

## Joe Holmes: the singing North Antrim fiddler

Len Graham

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Ón gCos go Cluas

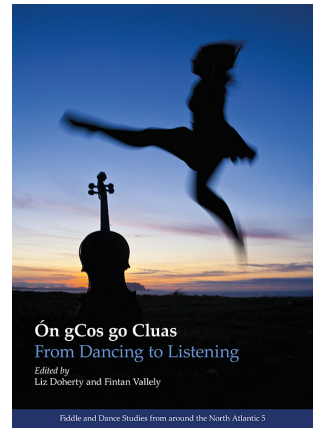
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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### About the author:

**Len Graham**, a singer and song collector from Co. Antrim, who picked up local Derry and Antrim song initially from his parents. His mother Eveline Robinson – a cousin of hammer dulcimer player John Rea – sang and danced old set dances; she had been familiar as a child with the Irish language from the last of the Irish speakers in the Antrim Glens, and had heard keening women at funerals. With his father, Len attended gatherings of the Counties Derry and Antrim Fiddlers' Association, this introducing him to a wider repertoire. In 1964 he met singer Joe Holmes, this beginning a friendship that was to last until the latter's death in 1978. He recorded *Chaste Muses, Bards and Sages* with Holmes in 1975, and *After Dawning* in 1978, a solo album *Wind and Water* in 1976, *Do Me Justice* (1983) and *Ye Lovers All* (1985). He started the group Skylark with Gerry O'Connor, Gary Ó Briain and Andrew McNamara in 1986 and for many years performed with Mullaghbane, Co. Armagh storyteller John Campbell. His major collecting project has been a field recordings series, *Harvest Home*. In 2010 he published a study with memoirs and songs of his old song partner: *Joe Holmes, Here I am Amongst You: Songs, Music and Traditions of an Ulsterman*.

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**Figure 1** Joe Holmes at Antrim and Derry Fiddlers' Night in Smyth's Hall, Carnlough, County Antrim, c. 1972. *Photo courtesy of Billy McKee.*

Oh, my love Nell is a charming girl,  
From the county Down came she,  
But I weeped and I wailed,  
When the big ship sailed,  
For the shores of Amerikay

*'My Love Nell' (polka)*

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This fragment of a song and polka was first heard by me in the early 1960s from Joe Holmes of Killyrammer, County Antrim who had learnt the tune and the few words from his brother Harry; the same brother had also given the twelve year old Joe his first fiddle in 1918 on his return from the First World War. I was delighted recently to come across a published version of the song in the archives of the Library of Congress in Washington DC.<sup>1</sup> The song sheet states that the song was written and sung by William Carleton and performed in Tony Pastor's Opera-House, which opened in the Bowery district of New York City in 1865 and the William Carleton here would not seem to be the County Tyrone novelist (1794-1869). Today we usually associate polkas in Ireland with County Kerry, but this dance of eastern European origin arrived in Ireland in the early nineteenth century and was popular throughout Ireland, Europe and North America.



Figure 2 'Harry Holmes's Mazurka No.1'.

Joe Holmes was born in 1906 (see Figure 1); his grandfather as well as his older brother Harry played the fiddle.<sup>2</sup> Joe's mother Jane Getty was a singer from whom Joe inherited many songs, and she also lilted dance tunes that sometimes had words. Their home was a popular céilí-house frequented by local musicians and singers from the locality and beyond. Joe told me that dancing was a regular feature in his home, and that on bigger



Figure 3 'Harry Holmes's Mazurka No. 2'.

occasions the dance or ball would be held in a local barn. One of the neighbouring farmers had a large barn with a wooden loft above, which was popular as the wooden floor acted

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as percussion for the dancers. When the grain, potato and flax (lint-pulling) harvests were saved, these were some of the occasions for which the bigger venue of a barn was required. In Joe's time this sort of céilí-ing with song, story and dance was common in many houses in County Antrim and other parts of Ulster, irrespective of religious affiliation and social background. Other dances Joe played for included, jigs, hornpipes, schottisches, quadrilles, four- and eight-hand reels, lancers, waltzes, and the mazurka, that latter of which I have fond memories of Joe's sister Nancy and my mother dancing in Joe's kitchen in the late 1960s. The two mazurkas that Joe learned from his brother Harry he called 'Harry's Mazurkas' (see Figures 2 & 3). With the demise of the house and barn-dances after the Second World War, Joe acquired a 125cc BSA motorcycle, and with the fiddle strapped to his back he travelled to play fiddle in Molloy's Hall in Armoy. In the 1950s he became a member of the Counties Antrim and Derry Country Fiddlers' Association, and it was at one of these gatherings in Dunminning, near Ballymena that I first met Joe in 1963; founder members included Willie Hope, Mickey McIlhatton, and Alex Kerr. I recall Alex Kerr saying, 'Traditional music knows no border, nor no creed'.

Figure 4 'The Parting Glass'.

A musical score for the song 'The Parting Glass' in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are written below the staff, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across notes. The lyrics are: 'A man may drink and not be drunk, a man may fight and not be slain, a man may court a pretty girl, and perhaps be welcome back again, but since it has so ordered been, be a time to rise and a time to fall, come fill to me the parting glass, good night and joy be with you all.'

Figure 5 'The Peacock's Feather'.

A musical score for the Schottische 'The Peacock's Feather' in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (D major). The score includes first and second endings, indicated by brackets and numbers 1 and 2. There are also triplets marked with a '3' and a vertical line. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The last song that Joe Holmes and I sang together was a North Antrim version of the song 'The Parting Glass', which was in the Guild Hall in Derry a few nights before he died in January 1978 (see Figure 4). The song/tune speeded up becomes the schottische, 'The

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Peacock's Feather', which Joe taught to the Keane Family of Caherlistrane, County Galway and they in turn passed it on to fiddler, Frankie Gavin, who popularised it with his recording of the 1970s (see Figure 5).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'My Love Nell', polka and song, is in the Library of Congress, ref: as202560, <https://www.loc.gov/item/amss.as202560/> [accessed June 2015]; see also Bodleian Libraries Broadside Ballads Online, 2806 b.11 (178), <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/sheet/25653> [accessed June 2015].

<sup>2</sup> See Len Graham, *Joe Holmes – Here I am Amongst You: Songs, Music and Traditions of an Ulsterman* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010).