



TRADITIONAL MUSIC ON THE HAMMER DULCIMER

John Rea

- 1 Highlands: **Whistle o'er the Lave o't/The Braes of Tulimet** and reel: **Scudding Through the Whins**
- 2 Jigs: **Bundle and Go/The Jug o' Punch**
- 3 Reels: **The Galway Reel/Dinny O'Brien's Reel**
- 4 Jigs: **The Ladies of France/Jackson's Trip to Aghrim/Jackson's Return from Dover**
- 5 Hornpipes: **The Belfast Hornpipe/The Rights of Man**
- 6 Reels: **The Sailor on the Rope/The Bonny Bunch of Roses**
- 7 Set Dance: **The Three Sea Captains**
- 8 Jig and Strathspey: **Kitty's Fancy/Lady Anne Hope**
- 9 Reels: **The Boys of Ballycastle/The Five Mile Heat**
- 10 Hornpipes: **The Mountain Hornpipe/The Kingston Hornpipe**
- 11 Jigs: **The Kinnegad Slashers/The Tenpenny Bit**
- 12 Hornpipe and Jig: **The Plains of Boyle/Jackson's Slippers**
- 13 Reels: **Roaring Mary/Tim Moloney**
- 14 Set Dance and Highland: **St. Patrick's Day/Duncan Davidson**



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THE MAN

John Rea was born and reared in the Glens of Antrim. After nineteen years as a deck hand on the tug boats in Belfast harbour, he recently returned and now spends most of his time back in his home village of Glenarm. He also has more time to play the dulcimer.

John was the youngest of ten children, and all the six surviving boys were taught to play the fiddle by their father. In 1924, however, he had a dulcimer built for John and that became his instrument. John's older brother, Alex, was a carpenter and the father arranged for him to take the plan from one owned by James Davidson of Buckna, a village between Glenarm and Ballymena. Another brother, Willie, learned it and he passed on his knowledge to John. It is that same instrument that he plays today.

The dulcimer seems to have been a fairly common instrument in the Co. Antrim area. Perhaps it was originally introduced by homecoming sailors. Being a coastal county, a high proportion of the male population of Co. Antrim, especially the Glens, go to sea for at least part of their lives. Indeed, John himself is an example of this process.

John's father was not only a big influence in his choice of instrument, but the tunes he played and the musical company he kept had, naturally, a great effect on John's repertoire. For example he plays a lot of jigs attributed to the 18th century musician Piper Jackson. (See also Drops of Brandy Topic TSDL287). Other musicians may play one or two, but Jackson's jigs are an obvious and important part of John's repertoire. These tunes he has from his father. Much of his other music came from friends of his father. There is also a big Scottish influence in the music he plays. I think it would be true to say that this is generally the case with Antrim traditional musicians. The reason is a simple and obvious one. County Antrim, right into the mists of the past, has had deep historical, commercial and cultural ties with Scotland.

Whistle o'er the Lave o't/The Braes of Tulimet Highlands/Scudding through the Whins Reel

The first two tunes here are Scottish, as befits a musician from Co. Antrim. Both these tunes are in Kerr's "First Collection of Merry Melodies", the first is classified as a strathspey and the second as a schottische. Tom Anderson tells me that technically speaking a "strathspey" is a type of tune whereas a Highland schottische is a dance, though now the phrases have become confused and interchangeable. In Ireland both tunes are "straightened out" slightly and called "highlands" or "flings".

Whistle o'er the Lave o't takes its title from the poem that Burns put to it:-

"First when Maggy was my care,
Heaven I thought was in her air,
Now we're married - speir nae mair,
But whistle o'er the lave o't."

(speir = ask; lave = rest)

The reel came to his father via a fiddler, local to Glenarm, Stewart Martin. John's father told him that Stewart was an old man when he learned it from him - "he was the remains of a great fiddler".

Bundle and Go/The Jug o' Punch Jigs

More tunes he learned from his father. John's father often played with another fiddler, Davy Rea (no relation). Davy's mother lilted many tunes to this duo when they were together and many tunes came to them this way. Both are oldish melodies. **Bundle and Go**, which perhaps belongs to Scotland, was known in the 18th century and **The Jug o' Punch** is in the early 19th century manuscript of P. Carew where it is described as being based on an older tune called *Bridget Astore*. It is best known as a song with words adapted by A.P. Graves (father of Robert Graves the poet) published in 1897 and familiarised particularly by the McPeake family.

The Galway Reel/Dinny O’Brien’s Reel Reels

The first John learned from a record of James Morrison. Morrison came from Sligo, a fiddler, and was a contemporary of Coleman; indeed went to the U.S.A. at the same time as Coleman. On Morrison’s record the Galway reel was preceded by *The Girl That Broke My Heart*. The second he heard at a session in Belfast. It was written down for him by Liam Donnelly.

The Ladies of France/Jackson’s Trip to Aughrim/Jackson’s Return from Dover Jigs

These three tunes come from John’s father. As already noted, he played a lot of jigs attributed to Piper Jackson. John says “I don’t know much about him except he was a gentleman piper and played a lot in the big houses. Whoever he was he was a man of music.” In fact he was a celebrated fiddler as well as a piper and a man of considerable landed property in the neighbourhood of Ballingarry, Co. Limerick. He was a prolific composer of dance tunes - jigs in particular many of which he published as “Jackson’s Celebrated Tunes” (Dublin, 1774).

The Belfast Hornpipe/The Rights of Man Hornpipes

The first tune John learned when he was a young boy. He thinks he got it out of a book. It is to be found in both O’Neill collections but John’s setting is not quite as written there. **The Rights of Man** came to him from another local musician William McNeill, who played a lot with his father... “If you told him you liked a tune he played it half the night.” **The Rights of Man** is affectionately named after the tract by Thomas Paine, published in 1792, which Wolfe Tone described as “the Koran” to radical Irishmen at a time when popular sympathy was strong for the French Revolution.

The Sailor on the Rope/The Bonny Bunch of Roses Reels

These came to John’s father from James Elliot whom he heard playing first at harvest dances. His father was a young man when Elliot died.

The Three Sea Captains Set-dance

Learned from “a notebook” called “The Irish Fiddler”. It is also in Francis O’Neill’s “Dance Music of Ireland” (Chicago, 1907, new edition 1965) where it is no. 961. O’Neill, who thought very highly of the tune, had it from a colleague in the Chicago police, Sgt. James O’Neill. There is a version of it in A. McGoun’s “Repository of Scots and Irish Airs” (Glasgow c. 1790).

Kitty’s Fancy Jig/Lady Anne Hope Strathspey

The double jig is to be found in O’Neill’s “Dance Music of Ireland” where it is no. 46. John called the second tune a strathspey and not a “highland” as is so often the case in Ireland. It is interesting that he keeps closer to the strathspey rhythm in this tune than he does in those he calls “highlands”.

The Boys of Ballycastle/The Five Mile Heat Reels

Two more tunes that came from Davy Rea’s mother (see notes, track 2).

The Mountain Hornpipe/The Kingston Hornpipe

Hornpipes

Both tunes again come from John’s father. The first is called *The Greencastle* in O’Neill’s collection but John insists on his father’s name for it. O’Neill considered it “one of the best traditional tunes” in his collection. He had it from a Limerick flute player, James Moore, in 1875.

The Kinnegad Slashers/The Tenpenny Bit Jigs

Two well known jigs here. O'Neill has various alternative names for the first. *The Land of Sweet Erin, The Powers of Whiskey, Bannocks of Barley Meal*. The tune seems to have been first published in 1804 in O'Farrell's "Pocket Companion for the Irish or Union Pipes, Vol.3". **The Tenpenny Bit** seems to have no relationship to the two tunes given that name by O'Neill in his "Music of Ireland". It is however, the tune commonly known by that title.

The Plains of Boyle Hornpipe/Jackson's Slippers Jig

John had the first from the printed collection called "The Irish Fiddler". The second is another of Piper Jackson's compositions that came through his father.

Roaring Mary/Tim Moloney Reels

John learnt the first tune from an old 78 rpm record that was in the house. He can't remember who played it but it was probably Coleman. The second reel was written out for him by fellow Comhaltas Ceolt oiri Eireann member, Liam Donnelly, of Belfast.

St. Patrick's Day Set-dance/Duncan Davidson Highland

Both these tunes were learnt when John was young. Despite the sound of its title **St. Patrick's Day** was first published in England in Rutherford's "Two Hundred Country Dances" (1748).

Robin Morton

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