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Colette Moloney

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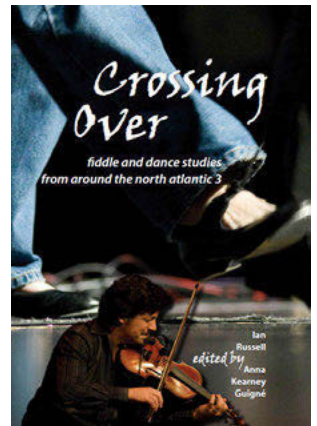
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

Edited by Ian Russell and Anna Kearney Guigné

First published in 2010 by The Elphinstone
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-6-5



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The silent witness: the fiddle manuscripts of John 'Boss' Murphy (1875–1955)

COLETTE MOLONEY

John, or 'Boss' Murphy as he was more commonly known, was born in 1875 in the townland of the Leap, near the village of Churchtown, County Cork, in Ireland. He was a fiddle player who, during the three-year period 1933–1935, compiled a music manuscript from his own repertory. After his death, his fiddle and manuscript remained in his family home. I was given access to his music manuscript in the early 1980s, and it opened up an area of local musical history of which, despite growing up just a few kilometres away, I was hitherto unaware. As the Murphy manuscript was compiled in the twentieth century, there were, in the 1980s, members of the community who could recall John Murphy and the musical scene in Churchtown during his lifetime. I interviewed a number of people in the Churchtown area in 1985 and again in 2003, to ascertain biographical details for John Murphy, and to research the music in the locality from approximately 1890 to 1955, the period when Murphy would have been most active as a musician. This paper therefore is based on the information gleaned from the Murphy manuscript, the Murphy family, public records, and also the memories recounted by musicians, or those close to them, of musical life in the area.

John Murphy was a farmer by profession, but he was renowned locally for his fiddle playing. His father, William 'Boss' Murphy (1829–1911), had also been a fiddle player and had endeavoured to teach John and his siblings to play the instrument. The siblings, a brother, Bill (1871–1906) and three sisters, Bridget (1870–1910), Mary (1872–1962), and Margaret (1874–1913), did not continue to play fiddle in adulthood. John's musical literacy was gained primarily from his father, as the latter had learnt to read music at a hedge school in the locality taught by Thomas Croke. There had been no formal education available to Catholics in rural Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries therefore informal schools, known as hedge schools, were common. The teachers in these schools were paid by the pupils and classes were held in huts, barns, or even in the open air, basically any place that they would not be discovered by the authorities. The curriculum in the hedge schools varied according to the expertise of the particular hedge schoolmaster but most taught at least the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, while some had

a range of subjects including music, Latin, and Greek.¹ Thomas Croke, many years later, stayed for long periods of time in the Murphy household and would perhaps also have taught the young John directly.

As in many parts of rural Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century the social life of the Churchtown area was largely dependent on house dances. These dances, which frequently included refreshments and card games, were usually all-night affairs, concluding around 6:00 a.m. to allow for the commencement of farm duties. There was a strong social and musical bond between the musicians and dancers at these events in the small domestic setting. The musicians were not paid for their services and generally alternated between playing and dancing. This helped to create a performing community where each individual contributed in some way to the evening's entertainment. Quadrilles, schottisches, flings, mazurkas, jig sets, and hornpipes were the dances of choice at these house dances. Apparently musicians were numerous in the area at the time, but very few details of individual players survive into the present century.

Another musical and social outlet, particularly during the summer months, was the stage. This was a small platform, erected at a crossroads or on waste ground, where dances were held on summer evenings. These stages were numerous in the Churchtown area during the first half of the twentieth century with the best known location in the early decades of the century being the Conkerfield. The Conkerfield stage was located in a field near the site of the current Catholic Church in Lisgriffin, a village about 7 kilometres from Churchtown. The stages continued until the 1950s, but, as the century progressed, their number and frequency drastically decreased.

From the 1890s, John was a regular performer at most of the house dances, stages, and sessions in the area, and he often ventured further afield to listen to a visiting musician or to play in a session. Indeed, he occasionally travelled to Kanturk, a town about 22 kilometres from Churchtown, both to hear and play music. He was also a frequent visitor to the military barracks in the nearby town of Buttevant where he listened to the military band rehearse and afterwards he often played fiddle for those assembled in the bandroom.

Jim Callaghan, from the townland known as the Windmill in Churchtown, regularly performed with John Murphy at local dances and stages. Callaghan was best known as a fiddle player, though he was one of the few concertina players in the area. Jim Callaghan was regularly seen following the Buttevant Military Band as they walked, each Sunday, from Buttevant to Churchtown and Lisscarroll and back. He, like John Murphy, was also a frequent visitor to the bandroom at the military barracks in Buttevant. This interaction between traditional musicians in the Churchtown area and the British military barracks in Buttevant may seem a little unusual given the political situation of the time, but it was not unique to the area, and the instruction witnessed at the band rehearsals undoubtedly contributed to the repertory and facility in musical notation of the traditional musicians.

In the late 1920s the house dances in the Churchtown area were moved to a derelict lodge near Ballygrade Church, where they were held every Saturday night.

In this new setting they were no longer hosted by an individual family, but instead were financed by an admission fee which each person paid. The lodge was able to accommodate a larger number of dancers than an ordinary house dance hence its use marked the beginning of a transition from house dance to public dance. The musicians were now paid for their services, which helped to create a division between musician and dancer. Previously, virtually all musicians were also dancers and generally alternated between playing and dancing at a house dance. When there was payment involved only a small number of musicians were invited to play for a dance. They tended only to do the job for which they were being paid, and hence did not take part in the dancing. The public paid an admission fee for the dance and, apart from providing the odd party piece, other musicians did not in general feel the necessity to relieve the paid musicians, so the paid musicians took no part in the dancing. Instead of the communal musical contribution which heretofore had existed, the addition of lodge dances set up a category of semi-professional musicians: particular musicians tended to play at dances and in public, and others assumed the position known locally as 'house musicians' in that they only played at home for their own enjoyment.

The house dances and stages continued throughout the early years of the twentieth century, though they became progressively less numerous and eventually died out around the 1940s. As the century progressed, however, the *ceili* dances such as the 'Siege of Ennis' supplanted many of the other types, though the 5-part jig set and one version of the quadrille remained for some time. The Catholic Church in Ireland had discouraged dancing and music for centuries, and this disapproval became more persistent with the advent of a more puritanical form of Catholicism in the mid nineteenth century. There were frequent stories of priests condemning dancing from the pulpit, or, in other parts of the country, of priests breaking musical instruments at house dances, or driving their cars over the stages used for crossroads dances.² The Churchtown area, however, appears to have escaped the worst effects of the Catholic Church's anti-dancing policy. In the 1930s, the Church successfully lobbied for legislation that banned informal dances. The Dance Hall Act of 1935, which was enacted into law by the Irish Government, made it an offence to hold a dance without a licence.³ If a licence was granted, a fee had to be paid to the government. In many parts of rural Ireland, including Churchtown, house dancing continued into the 1940s, despite police raids and denunciations from the pulpit. The Act, however, ultimately resulted in a decline in domestic music-making throughout Ireland as dancing moved into venues which were large, public, commercial, and often policed by the clergy. Here, locally popular dances, such as the sets of quadrilles, were replaced by the canon of group *ceili* figure dances, which had been disseminated by the Gaelic League. This particular organisation, which had been set up in 1893 to promote the Irish language, later extended its interest to include Irish music, song, and dance.⁴

The house dances in Churchtown, together with those at the lodge at Ballygrade, faded out during the 1940s due to the advent of popular music, pub

sessions, and dance halls. After the Dance Hall Act of 1935 the occasional fine for holding a dance without a permit also helped to signal the demise of the local house dances. Musicians then formed themselves into bands and began to play for *ceilís*, locally and further afield. The repertory of dances changed as the musicians were now required to play for the two-hand reel, '*Briseadh na Carrigeacha*', 'The Siege of Ennis', 'The Military Two Step', 'The Gay Gordons', and the waltz. The quadrilles, schottisches, mazurkas, and jig sets had completely vanished from the repertory. The disappearance of house dances also had other consequences for the musical communities in rural Ireland. Opportunities for a musician to play, either solo or in a small group, for an appreciative audience were reduced. With the disappearance of the house dances many musicians became discouraged and abandoned playing altogether as performing music had lost its purpose and local social context. The local musical social system in which everybody contributed to an evening's entertainment declined when music-making became a business, and when musicians had to travel away from their localities to perform. The former amateur, communal, informal performance setting was replaced by musicians forming themselves into bands to perform in the more disciplined, organised, formal, and uniform style favoured by the dance hall. Many local traditional musicians simply stopped playing, or alternatively just played at home for their own enjoyment, once the house dances and stages ceased in the locality.

While the musical scene evolved in Churchtown during the early decades of the twentieth century, John Murphy saw his personal circumstances change significantly. After the death of his father William Murphy in 1911, John inherited the family farm at the Leap. In 1915, at the age of 40, he married Margaret Cullinan-O'Keefe (c.1879–1942), a widow. Margaret had managed her own pub in the village of Churchtown following the death of her first husband. After her marriage to John Murphy they renamed the pub Murphy's and continued to operate the business until 1933. John is known to have played his fiddle in this pub at Christmas and on other special occasions. He remained on the family farm all his life but, as his responsibilities to his own family and farm grew, so his musical excursions decreased. John had been a regular player at both house and stage dances in the area but, as these social outlets declined, he did not make the transition to playing with a band for *ceilís*. He did continue to play the fiddle regularly in his own home and gave infrequent performances at local concerts or accompanied dancers at *Feiseanna*. These *Feiseanna* were dancing competitions organised by the aforementioned Gaelic League.⁵

After John's marriage, the Murphy house at the Leap also became a meeting place for local and travelling musicians to play and discuss their music. Two of the most frequent musical visitors were the previously-mentioned local fiddler, Jim Callaghan, and travelling fiddle teacher, Jim Condon. Condon, from the Knocklong area of County Limerick, taught fiddle in Churchtown and the neighbouring village of Liscarroll in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Churchtown in the early twentieth century was a haven for travelling companies. These companies set up in the area for a few weeks at a time and they provided musical entertainment, plays, acrobatics, conjuring tricks, and puppets, for the amusement of the local people. Many of the musicians with these groups received open invitations to the Murphy residence. One travelling player, for whom John had a particular respect, was known simply as 'Jim the fiddler' and he spent many musical evenings in the Murphy house with John noting down tunes from him. The repertory of these travelling companies spanned traditional, popular, and light classical music, and John Murphy is known to have learnt many tunes from 'Jim the fiddler'. The quality of performance of the travelling companies diminished as the years progressed and their audiences consequently decreased. The companies finally ceased to include Churchtown and Lisscarroll on their itinerary after the 1950s.

One of John's greatest ambitions was to deliver the musical heritage, which he had received from his father and others, into the hands of his children. As a necessary prerequisite to this he endeavoured to teach them to play the fiddle and enlisted the help of Jim Condon in the task. However, his four children, Bill (1916–1984), Peggy (1917–1971), Bridie (1918–1991), and Jack (1920–2000) lacked interest and failed to master the instrument. Although the girls played the piano a little, their father regarded piano music purely as 'drawing room' music and as no substitute for good fiddle playing.

By the early 1930s, John had abandoned any lingering hope he may have held of his own children learning to play the fiddle and he began to direct his thoughts towards future generations. Like many of his contemporaries he had witnessed the disappearance of older tunes and tune-types from the local repertory, and a general decline in interest in traditional music. Motivated by a desire to preserve his repertory for future generations of his own family, he embarked on the task of compiling a manuscript collection from tunes that he had already written in jotters, or that he retained in his memory. The mammoth task of notating the tunes was undertaken during the period 1933–1935. Technical problems, which he encountered during the notational process, were directed to the staff of Pigott's music shop on one of his visits to Cork city, which would have been a round journey of approximately 120 kilometres.

In later years, John Murphy suffered from arthritis and so eventually had to cease playing the fiddle. He died in May 1955, as the result of a road traffic accident.

John Murphy is just one of a number of early twentieth-century Irish traditional musicians who decided to commit their repertory to manuscript. The notion of collecting Irish music was not a new one, but the main waves of collection appeared to coincide with periods when Irish music was at a low ebb. Edward Bunting (1773–1843)⁶ collected the remnants of a Gaelic harp tradition in 1792 and there was a proliferation of collectors, such as George Petrie (1790–1866),⁷ Henry Hudson (1798–1889),⁸ and John Edward Pigot (1822–1871),⁹ active in the period

1840–1850, immediately after the ravages of the famine had decimated Irish music. These eighteenth and nineteenth century collectors were invariably trained in the European art music tradition and were selective in the material that they collected, at the very least, restricting their collections to what they saw as truly Irish items. In addition, their published collections were aimed at musicians from the Western art music tradition rather than the traditional musicians who were their sources. Captain Francis O'Neill (1848–1936), at the turn of the twentieth century, was probably one of the first traditional musicians to collect music and publish it for the use of fellow musicians within the tradition, although it must be remembered that much of his collection was noted by James O'Neill, who was a classical violinist.¹⁰

An increased facility in music notation amongst traditional musicians and a decline in Irish music led to a wave of private music collections being created by traditional musicians in the 1930s, the same decade that also saw the formation of the Irish Folklore Commission. Murphy, who created his manuscript between 1933 and 1935, typified many musicians during this period in that he aimed to have it available for the use of future generations of his own family. In common with other similar collectors, he was not puritanical in his approach to choosing material for inclusion. Instead he appears to have transcribed his repertoire without any selectiveness in respect of its origin. His collection therefore gives a true impression of what the repertoire of a traditional fiddle player in the area was at the time, a mixture of dance tunes and airs, with a splattering of non-Irish items.

This manuscript, as it exists today, is a 96-page document which is arranged in a single collation (see Figure 1). The cover of the manuscript is no longer intact and a number of the back pages are damaged, but the manuscript would appear to be complete. There are 312 individual items noted, if each quadrille is counted as one item rather than its composite parts of five or six tunes. In the case of six tunes their notation is too erratic to decipher. There appears to have been a variety of dance tune types used, with the jig and the reel being the most popular, followed closely by the waltz (see Figure 2). The majority of the contents of the manuscript are no longer heard in the aural repertoire of the area. There are a number of tunes with local place names such as the jigs the 'Walls of Liscarroll' and the 'Rakes of Dromina', Dromina being a village a few kilometres from Churchtown (see Figures 3 and 4). There are also common tunes under unusual titles and vice versa: the well-known jig 'The Blackthorn Stick', for instance, is given in the Murphy manuscript as 'The Fire on the Mountain' and the tune given as 'The Mug of Brown Ale' is different to the tune which is commonly known by that title (see Figures 5 and 6). In general though, the jigs, reels, hornpipes, and set dances appear Irish in origin, apart from a few notable exceptions such as a slip jig known as 'Sir Roger de Coverly' and the reel 'The Blue Bells of Scotland'. It is in the flings, galops, waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, barn dances, and marches in particular that the popular, classical, and Scottish repertoire is to be found. Tunes such as the 'Jenny Lind Polka', 'Toby Polka', 'French Polka', 'Highland Schottische', 'Paris Schottisches', and the 'Golden Sunshine' and 'After the Ball' waltzes, are just a few examples of the non-Irish repertoire, which

8 *The Cuckoo's Nest. Cuckoo's Nest-*

2 time

a. Hornpipe

2 time

Rodney's. Glogy.

2nd time

The Stage. Hornpipe

Figure 1 Page eight from the John Murphy Manuscript

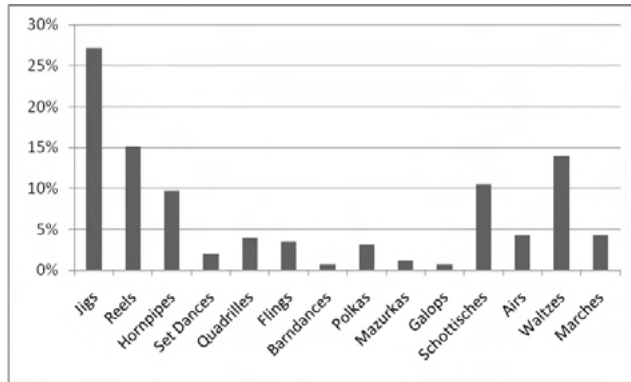


Figure 2 Breakdown of tune-types in the Murphy Manuscript



Figure 3 'Walls of Lis Carroll'



Figure 4 'Rakes of Dromina'



Figure 5 'The Fire on the Mountain'



Figure 6 'The Mug of Brown Ale'

was common among traditional musicians in the Churchtown area. The interaction between John Murphy and the musicians with the travelling companies, and the Military Band in Buttevant could account for some of the non-Irish repertory. In addition, there was a gramophone in the Murphy household and John Murphy regularly listened to 78rpm recordings, particularly those by the Irish tenor John McCormack (1884–1945)¹¹ and the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso (1873–1921).¹²

There are ten quadrilles included in the manuscripts and all have either five or six figures, with each figure being in either simple or compound duple time. There is a mixture of styles evident: the music for the 'Clifton' and 'Peacock Quadrilles', for instance, displays their popular origins, whereas the music used for the 'Irish' and 'Killarney Quadrilles', as the titles suggest, is more Irish in style, and there are also three Scottish Quadrilles. This mixture is probably indicative of the assimilation

of the quadrilles into Ireland with the original music being gradually replaced by native tunes.

The 'Boss' Murphy Manuscript may have been compiled between 1933 and 1935, but it is probable that much of the repertory that it contains was actually part of the aural repertory of the area earlier in the century, or indeed in the previous one. Musically, John Murphy was particularly influenced by his father and it is likely, especially since he was compiling the manuscript to pass his musical heritage on to future generations of his own family, that he would have included tunes which he had learnt from his father. As his responsibilities to farm and family grew in the 1910s he no longer played such an active part in the musical life of the community, in that he ceased to play regularly for house dances and stages. As a result, he would have been less influenced by the changes in taste that his contemporaries were experiencing and therefore much of his repertory probably reflects that which was popular in his younger years, *c.*1890–1915.

The composition of the repertory in the manuscript would also add weight to this assumption. In 1985, when I interviewed the Liscarroll fiddler, Nora Farrissey (1916–1995), she could only remember one type of quadrille, a 'Plain Quadrille', being danced in the area in her youth. Nora was born in 1916 and was therefore probably only active in the local musical scene from the late 1920s onwards. The multiplicity of varieties of quadrilles in the manuscript would therefore point to the repertory of an earlier time, when the quadrilles were still popular in the area. Moreover, dances such as the schottische declined in usage as the century progressed and therefore the multiplicity of these tune-types in the manuscript would also add weight to the argument that the repertory dates from an earlier period.

The music in the manuscript is idiomatic of the fiddle and a number of tunes have a range which requires the use of the second or third position on the instrument as an extension on the E string, but this is restricted to items which were of popular or classical origin such as 'The Prince Imperial Galop' (see Figure 7). Nora Farrissey recalled being taught to use second and third positions on the E-string of the fiddle by both the fiddle teacher, Jim Condon, and his successor, Willie Dunne (*d.*1953). It is likely, therefore, that fiddle players in the Churchtown area would have had the technical skills required to play the tunes in the manuscript. The tunes are generally noted with a key signature of G or D major, or very occasionally that of C, F, or A major, though the latter were usually in the items from popular and classical music.

The transcription of tunes in the manuscript is skeletal. Hence the type and extent of ornamentation or variation that may have been used is not clear. There are ornaments indicated, however, in three tunes. In bar 6 of 'Coming Through the Field' the first melody note in the bar is preceded by a single grace note or 'cut' (see Figure 8). The reels 'The Blue Bells of Scotland' and 'The Kerry Star' each have a single 'tr' sign in bar 8 of the tune (see Figures 9 and 10). There is no explanation offered in the manuscript as to the meaning of the 'tr' indication, but, from the position and duration of the note to which it is attached, it could have indicated a 'roll' or a bowed treble.

MOLONEY *The fiddle manuscripts of John 'Boss' Murphy*



Figure 7 'The Prince Imperial Galop'



Figure 8 'Coming through the Field'

The manuscript contains a selection of tunes and settings which have now vanished from the popular repertory, both locally and nationally, and represents that of a traditional musician in the Churchtown area of North Cork during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vast majority of the tunes, and indeed many of the tune-types, which the manuscript contains, are no longer found in the aural repertory of the area. The manuscript therefore provides a snapshot of the music of a small rural community at a particular point in time. The tunes and tune-types are similar to those used contemporaneously in other areas of the country, although it is likely that many of the settings were unique to the area. The mixture of Irish and non-Irish material is not unusual for the era; the influence of the travelling companies, and the military band in Buttevant, may also have been

responsible for the presence of some of this material. To date, none of the descendants of John Murphy have utilised either his fiddle or manuscript in the way that he hoped, and there are few if any traditional fiddle players in the Churchtown area today. Nonetheless, the musical content of the Murphy manuscript was published in 2003, thereby reaching a wider audience and facilitating the reintroduction of its repertory into the aural tradition, albeit not necessarily in its native area.¹³



Figure 9 'The Blue Bells of Scotland'



Figure 10 'The Kerry Star'

Notes

- ¹ Patrick Weston Joyce, *English as we Speak it in Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1910), p. 146.
- ² Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle: Brandon, 1999), p. 123.
- ³ Brennan, p. 125.
- ⁴ Helen O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), p. 17.
- ⁵ Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *A Pocket History of Irish Music* (O'Brien Press: Dublin, 1998), p. 98.
- ⁶ Charlotte Killigan Fox, *Annals of the Irish Harpers* (London: Murray, 1911), p. 10.
- ⁷ Donal O'Sullivan, *Irish Folk Music and Song*, Irish Life and Culture 3 (Dublin: Colm O Lochlainn for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1952), p. 17.
- ⁸ O'Sullivan, p. 14.
- ⁹ O'Sullivan, p. 22.
- ¹⁰ Nicholas Carolan, *A Harvest Saved: Francis O'Neill and Irish music in Chicago* (Cork: Ossian Publications, 1997), pp. 33–34
- ¹¹ Arthur Jacobs, *A New Dictionary of Music* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1958), p. 225.
- ¹² Jacobs, p. 65.
- ¹³ Colette Moloney, ed., *The Boss Murphy Musical Legacy* (Churchtown, Co. Cork: Churchtown Village Renewal Trust in association with Noah's Ark Press, 2003).