Spain: Vol. IV of The Alan Lomax Collection, World Library of Folk and Primitive Music (Columbia), Rounder Records 11661-1744-2 1999

Scholar/performer Judith Cohen lives in Toronto when she isn't collecting in Spain and Portugal, or performing internationally.

Spain: Galicia, fall 2001
Spain: Aragon/Valencia, fall 2001
Spain: Extremadura: spring 2002

Some books by Alan Lomax:

1946. Folk Songs: USA (with John A. Lomax), New York, Duell, Sloan and Pierce, re-editado Best Loved American Folk Songs, Grosset and Dunlap 1950

Mr. Jelly Roll, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pierce; re-editado Pantheon 1993.

1950. The Folk Songs of North America, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday 1967


1977. The Land Where the Blues Began, New York, Pantheon Premio “National Book Critics Did You Know?

The Canadian Folk Music Bulletin exchanges copies with other publications, such as:

Ballad of the Month

MacPherson's Farewell

(by Andrew Kantz)

MacPherson's Farewell

Ballad of the Month

What led him to his unfortunate demise?

MacPherson was born in Banffshire about 1675, the son of a beautiful gypsy woman and a Highland laird, MacPherson of Invershire, in Inverness-shire. He was raised by his father, who unfortunately died young, after which MacPherson went to live with his mother (whose good looks he had apparently inherited, though perhaps he acquired his immense physical presence and strength from his father). As he grew to adulthood he developed a fondness for the wild life and became the leader of a "lawless gypsy roving band," establishing a reputation as a freebooter who operated in the Scottish counties of Aberdeen, Banff and Moray. Highwaymen and freebooters were certainly not rare in 17th century Scotland, especially in the Highlands, and once he was captured and executed it is likely he would have been quickly forgotten, but MacPherson insured his lasting fame with a grand gesture on the scaffold at Market Cross in Banff on the cold November morning of his execution.

Although several stories of his end differ in details, the main threads relate that MacPherson stepped onto the platform with his fiddle in his hand, took up his bow and proceeded to play his last communication to the world, his rant (sometimes it is said he played three tunes: "MacPherson's Rant," "MacPherson's Pibroch" and "MacPherson's Farewell") at the conclusion of which he offered his violin "to anyone in the crowd who would think well of him." However, either no
one was brave enough to take it from the hands of a condemned man, or he had no well-wisher at his execution, and no one came forward. The outlaw looked sorrowfully about the crowd, then lifted the fiddle and broke it over his knee in a grand gesture of contempt. Some versions say that he dashed the instrument over his knee, and that he was carried to the gallows, where he composed and played on the Market Cross gallows.

Despite this, the MacPherson Museum at Newtonmore displays today the broken remains of an old fiddle, supposedly the very one the brigand played on the Market Cross gallows.

Early broadside ballads about the demise of the freebooter make little mention of any untoward drama regarding his execution, and say nothing at all about fiddling. The Last Words of James MacPherson, Murdered, a sheet printed about 1705, mentions nothing on the topic of fiddling, however, a later version set to music (the title is appended "To its own proper tune"). Mary Anne Alburger (Scottish Fiddlers and Their Music) insists it is quite likely that the tune was about 1705, mentions nothing on the topic of fiddling, however, a later version set to music. She believes it have been a MacPherson original. She believes it was acquainted, but with none of his gang.

However, he was at last taken by the common finisher of the law about 1678. As he was carried to the gallows, he played a fine tune of his own composing on the bagpipe, which retains the name of MacPherson's tune to this day. Elements of the story were incorporated into the folklore of the new land, although curiously, the actual song "MacPherson's Farewell" did not enter North American tradition, even in varying forms. Few versions have tradition was the memory of a condemned fiddler who fled to play his last tune on the gallows, and this melody surfaces attached to several tunes in American traditional tradition, the most notable of which is the title "Callahan's Farewell." The tune is often called "Callahan's Bag," "Lass of Callahan's," "Lass of Callahan's," and "Old Sport" (the latter title is from fiddler Alberth Hasby, of Virginia). "Callahan" was collected in tradition in the uplands regions of several south-central states, including Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. In addition, the tune and "Callahan" story were collected in the Mid-West states of Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma, presumably having been transported by migrants from the Appalachians. Usually played cross-tuned, it was regarded as one of the older pieces in the fiddler's repertoire and one which predates the "strong bend" tunes of that featured harp/tin whistle combinations (Tom Carter & Blount Oseen, 1976). Bobby Fulcher (1986) agrees that the melody is old and says it belongs to a group of archaic tunes characterized by cross tunes, elaborate bowings and economic melodic line. "Three dreaming maidens, finely favored tunes were not to be danced to, or accompanied by other instruments, but just made interesting listening." Clyde Davenport (1902), of Monticello, Kentucky, had the tune from his father, who picked it up from his father tunes up from a man named Will Hippe, "an old-timer" from Rock Creek, Tennessee (who is remembered for being buried with his fiddle in his coffin). Further west, the title (as "Last of the Callahans") appears in a list of traditional Ozark Mountain fiddle tunes collected and maintained she was a Callahan descendent and, Folk Songs soon after World War II. The writer correspondent to the Archive of American Folklore soon after World War II. The writer maintained she was a Callahan descendant and that her family, which included theCallahan story really happened in Clay County, Kentucky, though other locals also claim the honor. One such elderly source, Oscar Parks of Deuchars, Indiana, recounted the song to Alan Louis in 1958. Parks was originally from Livingston County, Kentucky, and said he had the tale from an old man in nearby Jackson County. According to Parks, Callahan, whose first name was John, was being hanged for killing a man in the course of a feud. Callahan offered his fiddle to anyone who would play it on the gallows and "let down with him and play that tune" and when no one dared for fear of being involved in the feud, Callahan "beatied" the instrument and played it, and they's a story goes with it. Well, they ask him if he wanted any request, any last request? And he was a fiddler so he said 'he'd like to play one more tune. So they give him his fiddle and he set on the end of his casket and played that tune. And he said, "If they anybody can play that tune better 'n I can, I'll give'm my fiddle." The story goes that nobody tried, and he busted his fiddle over the end of his casket.

Callahan stood as a symbol of the Callahan story "really happened" in Clay County, Kentucky, though other locals also claim the honor. One such elderly source, Oscar Parks of Deuchars, Indiana, recounted the song to Alan Louis in 1958. Parks was originally from Livingston County, Kentucky, and said he had the tale from an old man in nearby Jackson County. According to Parks, Callahan, whose first name was John, was being hanged for killing a man in the course of a feud. Callahan offered his fiddle to anyone who would play it on the gallows and "let down with him and play that tune" and when no one dared for fear of being involved in the feud, Callahan "beatied" the instrument and played it, and they's a story goes with it. Well, they ask him if he wanted any request, any last request? And he was a fiddler so he said 'he'd like to play one more tune. So they give him his fiddle and he set on the end of his casket and played that tune. And he said, "If they anybody can play that tune better 'n I can, I'll give'm my fiddle." The story goes that nobody tried, and he busted his fiddle over the end of his casket. Another version of the tale was supplied by a correspondent to the Archive of American Folklore soon after World War II. The writer maintained she was a Callahan descendant and that her family, which included theCallahan story really happened in Clay County, Kentucky, though other locals also claim the honor. One such elderly source, Oscar Parks of Deuchars, Indiana, recounted the song to Alan Louis in 1958. Parks was originally from Livingston County, Kentucky, and said he had the tale from an old man in nearby Jackson County. According to Parks, Callahan, whose first name was John, was being hanged for killing a man in the course of a feud. Callahan offered his fiddle to anyone who would play it on the gallows and "let down with him and play that tune" and when no one dared for fear of being involved in the feud, Callahan "beatied" the instrument and played it, and they's a story goes with it. Well, they ask him if he wanted any request, any last request? And he was a fiddler so he said 'he'd like to play one more tune. So they give him his fiddle and he set on the end of his casket and played that tune. And he said, "If they anybody can play that tune better 'n I can, I'll give'm my fiddle." The story goes that nobody tried, and he busted his fiddle over the end of his casket.

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was brave enough to take it to the hands of a condemned man, or he had no better wishes in attendance, or no one wished to implicate themselves by receiving the instrument, and so no one came forward. The outlaw looked scornfully down and cast off his headlong off the scaffold into oblivion, and over the head of his executioner and then flung himself into the grave.

The MacPherson legend has been a part of Scottish lore for centuries and is strongly identified with that country, however, D.K. Wilgus (in his article "Fiddler's Farewell: the Legend of the Hanged Fiddler," 1965) finds evidence of the existence of an earlier MacPherson in Ireland with an almost identical story. He cites a chapbook called The Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen and Rapparees, from Redmond O' Hanlon to Cahier Nu Gupplir, printed in Dublin in the early 19th century, that contains a story about a man named "Passages of the Life of Strong John Macpherson, a notorious Robber." It relates that the Irish highwayman had been sentenced to death and was awaiting execution, and had requested an instrument over his knee. "Diger Janke was the name of an old fiddler who settled in the central uplands region of the southern part of the country: the Appalachians. A Canadian Folksinger BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne
He then handed the violin to the sheriff, who wished to play "Callahan," and if anyone in the places. The sentiment of the fiddle's maker, as recorded in the Burkesville Herald Almanac for 1899, was to play "Bonaparte's Retreat." After the tune ended, the men were up in front of a tree and ordered by firing squad. Grooms' wife later collected the bodies and buried them in a single grave, marked by a headstone that is visible today. It reads simply "Murdered." A local name for "Bonaparte's Retreat" in "Grooms' Tune." Another Kentucky tune that has a rather sketchy end-of-life tale is "The Last of Callahan," a crossed-out (ARAD) piece in a major recorded for the Library of Congress in 1937 by both Royce Asheville and Lenorah (Hazard, Kentucky). It was collected by Bruce Greene from the playing of Hiram Stamper who claimed it was "learned from Civil War veterans," and who told Greene that it had to do with a soldier who was taken up a holler and shot during the Civil War days when raiders were prevalent in the region. The tale bears a clear resemblance to the North Carolina tale above. However, Morgan County, Kentucky fiddler Stanford Kelly maintained that Stamper was an old man who on his deathbed asked to play one last tune on the fiddle before he expired. He was given his fiddle and proceeded to play. A man was outside his window playing a garden and overheard the old fiddler's farewell tune, and being a fiddler himself he quickly memorized the tune and gave it the name it bears. Finally, we come to two Gypsy tunes in the repertoire of the famous Louisiana fiddler Dennis McGee, paired by him on one of his 78 RPM records "Value of a Gypsy" said to have been played by a condemned soldier, one Guibulje, in the presence of a general as a last request before his execution in front of a firing squad, an event McGee believed happened during the American Civil War. The general agreed to the request and the soldier's handcuffs were removed, after which the condemned man sat on his coffin and proceeded to play a Cajun waltz now known as "Grooms' Tune."}

References:


Editor: This article has been reprinted, with permission, from Fiddler Magazine, PO Box 101, North Sydney NS, B2A 3M1. Editor/Phanter, Mary Lorraine Holland has put together a wonderful quarterly, also printed on recycled paper, and one which I recommend most highly.

Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called Ragged but Right (1987) and as the lead singer of the online tune encyclopedia, "The Fiddler's Companion". Currently he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions, when not researching fiddle tunes.

[The author wishes to thank Jerry Bloch, Jeff Tilton, Geoffrey Castrell, Henrik Norbeck and Leonard Solhman for information and assistance with this article.]
He then handed the violin to the sheriff, and if anyone in the crowd that day (and it seems that at least one person other than the just executed individual) would be given the fiddle. Someone did come forward to play “Callahan,” and afterwards the fiddle was transferred to the new owner and the event proceeded. Sometimes the ending of the story has Callahan break the fiddle over his knee before he steps up to the gallows, just as in the MacPherson legend.

Some eastern Kentucky and West Virginia versions credit the event to the late 1860s, and place the event in Madison, Boone County, West Virginia, dated around 1869

Maxine Tisdell (1907) published a version of the piece played by Oklahomans and Arkansans under the title “The Last of Callahan” with the particularly Wild West story twist that Callahan was a horse thief and a murderer? and a fiddler? whose career came to an untimely end in 1845. It seems that Pennington, by a Kentucky visitor as he played for a camp dance in Lamar County, was recaptured, tried and condemned for his crimes. Similar to MacPherson or Callahan, at the gallows he asked for his fiddle and played a tune he composed called “Pennington’s Farewell.”

Our Singing Country

Edward Alonzo Pennington was a Kentucky passer of counterfeit money, a horse thief and a murderer? and a fiddler? whose career came to an untimely end in 1845. It seems that Pennington, had the hubris to publicly exercise his well-known talent on the fiddle and was recognized one night by a Kentucky visitor as he played for a camp dance in Lamar County. As the visitor realized it would be his last, and local legend records he chose to play “Bonaparte’s Retreat.” After the tune ended, the men were stood up in front of an oak and executed by firing squad. Pennington’s wife Eliza later collected the bodies and buried them in a single grave, marked by a pine headstone that is visible today. It reads simply “Murdered.” A local name for “Bonaparte’s Retreat” in “Grouse Tune.”

Another Kentucky tune that has a rather sketchy said-of-life tale is “The Last of Simmerson,” a crossed-out (ARAD) piece in a major recorded for the Library of Congress in 1957 by both Lloyd Ashley (Hyden, Kentucky) and Luther Strong (Hazard, Kentucky). It was collected by Bruce Cohen from a man in Georgia who was descended from the playing of Isaac Stumper who claimed it was learned from Civil War veterans, and who told Cohen that it had to do with a soldier who was taken up a boulder and shot during the Civil War days when rascals were prevalent in the region. The tune bears a close resemblance to the North Carolina tale above. However, Morgan County, Kentucky fiddler Sanford Kelly maintained that Pennington was an old man who on his deathbed asked to play one last tune on the fiddle before he expired. He was given his fiddle and proceeded to play. A man was outside his window playing a garden and overhead the old fiddler’s farewell tune, and being a fiddler himself he quickly memorized the tune and gave it the name it bears.

Finally, we come to two Cajun tunes in the repertoire of the famous Louisiana fiddler Dennis McGee, passed on by him of one of his 78 RPM recordings. “Coleman’s March” was said to have been played by a condemned soldier, one Guilbeau, in the presence of a general as a last request before his execution in front of a firing squad. An event McGee believed happened during the American Civil War. The general agreed to the request and the soldier’s hands were removed, after which the condemned man sat on his coffin and proceeded to play a Cajun Waltz now known by his name. There is a twist in this story, however, perhaps reflective of Cajun courtesy, as soon as the condemned soldier finished his tunes, he asked the general to return the Sawyer by playing in turn for him. The general complied, took up the bow and played “Topolect’s Waltz.”

Our Singing Country

The Civil War is the setting for several condemned fiddle tales. One is also based on recorded history in western North Carolina. In the last days of the conflict just after the surrender at Appomattox Court House, although wood had not arrived yet? Henry Grooms, along with his brother and brother-in-law, were stand by the Confederate Home Guard below Mount Sterling Gap. The border country had been a refuge for blackouts and bushwackers, and the local farms had been repeatedly raided by Union troops and by ruffians with no allegiance. The nearby town of Waynesville had recently been terrorized by a raid of the countryside was extremely tense, but to no one knew exactly why it is that these particular men were waylaid. As the Guard and their prisoners marched toward Cataloochee Valley, Grooms, clutching his fiddle and bow and hanged for his crimes he was later, and local legend records he chose to play “Bonaparte’s Retreat.” After the tune ended, the men were stood up in front of an oak and executed by firing squad. Grooms’ wife Eliza later collected the bodies and buried them in a single grave, marked by a pine headstone that is visible today. It reads simply “Murdered.” A local name for “Bonaparte’s Retreat” in “Grouse Tune.”

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This sentimentally exchange of skull seems a far cry from the last defiance of a MacPherson or Callahan, but is perhaps what led McGee to associate the pieces with the Civil War, for it demonstrates a kind of Victorian gallantry that, in romantic fantasy at least, has become attached to the conflicts.

[The author wishes to thank Larry Block, Jeff Tilton, Geoffrey Castell, Heinrich Norbeck and Lenora Shindam for information and assistance with this article.]

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