

Examining the Irish connection in the southern
American fiddle repertoire

Paul Wells

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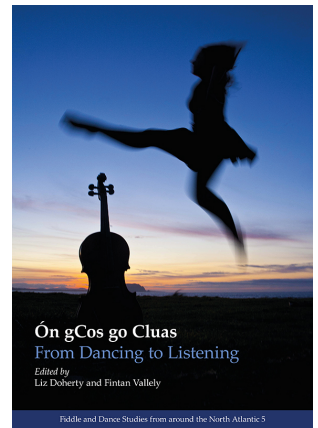
From Dancing to Listening

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Examining the Irish connection in the southern American fiddle repertoire

PAUL F. WELLS

Two or three years ago at the annual Breakin' Up Winter old-time music festival, an event held every March at Cedars of Lebanon State Park near Lebanon, Tennessee, I was playing guitar in a nice jam session led by two fiddler friends. At my request we played 'Indian Ate the Woodchuck', a driving three-strain tune associated with the legendary eastern Kentucky fiddler, Ed Haley. After a good romp through the tune we took a bit of a breather, and, as often happens, fell into conversation about the piece just played. In response to someone's musings about possible origins of 'Woodchuck', one of the fiddlers piped up and said: 'It's Irish'. This comment took me by surprise, because whereas this friend is a fine old-time fiddler, he has only a passing interest in and knowledge of Irish music. When I pushed a bit and asked why he thought it was an Irish tune, he replied simply: 'It's gotta be'.

On another occasion I attended a house concert by an American native who is a first-rate exponent of Irish fiddling. The couple who hosted the event are people who are deeply immersed in Irish music, but many members of the audience were their friends and neighbours for whom this would be their introduction to the tradition. Because of this, the hostess felt obliged to offer some introductory remarks to help put the music that people were about to hear in context. She explained to them that Irish traditional music was the source of much American old-time music, particularly that of the Appalachian region.

I offer these two anecdotes to illustrate some of the conventional wisdom regarding the relationship between Irish and Southern American traditional fiddle music. Note that in one instance the speaker is someone who is well-versed in old-time music and less so in Irish music, while in the other the opposite holds true. The assumption that there *is* a strong link between the two musical worlds – and that one forms a significant source of the other – is remarkably widespread in today's culture.

Among other things, this assumption drives a great deal of musical programming, both recordings and live performances. The Chieftains, Cherish the Ladies, and the Brock-McGuire Band have all recorded CDs in Nashville, in collaboration with some of Music City's finest players. These albums are based on the theme of perceived historical connections between Irish music and American country and bluegrass. Coming from the

opposite direction, American bluegrass musician Tim O'Brien has also recorded two CDs that explore the 'connections' theme.¹

Comments in the user reviews of these recordings on Amazon.com provide abundant evidence of the degree to which Irish music is perceived as constituting an ancient, deeply-rooted source of American country music. Listener Barry Bowman writes of Tim O'Brien's CD *The Crossing*: 'If you are at all interested in Celtic/fusion, this is for you. I am also interested in the Celtic roots of American and Appalachian music. This album perfectly traces those roots'.² Another listener, writing under the name 'DJ Joe Sixpack', characterizes the Chieftains' *Down the Old Plank Road* as: 'Another all-star country-Celtic guest-fest, exploring once again the centuries-old links between Irish folk and American country and bluegrass music'.³

Music journalists are equally certain of the role that Irish music played in the history of southern American music. The Amazon.com listing for the Chieftains' *Another Country* CD includes a brief review by veteran music writer Geoffrey Himes, whose work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, on NPR, and in many other respected outlets. Himes begins his description of the CD with the statement: 'It's a truism that Irish music was the basis of many of the Appalachian ballads and dance tunes that in turn evolved into country music...'⁴ Of *Down the Old Plank Road*, Amazon offers the following uncredited review: 'Leave it to the Chieftains to once again plunge an all-star cast of musicians into the Celtic wellsprings of old-time music'.⁵

Public programming that plays up the 'connections' theme is similarly abundant. On 23 September 2011 a concert in New York City by master uilleann piper Jerry O'Sullivan and old-time musician Rafe Stefanini was built on the idea that 'Jerry and Rafe will explore the many links between Irish and American traditional music'.⁶ In March of 2012 a more ambitious programme titled 'Celtic Appalachia' was staged at Symphony Space in New York City, under the aegis of that city's Irish Arts Center. This show featured several leading Irish-American musicians together with bluegrass and old-time players from the 'Crooked Road' region of southwest Virginia. Promotion for the concert enticed music lovers with the appeal: 'This St Patrick's Day season, join us for a real toe-tapping, knee-slapping, singing and dancing fête celebrating the Irish traditional music influences on old time American, country and bluegrass music'. The event was repeated in 2013 and 2014.⁷

Bluegrass musician Ricky Skaggs, who has participated in some of the recording projects noted above, is well-known for having an interest in Irish music. On the *Three Pickers* CD that he did with guitarist Doc Watson and banjo virtuoso Earl Scruggs, Skaggs introduces one of his original compositions by talking about travelling to Ireland and participating in an Irish session. After noting that he had 'thought so long and hard about the roots of bluegrass music...[it] wasn't no strain at all for me to jump right in and play the tunes I knew, and they mixed right in with the tunes they knew, and many of 'em were the same tunes, just with different names'.⁸

The context in which Skaggs made these comments did not allow him to be explicit about what these tunes might have been, but one wishes that historian Grady McWhiney had been more specific in his own discussion of shared fiddle traditions. In his 1988 book, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*, McWhiney offers testimony from two

Alabama fiddlers on the relationship of southern American and ‘Celtic’ fiddle repertoire. McWhiney writes:

In 1981, after hearing tapes of traditional Irish and Scottish fiddling, James Brock, an outstanding country fiddler from Aliceville, Alabama, said that he recognized many of the tunes, which were similar to southern ones, and that he was certain that much traditional southern music originated in Ireland and Scotland.⁹

He continues:

Arlin Moon, a skilled instrument maker and old-time musician from Holly Pond, Alabama, who heard the same tapes, remarked that the tunes and the fiddling styles were like those he learned from his father and were still played in the rural South. He fiddled some of the same tunes himself and then, to show that he was not simply copying what he had heard, played a tape made earlier in which J. T. Perkins, a traditional fiddler from Arab, Alabama, fiddled a number of tunes that sounded quite Celtic. [He then quotes Moon:] ‘They ought to sound Irish and Scottish’, said Moon; ‘most old time southern fiddle music came from Ireland and Scotland’.¹⁰

So, there you have it. Prominent musicians, academic historians, concert promoters, fans and players of both American old-time and Irish music, music journalists, all speaking with absolute certainty regarding the notion of Irish roots of southern American traditional fiddle music. What more could one want? At the risk of spoiling the party, I suggest that there is one very important thing missing from this scenario: *evidence*. A great many assumptions are being made, but very little in the way of hard evidence is offered in support of them. Claims of this sort require a careful examination of the history of both the Irish and American fiddle repertoires. Doing so results in a much different picture than that suggested by these assumptions.

The idea that there is a strong Irish element in southern fiddling is relatively new. It has become popular only within the past fifteen or twenty years – in other words, during the period in which Irish traditional music has risen to unprecedented heights of popularity. Perhaps even more striking than the assumption itself is the degree to which people *want* it to be true. Why this should be the case is something that I find more than a little perplexing.

While I certainly do not claim to be familiar with the entire American fiddle tune repertoire, in all time periods, and in all regions, I have spent rather a large amount of time over the course of my life listening to, studying, and playing American fiddle music. In the past fifteen or so years I have supplemented this knowledge of American traditions with a corresponding immersion in Irish traditional music.

The American fiddle tune repertoire is large and complex, and is comprised of tunes from many different eras and sources; I have come to think of it as being made up of a number of *layers*. Older, imported tunes form one of these layers, but it is one that is relatively small in the overall scheme of things – particularly in the South. Studies that I have done of the repertoires of individual fiddlers from various parts of the South, and from various eras, reveal that, on average, the percentage of tunes that can clearly be traced to Old World

originals – primarily Scottish ones – is something on the order of 10–15%. This is a good deal less than the number of tunes in the same fiddlers' repertoires that derive from popular culture sources of different eras: blackface minstrelsy from the middle nineteenth century; the work of Tin Pan Alley songsmiths from later in the nineteenth century; and commercial country music from the twentieth. The remainder – and by far the largest portion – are tunes whose histories are difficult or impossible to trace prior to the era of sound recording. Some of these are known across a relatively wide geographic area, but others are strictly local in circulation. These numbers argue against viewing the southern American fiddle tune repertoire as being primarily a received body of tunes, and in favour of understanding it as a dynamic, living tradition with many regional variants.

Let's turn to a consideration of the broad history of fiddle tunes, and then to how this history relates to the history of the movement of peoples from the Old World to the New. The most common form of fiddle tune known in the American South, and in virtually all other fiddling regions of the English-speaking world is the reel. Reels – or 'hoedowns' or 'breakdowns' as they are called in the South – are fast tunes in 2/4 or 4/4 time, consisting of two contrasting, but often melodically related, sections or strains. Strains typically are eight bars long, though four bar strains are not uncommon. As is the case with most types of fiddle tunes, each strain is played twice for one complete rendering of 'the tune', yielding an overall structure of AABB.

According to Scottish music and dance historian George Emmerson, the reel as a form coalesced in Scotland during the first half of the eighteenth century. Emmerson cites manuscripts containing reels that date from the 1730s (Drummond castle MS), and the first published collections of Scottish dance music (Bremner) from the decade of the 1750s.¹¹

Following the crystallization of this new type of tune came a period in which composition flourished in Scotland and a large repertoire developed. Emmerson notes that the earliest collations of Scottish tunes from the mid-eighteenth century 'were the forerunners of a veritable spate of collections of reels and strathspeys set for the violin'.¹² The years from roughly 1780 to 1810 formed arguably the greatest period of composition of new reels in Scotland, when the most famous Scottish fiddler-composers, such as Niel Gow, his son Nathaniel, William Marshall, and many others, were producing and publishing prolifically. The Gows' collections, for instance, appeared during the span of years from 1784 to 1809. The fixing of this repertoire in print ushered in a new era in the preservation and distribution of fiddle tunes.

As the reel form spread to other areas of the English-speaking world we can suppose that a similar growth of repertoire occurred in these regions as well. Unfortunately, nowhere else had as strong a practice of publishing fiddle tunes as did Scotland, so our knowledge of this development in other regions is much less clear. Documentation of tunes from the northeast USA in the late Colonial and early Federal eras is fair. A few reels that might be familiar to players today can be found in hand-written music manuscripts from around the time of the Revolutionary War, and begin to show up in increasing numbers in printed collections from New York, Boston, Albany, and elsewhere, early in the nineteenth century. Some of these were imported Scottish tunes, such as 'Flowers of Edinburgh', but many were new tunes – American tunes – built on the same model as the older ones. The new country

might not have produced anyone on the level of Niel Gow, but American fiddlers in the northeast clearly were writing new tunes and creating a distinctive New World repertoire.

The situation with the American South, however, is far different. There are no known manuscript collections of southern fiddle tunes from this era – that is, the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. It is not until the publication of George Knauff's *Virginia Reels* in 1839–1840 that we have any documentation at all of southern repertoire, and there are only a few other scattered sources between then and the advent of hillbilly recording in the 1920s.

Ireland is also a bit of a black hole in terms of documentation of tunes, particularly reels. The collections of piper O'Farrell from the first two decades of the nineteenth century contain many jigs, marches, and other airs, but only a smattering of reels – and most of these are identified as 'Scotch'. It is not until the Levey collections, published in London in 1858 and 1873, and then some of the works of Elias Howe in Boston from the third quarter of the nineteenth century – up to and including *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* in 1883 – that any substantial quantity of Irish reels found its way into print.

This begs the question: did a body of Irish reels develop during the same era in which Scottish and New England composers were at work, and simply elude documentation, or did they not appear until later in the nineteenth century? Finding an answer to this question is far beyond the scope of this paper, and beyond the range of my own serious work, but evidence suggests that perhaps the latter case holds true. After all, if there was an extant corpus of Irish reels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, would not O'Farrell have included them in his books?

Moving from matters of musical history to social and cultural concerns, it is my understanding that prior to the famines of the 1840s and 1850s, the vast majority of the people who emigrated from Ireland to America were the so-called 'Scotch-Irish', i.e. people who had left lowland Scotland in the seventeenth century and settled in Ireland in the province of Ulster, and then, in turn, went to the American colonies during the first half of the eighteenth century. These people were primarily Presbyterians, and they emigrated in several waves. Historian Roger Daniels identifies five 'pulses' of movement. The last of these was in the period of 1771–1775, but most of the Ulster immigrants who settled in the Appalachians had gone there earlier, by 1750 or before.¹³ Catholic Irish from other parts of the country moved to America as well, but many went as indentured servants or other labourers, and tended to become dispersed throughout the general population. Kerby Miller writing of seventeenth and eighteenth century Irish emigration, notes that for a variety of reasons 'most Irish Catholics in North America [...] never coalesced into permanent, distinctive ethnic communities', and, further, that: 'Since the great majority [of early emigrants] were single males, marriage usually entailed absorption into colonial Protestant family and community networks'.¹⁴

It is important to understand and underscore the chronology here. The migrations of the Scotch-Irish took place before or around the time in which the reel was evolving in Scotland, and most were already in America well before the time in which extensive repertoire of reels had developed in the Old World. In regard to fiddling traditions that the Scotch-Irish emigrants might have taken with them, quite frankly we know nothing

Ón gCos go Cluas – From Dancing to Listening

whatsoever. If the music in Knauff's *Virginia Reels* tells us anything about the music of the Scotch-Irish who settled in the South, it is that there was a strong Scottish flavour in early southern fiddling – but this collection was not published until nearly a century after the heavy Scotch-Irish movement into Appalachia. There certainly is no evidence that would allow us to conclude that there was a strong identifiably Irish element in their music.

Let's look at the tunes that do, in fact, constitute something of a common repertoire between American and Old World fiddlers. Again, although neither Ricky Skaggs nor the Alabama fiddlers cited by Grady McWhiney give specifics about the tunes that they characterize as being 'the same, just with different names', pieces that are often played at festivals and concerts when musicians from various traditions are called upon to perform together include: 'Soldier's Joy', which is easily the most universally-known fiddle tune; 'Miss [or Mrs] McLeod's Reel', known to southern old-time musicians as 'Did You Ever See the Devil Uncle Joe' or 'Hop High Ladies, the Cake's All Dough'; and 'Lord McDonald's Reel', known in old-time tradition as 'Leather Breeches'.

A somewhat longer list of common tunes might include:

- Soldier's Joy – McGlashan, Edinburgh, c. 1781
- Miss McLeod's Reel/Did You Ever See the Devil – Gow, Collection 5, Edinburgh, 1809
- McDonald's Reel/Leather Breeches – Aird 4, Glasgow, 1794
- Fairy Dance/Old Molly Hare – Gow, Collection 5, 1809
- Fisher's Hornpipe – J. Fishar, London, c. 1780,
- Miller of Drone/Grey Eagle – Aird 1, 1782/Gow Repository 2, 1802
- Mason's Apron/Wake up Susan/Redbird etc – Aird 5, 1797
- My Love She's But a Lassie Yet/Sweet Sixteen – Aird 2, 1782
- De'il among the Tailors/Devil's Dream – Riley's Flute Melodies, New York, c. 1815
- Braes of Auchtertyre/Billy in the Lowground – Aird 2, 1782

Several things are notable about the tunes on this list. The first is that virtually all of them are clearly of Scottish origin. The second is that they all first appear in the documentary record in the last two decades of the eighteenth century or the first decade of the nineteenth century, long after the Scotch-Irish emigrations were concluded. They do not constitute evidence of any ancient, deep-seated 'Celtic' root of southern American fiddling. Third, they all have extensive histories of publication, and most likely owe their widespread popularity as much to print as to oral tradition.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they also occur in modern Irish tradition, a fact which underscores the tremendous influence that Scottish tradition has had on the fiddle music of both Ireland and America. At the recent 'Celtic Appalachia' concert, for instance, Dan Neely, one of the performers who took part in the show, playing tenor banjo, reported that at the end of a segment that featured all the assembled banjo players, the group got together and 'all played 'Miss McLeod's', which the old timey/bluegrass guys called 'Did You Ever See the Devil Uncle Joe?' It was one of a small number of tunes raised that we could all agree upon on the spot'.¹⁵

In contrast to this body of Scottish tunes, the number of tunes common in southern Old Time tradition that may be of Irish origin is quite small. The most popular tune that is often perceived to be Irish, one known under a dizzying array of titles but most commonly called ‘Stony Point’, ‘Pigtown Fling’, or ‘Wild Horse’, actually surfaces first in America, not in Ireland. It was used as the melody for a minstrel song by Dan Emmett (who was of Irish heritage), ‘Old Dad’, and it may very well owe its popularity to dissemination via the minstrel stage. Arguably the second most popular ‘Irish’ tune among southern fiddlers, though a distant runner-up to ‘Stony Point’, is what Irish players today know as ‘Teetotallers’ Reel’, and which also travels under a variety of titles in the USA. The earliest known publication of this tune is in the first Levey collection, from London in 1858. There are numerous American printings soon thereafter and it, too, seems to have been associated with the minstrel stage. Other tunes of possible Irish origin include variants of ‘Over the Moor to Maggie’ (‘Waynesboro’), ‘Green Fields of America’ (‘Shippingsport’), and ‘Tom Ward’s Downfall’ (‘Meriwether’), but these are all rare tunes in southern American tradition; their circulation seems to have been restricted to certain areas of the upper South.

I must emphasize the fact that none of the ‘Irish’ tunes listed above are documented until well into the nineteenth century – nearly the middle of it, in fact. They may have been in circulation prior to that time, but we have no way of knowing that. In any event there is no evidence to support the idea of Irish repertoire comprising any sort of ‘root’ of southern American fiddle music. To extend the botanical metaphor, it is more appropriate to conceptualize the relationship of Irish tunes to southern old-time music as that of a scion – and a rather small one, at that – that has been grafted onto an already flourishing trunk. Or, as Alan Jabbour has characterized the relationship, they are perhaps best perceived as musical cousins.

If the evidence of an Irish strain in southern American fiddle music is so thin, why, then, is the notion of ‘Irish roots’ so prevalent? What is going on here? In an earlier era – that is the first half of the twentieth century – there was a widespread belief that American folksong, particularly Appalachian folksong, represented some sort of pure, Anglo-Saxon past of our culture. This phenomenon has been well-studied and much discussed among folklorists in more recent times. We seem now to be replacing this with the notion of a ‘Celtic’ past. Bill C. Malone, the dean of country music scholars, has discussed this puzzling switch in presumed cultural ancestry in many of his writings. In a 1997 article, titled ‘Neither Anglo-Saxon nor Celtic: The Music of the Southern Plain Folk’, Malone comments:

We have been assured on record-liner notes, in the public statements of a few country musicians, and in at least one book that Celtic musical traits/styles can easily be discerned in the playing and singing of southern country musicians. Buttressed by that faith [...] or perhaps by the desire to deny the prominence of black influence in country music, such observers imagine the strains of a Celtic bagpipe whenever they hear the drone of a country fiddle or banjo. They seek cultural legitimacy for modern country music by linking it to an ancient tradition, but instead obscure our understanding of it under a murky veil of romanticism.¹⁶

And herein lies what is, to my mind, the biggest problem with the promotion of the concept of ‘Irish roots of American fiddling’; that is, it promulgates a romanticized, superficial view of complex matters of musical history. Rather than seeking an informed, nuanced understanding of the history of the broad repertoire of American fiddle tunes, a body of music that is both musically and culturally diverse, the matter is reduced to the intellectual equivalent of a sound bite. Why should we privilege what is really quite a small portion of the overall repertoire at the expense of all of the other threads and layers that comprise the whole? I suggest that instead of attempting to invest the entire world of southern fiddling with the artificial patina of antiquity and notions of ‘Celticism’, we should applaud and celebrate what is, after all, a vibrant, living musical tradition – a tradition that is, by its very nature, American.

Notes

¹ In the interests of full disclosure, I must note that, at the invitation of Paul Brock, I contributed a brief essay to Brock-McGuire Band’s *Green Grass Blue Grass*, CD, Alliance B0055RT53Q, 2012. It was a *very* carefully-written essay.

² Barry Bowman, *The Crossing*, https://www.amazon.com/Crossing-Tim-OBrien/dp/B000QZSPJ2/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1465420563&sr=8-1&keywords=tim+o%27brien+the+crossing [accessed 8 June 2016].

³ DJ Joe Sixpack, *Down the Old Plank Road: The Nashville Sessions* (The Chieftains) http://www.amazon.com/Down-Old-Plank-Road-Nashville/product-reviews/B00006AG7G/ref=cm_cr_ar_paging_btm_next_2?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=2 [accessed 8 June 2016].

⁴ Geoffrey Himes, *Another Country* (The Chieftains), http://www.amazon.com/Another-Country-Chieftains/dp/B000003F7Z?ie=UTF8&keywords=chieftains%20another%20country&qid=1465421236&ref=sr_1_1&s=music&sr=1-1 [accessed 8 June 2016].

⁵ The Chieftains: *Down the Old Plank Road*, editorial reviews, http://www.amazon.com/Down-Old-Plank-Road-Nashville/dp/B003O5MNTO/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_pl_foot_top?ie=UTF8 [accessed 8 June 2016].

⁶ ‘The Blarney Star Concert Series: Jerry O’Sullivan and Rafe Stefanini’, *Glucksman Ireland House, New York University*, <http://irelandhouse.fas.nyu.edu/object/ne.osullivanstefanini> [accessed 8 June 2016].

⁷ ‘Celtic Appalachia’, *Symphony Space*, <http://www.symphonyspace.org/event/8259/Music/celtic-appalachia> [accessed 8 June 2016].

⁸ Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, Ricky Skaggs, *The Three Pickers* (Rounder Records, 2003).

⁹ Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1988), p. 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ George S. Emmerson, *Rantin’ Pipe and Tremblin’ String: A History of Scottish Dance Music* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971), pp. 55–56.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Roger Daniels, *Coming to America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 78–80.

¹⁴ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 147.

WELLS *Examining the Irish connection in the southern American fiddle repertoire*

¹⁵ Dan Neely, private e-mail, 3 April 2012.

¹⁶ Bill C. Malone, 'Neither Anglo-Saxon nor Celtic: The Music of the Southern Plain Folk', in *Plain Folk of the South Revisited* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), p. 25.