

# The Wandering Minstrel

**Séamus Ennis**

*Uilleann Pipes*

- 1 *Two Double Jigs*: **The Wandering Minstrel / Jackson's Morning Brush**
- 2 *Two Hornpipes*: **The Boys of Bluehill / Dunphy's Hornpipe**
- 3 *Slow Air and Slip-jig*: **The Glen-Nephin Cuckoo / The Little Fair Cannavans**
- 4 *Double Jig*: **The Frieze Britches**
- 5 *Two Reels*: **The Flags of Dublin / The Wind that Shakes the Barley**
- 6 *Two Hornpipes*: **The Little Stack of Barley / Cronin's Hornpipe**
- 7 *Reel*: **The New Demesne**
- 8 *Slow Air and Set Dance*: **The Blackbird**
- 9 *Three Double Jigs*: **Gillan's Apples / The Walls of Liscarroll / The Stone in the Field**
- 10 *Slow Air*: **Molly O'Malone**
- 11 *Reel*: **Kiss the Maid Behind the Barrel**
- 12 *Double Jig*: **Happy to Meet and Sorry to Part**

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My earliest conscious memory of familiarity with **The Wandering Minstrel** is a 78-record I had of the famous Michael Coleman's fiddle-playing during my mid-teens, although I must have heard my late father play it through the years. As undoubtedly Coleman did, I select its title as applicable to myself. It appears in the O'Neill collection *The Dance Music of Ireland: 1001 Gems* as 'The Merry Maiden'. Piper Jackson's **Morning Brush**, could not have been overlooked in his naming one of his numerous compositions, for in old times the piper was regarded and dressed as a gentleman, in dark suiting, often complete with top-hat, and the dust raised by last night's dancers would be noticeable. To me, the melody expresses satisfaction with the enjoyment of the previous night and hope for as good again or better to come, whilst carrying proud but wistful nuances.

A colourful and popular melody, with a colourful name, **The Boys of Bluehill** lends itself to the variations and adornments of the old pipers from whom my father culled it. Bluehill is a place-name in Co. Cavan and I am told that there is another Bluehill in Co. Cork. **Dunphy's Hornpipe** is named in honour of the Chicago piper who gave the tune to James O'Neill (Francis O'Neill's 'notator'). The hornpipe had no name, so O'Neill named it after the player they got it from. Francis O'Neill has a note 'This unpublished tune had some circulation in County Kilkenny, for Father Fielding also we found, had heard his mother liltin' it.' (F. O'Neill, *Irish Folk Music*, Chicago 1910, p115).

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This is a pastoral song of unrequited love which belongs to Connacht, our Western Province. The bard refers to his loved one as **The Glen-Nephin Cuckoo** (Cuaichin Ghleann Néifin) with the '-een' diminutive suffix, denoting fondness and attachment. A sung version may be heard on the Topic record 'Grand Airs of Connemara'.

A point of interest here is that in all instances where I heard the song, the verses were sung to the second couplet of the tune repeated, save in one instance where the singer had retained the full quatrain of the tune for each four-line verse. This also occurred with the same man in the case of another song which had lost the first half of its tune, everywhere else. He is Colm ó Caoidheain of Glynsk, Cashel Conamara, now either in or approaching his 80th year, from whose memory I noted down 212 songs and snatches, around thirty years ago. The Slip-jig (9/8 time-signature) which follows, is from the same source, but was lilted with words, as an infant-dandling song, Cannavan being a surname. Colm regards it as the folk-composition of a woman who was tending a neighbour's two children in their absence - an old-time baby-sitter's occupational song!

**The Frieze Britches**, arbitrarily named, is a pipers' elaboration on a straight-forward two-strain courting-lilt in Gaelic: 'who is down there that is tapping at the window?' (thrice), 'It is I, myself,' says Connla. 'Connla, my love, don't come any nearer me' etc. Joe Heaney sings it on Topic's *Irish Traditional Songs in Gaelic and English*. 'The Frieze Britches' ranks among the 'Big Jigs', having five strains or parts.

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I do not know of anyone but my late father who played **The Flags of Dublin**, culled by him from the old pipers. **The Wind that Shakes the Barley** is a well-known melody and is the vehicle of some lyrics such as ‘The Donavons’ and another, much older, ‘If I were a young maid’ origin unknown, which I noted down from the late Mrs Elizabeth Cronin, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, who was a vast repository of folksong in both English and Gaelic, R.I.P.

Much favoured for its attractive melodic structure **The Little Stack of Barley** (‘An Staicin Eorna’) has been made, the vehicle of several lyrics, such as ‘Kerry Long Ago’, and is the tune to which couples danced in polka style around a room or hall, a dance named after it since the beginning of this century. As with track 3, the diminutive suffix ‘-een’ in this title is one of endearment, since it refers to the amount of barley especially designated for distilling purposes. **Cronin’s Hompipe** is from the fiddle playing of the late Padruig O’Keefe from Gleanntan, near Castleisland in East Kerry, though I have taken the liberty of introducing some of the second part of another named ‘Callaghan’s Hompipe’ which O’Keefe nearly always played in the same breath, so to speak. Callaghan remains unidentified in bygone obscurity, but was undoubtedly a player of East Kerry. Cronin was probably Edward Cronin of Tipperary, one of O’Neill’s best informants.

As a title **The New Demesne** speaks for itself and was very probably devised and the tune composed by a nobleman’s aspirant or established piper, since it calls for some advanced piping skill. It is thus my father played it and is looked upon as one of the big reels.

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I was disappointed, some time ago now, to learn that **The Blackbird** is the tune of a song about a historical figure (James II) secretly so named and not the feathered songster. The tune would certainly be older and is likely to have been an ancient harpist’s composition. Converted to dancing rhythm it is one to which specifically set steps are performed.

The Double-Jig(6/8 time-signature), is said to be the oldest of our dance-measures. John Gillan was a Chicago business man with a manuscript collection of Irish tunes, several of which found their way ultimately into O’Neill’s publications. One of the jigs in Gillan’s collection was named *Apples in Winter*, but as another jig of that name had already been published O’Neill retitled the Gillan MS tune, to avoid confusion. (F. O’Neill *Irish Folk Music*, p 93). Likewise **The Walls of Liscarroll** are respectfully preserved from oblivion as is **The Stone in the Field**, probably a resting-, meeting-, chatting-, or trysting-place in some obscure spot in Co. Longford, whence hailed James McCrone, R.I.P., a piper who played and so named it for me. Liscarroll is in Co. Cork, about 10 miles N W of Mallow. Liscarroll Castle, now a ruin, is a very early Anglo-Norman fortress and has a massive keep flanked by two square and four round towers of extraordinary strength, worthy of preservation if only in a tune-title.

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**Molly O'Malone** is the tune of a classical tragic folk-ballad in Gaelic, indigenous to North-West Conamara, in which, after opening verses of pastoral courtship and devotion, the murder by her lover of a pregnant girl and the subsequent appearance of her ghost to warn him of his imminent arrest are disclosed in a subtle *semi-entendu* sequence. It ends on a note of his mother's grief over his pending execution. The tune and lyric are known to but few today and I regard them as a happy, fortuitous survival and one of the rarest.

**Kiss the Maid Behind the Barrel** is another of the big reels, calling for advanced piping skill and having more than two parts or strains - in this case four. As one would expect from the title, an anecdote tells how it was named but does not call for much inventive imagination.

**Happy to Meet and Sorry to Part.** An attractive double jig (6/8) selected for its name as a farewell-piece, my father frequently played in finalising a recital. I offer it here as my note of Adieu.

*Séamus Ennis*



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