

A Survey of Fiddling on Prince Edward Island

by Jim Hornby

Fiddling on Prince Edward Island can be dated with some degree of probability back to the early 1770s. While French settlement began half a century earlier in 1720, I have as yet found no suggestion of musical life until 1770. In that year an early Island diarist, William Drummond, recorded on June 4th: "At 9 went to another house where the French were convened, had a dance and spent the evening in jollity." But this doesn't say much because a) the music may have been purely vocal, and b) there is no indication of who provided it: Malpeque, he notes, was home to "Scotch, Irish and French families."

An oral tradition indicates that the Scots, the largest ethnic and the largest fiddling group on the Island, brought out fiddlers on the *Alexander* in 1772. This is certainly plausible since Captain John Macdonald's 210 settlers were Catholic Highlanders from the Hebrides and West Highlands of Scotland, the areas where fiddling is most influenced by the Highland bagpipes. It is not surprising that the oldest local (or locally-named) fiddle tunes make use of the pipes' "double tonic" progression, typically based on the chords A and G.

Over the next century, many Scots, Irish, English and a smattering of other emigrants settled on the Island (whose name was nearly changed to "New Ireland" in 1780). While modified over time, and showing as elsewhere a range of individual preference, Island fiddling retains its Celtic roots and sound in the present. An organizational impetus was given in the mid-1970s with the formation of the PEI Fiddlers Society, which has focused on Scottish, Irish and Cape Breton tunes, and plays 2/4 marches and strathspeys as well as reels (the fiddlers' favorite) and jigs (the main Irish component).

John McGregor, an observer of the 1820s, wrote:

The amusements of the farmer and other inhabitants settled in different parts of the island, are much the same as they have been accustomed to before leaving the countries they came from. Dances on many occasions are common.

He is more specific in reference to the Highlanders:

Their dancing is at the very antipodes of our fashionable quadrilling; with them every muscle and limb is actively and rapidly engaged, and they often maintain the floor till one, whose strength of body and lungs is weaker than that of the others, yields to the fatigue, and sits down. They have always dances at their marriages, and also when the bride arrives at her lord's house. Christmas is also with them the season of making merry.

And further:

No Scottish settlement was complete without bagpipe music. But, as one traveller explains, "At their dances within doors, they, however, generally prefer the old Highland fiddler, or the young one who has learnt the same music, which is at all times played with the spirit and rapidity of which the Scotch reels and strathspeys are so eminently susceptible."

These observations provide a capsule of Scots dance music on the Island at this period, with reference to the use of pipes and fiddles, the playing of strathspeys and reels, and the dancing of the Scotch Reel to them. The martial athleticism of the Scotch Reel was also noted by one Edward Topham in Edinburgh in the 1780s; as late as 1839 a Presbyterian minister ruptured his Achilles tendon dancing the Scotch Reel at Governor Ready's New Year's Ball in Charlottetown.

McGregor's note about a dance "when the bride arrives as her lord's house" seems to refer to the Wedding Reel, another Scotch custom that has disappeared only since the early 1950s; the Wedding Reel was both the dance that led off the wedding reception and the tune played for it. There were several tunes called "the Wedding Reel" and in some places there were other special tunes played including a Wedding March in jigtime. The common use of *scordatura* tuning (AEAE) in playing the Wedding Reel (and other tunes) is another feature deriving from 18th century Scotland that is now rarely met with on the Island.

The fiddle was, and remains, overwhelmingly the most popular vehicle of folk-dance tunes on Prince Edward Island.

Other instruments used have been the Highland and (more rarely) Irish pipes, jew's harp, harmonica, mandolin, banjo, flute and concertina. Mouth music, commonly known as "jigging," provided tunes where no instrument was available.

It must be remembered that our ancestors liked to dance on almost any social occasion or the pretext of one. Today, for all practical purposes, the solo stepdance is the only remnant of the country dances of yore. Of course, the context is vastly different. Where once "the crowd" went to the house-party ready to dance until exhaustion, or dawn, set in, it now turns out to the local hall or school auditorium to sit and watch a variety program that inevitably includes one or more stepdancers dancing to a fiddler.

While the ultimate origin of stepdancing may be Irish, it was also a component of the Scotch Reel, the earliest dance recorded on the Island. The Reel of Tulloch and Gille Calum are two other popular Scots dances here before 1800. Also popular, but seemingly for a longer period, was the country dance "Sir Roger de Coverly" (later known as the "Virginia Reel"). Noted Island architect William Critchlow Harris made a number of references to this dance in his 1872-73 diary, including: "The finishing of these parties by dancing 'Sir Roger' I may say is another very good Charlotte Town custom." Elsewhere he identifies the tune used for this dance as the Irish jig "Nora Criona."

Harris also recorded his participation in quadrilles, round dances, mazourkas, polkas, schottisches, and eight-hand reels. Of these the Lancers (a quadrille variant) and the eight-hand reel survived to represent "old-time" dances in the present for those who can remember them, since country dances have been infrequent in the last 25 years.

The fiddler's repertoire was affected by changes in dance fashions, although some of the standard reels like "Devil Among the Tailors," "Miss MacLeod's Reel" and "Lord MacDonald's Reel" have long been popular — perhaps since the 1770s. I believe that strathspeys were the tunes most affected; the playing of a strathspey followed by a reel accompanied the dancing of a Scotch Reel, but with the possible exception of the schottische, none of the dances

that eclipsed the Scotch Reel's popularity could utilize a strathspey. Some strathspeys were speeded up to reel time, but it seems that most fell by the wayside until the 1970s, when they were brought back by the Fiddlers' Society as part of an expanded, mostly Scottish repertoire played in a concert or listening context.

Fiddling was also important in the worklife of pioneer days, notably as part of a "frolic." This was known elsewhere as a "bee," where neighbours and kin would gather for communal work such as stump-pulling, harvesting, barn-raising, and wool-milling ("waulking"). The work was followed by a hearty meal and a dance, as in this 19th century Island description:

Then, when, in the evening, the work was done, all gathered, glad and hearty, around the supper table. After supper the kitchen was cleared for a dance, and reels, Scotch and Irish, with jigs, reels, polkas and schottisches followed in succession to music furnished by the neighbourly fiddler, while in the intervals, songs and merriment prevailed until the back-log in the fireplace had burned low.

In lives of great intimacy and toil, fiddle music provided a welcome release in dance.

The importance of having a fiddler at social occasions was such that a supply of liquor was of only secondary importance. But this social prominence seems to have carried with it, in the eyes of many, a negative status for the musicians who provided the social service of fiddling. As well as dancing, drinking and fighting were prominent features of dances, and late hours were to be expected. These environmental facts had some important consequences for the fiddlers personally.

Firstly, the fiddler was given the choice of available liquor on the theory that he was best able to transmit his high spirits to the others. Playing alone with only your feet for accompaniment to a noisy and festive throng for hours is hard work; many fiddlers, like the one described by Island songmaker Larry Gorman, enjoyed the stimulus of alcohol:

His elbows all were greased with gin
And his heart and soul were warmed within;
He picked up the fiddle and the bow he drew
And the dancers like chain lightening flew.

This, combined with the effects of late nights, made it hard for an active fiddler to make a living as a farmer or fisherman. As a further result, many fiddlers did not want their sons to learn fiddling because they would always be "on call" whenever someone for miles around decided to have a party. As one old fiddler expressed the reasons his father had banned fiddling when he was young, "He didn't want me to see as many sunrises as he seen."

The most fundamental change since the Second World War is that fiddling now is performed in front of a seated audience rather than dancers. This has been a fairly gradual change, from the late-19th century fiddling contests held at outdoor picnics, to the coming of radio and television and the great changes in community and entertainment life seen over the past 50 years.

Inspired by the organization of Cape Breton fiddlers into an association in the 1970s many Island fiddlers (who have been inspired by Cape Breton fiddlers and composers for years) formed the Fiddlers Society in 1976. This action has given a great impetus to local fiddling, although the organization seems to have lost much of its early vitality and its attraction for the better players, and now concentrates on teaching note-reading to both young and old. Most of the better players learn readily by note as well as aurally. Through the society, the importance of note-literacy and printed music is emphasized for the next generation over the traditional learning "by ear." However, the popularity of cassettes for learning tunes may keep aural transmission of tunes alive.

Today, fiddling is a more visible part of Island culture than it has been in 30 years. However, aside from several "modern and old-time" dances and many local variety fund-raising concerts, there is little presentation of it on a regular basis. There is no Charlottetown folk club nor locally-produced radio program featuring old-time music. Fiddlers were given good television exposure on "Sounds

of the Island," a music variety program from CBC Charlottetown, but it was terminated after three seasons (1982-84) by CBC cutbacks.

There is a lot of fiddle music played, but it is mostly in private homes. Younger street-players may be found in the city on hot summer days. The Benevolent Irish Society began a series of Celtic concerts in April '85. The Fiddlers Society presents several annual concerts, most notably the Rollo Bay Festival of Scottish Fiddling presented by Souris-area fiddlers, the Chaissons, on the third weekend in July.



The non-competitive festival or concert format is now much preferred over the fiddling contest. Contests created a lot of animosity in the past and are now just about finished since few good players will participate.

There is clearly a substantial and probably growing Island audience for fiddle music, but the provincial population of 125,000 offers no economies of scale that would make it commercially viable.

But at least some appreciation is given to fiddlers for the power of their music and its prominence in our history, and with new generations of players developing, its future seems assured for the foreseeable future.

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