

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

by David Speers

The tunes in the three 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. 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 third 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.

Daunsey, or Car, ny Ferrishyn

(also: *Snieu, Queeyl, Snieu*)



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The only true reel recorded in the Clague music books is called Daunsey ny Ferrishyn, the Fairy Dance (Daunsey is spelled without the “y” in the manuscript, see above). This is a strange feature of the Manx collections and, to players of traditional music, disappointing. It is strange because historically reels were played (and danced) in the Isle of Man and were very popular in the 19th century. George Quarrie’s poem *The Melliah* (a celebration traditionally held at harvest time), for example, talks of “reel on reel, jig on jig” being played for dancers in 1860’s.

One explanation for the lack of reels could be that they weren’t known amongst the body of informants used by collectors of traditional music. However, this doesn’t make sense as those informants were aged between about 50 and 75, making them the very people who probably danced at Melliah’s such as that described by Quarrie.

Unless the people who supplied collectors with music were chosen for their lack of knowledge of dancing and dance music (very unlikely, given its popularity), the lack of reels, and dance music in general in the music books, is due to the collectors not asking for them.

Some known dance tunes did find their way into the collection. These are mainly in triple-time (for jigs or waltzes) and are song airs. An example of this being *Keep the Old Petticoat Warm*, both a popular double jig (known elsewhere as the *Rakes of Kildare* and the *Galbally Farmer*), and a bawdy ballad.

There are also a few quadruple-time tunes (for hornpipes or reels), such as Mona's Delight which, as we saw in the previous article in this series, is a dance tune that has two variations used for songs.

From this, it seems that most of the small number of dance tunes that found their way into the collection did so because they were known to the informants as song tunes. Daunsey ny Ferrishyn is an exception, as are the few tunes that are called "step dance", or have "jig" in their title.

The title Daunsey ny Ferrishyn is a direct translation into Manx Gaelic of the earliest known title of the tune, the Fairy Dance. Nathaniel Gow composed it for the Fife Hunt Ball in 1802, but it was first published as the Fairy Dance in 1809 with another tune, the Fairies Advancing, both under the title Largo's Fairy Dance (Largo is a place name in Fife). Gow was one of a family of Scottish musicians and music publishers active between the middle of the 18th and first part of the 19th century.

Perhaps because of the simplicity of the original tune it became widely popular in Britain and Ireland, and also in North America, under the names: Old Molly Hare, Grandma Blair and, in Quebec, la Ronde de Vieux. As well as travelling by aural transmission - musicians learning by ear - it was included in several printed music collections after Gow had published it.

The earliest of these is the Edinburgh Repository of Music Containing the Most Select English Scottish & Irish Airs, Reels, Strathspeys etc Arranged for the German Flute or Violin, Volume I, published in 1816. It wasn't included in some other major collections, such as George Petrie's 1851 Complete Collection of Irish Music and the Darley and McCall Collection of Traditional Irish Music (1914).

It does appear in Francis O'Neill's Irish music collections (1903 and 1907), but classified under miscellaneous tunes, and in the third volume of Francis Roche's Collection of Traditional Music, made between 1891 and 1927. As with the Edinburgh Repository, no reference to Gow is made (judging by the indexes of such collections, it was common to popular tunes with or without mentioning the composer).

Like the original tune, Roche's collection has the tune written in 2/4 time rather than using 4/4 time more common for reels. Also in Roche, the tune is a little more elaborate than either the original tune or Daunsey ny Ferrishyn. This points to a feature of traditional fiddle music whereby the tune is embellished and varied to the point where, especially in Scotland, the variations become formalised into new parts.

In the Isle of Man, the tune has become known as Car ny Ferrishyn (the Fairy Reel). Mona Douglas, collecting in the Isle of Man from about 1910, recalled hearing the tune played to a dance called Car ny Ferrishyn.

She was well aware of its wide popularity, and later recalled hearing it being used for a dance in Donegal. Even though there was a wish amongst those involved in collecting and reviving traditional music and dance to find uniquely Manx material, Mona decided to use it when publishing her reconstruction of the dance she had seen

as a child. Her reason was that “it would be a pity to separate a dance and the air that are definitely linked together traditionally because the same air may be used for other dances elsewhere”. The dance, with the tune, appeared in *Seven Manx Folk Dances: Dances and Airs collected from Traditional Sources by Mona Douglas - Set II (1953)*.

The late Breandán Breathnach, author and authority on Irish traditional music, and others, have drawn comparisons between the Fairy Dance and the reel *Wind That Shakes the Barley*, suggesting that the latter was used by Gow as a start point for his own composition.

The second part of *Daunsey/Car ny Ferrishyn* forms the melody of the song known in the Isle of Man as *Sniue, Queeyl, Sniue (Spin, Wheel, Spin)*. Anne Gilchrist, writing in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* in 1928, recorded the fact that the song accompanied a *cante fable* in England and the Isle of Man (a *cante fable* is a story with a moral, interspersed with a song telling part of that story).

Gilchrist gave two Manx versions of the tune to *Snieu, Queeyl, Snieu*, one from the *Clague* music books and the other from *A W Moore's Manx Ballads*. Both of these tunes are close to the second part of Gow's *Fairy Dance*, and, of course, *Daunsey ny Ferrishyn*

She also gave the tune used for an English version of the *cante fable* which she had collected in *Altrincham, Cheshire* in 1872. This has the same elements of the *Fairy Reel* but the first four bars are not related and the next eight bars repeat themselves before the tune is resolved in the final four bars:

THIRD VERSION.
[SALLY WATERS.]

Noted by A. G. Gilchrist. SAME TUNE, SUNG AT
ALTRINCHAM, CHESHIRE, 1870.

Rise, Sal - ly Wa - ters, rise if you can, Rise up,.... Sal - ly,
for a young man; Choose to the East, choose to the West,
Choose to the ve - ry one that you love best.

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Gilchrist speculated that the common features of this version and the Manx ones was the result of the long association between the Stanley family, Earls of Derby, in Lancashire, and the Isle of Man (they also being rulers of the Island for nearly two hundred and fifty years, between 1405 and 1651).

However, the English version has been elaborated away from the original tune, whereas the Manx versions are similar to the original. The English version must have been based on the original version, or something close to that. So, if the tune travelled during the Stanley period, it must have been from the Island to Lancashire (and, presumably from there to Cheshire, where Gilchrist collected it).

A different link that might indicate how the tune travelled is that between Gow and his patron, John Murray, 4th Duke of Atholl, who was also Lord of Mann. Also, another Gow composition, Farewell to Whiskey, by Nathaniel's father Neil, is also in the Clague books under the title Step Dance.

Gow senior wrote Farewell to Whiskey in 1799 as a lament. The title is a sardonic reference to the temporary cessation of whiskey caused by a failure of the Highland barley harvest. It was later played as a polka in Ireland, and is still known there as a polka tune.

There appears to be no evidence that Nathaniel Gow ever visited the Island with his patron the Duke of Atholl. However it is possible that the Duke travelled there with one or more musicians familiar with the Gow's music, or printed copies of the music. Perhaps we will never know for sure if this connection was the reason for both these popular Gow tunes becoming known in the Isle of Man but it is a tantalising possibility.

Next time, we will look at the history and mystery of the Manx tunes having the title Thurot and Thurot and Elliott.

Acknowledgments

Manx National Heritage for the image of Daunsey ny Ferrishyn from the Clague MS
The English Folk Dance and Song Society for Sally Waters.

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) and via manxmusic.com

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Published in April KMJ 2014