

## Crossing boundaries

*Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger*

Excerpted from:

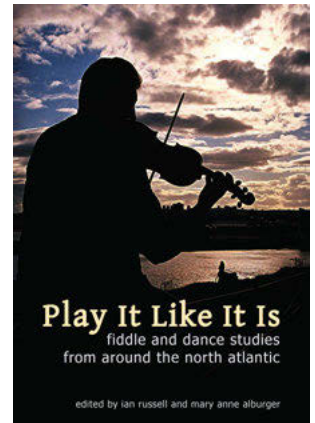
### Play It Like It Is

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

*Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger*

First published in 2006 by The Elphinstone  
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert  
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-3-0



### About the authors:

**Ian Russell** is Director of the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen and was Co-Convenor of NAFCo 2001. His current research is focused on the traditional culture of North-East Scotland, including sacred singing, ballad singing, flute bands, free reed instruments, recitation, Travellers' tradition, and the local craft of building model sailing luggers, known as 'boaties'. He has also conducted extensive fieldwork into singing traditions in the English Pennines, especially Christmas carolling.

**Mary Anne Alburger**, Co-Convenor of NAFCo 2001, is an Honorary Fellow of the Elphinstone Institute. She is the author of *The Violin Makers: Portrait of a Living Craft* and *Scottish Fiddlers and their Music*. As Peter A. Hall Research Fellow at the Institute (1998-2002), she undertook a doctoral study of the Gaelic sources of Captain Simon Fraser's *Airs and Melodies* (1816), and has researched the Tudor fiddles recovered from the wreck of the 'Mary Rose'. She is a player of the violin and viola, and a member of several ensembles.

Copyright © 2006 the Elphinstone Institute and the contributors

While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Elphinstone Institute, copyright in individual contributions remains with the contributors. The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of their work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



# 1

## Crossing boundaries

IAN RUSSELL and MARY ANNE ALBURGER

Although this is not an extensive collection, the papers relate to most of the major themes that have preoccupied researchers of traditional music in Europe and North America since the Second World War. In the context of the fiddle (and related dance), the authors variously consider the topics of: revitalisation, revival, and re-creation; marginalisation, diaspora and repatriation; gender and competition; organisation and institutionalisation; landscape and cultural tourism; localisation, hybridity, and acculturation; the interrelationship with dance; social context and markers of identity; repertoire, accompaniment, instrumentation, and virtuosity. The focus on the fiddle is entirely appropriate since in many of the cultures of the communities bordering the North Atlantic the instrument has been (and remains) pre-eminent as the chosen vehicle of performance for repertoire and style in traditional music contexts for the past three centuries or more.

This book is the direct product of an international celebration of fiddle music and dance that was held in Aberdeen, 25-29 July 2001. The North Atlantic Fiddle Convention was conceived as a combination of a festival and an academic conference around the theme of 'Crossing Boundaries' supported by workshops, interviews and 'market place' events. It was an ambitious formula and a heady mixture, and, for those who experienced it, the springboard for subsequent collaborations and enterprises, both artistic and academic. Perhaps the potency of the event, from both scholarly and artistic perspectives, was the main reason why it has taken until 2006 to repeat the formula. One of the original aims was that the celebration might achieve the momentum to roll out across the North Atlantic from West Sweden to Nova Scotia, and this may yet be realized with the possibility of the NAFCo vision materialising in Newfoundland in 2008.

The Convention was located in Scotland at Aberdeen, firstly because of the North-East's prominence in Scottish fiddling, secondly because of the importance of cultures of the Scottish diaspora in terms of fiddle music, and thirdly because of the city's significance as a gateway to Europe and North America enhanced by its standing

as Europe's oil capital. This conception interpreted the seas not as boundaries that separate and divide peoples but rather as corridors through which cultures have flowed and continue to flow in a process of exchange and communication. There are some well known instances of this cultural interchange, notably the ringing strings of Shetland echoing the sympathetic strings of the Norwegian Hardanger Fiddle, *hardingfele*, and the transformation of an older Scottish repertoire in the hands of Cape Breton fiddlers; but less well known is the Anglo-Scottish cross-fertilization of reels in West Swedish fiddle repertoire manifested in the form known as *engelska*, or the simple fact that the Scots rather than the Irish provided the single most significant cultural input into Appalachia and its fiddle styles.

Our volume opens with three historical papers that reflect the evolution of the tradition through many significant stages and developments, not the least of which was the introduction of the modern instrument – the 'violin' – from Cremona in Italy in the later part of the seventeenth century. The three Welsh manuscripts discussed by Cass Meurig reflect this technological innovation, in that she detects both an older more local repertoire that had been played on earlier instruments, notably the *crwth*, and a more modern cosmopolitan one that was largely introduced to Wales in the wake of the introduction of the 'improved' instrument.

A similar juxtaposition of repertoires is identified by Fenella Bazin, who recognizes in the fiddle music of the Isle of Man older influences: Norse (via Shetland), and more modern ones, such as English and Scottish. Paul E. W. Roberts, like Bazin and Meurig, works from fiddlers' manuscripts and other sources and presents here a picture of pre-Victorian English fiddling prior to the influx of popular European dance music. Using an extensive sample of manuscripts, Roberts goes beyond repertoire analysis to identify markers of style and performance, including bowing, ornamentation, and extemporisation. (Several of these manuscripts have been archived for the Village Music Project, see [www.village-music-project.org.uk](http://www.village-music-project.org.uk).) It is clear that the three authors of these papers see the legacy of various manuscript collections as a valuable resource for contemporary players, and as a means by and through which Welsh, Manx, and English fiddling can be revitalized and reconnected with past traditions to generate a more distinctively national style with growing confidence in its historical accuracy.

Undoubtedly, markers of style distinguish local and regional fiddle traditions and set them apart from universal formalized classical violin techniques. They can also provide links with performance styles across the centuries, arguably predating the introduction of the modern instrument. One such marker is the musical decoration which the Scots call the 'birl', and Stuart Eydmann's paper provides an insight into the structure and interpretation of this motif, with the help of computer technology.

Whereas the fiddle traditions of England, Wales, and the Isle of Man are seen to have been weakened by factions, fractiousness, and discontinuities, the Scottish experience has seen fiddle playing flourish and adapt over the course of more than two and a half centuries. Catherine A. Shoupe's case study, from the Scottish Kingdom

of Fife, deals with the symbiotic relationship of fiddle and dance, particularly as communicated through the persons of Alexander and William Adamson, father and son, itinerant dancing masters there for many years. In Shoupe's work, the teaching of Scottish social dance is recorded and considered as oral history, particularly through its role in the continued maintenance of deportment and manners, an educational role that Shoupe identifies in the Adamson family's teaching and practice, which form direct connections with eighteenth-century traditional dancing, and the professional dancing masters that made it possible.

The gradual development of groups dedicated to preserving styles of fiddle playing through organisations that promoted some aspects, while sometimes prohibiting others, were a significant phenomenon in twentieth-century North American and northern European cultures. These movements preserved and reinterpreted those aspects of tradition which they deemed to be worthy, believing them to be at risk of eclipse by more popular mass music movements, such as jazz and rock 'n' roll. Richard Blaustein's wide-ranging survey examines common motivations for some of these groups, including the desire to emphasize national and regional differences in style and repertoire as a bulwark against relentless modernity and technological change. In Karin Eriksson's study of the Fiddlers' Movement in Halland, Sweden, these motivations are identified, though the focus shifts to the way the tradition is transforming into new music in both classical and popular music contexts. Whereas Eriksson's and Blaustein's essays are concerned with musical communities, the role of the individual is at the centre of Jan Ling's paper. This examines the ways in which the flare of a leading player of the keyed fiddle (the *nyckelharpa*), Johan Hedin, was able to transform perceptions of his instrument from one confined in regional traditional music, and largely a curio, into one perfectly at home in the creative arena of contemporary world music.

An important theme of the 2001 conference was the interrelationship of fiddle music and dance, which has produced uncomfortable tensions between the two as an increasing amount of fiddle music is presented on the concert stage (and in bar-room or pub sessions), detached from the original context of dancing and (further back in history) the delivery of orally transmitted ballads, which is now unknown in Britain, and perhaps an omen for the future. There is nothing new about this 'contemporary' trend; Neil Gow, for example, performed his music in both dance and salon settings in the eighteenth century, much of the energy and rhythm in both settings informed by the 'lift' of the music – that which lightens the dancer's steps, and is crucial to music played for Scottish traditional dance. Such, from Norwegian dance experience, is the starting point for Jan Petter Blom's discussion, which goes beyond the functional purposes of the music to explore and analyse the ways in which the dance informs and characterizes what the fiddler plays, the opposite role to Gow, but both are, and remain, interdependent.

There can be no doubt about the importance of dance to the two Newfoundland fiddlers Rufus Guinchard and Emile Benoit, discussed by Evelyn Osborne, for such was the context of much of their music. Moreover, their playing was

nearly always accompanied by dance, in the form of the patter of their own feet (*'podorhythmie'*), a defining characteristic of fiddling from these two exemplars from Francophone Canada.

Another aspect of fiddling divorced from dance is the competition circuit, the contemporary context for many young Canadian fiddlers. Sherry Johnson has experienced this both as a competitor (step dancer and fiddler), and a judge. Through her research with other female contestants, she examines the recent history of competitive events, the gendered discourse surrounding performance, and the inherent asymmetries in the inequality still rife in the ways in which female participants are perceived.

Another example of insider knowledge, one of the strengths of this collection, is brought to these essays by fiddler-scholar Liz Doherty's contribution, an illustration of the value of this type of contribution. Doherty examines, and questions, the popular contention that Cape Breton fiddle music today in some way represents the fiddle music of eighteenth-century Scotland. Drawing on her doctoral fieldwork in Nova Scotia and her background knowledge of the Scottish fiddling scene (from her Donegal-born standpoint), she examines the relationships between the Cape Breton and Scottish traditions, through the testimony of several active exponents, thereby shedding light on the nature of diasporic cultures, and their view of themselves.

The final paper, one of the keynote contributions of the 2001 conference, also focuses on Cape Breton, and is similarly based on contemporary ethnographic research. Here the culture of the island is considered in its contemporaneous geographical context, being on the margins of North America, rather than in its diasporic and historical context. Burt Feintuch considers this to be the key to understanding the province's phenomenal success in nurturing its traditional music and, as he notes, one of the reasons for the vitality of the music is, of course, in its function as dance accompaniment. He goes on to examine the role of the family, social and economic factors, issues of local identity, and the growing influence of cultural tourism.

The value of this volume is not in radical new theoretical perspectives, nor is it in any way definitive or comprehensive; it does, however, offer a refreshing and thoughtful addition to a literature that is all too sparse. The contents, taken as a whole, help to build a picture not just of isolated minor musical subcultures, but rather of a greater tradition that is characterized by interrelationships, is deeply rooted, and currently thriving. The growing number of young people, as well as lifelong learners, taking up the instrument, achieving proficiency with traditional repertoires, and keenly promoting their performances, bears testimony to the fiddle's contemporary relevance. This is, similarly, the case for traditional dance.

The research presented here on fiddle and related dance traditions helps us to understand the whys and wherefores of these phenomena, as well as to help answer questions such as 'how did we get here?' and 'where is here?' Similarly, the maintenance of richness and diversity in the face of increasing homogenisation of style is clearly a dilemma. As fiddlers and audiences cross cultural and physical

boundaries, what can be discovered about the changes: 'what is being diminished?' 'what is being enhanced?'; 'what are the synergies of today?', and 'where are the creative energies to be found?' As Feintuch rightly concludes, the challenge of maintaining local identity is a fine balancing act of three interactive forces: community aesthetics and values, external economic pressures, and mass market influences. Our collection demonstrates that in understanding the voice of the fiddle, what it represents, and what it stands for, we recognize that it resonates far more widely, and fundamentally, in cultural terms than the immediate performance and audience milieu. In this respect, the integrity and validity of each of our authors' contributions is respected in the honesty and openness of our title: 'Play It Like It Is'.

*We would like to thank: the authors for their contributions; participants in the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention 2001 for providing the forum for the ideas developed in this book; Thomas A. McKean and Malcolm Reavell for their guidance with typesetting and artwork; the peer reviewers for their thoughtful comments; Frances Wilkins for help with referencing; and the Elphinstone Institute and the University of Aberdeen for giving the volume an imprint.*