

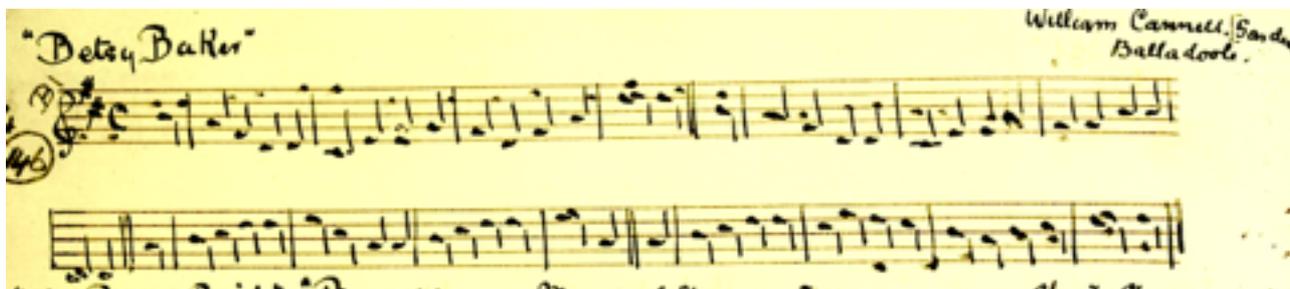
Histories and Mysteries – the secret life of traditional music in the Isle of Man

by David Speers

The tunes in the three manuscript music books that are part of the Clague Collection, held in the Manx Museum Archive, form the bulk of the traditional music recorded in the Isle of Man in the 1890's and earlier. They have not been arranged or changed in any way and are the best record of how the music sounded when it was collected.

This is the ninth in a series of articles that sets out to explore some of the links between the traditional music collected in the Isle of Man and that found in Ireland and Britain, to discover some of the hidden histories behind our traditional music, and to show that the Island has produced beautiful music to match any found elsewhere.

Betsy Baker



Betsy Baker, from the manuscript music books (Copyright Manx National Heritage)

Betsy Baker is an example of one of a number of tunes collected in the Isle of Man that takes its title from a 19th century ballad popular in Britain. One early example of a broadside containing this ballad is dated at around 1828, printed in London.

The ballad tells the story of a rejected suitor: a young farmer meets Betsy at a church service and falls for her; she has been to finishing school (signifying that she is expected by her parents to marry into gentry); she rejects him and he falls sick as a result; a doctor is called and prescribes him medicines; “thoughts of Betsy Baker” help him recover; meanwhile, she falls for an actor and runs away with him; he is sent away to London by his mother to recover but he can’t stop thinking about “cruel Betsy Baker”.

The language used in the ballad points to an early 19th century origin. The actor in the story “gammons” her into running away with him. To “gammon” someone is to deceive them, especially by distracting their attention, this meaning originating in the 18th century but well used in the early-to mid-19th century. And the doctor in the story has a “long face like a Quaker”. Although Quakerism began in the 17th century and took root in America, it was topical at the time of the ballad. Quakers in America became divided by how their faith should be expressed, resulting in the Great Separation of 1827, a newsworthy story. And, of course, ‘Quaker’ also makes a comically obvious rhyme with ‘Baker’.

The known published versions of the song and tune agree with the historical detail and date the ballad to the 1820's. 'Comic Songs' by Thomas Hudson, Fifth Collection, London, 1824, seems to be the earliest reference to Betsy Baker, followed by: 'The Universal Songster or Museum of Mirth', Volume II, London, 1826. The latter gives the air, or tune, as being: 'Head Man at Mrs Grundy's', a tune that doesn't seem to appear in any other collection. It isn't clear whether this is an earlier, or different, name for the Betsy Baker tune, or if it was a different tune for the Betsy Baker ballad. However, it is likely that it was well known at that time for it to appear as a named tune without any musical notation.

The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society attributes the ballad to Thomas Hudson, publisher of 'Comic Songs' however, since he published some thirteen volumes of these songs, he may have simply included it as a well-known example.

A broadside ballad sheet dated between 1840 and 1860 contains a ballad called: 'Mary Martin'. It gives 'Betsy Baker' as the tune to be used. As with 'Head Man at Mrs Grundy's', it is likely that the tune was by that time very well known for it to be named.

Another broadside, of about 1841, contains a song and recitation called: 'A Trip to the Harvest' that also gives 'Betsy Baker' as the tune to be used, which again suggests its widespread popularity at that time.

Both the ballad and the tune seem to have travelled to America and the character of Betsy Baker is placed in a different story in another ballad, also called 'Betsy Baker', in 'Dixon's Songs', 1842. In this, Betsy's sweetheart is taking her for a trip from Alleghany, North Carolina (or possibly Virginia, as there are two Allagheny Counties), to New Orleans through the developing south west of America.

The words in the American ballad are also in a comic tone and it is clear from the first verse that the listener must be familiar with Betsy Baker as a character:

“My sweetheart is a wonder quite,
And lately I did take her,
Her name you've heard before tonight,
Or else I do mistake her.
Others may be great and good,
On land, on sea or lake, sir.
Few names have ever fairer stood,
Than my sweet Betsy Baker”.

This is a sequel ballad, ensuring interest by continuing a well known story. Its words scan well with the Betsy Baker tune, which may mean the tune travelled with the original ballad and was later re-used for the sequel. However, there appears to be no hard evidence for this.

The tune alone appears in a manuscript collection from 1840 (image below), grandly entitled: 'Mulum in Parvo, or a Collection of Old English, Scotch, Irish & Welsh Tunes for the [a drawing of instruments follows including: pipes, fiddle, accordion, flute, whistles and what looks like the bell of a trumpet or, maybe, a clarinet] Containing Upwards of 1260 Airs Selected by John Rook'. The collection is a miscellany of tunes, including many dance tunes: marches, quicksteps, jigs,



Betsy Baker as it appears in the Rook manuscript, 1840.

reels, hornpipes, strathspeys, flings, quadrilles, waltzes and gallopades.

It contains several other tunes that appear in the Manx collections: 'Neil Gow's Farewell to Whiskey' ('Step Dance' in Clague), 'Nancy Dawson', 'Deukes dang oer my Daddy' ('Katherine's hen is dead'/'Kiark Catreney'), 'Barbara Allen', 'Pretty Girl Milking her Cow' ('O Kathleen you are Going to Leave me'), the Morpeth Rant (the first part being the same as that of 'Car Juan Nan', from Mona Douglas' collection) and the Black and the Gray (not in a Manx collection but mentioned as being played traditionally at weddings in the Island).

The tune also appears in: 'Alexander's New Scrap Book Containing 1000 Favourite Airs for the Flute, Violin or Flageolet', Volume 6, from around 1845. This is another miscellany containing song airs and dance tunes from England, Ireland and Scotland, as well as France,

Spain and other countries; tunes by composers such as Rossini and Mozart; popular song tunes, as sung by named stage performers, and a few tunes (as well as Betsy Baker) that were known in the Isle of Man: 'Come Haste to the Wedding'; the 'Lass o' Gowrie' (named as the tune to one of Tom the Dipper of Castletown's ballads).

The small overlap of tunes between these collections and what was known to have been played in the Island gives some idea of the way tunes circulated and became popular.

The song appears again later in: 'The Comic Song Book', edited by J Carpenter, London 1863 and various other collections, however the main period of its popularity seems to have been in the first half of the century.

The examples of the tune in the collections mentioned above are written in both 2/4 and 4/4. It has the feel of a polka when played instrumentally and sits well with other polkas. It was collected in the Island from William Cannell, a gardner at Balladoole near Castletown, most likely by Dr John Clague and probably in the 1890's. The tune would have been recalled by Cannell from his youth, so, with the other facts we have seen, it is reasonable to assume that its earliest popularity in the Island was around the early to middle part of the century.

Both as a tune and a ballad, Betsy Baker was by the 1840's popular enough in Britain for the tune to have been named for other songs, and it must also have also been popular in America for a sequel ballad to have been made. The tune may have been used earlier and called: 'Head Man at Mrs

Grundy's', but is that just a tune title or (more likely) was it used for a ballad of that name? How did it arrive in the Isle of Man: just as a tune, or were both tune and ballad popular? And, finally, how and when did it come to be known by William Cannell?

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Manx National Heritage for the image of 'Betsy Baker', from the Clague MS.

David Speers is the author of Manx Traditional Music for Sessions, which discusses history and revival of Manx traditional music and dance (available from the Manx National Heritage Bookshop, manxheritageshop.com). If you wish to contact the author about anything in these articles please email: manx_trad_music@yahoo.com