

Aboriginal fiddling in the North: the two traditions

Anne Lederman

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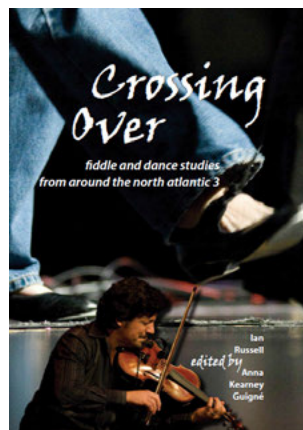
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

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Aboriginal fiddling in the North: the two traditions

ANNE LEDERMAN

This is a preliminary report, undertaken initially under the auspices of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Evidence so far indicates two distinct fiddle and dance traditions: one active throughout the First Nations communities of the Mackenzie Delta, and one further south in the Métis communities around Great Slave Lake. The first is characterized by more asymmetric tunes, greater retention of older dance forms, faster tempos, and a ‘one-step’ approach to jigging; whereas the second has sequences of more distinct jigging steps and stronger ties to prairie Métis traditions. However, in both areas, the ‘old style’ is giving way to a two-step and waltz repertoire based on popular country/western songs, though still maintaining some of the rhythmic characteristics of the older music.

The Northwest Territories (NWT) and the Yukon cover approximately 1,655,000 square km, and have a population of only about 75,000 people (see Figure 1). The Aboriginal population ranges from approximately 20% in the Yukon, to about 50% in the NWT. This includes all three Aboriginal groups: Inuit, First Nations, and Métis, with the largest concentration of Inuit being in the most northerly regions and the majority of Métis in the south.¹ Although there are a couple of well-known Inuit fiddlers, namely, Colin Adjun of Kugluktuk and Frank Cockney (now deceased), it quickly became clear that fiddle traditions are strongest among the other two groups: First Nations, especially the Gwich'in First Nation of the Mackenzie Delta (a large area crossing the borders of Alaska, Yukon and the NWT) and the

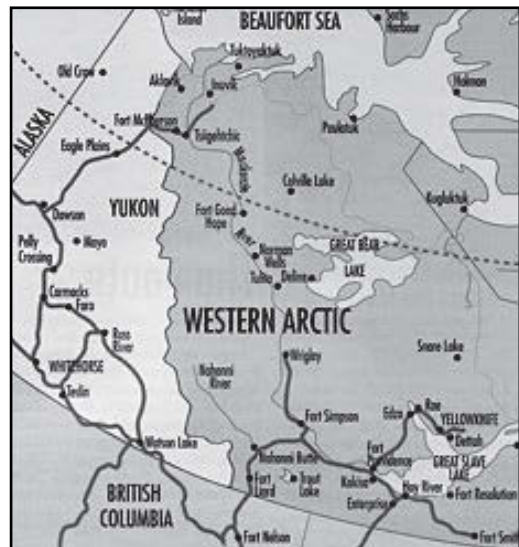


Figure 1 Map of Yukon and the Northwest Territories²

Métis of the Great Slave Lake area. Therefore, I will focus on these two groups: the two traditions.

By piecing together historical accounts, we can safely say that Aboriginal communities in the North developed their practices originally by adapting the Scottish and French Canadian tunes and dances that arrived with traders, explorers, and adventurers from Québec, the Prairies, and Scotland – the Shetland and Orkney Islands (especially the latter) in the mid-nineteenth century. These traditions were then refracted through the prism of an Aboriginal aesthetic, as in many other parts of Canada. Whereas in many other places much of the old dance tradition is gone or only dimly remembered, in some communities in the North, such as Old Crow, it still thrives. This enabled me to see, in 2007, many of the dances I had only heard described in Manitoba in the mid-1980s. Furthermore, the sparse population across the north means both that communities are quite isolated, and that ‘everyone knows everyone else’s business’, so to speak, making it almost the perfect ‘Petri dish’ for this sort of study. In short, the conditions that prevailed throughout much of the Prairie Provinces in the nineteenth century, where many of the same dances and tunes have been documented, still exist,³ to some extent, in the north, though with the added complication of modern technology. Thus, the North not only offers the opportunity to see and hear some of the oldest-style expressions of Aboriginal fiddle and dance traditions in North America, but also, perhaps, an accelerated version of their transformation.

I have divided the basic tune repertoire in the North into three historical waves. The first wave consists of the tunes used for older Scottish and/or French-Canadian dances. The second wave includes common North American fiddle tunes generally used for ‘square’ dancing which appear to have entered the repertoire somewhat later.⁴ The third wave is the even newer two-step, foxtrot and waltz repertoire, largely adapted from popular Country songs. Historically, these waves apply to both traditions, but they differ in current practice, as we shall see.

The Gwitchin tradition in Old Crow

Gwitchin fiddle and dance practices in Alaska and Canada are the subject of a long-term study by Craig Mishler, published in his thorough and enlightening book *The Crooked Stovepipe*.⁵ Most of the dances he documented, I was able to witness in the community of Old Crow, Yukon, in July 2007. It was clear that his description of Gwitchin dance practices is still relevant for Old Crow twenty-one years later, for the most part. Similarly, some of the tunes in Old Crow are variants of the tunes Mishler has published, although others are different.⁶ Often the Old Crow versions I heard were more ‘standard’ in form, though still generally somewhat ‘asymmetric,’ that is, consisting of phrases of irregular lengths.

Old Crow is an isolated, fly-in settlement of about 300 people. They held their first Old Crow Fiddle Festival over the weekend of 1 July 2007, featuring four days of continuous activity: feasts, music and dance. Fiddlers consisted of the four main local players – Ben Charlie (who no longer lives in the community), Doug Charlie (whose wedding on the Saturday put a one-day pause in the festival), Allan Benjamin, and

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Harold Frost⁷ – as well as several players from other Gwitchin communities⁸ and a few outsiders such as myself, who were all pressed into musical service at various times. Fiddlers started performing about one o'clock in the afternoon and rotated each hour throughout the day. The music stopped only for a couple of hours for the evening meal around 7.00 pm, when huge trays of caribou, moose, beaver, muskrat, and whitefish were heaped on the tables. Dancing began in earnest after that, and continued until about 4.00 am each morning.

There are some interesting things to note about the fiddle repertoire in Old Crow:

- All the tunes are in the keys of A, D or G major. There are no minor keys, though A mixolydian does turn up occasionally, as in the tune of Allan Benjamin's 'Boil 'em Dzeegyuu Down' ('dzeegyuu' is the Gwitchin word for rhubarb – see Figure 2).
- Most of the tunes have asymmetric phrasing, even the most popular Country songs.
- Two altered tunings are still used, often even for newer Country tunes. Either the bottom string goes up to A, giving (from lowest pitch) A D A E, or both bottom strings go up, giving A E A E.
- Tempos are fast, with reels between 126 and 132bpm, and two-steps between 126–132bpm.

MM. ~ 126

Figure 2 'Boil 'Em Dzeegyuu Down', composed and played by Allan Benjamin, Old Crow⁹

The first wave: old Scottish/French dance tunes

Since the tunes in this group are inextricably associated with particular dances, and since the dances often offer as much or more evidence about the origin, history, and transmission of the music as the tunes themselves, I feel it necessary to explain their execution in some detail. As far as we can tell, these dances all came into the north with early traders, largely in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company who had established posts in the Northwest Territories by 1804, and moved westward into the interior of Yukon and Alaska by the mid 1840s. These early Hudson's Bay employees tended to be of either French-Canadian ancestry (having come up overland from southern Canada), or Scots, many of them young men from the Orkney Islands.¹⁰ There is evidence that all of these dances (with the possible exception of this particular version of the Double Jig) were done throughout the Prairies at one time, and most are in the repertoires of revival Métis dance ensembles on the Prairies.¹¹ My guess is that most of the tunes also date back to the mid-to-late nineteenth century, though they may have evolved greatly since then. The following is a brief description of the dances and tunes in this group, as done in Old Crow.

On the correspondence of dance figures and tunes, my sense is that dancers in Old Crow generally change figures as they perceive the tune going to a new section, and fiddlers sometimes adapt the length of their sections to where the dancers are, but it is an inexact science at best.

1. 'The Red River Jig' ('Jig Ahtsi Ch'aadzaa')

'The Red River Jig' is synonymous with step dancing, or 'jigging', as it is known in most Aboriginal communities throughout the Northwest.¹² As Mishler has earlier described, this dance is usually performed by one male and one female at a time in Old Crow, each with their own basic step. However, unlike Mishler's experience in other communities, where partners held hands for the first part of the dance, in Old Crow partners dropped hands as soon as they moved onto the floor, and simply faced each other, loosely circling clockwise, without any of the fancier 'gyroscope' or 'petal' patterns of women advancing towards their partners and retreating that he documents. Nor were any dancers 'spelled off' by others, each couple simply dancing two times through the tune.¹³

Each Old Crow fiddler's version of the tune is somewhat distinct, though they were all recognisable as variants of the 'standard' prairie tune (see Figure 3).

2. 'The Double Jig'

Though done to asymmetric versions of 'Fisher's Hornpipe', usually with the bottom string of the fiddle tuned up to A (see Figure 4), as is the dance of the same name throughout the Prairies,¹⁵ this two-couple reel is quite different in the north than prairie versions I have observed. The movements are as follows:

- a. Couples begin by facing each other, men left, women right. The first couple (furthest from band) dances up through the second couple in side-by-side

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MM.- 132

NOTE: one of the repeating 2- beat figures is often dropped or added on the B part. 3X

all except last Last Time

- lots of E, A and D drones throughout

Figure 3 'Red River Jig', as played by
Harold Frost, Old Crow¹⁴

INTRO V

A1

A2

Dance starts here

A3

A4

rpt. A3, A4/A2

B

A5

Form	A1	A2	A3	A3	A4	A3	A4	B	B
	A3	A3	A4	A3	A2	B	B		
	A3	A3	A2	A3	A5	B	B		

-bowing indicated only on the first few bars where I could see it on the video

Figure 4 'Double Jig', as played by Allan Benjamin²⁰

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formation, hands not joined, then turns face-to-face again at the 'bottom' of the set, jiggling a few steps on the spot.

b. The first couple joins hands in promenade position (left to left, right to right), goes back up the set and down, then turns around each other clockwise.

c. The first couple splits and each does a figure eight around the other two dancers, with the first man going first around the man, then around the lady, and the first lady doing the opposite.

d. Partners move to the centre for a 'left-hand star',¹⁶ join hands diagonally and do four single steps left (4 beats of music) then four right. The first couple then moves to the bottom of the set (closest to the band) and the dance repeats with the other couple leading.

This is similar to Mishler's description,¹⁷ but without the fancier jiggling steps he mentions. Instead, couples do a basic 'pas de Basque' step throughout, except for the 'star' figure where they switch to single steps.¹⁸ Also, the head couple does not go down and up the set as often at the beginning, and Mishler's second figure is eliminated entirely – one in which the lead couple goes down and up with, alternately, the other woman and man between them. I have not, as yet, been able to connect this dance precisely to an older Scottish form, but two-couple reels were apparently common in the Orkney and Shetland Islands, at least one of which includes the 'star' figure described here.¹⁹

3. 'The Handkerchief Dance' ('K'ooniit'aii Ch'aadzaa')

This dance is done to a particular reel in open A tuning where both bottom strings are tuned up giving A E A E (see Figure 5), and is performed in a group of three people, usually one man and two women. The man is in the middle holding the ends of two sashes with each of the two women holding the other ends. The dancers jig on the spot to two or three phrases of music, then the man raises one sash so that the lady on the opposite side can go under, followed by himself, then all back to original places. The sequence repeats with the dancers again jiggling for a couple of phrases, followed by raising the other sash for the other lady, man again following. After each woman has gone under the sash a couple of times, three new dancers take over (although at one point in Old Crow only two women came up, keeping the young man on the floor to the general merriment of the onlookers).

Mishler's description from Alaska is the same except that the dancers start in a straight line, whereas the Old Crow dancers seem to be always in a triangle formation. Mishler was informed that dancers should match their 'setting' figure (on the spot) and their moving figure to A and B parts of the tune, but that this tended not to happen in practice,²¹ which matches my observations in Old Crow, where moving on the high phrase of the tune varied according to which man was leading the dance. Mostly, the dancers were clearly listening for the beginning of a phrase to start the moving figure, but not necessarily the high phrase. As Mishler has also pointed out, the dance is a version of the old Scottish Threesome Reel (also

called 'Hankies Reel' and the 'Dashing White Sargeant') as described by Flett and Flett²²

The tune Ben Charlie played in Old Crow seems to be a much more regular version of the one Mishler recorded.²³ Mishler claims a connection to a Shetland tune in open A tuning called 'Wynadepla', but I am of the opinion that they are not close enough to necessarily be related.²⁴

MM. ~ 132

A part usually 3 X, sometimes 4

D.S.

Last Time

- lots of A and E drones throughout.
- sometimes an extra beat of the first figure of B

Figure 5 'Handkerchief Dance', as played by Ben Charlie, Old Crow²⁵

4. 'Duck Dance' ('Dats'an Ch'aadzaa')

This three-couple dance is well-documented throughout the Prairies, but, unlike most of the other dances here, it seems unknown in Québec.²⁶ However, three-couple reels were well-known in the Shetland and Orkney Islands, including older forms in the side-by-side formation of this dance.²⁷ Mishler believes it may be related to a seventeenth-century English Playford dance called 'Grimstock'.²⁸

In most communities all versions of this dance seem to involve a basic set of four moves, in various orders and repeated a various numbers of times, although three times each is mentioned as standard on the Prairies,²⁹ and seems to be the practice in Old Crow, but not in Mishler's description.³⁰ The dance movements unfold as follows:

- a. Three couples in side-by-side formation, one behind the other, move back and forwards 3 full times, 3 steps more or less each way each time, starting backwards. (Mishler describes moving forwards first, with four steps, then just back and forwards one more time, immediately moving into the split).
- b. Couples split and go around the outside. In Old Crow and the Prairies this happens three times, but only once in Mishler's description.
- c. For the 'duck and dive',³¹ the head couple makes an arch for couple 2 then 'dives' under the arch made by couple three. They turn and repeat the arch and dive going in the other direction; they are followed by the other two couples similarly alternating. As Mishler recorded and I observed in Old Crow and on

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the Prairies, the whole movement down and up is repeated for a total of two times. (This move seems to be the exception to the 'three-time' rule.)

d. The figure of 8 is performed three times each in Old Crow but only twice in the communities Mishler observed. Couples stand side by side again with crossed hands (left to left, right to right). Each couple moves as a unit in a figure of 8 pattern by going between the other two and turning at the top and bottom of the set.

Prairie versions I have seen also add in an 'arch' move after the first two moves here, in which the second and third couples go under the arch made by the first, followed by a repeat of the first movement, while northern Gwitchin communities go straight to the 'duck and dive'.

In Old Crow, the dance is done to a reel in D major which is somewhat reminiscent of the Scottish 'Fairy Dance' (see Figure 6), while Mishler's tune is different and several other tunes turn up on the Prairies. So, while each community seems to associate the dance with a particular tune of the older wave, it is the least tied to one particular tune overall.

*see variations at bottom

*variations of first bar

Figure 6 'Duck Dance' as played by Allan Benjamin³²

5. 'Drops of Brandy' ('Varaandi' is the local pronunciation of the word 'brandy')

This is the old Scottish line dance of the same name and done to versions of the standard prairie tune used for this dance, which is probably based on Québec versions originally (see Figure 7). It is as Mishler describes, and, with minor variations, is as done throughout the Prairies and Québec.



Figure 7 'Drops of Brandy' or 'Varaandi' as played by Ben Charlie³³

6. 'The Eight Couple Dance' ('Nihk'iidoo') and 'Mountain Rope' ('Neets'ee TI'yaa')
 I saw these dances done as a pair in Old Crow, both with eight couples, though Mishler says that neither the sequence nor the number of couples is fixed anymore.³⁴ I have not seen the first one done elsewhere, but the second is well-known on the Prairies as the 'Reel of Eight' or 'Old Reel of Eight'.³⁵ An asymmetric version of 'Arkansas Traveller' was the tune for the first in Old Crow ('Nihk'iidoo', see Figure 8), while the second was done to another D reel reminiscent of 'Whiskey Before Breakfast', at the beginning, but with a B part that seemed more like another variation of 'Arkansas Traveller' (see Figure 9).³⁶

The first dance is quite simple, with dancers starting off in two lines, men and women facing each other (like 'Drops of Brandy'). Then, each alternate couple moves (man forwards, lady backwards) to create a new set of four couples beside the first. The dance proceeds with an alternation of jiggging on the spot to one part of the tune, and 'travelling' on the other in a figure of 8 pattern with the corresponding couple in the other set. This is strongly reminiscent of documented Shetland reels (where they were done with fewer couples) and one mentioned in the Orkneys for eight couples but not described in detail.³⁷



Occasionally the high part is played only once, and there may be an extra beat on D going back into the low part.

Figure 8 'Eight Couple Reel' ('Arkansas Traveller'), as played by Allan Benjamin³⁸

The second dance starts with all couples in a large circle (men on the left in each couple) and proceeds through the following figures:

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- a. Opposite couples cross, then cross back to their place.
- b. Women go in to the centre for left-hand and right-hand stars, and back to their place.
- c. Men do the same.
- d. Women make an inner circle. Holding hands they circle left, then right.
- e. Men come forward and take hands in front of the women (the basket), and circle left.
- f. Men swing their arms back out so there are two concentric circles, one of men, one of women. They then circle right.
- g. All move back into large circle, and circle left, then right.
- h. All do a grand chain without clasping hands.
- i. All reel around the set with elbow swings (men counter-clockwise, women clockwise).
- j. Repeat '1' – couples cross and back to place.

The whole dance may be done more than once. When I saw it they got as far as the men's star for the second time when the fiddler stopped. At this point, I do not know whether or not this is standard practice.

Figure 9 'Mountain Rope' as played by Allan Benjamin³⁹

7. 'The Rabbit Dance' ('Geh Chaadza')

I did not see this dance at Old Crow but was told that it is done. Mishler's description corresponds to prairie practice: two lines of men and women facing each other; the lead couple moves down, up, and around; eventually the woman breaks off and the man chases her, then vice versa. As is the case with the 'Duck Dance', it may have roots in an old English dance, in this case, 'Hunt the Squirrel'. This dance is also unknown in Québec.⁴⁰

Interestingly, the tune as played by Bill Stevens, a popular Alaskan Gwitchin fiddler, is a reel, but definitely a version of the 6/8 tune used in Manitoba for the same dance. This gives rise to the idea that it might have transformed from a 6/8 'Old World' tune into standard simple time in Canada (see Figures 10 and 11). This

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has been the subject of conjecture in the case of 'Drops of Brandy' performed as a 9/8 tune in both Scottish and Irish tradition, but in simple time in French-Canadian and Aboriginal communities, that is, a reel, though often in 6/4, maintaining the 'three-beat' structure of the 9/8 jig. However, it is usually asymmetric in the Northwest.⁴¹

MM. ~124



A drones throughout, when convenient

Figure 10 'Rabbit Dance' as played by Eldon Campbell, Kinosota, Manitoba⁴²

MM ~132



Figure 11 'Rabbit Dance', as played by Bill Stevens, Alaska⁴³

What are we to conclude from all this? I would say that the dance and tune evidence in Gwitchin culture shows strong historical ties to nineteenth-century fur trade practice throughout the Prairies, but also some direct links to Orkney/Shetland practice of the time.⁴⁴ Manitoba evidence indicates that many dances and tunes came from Québec to the Prairies,⁴⁵ and many of the dances described here are also common in Québec. However, there are several indications that transmission was probably also happening directly from the Old World to the North as well as up from the Prairies. The first is the known presence of Orkney fiddlers in the north, and their documented influence on the culture of other Aboriginal communities, notably James Bay.⁴⁶ Even stronger evidence is found in the fact that certain dances in the Northwest have not been documented in Québec, namely the 'Duck Dance' and the 'Rabbit Dance',⁴⁷ and one, the 'Double Jig' described here, appears not to have been documented on the Prairies (although this is just a preliminary observation at

this point). The predominance of reels for older forms of dancing is also consistent with a possible Orkney/Shetland-derived repertoire, the latter we know is similarly reel-based. Finally, evidence may lie in the prevalence of asymmetric phrasing itself, which, in my view, while primarily due to the influence of Aboriginal culture,⁴⁸ may also point to the older Scandinavian-influenced asymmetric forms of the Islands. Further research into the links between Norwegian, Shetland and Aboriginal repertoire may yield greater insights in this direction.

The second wave: common North American fiddle tunes

These are mostly reels and two-steps for 'square' dances, plus waltzes, two-steps, polkas, and schottisches. Square dances in Gwitchin communities involve large numbers of couples in a circular or roughly rectangular formation. They tend to consist of a set of simple figures done with two couples and progress around the circle.⁴⁹

Mishler makes a convincing case that the square dances themselves are of American origin and probably came up north between 1890 and 1910, the time of the Gold Rush. Tunes appear to have entered the repertoire throughout the twentieth century and correspond to those popular in other parts of the country to a great extent, although often played in asymmetric versions. Currently, popular ones for dancing in Old Crow include 'The Crooked Stovepipe', 'Rubber Dolly', 'Miller's Reel', 'Buffalo Gals', 'Big John McNeill', 'Boil Them Cabbage Down', and 'Flop-Eared Mule'.⁵⁰

The third wave: foxtrots, two-steps and waltzes

These tunes are adapted from Country songs that, in my observation, were generally popular between 1940 and 1970. They frequently feature asymmetric phrasing (unlike the original songs they are based on), and are sometimes played in altered tunings. Thomas Manuel of Fort Good Hope told me that at home, he plays mostly 'two-steps' and 'waltzes' for dancing, not the old repertoire.⁵¹ The country tunes are usually just played instrumentally, although Ben Charlie recorded several in both versions, with words and without.⁵² Popular ones include 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' (Bill Monroe), 'Frozen Heart' (George Jones), 'Diggi Diggi Lo' (J. D. Miller, see Figure 12), and 'On My Mind'.

'Diggi Diggi Lo' (see Figure 12) and Albert Beaulieu's 'Blackboard of My Heart' are really in 'swing' time, that is 12/8, but following standard practice I have notated them in 4/4. The dotted eighth/sixteenth figures are played as triplets of quarter/eighth.

MM. ~168



Figure 12 'Diggy Diggy Lo', as played by Ben Charlie⁵³

The Slave Lake Métis

The Métis communities of the southern Northwest Territories who still have active fiddlers – mainly Fort Providence, Fort Resolution, and Hay River – trace their personal and musical lineage to the riverboat transportation system of the early part of the twentieth century, which regularly brought up players from the Prairies.⁵⁴ While the same basic three waves of repertoire exist in these communities, preliminary research⁵⁵ indicates there are several significant differences between them and Gwitchin tradition, both in repertoire and dance style. However, since I was unable to observe community dances in this area, at this point I can only highlight certain aspects spoken of by my informants.

The First Wave – that of Scottish and French dance tunes – seems to be almost gone in the southern areas. Angus Beaulieu plays mostly country repertoire (the Third Wave) and says that he generally left the older fast dance reels to his elders, all of whom have passed on, so that these dances are not generally done in the community anymore.

Well, myself, I never played for too many old dances [...] In the younger days, we had two fiddlers, we had an old time fiddler here who done all the old dances before I started travelling around the community [...] It was still around but then when I started, I thought, well, I don't need to learn that.⁵⁶

There have been performance dance groups doing demonstrations of the older dances within the past twenty years,⁵⁷ and there are still active callers, but the window may be closing. We are left primarily with the later two waves: North American fiddle repertoire, and an adapted country repertoire. In an interesting reversal of expectations, it is often older players, such as Angus Beaulieu, who play mostly country foxtrots, two-steps and waltzes, leaving the fast reels (including the older dance tunes) to the younger players, who tend to play more often for shows than for dancing.

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The dance style is different. This is what northern residents most commonly note as a distinguishing mark between the two traditions. For example, when the 'Red River Jig' is performed in the south, it tends to follow the prairie model of distinct steps for high and low parts of the tune, with dancers having a repertoire of several different steps. This is in contrast to Gwitchin communities, where each dancer tends to have one signature step. As Rick Lafferty informed me:

It's pretty well all the same, right from Manitoba to here, similar, the way it's supposed to be done, the good old Métis style, the traditional way. The steps are different, you add and change, but the form, in general, right from Manitoba.⁵⁸

Tunes tend to be more regular in structure, pointing once more to the influence of recordings from southern Canada. Although this again depends to some extent on the player's age, older players tend to have more asymmetric phrasing (see Figure 13).

MM ~172

Figure 13 'Blackboard of My Heart', as played by Angus Beaulieu, Fort Resolution, NWT⁵⁹

One aspect that both traditions share is the great value placed on personal creativity and innovation. This is reflected both in the highly individual versions of tunes (two fiddlers rarely play together), and in 'show' aspects of certain players performances. For example, Angus Beaulieu (Fort Resolution) accompanies himself on the electric keyboard by pre-setting the rhythm and hitting the root note with his bow hand to change chords at the appropriate point, while Allan Benjamin (Old Crow) sometimes holds the bow between his toes, and saws out a tune by turning the fiddle away from him and moving it against the bow.

In conclusion, while the historical forces on the two traditions are similar, leading to the same three basic waves of repertoire, cultural factors have led to differences. In the northerly Gwitchin areas, more Aboriginal influence and more isolation seems to have contributed to a greater preservation of older tunes and

dances and a much more asymmetric approach to phrasing. In the south, greater cultural identification with the prairie Métis has led players to emulate their southern counterparts more. This has affected the repertoire, both historically, when much of it was coming up directly from the prairies, and in more recent years, when much has been learned from southern recordings of prominent players such as Andy Dejarlis and Reg Bouvette. Phrasing is also more symmetric overall. In my work in the 1980s, I noticed a similar tendency for phrasing to be more irregular in First Nations communities than in Métis areas, a fact I attribute largely to the greater influence of Aboriginal tradition in which phrasing in traditional song is highly irregular.

Commercial country music is one major cultural factor considerably affecting both traditions in similar ways. The tendency throughout both northern traditions to turn country songs into instrumental dance tunes is almost a signature of contemporary northern practice, and is not to be found anywhere else in the country to the same extent. This practice is threatening to close the wonderful window on the past that parts of the north still provide, which may limit our ability to further understand the origins and evolution of Aboriginal fiddle and dance traditions in North America. However, time marches on, and this practice, interesting in its own right, is certainly deserving of further study.

Appendix: Notes on transcriptions

All transcriptions are by the author. I have transcribed bow slurs where I could make them out. Because of the gymnasium setting, some tunes were not clear enough on the recording to be able to make out the bowing. The form is frequently different the first time through a tune and minor variations in form are a hallmark of the style throughout. Players often substitute one note for another here and there, and frequently use doubling of notes (2 shorter notes of the same pitch instead of one longer note), but versions are remarkably consistent in general. I have indicated some of these possibilities by putting certain notes in brackets. I have also indicated some of the double-stringing, since it is an important part of the style, but with an eye to keeping the transcription readable.

Notes

¹ Government of Yukon and NWT official websites, www.gov.yk.ca, www.gov.nt.ca [accessed 9 April 2010].

² Inuvik Visitors Guide (Inuvik, NWT: Northern News Services, 2008).

³ Anne Lederman, ed., *Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba*, vols 1 and 2, Falcon Productions LP and audio cassette P 187 and FP 287, Toronto, 1987; re-released on CD by the Canadian Museum of Civilization Archive Series, FP 386–387, 2004. Gabriel Dumont Institute, *Drops of Brandy*, CD collection, GDI 001, GDI 002, 2001.

⁴The term 'square' is used loosely here because sets often consist of large numbers of couples, not the standard four of square sets in other parts of North America.

⁵ Craig Mishler, *The Crooked Stovepipe: Athapaskan Fiddle Music and Square Dancing in Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁶ Typically, every player, even in the same community, has his own versions of tunes.

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⁷ Ben Charlie, Allan Benjamin, and Harold Frost have commercial recordings available. Information on acquiring these recordings is available on the Old Crow website, www.oldcrow.ca [accessed 9 April 2010].

⁸ Thomas Manuel and Everett akfwi from Fort Good Hope, and Michael Francis from Fort McPherson were the other Gwitchin fiddlers present.

⁹ From Keitha Clarke's *Yukon Fiddle Project*, CBC, 2008, used by permission.

¹⁰ Mishler, pp. 15–20.

¹¹ More research needs to be done to confirm that the Eight Couple (six here), was common on the Prairies, but tune evidence noted below would seem to indicate there were a pair of dances in Manitoba with these tunes.

¹² I use the general term 'Northwest' to indicate the entire Aboriginal fiddle and dance tradition from northern Ontario through the Prairies, British Columbia, the Yukon and Northwest Territories. I do not know, at this time, how Nunavut fits into the fiddle and dance tradition described here.

¹³ See Mishler, pp. 65–69. However, it is to be noted that I was observing contest situations for the most part, rather than merely social ones.

¹⁴ Harold Frost, Old Crow, from his audio cassette recording *Vuntut Gwitchin Fiddler* [no matrix number, n.d.].

¹⁵ James P. Leary, ed., *Medicine Fiddle: A Humanities Discussion Guide*, to accompany the film *Medicine Fiddle*, Up North Films (Marquett : Northern Michigan University, 1992), [no pagination]. 'Lord MacDonald's' is mentioned in North Dakota.

¹⁶ 'Left-hand star' is a term commonly used in square dance terminology for this figure. I did not hear it called this locally.

¹⁷ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 69–72.

¹⁸ J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 110. The 'pas de Basque' step, as called by Flett and Flett, p. 110, is a simple right left right, left right left pattern done to reels. It is commonly used throughout many group dances in Aboriginal communities in the Northwest.

¹⁹ Flett and Flett, p. 202.

²⁰ Allan Benjamin, from a recording made by the author, Old Crow, July 2007.

²¹ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, p. 95.

²² Flett and Flett, pp. 140–42.

²³ See Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, p. 193. There may be a general trend on the part of younger players towards simplifying some of the older dance tunes.

²⁴ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, p. 96.

²⁵ Ben Charlie, Old Crow, from his self published CD *Ben Chuck: Old Crow Fiddler* [no matrix number, n.d.].

²⁶ Author's correspondence with Pierre Chartrand, director of Centre Mnemo, in Montreal, an institute for the study and teaching of traditional Québec dance.

²⁷ Flett and Flett, p. 62.

²⁸ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 92–93.

²⁹ See, for example, *The Dances of the Métis* (Winnipeg: Métis Resource Centre Inc., 2001), educational DVD produced and distributed by the Métis Resource Centre Inc., www.metisresourcecentre.mb.ca [accessed 8 April 2010].

³⁰ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 89–93.

³¹ Again, so-called in other square dance traditions, 'duck and dive' is not a term used locally, to my knowledge.

³² Allan Benjamin, from an interview conducted by Keitha Clark for the Yukon Fiddle Project, CBC Whitehorse 2008.

³³ Ben Charlie, from his CD *Ben Chuck: Old Crow Fiddler*.

³⁴ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 72–77, 84–88.

³⁵ See, for example, *The Dances of the Métis*, and Leary, *Medicine Fiddle*, [np].

³⁶ Interestingly, my oldest prairie informant, Grandy Fagnan of Camperville, Manitoba, played 'Arkansas Traveller' always with a 'brother' tune similar to this one, which implies that two dances might have been done there as well as 'partners', possibly these same two. However, other tunes are used elsewhere. Mishler documents 'Lord MacDonald's' for the Eight Couple and 'Whisky Before Breakfast' for the 'Mountain Rope', see Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 185–86. 'Whisky Before Breakfast' is also used in Turtle Mountain for the same dance called Reel of Eight, see Leary, *Medicine Fiddle*, [np]. 'Lord MacDonald's' turns up on the video collection *The Dances of the Métis*, called 'Old Reel of Eight'. 'Lord MacDonald's' seems to rank as the all-time nineteenth century favourite Scottish tune, judging by its use for several different dances in various places – at the very least, the 'Double Jig' (Reel of Four), 'Eight Couple' and 'Old Reel of Eight'. Other Scottish tunes of similar age and provenance, which similarly turn up in many asymmetric versions throughout Québec and the Northwest, include 'Drops of Brandy', 'Soldier's Joy' (possibly the original source of this 'Mountain Rope' tune), 'Fisher's Hornpipe', and possibly others which may have been altered beyond recognition, such as 'The Fairy Dance'.

³⁷ Flett and Flett, p. 191.

³⁸ Allan Benjamin, from a recording made by the author, Old Crow, July 2007.

³⁹ Allan Benjamin, from a recording made by the author, Old Crow, July 2007.

⁴⁰ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 81–84.

⁴¹ Peter Cooke comments on the rhythmic fluidity of certain tunes in Shetland tradition between 6/8 and 2/4; see Peter Cooke, *The Fiddle Tradition of the Shetland Isles* (Cambridge, London, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 57–58, 76–77.

⁴² Eldon Campbell, Kinosota, Manitoba; see Lederman, *Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba*.

⁴³ Bill Stevens, Alaska, from his self published CD *Gwitch'in Athabascan Fiddle Music* [no matrix number, n.d.].

⁴⁴ The atypical form of the 'Double Jig', which seems to be more closely related to Shetland/Orkney practice than to the Prairies, is evidence for this. However, it is possible that at one time there were several forms of two-couple reels, and that 'Fisher's Hornpipe' has become attached to all of them over the years.

⁴⁵ Several of the fiddlers I recorded and interviewed in the mid 1980s had traced their family back to Québec. Also see Track 1, *Drops of Brandy* CD, in which the Radio introduction to Mr Genthon's 1940 performance of the 'Red River Jig' records that Mr Genthon's father learned the 'Red River Jig' in 1842 from a man named Latourelle who had just come from Québec, where it was called 'La gigue du bas-Canada'.

⁴⁶ Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 19–20. The influence of Orkney tradition in James Bay is documented by oral tradition; see liner notes to James Cheechoo, *Shay Chee Man*, CD, Kwisiekan Productions, KWIS 001, 1998.

⁴⁷ Is it just an interesting coincidence that both of these dances seem to relate to English tradition? It is tempting to speculate that they may have come with mainland Scots into the Northwest.

⁴⁸ The case for asymmetric phrasing as a result of the influence of Aboriginal culture is presented extensively in Anne Lederman, 'Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Two Manitoba Communities: Camperville and Ebb and Flow' (Master's dissertation, York University, 1986), and summarized in Anne Lederman, 'Old Indian [sic] and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba: Origins, Structure and the Question of Syncretism', *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 8, no. 2 (1988), 205–30; and Anne Lederman, 'Native and Métis Fiddling: A Portrait of a People', *Fiddler Magazine*, 8, no. 4 (2001), 4–10.

⁴⁹ See Mishler, *Crooked Stovepipe*, pp. 99–112.

⁵⁰ Author's recordings, Old Crow Fiddle Festival; these tunes were played repeatedly for square dances over the four days I was there. Other tunes are mentioned in an interview with Charlie Peter Charlie by Craig Mishler, Fairbanks, Alaska, 1986 (Mishler, personal collection, given to the author). Charlie Peter Charlie is father of Doug and Charlie who played at the Festival. He notes as being popular in his lifetime 'Chicken Reel', 'St Anne's Reel', 'Devil's Dream', 'Golden Slippers', 'Redwing', 'Turkey in the Straw', 'Red River Valley', 'Over the Waves', 'Tennessee Waltz', and the 'Teardrop Waltz' (composed and recorded in the 1960s by Reg Bouvett, popular Manitoba Métis fiddler).

⁵¹ Unrecorded conversation, Old Crow Fiddle Festival, 30 June 2007.

⁵² Ben Charlie, *Ben Chuck: Old Crow Fiddler*, CD, HTA 12336, 2000.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Richard Lafferty, interview by author, July 2007.

⁵⁵ I undertook interviews with two prominent fiddlers, Angus Beaulieu (Fort Resolution) and Richard Lafferty (Hay River), (Lederman Collection, Canadian Museum of Civilisation), and had many informal conversations with callers such as Fred Koe, and media people. Both CBC Radio and the Native Communications Society allowed me access to their archives and provided me with copies of recordings they had made at northern events over many years. Several players in this area, including Richard Lafferty, Angus Beaulieu, Stanley Beaulieu, and Ed Lafferty, have made commercial recordings, though copies of these can be hard to find.

⁵⁶ Angus Beaulieu, interview by author, 18 July 2007. The older fiddler he is referring to is his uncle, Johnny Beaulieu.

⁵⁷ Richard Lafferty of Hay River performed with the Métis Reelers, a NWT group that was active from approximately 1983 to 1989 or so, according to Richard.

⁵⁸ Richard Lafferty, interview by author, 16 July 2007.

⁵⁹ Angus Beaulieu, Fort Resolution, NWT, from his CD *Angus Beaulieu I* [no matrix number, n.d.].