

“Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance” Part 11 - The Irish Equation, continued.

Peter Ellis



Continuing with the quote from Pat Murphy’s ‘Toss the Feathers’ from the conclusion of Part 10:

*“Many of the dances in *Ár rinncí fóirne*, the dancing commission book, were composed in this manner. It is said that the secretary of the Gaelic League in Munster composed the 'Walls of Limerick' and the 'Siege of Ennis'. The High-Cauled Cap' (*An Caidhp*) was constructed by Fionán MacColum and Cormac McGinley, both Scottish and both *timiri* of the Gaelic League. This dance is said by one source to be based on a set from South Armagh. The 'Fairy Reel' was composed by An t-Arthair Ó Flannagáin and the 'Sweets of May' by Nan Quinn of Bessbrook, County Armagh.” “The banned set dances, with their relaxed, informal style, survived in all dancing areas, even in the*

Gaeltacht areas of Munster.”

Also in *A Handbook of Irish Dancing*, compiled from 1902 and published in Dublin in December 1904 by J.G. O’Keefe and Art O’Brien there is an extensive description of dances including ‘*Limerick Walls*’. These two dance teachers were members of the Gaelic League. Terry Moylan has conferred to me that Brendan Breathnach told him the High-Cauled Cap was older, predating the Gaelic League. It does say in Pat Murphy’s quote that one source states it is based on a set from County Armagh. One thing I can say is that the Sweets of May is in the very old Cotillon arrangement of a common chorus alternating between a number of verses or ‘changes’. Cotillions were of this pattern and danced at the Irish crossroads around 1813 according to Helen Brennan in her ‘Story of Irish Dance’. Helen Brennan also points out on p93 of her book that “*The Waves of Tory and the Bridge of Athlone*” were possibly newly created by the Gaelic League as being suitable for beginners’ classes; they were in any case popularised by the League’s dance teachers.

Unfortunately there are little or no diary or newspaper accounts so far that illustrate anything other than the Irish contributing mainly the popular ballroom dances of the day to the Australian tradition. This would be partly because Australia was a British Colony and with the order of the day mainstream dances would be dominated by the British style of conduct. The Australian MCs were likewise very strict, something that dancers in the contemporary folk scene have little understanding. Obviously some indigenous Irish dance if I can use that term would have been supported in Irish settled communities and special Hibernian gatherings out here. Finding that information seems to be of an ethereal nature. There is little known in the Irish descended communities other than that of the popular dances everybody was doing. But again the St. Pat’s Day illustration of 1881 in Melbourne indicates the Irish style was certainly well and truly to the fore at their special gatherings at that time. There is one Australian reference relating to Ireland that mentions some Irish dances:

Bathurst Advocate (NSW: 1848-1849) Saturday 11 March 1848 pg. 4.

“While the usual variety of Irish dance—the reel, jig, fling, three-part reel, four-hand reel, rowly powly, country dance, and cut along, were going forward in due rotation” and further on ...”Paddy — Why you could dance the Dusty Miller upon a flure paved wid drawn razures you're so supple — Katty for ever — The blood's in ye Katty, you'll win the day — More power to ye — Hurrah Paddy— Heel and toe, Paddy you sinner— Right an left Katty — Hould on, his breath's a goin— Right an wrong Paddy you spalpeen— The whisky's on ye man alive, do it dacently and don't let me lose my wager.”

But it turns out the Bathurst Advocate article is a plagiarized account taken from an 1843 edition of an 1830 book ‘Traits and stories of the Irish Peasantry’ by William Carleton. Notice the minuet is also mentioned.

‘While the usual variety of Irish dances—the reel, jig, fling, three-part reel, four-part-reel, rowly-powly, country-dance, cotillion, or cut-along (as the peasantry call it), and minuet, vulgarly minion, and minionet - were going forward in due rotation....’

Inez Fletcher of the National Library of Ireland points out *“I would definitely go with the idea that the "cut along" is a corruption of the word "cotillion" ... It is a known linguistic phenomenon that when faced with an unfamiliar word or phrase people hear and reproduce it as something more familiar”*.

Re the ‘Rowly Powly’ (a term for a fight or punch up) Heather Clarke makes the following comment:-

‘The dance The Three Tunes contains this movement as part of a sequence of mime actions – the men advance to the centre with fists raised as though about to fight, they then retreat to place, only to find their partners have turned their backs to them. The roly-poly action proceeds this charade so I’m not quite sure what it represents’. Similar information was forwarded by Inez Fletcher: - ‘there is a "roly poly" in the Three Tunes dance where the dancers’ fists/hands are rotated about each other, in one direction, then the other’.



The illustration of the *Irish Dance in a Barn* on page 2 (above) accompanies the article from the 1843 edition of the 1830 book *'Traits and stories of the Irish Peasantry'* by William Carleton

Kate Hughes of Dundalk Ireland from the age of 14 in 1867 wrote down the instructions of the dances she was learning from one of the 'dancies' and these notations can be found online via Chris J Brady's homepage. By then the dances are almost entirely the country dances, reels and quadrilles popular throughout England, Scotland and Ireland at that time and the list is extensive. All of the well-known quadrilles are listed and described but there are many others (using Kate Hughes spelling) such as Lord Deas, Princess Alexandria, Reagle Ballmorall, Mazourka Quadrille, La Belle France, La Russe, Manfriana, La Gavottiana, Assembly Reel, New Petronell, Circassian, Bas Quadrell, Phoulcan, and the Grand March.

The total of Country Dances is also extensive:- Blandon CD, Littil Favourite, Merry Oddfellows, Meg Merrilles, Roayle Albert, Royal Oak, Queen Victoria, Queen's Welcome, Peteronella, Paddy O'Rafferty, Rovers Joye, Pheasants, Ollandina, Bohemian Girl, Clutha, Honeymoon, Humming Birds, Prince Concert, Jessies Hornpipe, Lovers Dream, La Tempete, Nut, Silver Bell, Rorry O'Morre, Shoulder to Shoulder, Meszeppa, Prince Charles, Riffill Volunteers, Wee Rigg, Hay Makers, Cumberland Reel, Lads of Clintyre, Love at the Window, Triumph, Merry Milk Maid, Aeonian Pony, Sachá, Jacks the Lad, Jock the Boye, Merry Lads of Ayr, The Thistle, Duke of Perth, Clydesdale Lassies, Merry Dance, Heather Bell, British Grenadiers, Venetian Waltz, Fairy, Flowers of Edinburgh, Polka CD, Reel of Eight, and Hullachan- true reel.

In addition there's a few circle dances: - Circassian, Hibernian Circle, Virginia Circle, Guarachan Waltz and German Schottische. In all cases the descriptions appear little different to those throughout Britain.

A later dance source, T. Leggett-Byrne's manual "Terpsichore - Her Votaries and Fashions" published in 1898), was possibly used by local and travelling dancing masters holding classes in Irish towns and village communities to teach the very latest fashionable dances and steps. This can also be found on Chris J Brady's site; the repertoire has changed from the earlier days of Kate Hughes, consisting more of couple dances such as Washington Post, Rheinländer, Alsatian Polka, Polka Mazurka, still the usual quadrilles, Lancers, Caledonians etc. and only three country dances, Sir Roger de Coverley, Norwegian Country Dance and La Tempête.

Brendan Breathnach wrote an article about Irish dancing masters for the publication *Ceol* (III, 3 & 4, 1969/70), republished in *The Man and His Music* (1996). Itinerant dancing masters in Ireland held territories or districts of ten miles or so in which they plied their trade, and had friendly rivalries with neighbouring dancing masters. When they met at fairs or sporting events they would vie with each other by dancing in public, to the pleasure of the spectators and the honour of the moment.

In brief – *'Contracts survive that record the formal activity of a dancing master in West Cork as early as 1718. It was just as common for instructors to play the music themselves while as it was for them to be accompanied by a musician. Refer to the illustration in the previous chapter.*

In Dublin, dance masters often taught French and other Continental dances using a small type of violin called a kit or 'pochette' fiddle, which would fit between the hand elbow, thus affording the instructor more physical freedom. The instructor here, however, carries a full-size violin. A peripatetic existence meant that masters could become known among numerous communities, albeit normally in a localised area, and could trade upon a good reputation. They could also be territorial, a tendency that might lead as William Carleton recorded, to animated disputes and dancing contests.'

Following the early twentieth century a most wonderful tradition of revived Irish dancing has

continued to grow through to the present time, but it wasn't there in terms of introduction of those Irish dances to Australia during her Colonial era. In contrast many fine Irish fiddlers and teachers of dancing are frequently mentioned in Australian accounts and it is the fashionable dances and the country dances and reels shared throughout the British Isles that were their repertoire. The Irish were generally involved in playing as much popular dance music of the period as their own airs. This is confirmed in the following quotation: St Patrick's Night at Beechworth Tuesday 24th March 1857, as reported in the "Ovens Constitution", and reprinted in the Age" six hundred dancers present:-

'Country dances, quadrilles, waltzes, etc. were rapidly shuffled, whirled and figured when, as by a genuine Irish gush, the band burst forth the 'stick enlivening strains' of Donnybrook Fair. Twelve stalwart 'boys' were in an instant up and at it . . . "The band was constantly asserting their ignorance of the existence of "The Goose in the Bog", "Boys from the West", "Gone to Carlow" and "The Priest in his Boots" in the repertoire of Strauss, Mussard, or Jullien, also an elderly gent complaining because the band couldn't play "Yellow Wattle". It was held in the great hall of Beechworth and comments that it would dissipate the popular fallacy that a row is a necessary adjunct to the feast of St. Patrick. The account mentions dancers from the Woolshed, Yackandandah and even Nine Mile.'

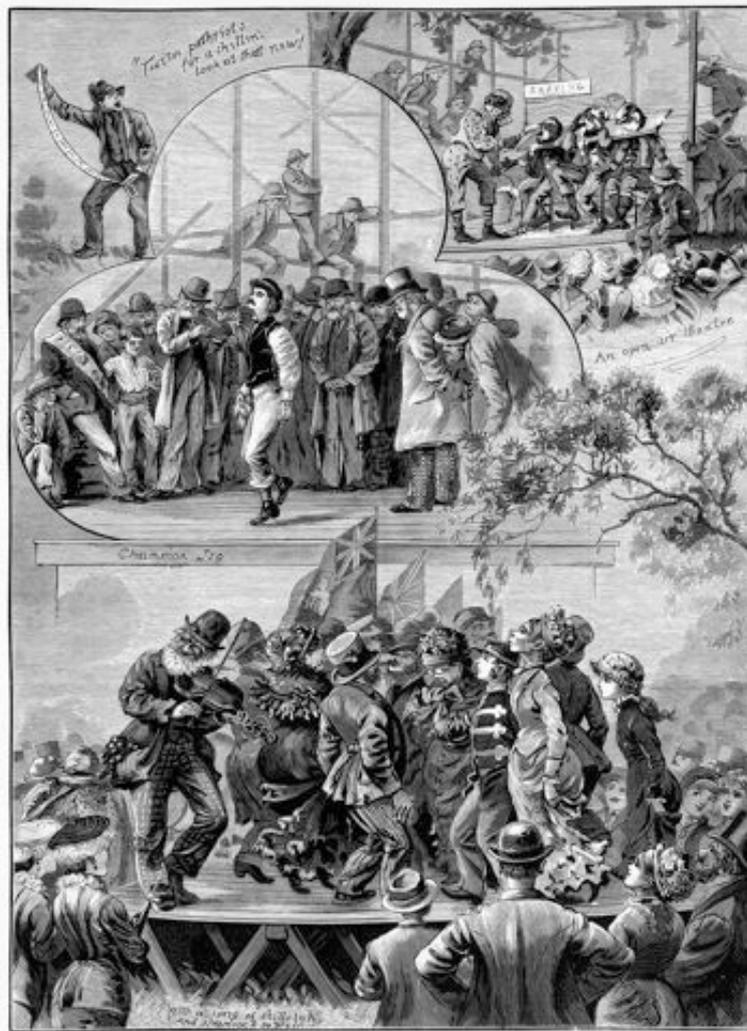
It would take extensive research to determine if things like 'The Priest in his Boots' would a country dance as described in some of the extended Regency Period dance manuals held in the British Museum, or whether the more contemporary Irish step dance of that name would have been in vogue at the time of this Australian quote.

The James Goulding manuscripts penned in Cork in 1817 and brought out to Australia in the 1840s and now held by great great granddaughter Judi Forrester of Apollo Bay, show an amazing musical repertoire with not only Irish tunes - jigs, reels and hornpipes, but numerous Scottish and European material including some that are Russian, German, Danish, an 'original Portuguese Waltz' as well as three of the Spanish Waltzes from part 7 of this series. Judi's forebears were of a Methodist background whose population was major in Cork.

On page 5 (below) the line drawing from the Illustrated Australian News (6/4/1881) of St. Patrick's Day in Melbourne shows a Country Dance or Reel with a line of 3 facing a line of 4, a lady and a man on each side in one, and a man and a lady on each side facing them but an extra man right in the centre. The caption to the picture says:-*Twelve patriots for a shillin' Look at that now! -- An open air theatre -- Champion jig -- With a sprig of shillelah and shamrock so green.* The Champion Jig caption is referring to the solo dancer above, the lower picture with four lines of three and/or four (look carefully) - I can only hazard a guess, dancing an Irish reel or country dance, perhaps a reel of 3 or 4 or 8 hand reel or an Irish equivalent of the New Highland Reel. The Swedish country dance introduced the concept of three in a line in a progressive Sicilian circle into which movements from the old Scottish Reel could be incorporated. The Highland Reel was an alternative name for the old Scottish Reel, but this is how the New Highland Reel (4 in a line) and the similar Dashing White Sergeant (3 in a line) evolved by or after mid nineteenth century.

I have checked the full article on page 74 of the paper and here are some extracts:-

"Ireland's patron saint – whether he be Irishman or Scotchman by birth – is regarded with the greatest respect and veneration all over the world – and in no place more than in Melbourne, where his anniversary is the occasion of a great national display, which assumes larger and more important proportions with every year. "Here fortunately far removed from the disquieting circumstances that are now felt in the old country, the day is regarded as nothing more than an occasion for the interchange of mutual good wishes between Celt and Saxon, and a day of recreation and enjoyment, where amid pleasures the most harmless, the bonds of sympathy and love for the "ould sod" are closer drawn.....The jig and reel dancing contests excited a great amount of



ST. PATRICK'S DAY IN MELBOURNE.

Illustration courtesy the State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Collection

enthusiasm,.... An improved platform was arranged for the contestants to show their ability, and a real Irish fiddler was there to play the most approved air as each 'took to the fiure' (sic).....The fiddlers (who we presume would feel insulted if they were called violinists) were kept busily occupied for the whole day, for the number of dancers of every age and sex was something wonderful, and the strains of Irish music kept time to by scores of busy feet was the characteristic of the day. The youth who sold the "twelve patriots" for a shilling did a roaring trade"

I can't help feeling the lower picture is not part of the competition, but a Hibernian group 'up and at it' as part of a show for the occasion. The factor that stands out in this illustration is the unquestionable style of Irish footwork, stance and bent knees that Helen O'Shea says:-

"I would be tempted to describe it as battering down on the beat, something that's really obvious in the older step-dancing styles (sean nos) that have become very popular recently."