Fennig's album — was Robin Williamson's *English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish Fiddle Tunes* (Oak, 1976), where it is listed as an Irish hornpipe. There's certainly a strong Irish connection in print, beginning with Francis O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* (1903), in Allan's *Irish Fiddler* (c. 1920s where it's given as "Humours of California"), and much more recently Michael Tubridy's *Irish Traditional Music* (1999). There's also no doubt the tune has long been in the Irish aural repertoire, for it was early recorded on 78 RPM discs by button accordion player Michael J. Grogan in 1931 and tin whistle player Peter Guinan in 1937. There apparently are no printed Irish sources of the tune prior to O'Neill, although O'Neill also included other versions of the melody in his 1903 collection. One of these is called "Whiskey, You're the Devil," a title that has similarities to the name the hornpipe appears under in Frank Roche's 1927 Irish collection where it's given as "Whiskey in the Jar" (vol. 2, No. 217). When tunes appear under multiple titles in the same collection, or collections from the same era, it's obvious they have been in tradition for some time, and there's every reason to suspect "Off to California" (by whatever name) was in Irish repertoire for many years, and possibly prior to O'Neill.

Earlier sources suggest an English provenance for the melody. It was printed in a few of the Kerr collections (*Merry Melodies* and *Collection of Reels and Strathspeys*) dating to approximately the

1870s. Although it is a Scottish publication, Kerr's includes northern English along with Low- and Highland Scots melodies in their various volumes. The earliest I can find the tune, however, is in the c. 1847 music manuscript book of Ellis Knowles, a very good amateur fiddler from Radcliffe, Lancashire, northwest England, where it is simply listed as "A Clog Dance," just as it was listed in the Kerr volume some thirty years later. Musicians' manuscript books are important as they can give some general indication of the popularity and dissemination of melodies — if an amateur or semi-professional fiddler found a tune important enough to record so as to be able to call on it later, then it probably had some status and currency among the musical community of his or her region at the time. One might hypothesize from its inclusion in Knowles' manuscript that the tune later known as "Off to California" was current in his area of England in the early 19th century as an accompaniment for a clog dance, although one would like to find the hypothesis corroborated by its inclusion in other music manuscript books of the era.

What about the title? When did the generically titled Kershaw/Kerr "clog dance" acquire a name, and why mention California? Chief O'Neill may again provide the answer in his remark about the related tune "Far from Home"; both have second parts that begin nearly identically, and both are in AABA form (which, by the way, is a common song ballad form), and they are both sometimes confused with one another. O'Neill himself learned much of his music as a boy in County Cork in the middle of the 19th century, and much more from his contacts in Chicago's Irish Music Club from the latter part of the century on, but he learned "Far from Home" from neither experience. Prior to landing in Chicago and before he began his career as a police patrolman (on his way to becoming Chief of Police of the city), O'Neill was a world traveler. He left home at age sixteen and took to sea, voyaging even to the Pacific South Seas (where he was captured and held by pirates for a time) and finally to North America. At age nineteen, in the 1870s, he found employment in California's San Joaquin Valley, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada range, herding sheep with a companion, and it was from his co-worker's whistling that O'Neill first heard "Far from Home," a title which may certainly have resonated with the young Irishman in a foreign land, if it did not originate with him. The California connection is there, albeit tenuous — one tune was learned in the state, and a melody with similar melodic material names it in the title. One might speculate that the "Going/Off to California" title had to do with lure of the California Gold Rush of 1849, or, if a later title, with the lure of prime land in a temperate climate. Still, the earliest appearance of both tunes in the Irish genre, and both titles, occurs in O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* (1903), and it is therefore easy to see why many believe the melody to be Irish in origin.

"Far from Home," by the way, is sometimes assigned a Shetland provenance, although there's little evidence to support the claim. It is played by Shetland fiddlers, to be sure, and even appears under "Scotticized" titles such as "Far frae Hame" and such, but it appears to have no intrinsic history on those islands, and instead was probably learned just as most had it, from fiddlers whose source was O'Neill. Irish musician Laurence Nugent plays "Far from Home" but calls it "The Windy Gap," by which title the Chieftains recorded it (playing with the Kilfenora Ceili Band) on their recent album *Water from the Well*.

As is typical with hornpipes, if they've been around long enough, the rhythm invariably gets straightened out, and reel-time versions appear in the repertoire. "Fireman's Reel" and "Portsmouth Hornpipe" are both New England variants that pre-date O'Neill, and are nearly note-for-note the same as "Off to California." The former tune has long had regional association in New England with the dance Lady Walpole's Reel. The melody (which in its "Portsmouth" incarnation may have been named for Portsmouth, New Hampshire) was recorded on 78 RPM in 1926 by Norway, Maine, fiddler Mellie Dunham, who became a favorite of automobile magnate Henry Ford and his square dance revival movement. It appears on Dunham's record under the title "Lady of the Lake," which is the name of the dance that he played it for, and, as often happens with regional dance tunes, the name of the dance and the accompanying melody became interchangeable. In fact, several variants in both hornpipe and reel rhythm appear in the Boston-published *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* (1883), later Cole's *1000 Fiddle Tunes*, the former perhaps Dunham's source for "Portsmouth Hornpipe"/"Lady of the Lake" or perhaps it was current in aural repertoire in Maine when he learned it. Ira Ford's reel "Old Towser" (probably collected in Missouri) in his *Traditional Music in America* (1940) is largely the same melody, as is Samuel Bayard's south-western Pennsylvania version called "Buttermilk and Cider," which he said was played in the region as both a hornpipe and a reel.

Generational aspects of the core melody surface in the repertoire when a whole or part strain is married to a different one, as we've already seen with "Far from Home," producing a related melody that is "once removed." Similarly, Ryan's "Silver Cluster Reel" shares the A part of the "Off to California" tune with a different B part, a reel-time pairing that was repeated in Viola "Mom" Ruth's book of Western dance tunes, although under the slightly-altered title "Silver Cluster Cacti," which gives it a nice Southwest tinge (Ruth was a champion fiddler from Arizona in the 1940s). O'Neill's own "I'm Waiting for You," another hornpipe, similarly shares the first part of our tune family although with a completely new second part, as does Ryan's "You Bet" which has yet another second strain.

Another type of variation takes place with a change in meter. A 6/8 time version of the "Off to California" tune appears as "Belle of the Kitchen" (although there's a more famous, though unrelated, tune that goes by that name) in White's *Excelsior Collection* (p. 22). The publications under the White name, from the very late 19th century, appear to be derived from the Howe/Ryan/Cole publication stock, as many of the settings are identical.

So far, then, we have a seminal melody that may have originated in northern England in the early 19th century, that was quickly absorbed into different traditions, sometimes paired with different strains for the A part or the B part, played in both hornpipe and reel rhythms, and occasionally set in triple time. All in all, not unusual paths for a good melody in aural tradition, and all the preceding are good examples of traditional "straying" from the core melody. If one strays a bit farther, however, we start to approach the distant relationships that surprise and confound — those tunes that one musician will swear is a cognate version of another, while a colleague insists they are two separate and distinct melodies with little in common.



*Possum
Up a Gum
Stump, by
Roger McKay*

Taking a look at "Possum Up a Gum Stump" ("Coonie in the Hollow") one finds on the surface a different melody in both parts. Clearly, the B part with its syncopations in the first, third, and fifth measures is an entirely different strain than the usual "Off to California" B part, but the first strain, while clearly different, has unmistakable similarities. First, the tune is, again, in AABA form — the end of the second part corresponds to the end of the first part — similar to "Off to California." Second, the first part of both tunes harmonizes nearly the same — transposing "Possum" to the key of G helps to confirm that the chord structures in both parts are strikingly similar. Finally, they have the same "melodic contour." If one were to draw a continuous line along the tops of the notes one would see rises and falls over the bar, similar to the outline of distant mountains on the horizon. Comparing the contours of both "Possum" and "Off to California" results in the same view; the same mountain vista is revealed.

Confirming evidence of relatedness is harder to come by. Historically, Mark Wilson says the tune was mentioned in chronicles before the year 1830, and it was in blackface minstrel repertory in the next decade, when it became widely and wildly popular. In fact, notes to *Possum Up a Gum Stump*, a collection of Alabama fiddlers (Alabama Traditions), says the tune "probably originated among black musicians on southern plantations and was spread across the country by blackface minstrels," a generalization that can be (and has been) made of many minstrel-era songs. An American broadside print from around the year 1850 identifies it as a "Black Shaker Song," and is viewable at the American Memory website sponsored by the Library of Congress. Another version appears in the nowadays unfortunately-named *Nigga Songster* of 1850, a collection of songs from the Christy Minstrels, one of the most famous of the mid-19th century troupes, where it is entitled "Opposum Up a Gum Tree," with words beginning:

Opossum up a gum tree, His tail has body follow,
Raccoon quickly him see, Looking out ob hollow.

Long Island genre painter William Sydney Mount, an accomplished amateur fiddler, learned the tune from his brother Nelson, a music teacher and dancing instructor who had spent some time plying his trade in Georgia in the 1840s.

Thomas Tally's *Negro Folk Rhymes* (reprinted 1991) gives a similar set of dialect words, collected from both black and white sources, and the song appears (sometimes with different animals "up the gum stump," such as a rabbit) in many collections of both black and white folk songs, including those of Brown, Randolph, White, the Lomaxes, Scarborough, and others. Among the earliest sound recordings of the melody was that of fiddler Hiter Colvin, who recorded it for Victor in 1930 (reissued on County CO-CD-3507, *Echoes of the Ozarks, Vol. 2*). So clearly, the tune/song has a long pedigree in the United States, and was widely known from North to South, East to West. Arguably, the minstrel song/breakdown "Possum" has had a longer history in the United States than the hornpipe/clog "Off to California" has had in Britain and Ireland.

How does "Possum Up a Gum Stump" tie in with "Off to California?" It's not known for sure, save for speculation. It may be that the melodies simply developed independently, the similarities being nothing more than coincidence. If they are related — distant cousins in our tune family — then other possibilities include a scenario in which melodic material from northern England was transported to southern America (common enough) in the very early 19th century, and was transformed on the plantation over the next few decades before finding fame and wide dissemination as a minstrel song. Or, significantly less likely, the tune had plantation origins and was transported to England by touring minstrel troupes, whereupon melodic material was transformed into a vehicle for clog-dancing.

[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.]

Off to California

The musical notation for "Off to California" consists of three staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The melody is written in treble clef. The first staff contains the first eight measures, the second staff contains the next eight measures, and the third staff contains the final eight measures, ending with a double bar line and repeat dots. The melody is characterized by eighth-note patterns and a mix of quarter and eighth notes.

Fireman's Reel

The musical notation for "Fireman's Reel" consists of three staves of music in D major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. The melody is written in treble clef. The first staff contains the first eight measures, the second staff contains the next eight measures, and the third staff contains the final eight measures, ending with a double bar line and repeat dots. The melody features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure of the second staff and another triplet in the second measure of the third staff.

Silver Cluster

Musical score for 'Silver Cluster' in 2/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 2/4 time signature. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3' above it. The melody is characterized by rapid sixteenth-note passages and eighth-note runs.

Far from Home

Musical score for 'Far from Home' in 2/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is primarily composed of quarter and eighth notes, with some dotted rhythms. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Possum Up a Gum Stump

Musical score for 'Possum Up a Gum Stump' in 2/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is highly rhythmic, featuring many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. Measure numbers 6 and 12 are indicated at the start of the second and third staves, respectively. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.