

Ontario: An Introduction

by Anne Lederman

Ontario is a large province with several quite distinct regions, historically and culturally. No one has undertaken comprehensive research into instrumental music in the province as a whole. Aside from the Ottawa Valley, which is represented in the present monograph by two very localized articles, there are largely Scottish pockets such as Glengarry County, French towns and regions to the north and southwest, Polish, Norwegian, Swedish, Mennonite, Irish and German areas, plus others, all of whom have maintained at least some aspects of their Old Country traditions and all of which deserve special treatment. The dominant pre-radio influences on fiddle music as a whole in Ontario seem to have been the British Isles traditions, including Irish, and the German Brass Band repertoire which contributed many of the polkas and waltzes. However, confirmation of the origins of much of the early and present-day repertoire awaits further research.

Most of the historical evidence of fiddling in Ontario comes from diaries and traveller's accounts of the 1800's, in which Scottish and Irish fiddlers are often mentioned. The National Library of Canada also has a manuscript from an Allen Ash, a fiddler, farmer and inventor who lived near Coburg, Ontario from about 1800-1870. It contains over 100 tunes, mostly marches, jigs and hornpipes of mixed Scottish, Irish and English origin. It is interesting to note that there are very few reels in this collection, a phenomenon which corresponds to other evidence about English Country Dance traditions and indicates that Allen Ash was probably a dance musician first and foremost. (It is often difficult to play reels, especially Scots-Irish tunes with their complicated ornamentation, quickly enough for dancing, whereas marches, hornpipes and jigs generally have fewer notes to the beat.)

However, fiddling in Ontario was irrevocably changed by the radio. George Wade and His Cornhuskers first hit the airwaves from Toronto in 1928. Although born in Manitoba, Wade was thought of as a New Brunswick boy, but hired fiddlers from the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario including Jean Carignan and the three Cormiers, Bill, Laury and Francis. The Cornhuskers tune books were widely circulated, and many of the tunes they made popular are

still amongst the best-known repertoire of Old-Time fiddling. Jim Magill and Abby Andrews were heard in the '30's along with recordings from Quebec players Isidore Soucy, Joseph Allard and others. The early '40's brought Don Messer and his Islanders to National Radio, as well as Camy Howard and the Western Five from Ottawa, and the Prairie Schooners from Manitoba. During the '50's Ward Allen and Andy deJarlis became popular. Besides the radio, many bands travelled the province playing dances, notably Russ Creighton's with fiddler Billy Crawford, who influenced many other players but never recorded himself.

Most of these players favoured a smooth, blended style of fiddling which emphasized the melody and avoided intricate ornamentation and variation. This became the basis of a still thriving 'Old-Time' or 'Down-East' style, followed by most of the players in the discography below. Graham Townsend, for example, got his start on the Don Messer show and believes very strongly that "you shouldn't play over people's heads . . . It's important to play what people want to hear . . . to play the melody and not dress it up too much."

There are, however, still many who remember what fiddling and dances were like before they heard the radio — what I like to call "older than 'Old-Time' music. It would be well to approach these people before their knowledge is lost to us forever.

Note: I would like to thank Graham Townsend for providing me with the information on radio performers and Ontario bands and his observations about Old-Time playing.

Bibliography

As a small monument to the subject, George Proctor's *Old-Time Fiddling in Ontario* (Ottawa: National Museum Anthropology Paper, 1960) is an extremely informative article and a wonderful example of well-researched and concise writing. You will probably have to find it in your local Music Library. As mentioned earlier, another useful source is Dorothy and Homer Hogan's "Canadian Fiddle Culture" (*Communique*, Canadian Studies, 1977).

Discography

Again, I can only provide a partial list of players who have recorded. See Richard Green's article on "Fiddle Records in Canada" and the CFMS Mail Order List for further leads. Graham Townsend, Eleanor Townsend (or Eleanor Moorehead, her maiden name), Ed Gyurki, Rudy Meeks, Al Czerny, Ward Allen, June Eikhard, George Wade and the Cornhuskers ('78's), Joe, Pat and Paul Menard, Byron Barron.

Kirk Elliott's "No Fixed Address" covers a variety of styles and Muddy York's "Scatter the Ashes" contains some early Ontario repertoire.



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