

## MacPherson's Farewell

(Last Request: Music and Legends of  
Condemned Fiddlers)

*By Andrew Kuntz*

**F**iddlers, fiddle tunes and tragically fatal endings have seemingly been linked from the time of the consolidation of the modern form of the instrument in the early 17th century. At the same time that a mature Antonio Stradivarius was fashioning his most famous instruments in Cremona, the earliest and most famous condemned fiddler legend came into being with the Scots highwayman James MacPherson. The tune which bears the outlaw's name has frequently been printed in collections of Scottish fiddle music, after its first appearance in the Sinkler Manuscript in 1710 under the title "McFarsance's Testament," and has the distinction of being the earliest known fiddle tune in strathspey rhythm. There is no proof that MacPherson, a historical figure, composed the melody usually known as "MacPherson's Rant," but it has been popularly attributed to him for centuries.

What led him to his unfortunate demise? MacPherson was born in Banffshire about 1675, the son of a beautiful gypsy woman and a Highland laird, MacPherson of Invershire, in Inverness-shire. He was raised by his father, who unfortunately died young, after which MacPherson went to live with his mother (whose good looks he had apparently inherited, though perhaps he acquired his immense physical presence and strength from his father). As he grew to adulthood he developed a fondness for the wild life and became the leader of a "lawless gypsy roving band," establishing a reputation as a freebooter who operated in the Scottish counties of Aberdeen, Banff and Moray. Highwaymen and freebooters were certainly not rare in 17th century Scotland, especially in the Highlands, and once he was captured and executed it is likely he would have been quickly forgotten, but MacPherson insured his lasting fame with a grand gesture on the scaffold at Market Cross in Banff on the cold November morning of his execution.

Although several stories of his end differ in details, the main threads relate that MacPherson stepped onto the platform with his fiddle in his hand, took up his bow and proceeded to play his last communication to the world, his rant (sometimes it is said he played three tunes: "MacPherson's Rant," "MacPherson's Pibroch" and "MacPherson's Farewell") at the conclusion of which he offered his violin "to anyone in the crowd who would think well of him." However, either no

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one was brave enough to take it from the hands of a condemned man, or he had no well-wishers in attendance, or no one wished to implicate themselves by receiving the instrument, and no one came forward. The outlaw looked scornfully about the crowd, then lifted the fiddle and broke it over his knee in a grand gesture of contempt. Some versions say that he dashed the instrument over the head of his executioner and then flung himself headlong off the scaffold into oblivion, and one version claims he threw the pieces of the broken instrument into his awaiting grave. Despite this, the Clan Macpherson Museum at Newtonmore displays today the broken remains of an old fiddle, supposedly the very one the brigand played on the Market Cross gallows.

Early broadside ballads about the demise of the freebooter make little mention of any untoward drama regarding his execution, and say nothing at all about fiddling. The Last Words of James Macpherson, Murderer, a sheet printed about 1705, mentions nothing on the topic of fiddling, however, a later version was set to music (as the title is appended "To its own proper tune"). Mary Anne Alburger (Scottish Fiddlers and Their Music) insists it is quite likely that the tune was written after the event to suit the broadside for the melody fits the words perfectly, and could not have been a MacPherson original. She believes it possible that over the years, traditional memory fused MacPherson's story with that of a documented fiddler, Peter Broune, who was a member of MacPherson's gang and on trial at the same time. Broune, she suggests, may have been one of the fiddling Brown family of Kincardine who were early strathspey players and composers and who are credited with developing the strathspey form out of the reel.

It is Robert Burns, the Scots national poet, who emerges as the consolidating force for all the MacPherson legends that had been brewing for nearly a century. He wrote his famous song called "MacPherson's Farewell," bringing together the now-famous imagery of the bold unrepentant outlaw. Burns' song begins:

Farewell, ye dungeons dark and strong,  
The wretch's destinie! MacPherson's time will not  
be long On yonder gallows-tree. Sae rantingly,  
sae wantonly, Sae dauntingly gaed he, He play'd  
a spring, and danc'd it round Below the gallows-  
tree.

It is essentially this same song that has been printed and sung ever since.

The MacPherson legend has been a part of Scottish lore for centuries and is strongly identified with that country, however, D.K. Wilgus (in his article "Fiddler's Farewell: the Legend of the Hanged Fiddler," 1965) finds evidence of the

existence of an earlier MacPherson in Ireland with an almost identical story. He cites a chapbook called *The Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen Tories and Rapparees*, from Redmond O'Hanlon to Cahier Na Gappul, printed in Dublin in the early 19th century, that contains a section entitled "Some Passages of the Life of Strong John Macpherson, a notorious Robber." It relates that the Irish highwayman was a strapping man, fond of sports and "accounted in his time the strongest man in the nation." He inherited some money while still in his teens, which he promptly squandered in gambling and sporting, and was reduced to poverty:

*...and so, from one step after another, [he was] brought to the gallows. He was never known to murder anybody; nay he was very cautious of striking unless in his own defence; though in his time he committed more robberies single handed by far than Redmond O'Hanlon did, with whom he was acquainted, but with none of his gang. However, he was at last taken by treachery, and after being tried and found Guilty was despatched by the common finisher of the law about 1678. As he was carried to the gallows, he played a fine tune of his own composing on the bagpipe, which retains the name of Macpherson's tune to this day.*

There are only a very few condemned-musician legends from Continental Europe. A relevant Swedish legend is mentioned in the great collection of Swedish fiddle tunes, *Svenska Låtar*, in the section of tunes from the Medelpad region of central Sweden, collected in the first decades of the 20th century. There is a selection of tunes from the legendary fiddler Gullik Falk (1875-1928), one of which is a rather strange old waltz called "Diger Janke vals" (Big Janke's Waltz). It seems that Diger Janke was the name of an old fiddler who met his fate on the gallows at Hellsjömoarna nearby the town of Sundsvall. Before he was hanged he asked to play a tune, which was granted, and he played the waltz that afterward bore his name. This story seems to lack the fire and presence of the MacPherson legend, and, at least in the form recorded, seems a rather sad and resigned tale compared with the in-your-face panache of the Scots fiddler.

If not in Continental Europe, where did the condemned-fiddler legend resonate? In a land where the main background elements of the legend were replicated: where outlaws, rugged frontier country, folk musicians and individualism were common. The MacPherson legend was transported to North America with the waves of immigrants from Scotland and Northern England who settled in the central uplands region of the eastern part of the country: the Appalachians.

Elements of the story were incorporated into the folklore of the new land, although curiously, the actual song "MacPherson's Farewell" did not enter North American tradition, even in variant form. What did survive in tradition was the memory of a condemned fiddler who elects to boldly play his last farewell to the crowd, and this memory surfaces attached to several tunes in American traditional fiddling, the most notable of which is the tune that goes by the titles "Callahan," "Callahan Rag," "Calloway," "Last of Callahan," "Last of the Callahan's" and "Old Sport" (the latter title is from fiddler Albert Hash, of Rugby, Virginia).

"Callahan" was collected in tradition in the uplands regions of several south-central states, including Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. In addition, the tune and variants were collected in the Mid-West states of Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma, presumably having been transported by migrants from the Appalachians. Usually played cross-tuned, it was regarded as one of the older pieces in the fiddler's repertoire and one which predated the "string band" genre of tunes that featured banjo/fiddle combinations (Tom Carter & Blanton Owen, 1976). Bobby Fulcher (1986) agrees that the melody is old and says it belongs to a group of archaic tunes characterized by cross tunings, elaborate bowings and eccentric melody lines: "These droning exotic, richly flavored tunes were not to be danced to, or accompanied by other instruments, but just made interesting listening." Clyde Davenport (b. 1921), of Monticello, Kentucky, had the tune from his father, who picked it and other similar tunes up from a man named Will Phipps, an "old-timer" from Rock Creek, Tennessee (who is remembered for being buried with his fiddle in his coffin). Farther west, the title (as "Last of the Callahans") appears in a list of traditional Ozark Mountain fiddle tunes compiled by musicologist/folklorist Vance Randolph, published in 1954.

The MacPherson-like legend attached to the tune was first collected in 1909 by Katherine Jackson French near Loudon, Kentucky, from two boys who "played and sang 'Callahan's Confession,'" according to Wilgus. A report by E.C. Perrow in the *Journal of American Folklore* (25) in 1912 gave that "Some years ago an outlaw named Callahan was executed in Kentucky. Just before his execution he sat on his coffin and played and sang a ballad of his own composing, and, when he had finished, broke his musical instrument over his knee." This story, in almost exactly the same words, was related seventy-five years later by elderly Bell County, Kentucky, fiddler Estill Bingham (1899-1990) to Bob Butler

and Bruce Greene, and appears in Suzy Jones' *Oregon Folklore* (Bingham had lived in Oregon for a time before returning to Kentucky):

*One I never have heard played nowhere only around amongst a few old fiddlers there (i.e. Kentucky). It was called "Callahan." My dad played it, and they's a story goes with it. Well, they had this man Callahan up to be hung. And he had his casket made and brought there to the scaffold where they was aimin' to hang him, and they asked him if he wanted any request, any last request ?? and he was a fiddler so he said he'd like to play one more tune. So they give him his fiddle and he set on the end of his casket and played that tune. And he said, "If they's anybody can play that tune any better 'n I can, I'll give 'em my fiddle." The story goes that nobody tried, and he busted his fiddle over the end of his casket.*

Elderly sources swear the Callahan story "really happened" in Clay County, Kentucky, though other locales also claim the honor. One such elderly source, Oscar Parks of Deuchars, Indiana, recounted the story to Alan Lomax in 1938. Parks was originally from Livingston County, Kentucky, and said he had the tale from an old man in nearby Jackson County. According to Parks, Callahan, whose first name was John, was being hanged for killing a man in the course of a feud. Callahan offered his fiddle to anyone who would join him on the gallows and "sit down with him and play that tune" and when no one dared for fear of being involved in the feud, Callahan "busted that fiddle all to pieces over that coffin." Digging deeper into this story, Wilgus found there indeed were Callahans (one John Abe Callahan in particular, a notorious feudist) involved in feuds in Kentucky, although the location of these family conflicts was in Breathitt County, and none of the antagonists was recorded as having been hanged.

Another version of the tale was supplied by a correspondent to the Archive of American Folksong soon after World War II. The writer maintained she was a Callahan descendent and that her family, which included fiddlers, told her that the tune had to do with one Isaac Callahan who died in the middle of the 19th century. Callahan, "knowing he was to hang, he built his coffin, and taking his fiddle he played while his sister danced upon his coffin." Wilgus found a similar citation in folklore literature by A. Porter Hamblen who noted that he had information that Callahan was convicted of murdering a Jewish peddler and was hanged at Barbourville, Kentucky, on May 15, 1835. "At the hour of his execution he requested to be allowed to play a farewell on his violin. While seated on his coffin he played this tune which since has borne his name.

He then handed the violin to the sheriff, was led onto the gallows and the trap sprung, sending Callahan to his maker." Kentucky fiddler Pete Steele told musicologist Alan Lomax in 1938 the Callahan tale, a variant which Wilgus observes places emphasis on the disposition of the fiddle. In this version the condemned man sat on his coffin at the place of execution and declared that his last wish was to play "Callahan," and if anyone in the crowd could also play the tune then that individual would be given the fiddle. Someone did come forward to play "Callahan," and afterwards the fiddle was transferred to the new owner and the event proceeded. Sometimes the ending of the story has Callahan break the fiddle over his knee before he steps up to the gallows, just as in the MacPherson legend.

Some eastern Kentucky and West Virginia sources give the title as "Calloway," and place the event in Madison, Boone County, West Virginia, dated around 1850. Marion Thede (1967) published a version of the piece played by Oklahoma and Arkansas fiddlers under the title "The Last of Callahan" with the particularly Wild West story twist that Callahan was a horse thief who had been caught by a posse and who was about to be summarily hanged. While standing in a wagon underneath a tree limb with a noose around his neck, Callahan was asked for his last words. The outlaw requested instead to play the fiddle one more time, and with the noose still around his neck he played a tune, the likeness of which is remembered as "The Last of Callahan," and then he too handed his fiddle down to one of the bystanders at the fateful event.

A note-for-note transcription of Luther Strong's "Callahan" appears in the Lomax's book *Our Singing Country* (1941).

Wilgus found the hanged-fiddler tale melded to other fiddle tunes in the United States as well, another of which has come down as "Pennington's Farewell," and it too involves a real person. Edward Alonzo Pennington was a Kentucky businessman known for his sharp deals; he was a passer of counterfeit money, a horse thief and murderer? and a fiddler? whose career came to an untimely end in 1845. It seems that Pennington, feeling that he was to imminently be brought to justice for his misdeeds, fled to Texas just ahead of the authorities. Texas at the time was a haven for ne'er-do-wells and worse, however, Pennington had the hubris to publicly exercise his well-known talent on the fiddle and was recognized one night by a Kentucky visitor as he played for a camp dance in Lamar County. He was recaptured, tried and condemned for his crimes. Similar to MacPherson or Callahan, at the gallows he asked for his fiddle and played a tune he composed called

"Pennington's Farewell," then recited the following rhyme:

*Oh, dreadful, dark and dismal day, How  
have my joys all passed away! My sun's gone  
down, my days are done, My race on earth has  
now been run.*

The Kentucky tune "Coleman's March" is also a condemned-fiddler tune. Joe Coleman, a shoemaker, was accused of stabbing his wife to death near the town of Slate Fork, Adair County, Kentucky, as recorded in the *Burkesville Herald Almanac* for 1899. Convicted on circumstantial evidence and the testimony of his sister-in-law who was living with them at the time, Coleman was sentenced to death. While being driven to the place of execution in a two-wheeled ox cart, Coleman sat on his coffin and played a tune that has come down as "Coleman's March". In modern times, the melody has been popularized through the playing of Bruce Greene and Pete Sutherland.

The fiddling shoemaker protested his innocence to the last, insinuating he knew who really killed his wife (causing one of the jurors to remark acerbically that if that were true he should be hanged anyway, for his silence). This may have sowed some doubt, for several stories exist of another man confessing to the crime and an elderly lady even gave a death-bed confession that it was she who killed Coleman's wife. One published account maintained that Coleman's relatives quickly recovered his body and somehow managed to revive him, then put him on a steamboat down the Cumberland River to Nashville, where he disappeared into the West. Attached to the tune is the legend that before Coleman was hanged he offered his fiddle to anyone who could play his march as well as he, and that a Kentucky fiddler named Franz Prewitt came forward and won the instrument. Wilgus found Prewitt's descendants, who remembered him as having indeed been a fine fiddler, though they did not remember any tales connected with his receiving a fiddle.

The Civil War is the setting for several condemned fiddler tales. One is also based on recorded history in western North Carolina. In the last days of the conflict ?? just after the surrender at Appomattox Court House, although word had not arrived yet ?? Henry Grooms, along with his brother and brother-in-law, were stopped by the Confederate Home Guard below Mount Sterling Gap. The border country had been a refuge for scalawags and bushwackers, and the local farms had been repeatedly raided by Union troops and by ruffians with no allegiances. The nearby town of Waynesville had recently been torched and the mood of the countryside was extremely tense, but no one knows exactly why it is that these

particular men were waylaid. As the Guard and their prisoners marched toward Cataloochee Valley, Grooms, clutching his fiddle and bow, was asked by his captors for a tune. Grooms must have realized it would be his last, and local legend records he chose to play "Bonaparte's Retreat." After the tune ended, the men were stood up in front of an oak and executed by firing squad. Grooms' wife Eliza later collected the bodies and buried them in a single grave, marked by a plain headstone that is visible today. It reads simply "Murdered." A local name for "Bonaparte's Retreat" is "Grooms' Tune."

Another Kentucky tune that has a rather sketchy end-of-life tale is "The Last of Sizemore," a crosstuned (AEAE) piece in A major recorded for the Library of Congress in 1937 by both Boyd Asher (Hyden, Kentucky) and Luther Strong (Hazard, Kentucky). It was collected by Bruce Greene from the playing of Hiram Stamper who claimed it was "learned from Civil War veterans," and who told Greene that it had to do with a soldier who was taken up a holler and shot during the Civil War days when raiders were prevalent in the region. The tale thus bears a clear resemblance to the North Carolina tale above. However, Morgan County, Kentucky fiddler Sanford Kelly maintained that Sizemore was an old man who on his deathbed asked to play one last tune on the fiddle before he expired. He was given his fiddle and proceeded to play. A man was outside his window plowing a garden and overheard the old fiddler's farewell tune, and being a fiddler himself he quickly memorized the tune and gave it the name it bears.

Finally, we come to two Cajun tunes in the repertoire of the famous Louisiana fiddler Dennis McGee, paired by him on one of his 78 RPM recordings. "Valse à Guilbeau" was said to have been played by a condemned soldier, one Guilbeau, in the presence of a general as a last request before his execution in front of a firing squad, an event McGee believed happened during the American Civil War. The general agreed to the request and the soldier's handcuffs were removed, after which the condemned man sat on his coffin and proceeded to play a Cajun waltz now known by his name. There is a twist to this story, however, perhaps reflective of Gallic courtesy, for as soon as the condemned soldier finished his tune, he asked the general to return the favour by playing in turn for him. The general complied, took up the bow and played "Napoleon's Waltz." This gentlemanly exchange of skill seems a far cry from the last defiance of a MacPherson or Callahan, but is perhaps what led McGee to associate the pieces with the Civil War, for it demonstrates a kind of Victorian gallantry that, in

romantic fantasy at least, has become attached to the conflict.

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