

'Jack is yet alive':
fiddle lessons in Shetland Isles schools, 1973–1985

Pamela Swing

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Ón gCos go Cluas

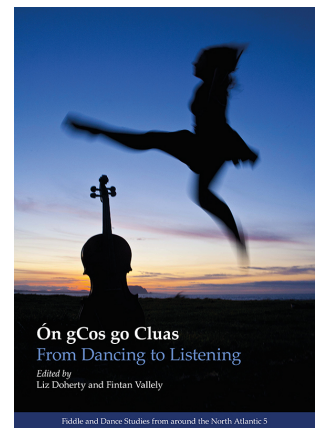
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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Pamela Swing has done extensive research on Shetland fiddle music, wrote her doctoral dissertation on fiddle teaching in Shetland Isles schools, and with Tom Anderson, MBE, co-authored *Haand Me Doon Da Fiddle* (1978), Shetland fiddle tunes and stories illustrated by Shetland children. As a musician and artist, she is deeply interested in how we access and sustain creativity. Her performances include Clearwater Festival and NEFFA; her photographs have been shown in the Boston area. Now based in Concord, Massachusetts, she is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University and is developing a curriculum for women entitled 'Thresholds', which focuses on how ritual and art support women's inner transformation.

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'Jack is yet alive': fiddle lessons in Shetland Isles schools, 1973–1985

PAMELA SWING

In 1918, eight-year-old Tammie o' Moarfield was sent for by his grandfather, who had heard he was trying out tunes on the fiddle. His grandfather listened as Tammie played, holding the fiddle low against his chest and grasping the bow well above the frog as fiddlers did in those days. Then his grandfather took his fiddle from the drawer of the resting chair and played the reel 'Jack is Yet Alive' a few times until Tammie could pick out most of the notes, and told him to come back again in a few weeks. Fifty-five years later, Tammie o' Moarfield (better known as Tom Anderson), was sent for again; this time by the Director of Education. It was 1973, and Tom had recently retired from the insurance business. He phoned the Education Office about a position for a school violin teacher. He told me:

I could hear John Spence, the Director of Education in the background saying, 'Send him along'. So I went and told him that I didn't have any degrees or training, but that I could teach the basics of fiddle. Spence looked thoughtful and asked if I had ever considered teaching my own traditional music. I said I hadn't.¹ 'Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. How about if I give you a Saturday forenoon at Islesburgh House? It might be a bit difficult to get past the Education Committee but I'll see what I can do'. The first Saturday came, and I was snowballed: thirty-five pupils and parents showed up with different instruments, all expecting tuition [...] After two weeks, Spence said, 'We'd better give you Fridays as well.'²

And so Tom became a fiddle teacher. In this paper, I look at how Tom chose to 'teach his own traditional music', as John Spence put it. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl recognised the importance of focusing on the way a music is transmitted or taught, saying that 'we must be concerned with the way it is learnt and even with the materials that are used to teach it'.³ Nettl was referring to music traditions that are ongoing. What makes Shetland music especially interesting is that a new form of transmission, 'a school fiddle lesson', was created with the specific goal of reviving a tradition. The way tunes have been taught and the form the revival has taken are intertwined. As Hobsbawm and Ranger have noted, there is a sense in which all traditions are reinterpreted, or even reinvented, by each generation.⁴ This process

is even more pronounced when a tradition is consciously revived, for that leads to all sorts of decisions about what is and how it is revived. I am going to discuss three implications of this interconnection between reviving music and a new approach to transmission.

First, the shift from picking up tunes informally at home and at dances to being taught in institutional school fiddle-lessons has created new roles of fiddle teacher and fiddle student, with the teacher choosing what tunes are learned, and how they are taught. Second, there has been a major shift in context for Shetland music – whereas formerly, fiddle music was played for dancing, the fiddle has become a listening instrument and students learning fiddle in schools are trained to be concert performers. And third, in both new contexts – fiddle lessons and the concert stage – Tom presented Shetland music as a positive source of cultural identity. There are questions, however, about how far one person can go in reshaping cultural attitudes.

A little more background is required: when Tom learnt to play fiddle as a boy, he was at the cusp of a fading tradition. By the time he was fifteen and asked to play at his first wedding, he was no longer holding the fiddle low down against his chest, and was avidly learning Scottish tunes he heard on records, especially the music of Scott Skinner. New dances with new tunes were the order of the day – waltzes, polkas, quadrilles, Boston two-step, and eightsome reels – and he could play for all of them. New instruments were also coming in, and musicians, including Tom's family, were forming dance bands. Tom developed a dismissive attitude towards Shetland music that was echoed all over Shetland:

The Shetland tunes, somehow there was a time in my life when I was inclined to look down on them [...] My regret is that I had a period where I really tried to forget [Shetland music] and tried to imitate the Scottish thing [...] I lost a lot of tunes because there were old fiddlers dying and there were old fiddlers who were saying in disgust, 'Oh well, dere no use playing these things because the records are in now'.⁵

It took leaving the islands for Tom to see the value of his own culture and music. During World War II, he was stationed in India, and saw how local folk music was integral to people's lives, in sharp contrast to the way Shetlanders had discarded their own music.

I made a decision [...] after the war, I would devote the rest of my life to preserving the culture, which even then was being affected by incoming things. And I decided then that I would give everything I had to collecting my own music and really studying it.⁶

On his return from India, he joined the recently formed Shetland Folk Society (founded in 1945) and became leader of the Folk Society Band. He worked as an insurance agent by day, and collected tunes in his off hours, amassing an enormous collection of recordings and interviews of fiddlers from all over Shetland. The records he made, and extensive BBC coverage, saw him well-known throughout Great Britain and helped consolidate his position as the key figure in the revival of Shetland fiddle music. Nevertheless, when he began teaching fiddle in school, few bairns were taking up the fiddle and the traditional tunes were rarely heard in Shetland.

The fiddle-teaching experiment in Lerwick did not go unnoticed in the rest of Shetland. In 1974, at the request of the Baltasound School Headmaster and a Shetland Islands Council member from Yell, the program expanded to two schools on the island of Unst and three schools on the island of Yell. As it happened, I had taken time off from college to spend the year in the Shetland Isles learning fiddle myself, and I assisted Tom with the teaching. So I was in a unique position – what I later learnt was termed ‘participant-observer’ by anthropologists – to both witness and participate in the way that fiddle was taught in schools. My personal journal is the only documentation of the early days of teaching fiddle in schools. The Shetland fiddle teaching programme would eventually become the topic of my doctoral dissertation.⁷

There is something inherently special about beginnings. I could tell you stories about somewhat tense early morning trips in the car trying to be on time for two ferries, so as to get to the Uyeasound School by 9:30 am, and how on the first day, a group of students and I all collapsed in giggles as they squawked out a scale together while Tom was outside trying to calm his nerves with a quick cigarette. I could tell you about writing out tunes on slips of paper, and how we spent weeks bringing back fiddles for Alec Leask, the fiddle-maker in Lerwick, to repair.

Establishing a program of teaching fiddle in school in the North Isles was a seat-of-the-pants experiment that evolved over time. From the start, Tom made lessons fun, always bringing in a bit of humour, and instinctively building a personal connection with each student. He emphasised the joy of making music with others – both men and women. For offering fiddle lessons in school had unexpectedly opened the door for girls to join what had formerly been a male tradition. In both Lerwick and the North Isles, the majority of fiddle students were girls. It made no difference to Tom, and, though remarked upon by Shetlanders, it was totally accepted.

We had to figure out what actually would be taught during a lesson. There were so many students that we had to teach in groups. Tom had a true talent at bringing out music in a fledgling fiddler, but we had to first get the students going with the mechanics of playing. This was already a major shift from the past, when boys might have been given a few pointers by a fiddler, but were otherwise left on their own. We tried starting out with handing out the music for ‘Da Merry Boys o’ Greenland’, a tune once familiar throughout Shetland, and as such, one that boys might have tried to pick up first. It was a failure. The students didn’t know the melody, they didn’t know how to read music, and they floundered with the string crossings. We soon realised that we needed ‘bridge’ tunes, such as ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’, that would help students become comfortable with the basics of fingering and bowing. We then came up with simple polkas and waltzes that could allow the student to continue gaining mastery of the instrument, but still be playing tunes. And so the repertoire, and the way tunes were transmitted, began to be reshaped by the exigencies of the classroom.

Once students became comfortable with the instrument, then noticeable progress could be made. I am going to read a few quotes from my journal, to give you a sense of the excitement that was being generated by learning to play the fiddle. Both quotes are about the Uyeasound School, where the entire upper primary class was learning fiddle:

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Oct. 8: Kim was really making music today, smiling as she played and moving her body. Maureen's little sister Caroline has suddenly started to come on fast, so much so that Maureen told us she could hardly get the fiddle away from her to practice herself. Steven Spence, boy wonder, has had four lessons and can already play 'Da Merry Boys o' Greenland' up to tempo and three other tunes as well.⁸

Nov. 4: Teaching with the piano, a high energy day when a half hour [per group] just isn't enough. Richard was promoted to the middle group; happy blue eyes. He's a very determined worker. Both David and Peter, the other beginners, came back proud because they could play part of 'Baa Baa Black Sheep'. [In the top group], Caroline is really playing and so is Kim, a proud beautiful person in her pink pantsuit. I had a glimpse of Angela as a wise old woman [as she played] [...] Tammie banged out accompaniment on the piano, blissfully unaware of how well they really were doing and what went wrong when they got lost.⁹

Before we started teaching in the North Isles, Tom and I had discussions about whether to teach from printed music or aurally. I advocated the latter; having recently begun learning tunes by ear and experiencing first-hand how it changed my relationship to a tune. When Norway began reviving folk music traditions, they incorporated aural transmission as an integral part of passing on the tradition because it allowed you to pick up elements of style that are difficult to notate, and much simpler to learn by example. This certainly was the way it had been done in Shetland in the past. Not only that, learning tunes by ear was informal – you weren't expected to get the tune note for note, and in fact, value was placed on making a tune your own.

For the North Isles, however, Tom was adamant that we teach from music. This presented a challenge, as the Shetland Folk Society book of traditional tunes, *Da Mirrie Dancers*, was long out of print.¹⁰ We had to write out tunes many times over. Nevertheless, I think it was partly from expediency – the sheer numbers of students meant he had to use short cuts to teaching the tunes. Reading music was also a tool that he wanted his students to have, so that they would have access to a much broader range of music. But I also think there is another issue at play here. I found there was an attitude amongst many of the older fiddlers in Shetland that learning by ear was limiting. A number of fiddlers who I approached said, 'What can I show you? I can't even read music'. There was a sense that since Shetland music was passed on aurally, it was of lesser value than published music. Since music transmitted aurally had been stigmatised in this way, teaching Shetland music from written music can be seen as a way of giving it a higher status, and putting it more on a level with other music.

I should mention that some of the fiddle students ignored the printed music, at least initially, and picked up tunes by ear from Tom's playing. Such matters are rarely clear-cut. Peter Cooke was very critical of this decision, as it formalised the tune melodies, so that they tended to be played similarly by all the students. Tom knew this, and did his best to mitigate this effect. He often referred to printed music as the 'skeleton' of a tune, and told pupils he never played a tune the same way twice. He insisted again and again that he did not want his students to sound like carbon copies of him. But then, when practicing for a performance, he would insist that everyone's bowings be identical and that they all play the same notes.

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This brings me to my second point, which is that fiddle students were being trained to play on stage. Tom used to love to play for dancing, and did so for many years. Yet he taught his students to be concert performers. This was not something we discussed; it simply was the way it was done. On our last visit to the Uyeasound School before summer break, we put on a short concert for the lower primary class:

July 1: The little ones were all seated in two rows of tiny chairs [...] With Tom at piano, five music stands stuck up and twelve children plus Pam behind, we launched into ‘Da Merry Boys’, then ‘Mrs Macleod’s Reel’, and ‘Starry Nights in Shetland’ for the most advanced. There were three who were lost for most of the time, but the rest of them plugged on very well. It was a very joyous moment [...] I grinned and enjoyed tasting the fruits of my labours.¹¹



Why did he make this choice? Once again, in parallel with raising the status of Shetland tunes by teaching from printed music, putting Shetland music on stage was a way of setting it off from the current dance music scene, and marking it as something special. Tom had a vision of creating a ‘classical’ Shetland music corpus, consisting of dance tunes, descriptive and listening tunes, and some contemporary compositions:

There are certain tunes in Shetland [that] are classical, as in any folk music. What is classical? That which is put in a class [...] Shetland has a right to its own classical music. It should come near to its natural sounds, that is, the sounds of nature [...] What we’ve got here are these beautiful old melodies.¹²

Most Shetland tunes, however, were reels. Even on stage, it was critical to Tom that his students play Shetland Reels with the lilt of a danced tune. Over time, Tom identified and taught specific stylistic elements that grew out of playing for dancing such as ‘lang draws’, ringing strings, and stop and go rhythm. Tom told me that when he played a reel, he could see the dancing feet in his mind’s eye. But the students do not have access to that memory. Tom’s playing is their link to the past. So these stylistic elements become isolated techniques learned through fiddle lessons, more formulaic than improvisationally grounded in an ongoing music/dance process. This approach has reduced the range of styles of playing that formerly existed in the islands. Nevertheless, they can be very effective when performed on stage.

My third point is that training performers rather than dance musicians was part of Tom’s overarching goal in teaching fiddle in school: that playing their own music would instil a positive sense of cultural identity. Shetlanders have had a very ambivalent attitude towards their past, which had many hardships. Over years of collecting fiddle tunes, Tom learned to always ask where a fiddler had learned a tune, and if there was a story associated with it. Tom discovered that Shetland tunes were a way of bringing history alive and reclaiming the past by transforming hardships into a source of pride. The stories associated with the tunes imbued them with significance far beyond that of a reel played for a long night of dancing. Tom would teach these stories along with the music, and introduce tunes on stage with them.

40. JACK IS YET ALIVE

JACK IS YET ALIVE

Bobby Gear
Anderson High

Dere wis aince a fiddler caaed Jack it was taen wi da Press Gang. Dey took him out o' a boat along wi da rest o' da crew an naebody kent what hed happened te dem. Dey tocht da boat hed been lost wi everybody in her. Dey were pitten ida Navy an Jack wis awa fir five years. Finally dey slippit him an he made fir hame as fast as he could. Dey wir nae roads denadays so it took him a braw while to win hame. Whin he got to da hoose it wis dark, an whin he guid in his midder tocht he wis a feyness. Hooever, shu saw it he wis real an made him a cup o' tae. Whin he'd finished his tae he rekkeed doon da fiddle it was hangin' upa da wa' an efter he'd gotten her tuned he played a tūn. His midder wha kent aa da tūns at dat time saed, "Boy I'm never heard yon-een afore; what's yun?" Jack said, "Yun's een I made up as I wis maakin fir hame an I caa him, "Jack is Yet Alive". Dis wis da first tūn I learned fae me grandfaider.

Figure 1 'Jack is Yet Alive' in *Haand Me Doon Da Fiddle*.¹³

The first tune that Tom learned from his grandfather, ‘Jack is Yet Alive’, for example, is a redemptive tale about the destructive practice of press-ganging, in which the British Navy would abduct Shetland men to serve as unwilling recruits. Families were left to wonder what had happened and many men never returned. One Shetlander, the story goes, did make it home again after five years. When he walked in the door of his house, his mother thought he was a ghost. After a cup of tea, he took the fiddle off the wall and played a tune. When his mother asked what it was, he told her he had composed it as he was making his way home, and called it ‘Jack is Yet Alive’ (see Figure 1).

Such stories were powerful in another way as well. Often, they were verbal clues about how to bring out the musical intent of a tune. When playing ‘Jack is Yet Alive’, a young fiddler might imagine himself as Jack triumphantly playing the tune for the first time after arriving home, and bring out a sense of joy and defiance inherent in the melody. If a tune didn’t have a story, Tom would create a description that had the same effect. Tom was a genius in his ability to help a student ‘get inside’ the music. The students responded strongly to Tom’s approach to teaching fiddle, and to the underlying message that their music was a source of pride. One pupil described what learning fiddle in school meant to her:

Just the fact that Tammie was my hero. I thought of him as famous [...] It was a traditional instrument – gone through the past – being able to play yourself; the thrill of being able to play. And to think [...] my granddad had [played fiddle too]. You’d learn a tune and rush home and play it. It was a gift, something to be proud of. I couldn’t wait to get to me fiddle lessons.¹⁴

At the same time, however, that Tom presented Shetland music as a positive source of cultural identity, he worried that he had attached too much weight to something that used to be done ‘just for a fun’ as Shetlanders would say. The corpus of traditional Shetland tunes that survived is quite small – around 200, with somewhat fluid boundaries as to what constitutes a Shetland tune. Is it possible for a cultural artefact to become overlaid with value, and backfire as a source of identity? Possibly. Arlene Leitch, an American fiddler, told me Aly Bain once said to her, ‘Shetland music is really very simple, of humble origins. Now it’s being heard around the world and made much of, beyond what it really is’.¹⁵ Over and over I met Shetlanders who spontaneously told me they thought Tom had done a tremendous job bringing back fiddle playing in Shetland. They were less enthusiastic, however, about his desire to keep the old tunes going. Tom was well aware of this – and equally aware that his students would need to expand far beyond the Shetland repertoire as they grew as musicians. One student told me, ‘Folk don’t want to hear the old tunes. We just play them to please Tammie’.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Tom ultimately hoped that the Shetland tunes would run deep for them, as a touchstone of cultural identity, even as they embraced other traditions.

What has been the result of the fiddle teaching program? In sheer numbers of students taught fiddle, it has been an astounding success. In 1985, when I returned to do doctoral research on the fiddle program, there were three instructors teaching in fifteen schools on six islands, and over seven hundred students had received lessons. Since 1973, thousands of students have learned fiddle at school. Music is now thriving in Shetland. Fiddlers trained

through the Shetland schools add greatly to the cultural life, including participation in the Shetland Folk Festival, Accordion and Fiddle Festival, Gala days, Lifeboat Days, Tall Ships, Island Games, Johnsmas Foy, Young Fiddler of the Year, School Music Festival, as well as smaller but equally important local venues in schools and in the community.

Many students have become professional musicians known worldwide. They include Catriona MacDonald, Degree Programme Director for the Folk and Traditional BMus Degree at Newcastle University, Kevin Henderson, who replaced Aly Bain in the Boys of the Lough, and Chris Stout, who has composed commissioned works for national and international groups such as the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention. There have also been a number of music groups formed by fiddle students including Fiddlers Bid, Filska, and Shetland's Young Heritage, now known as the Heritage Fiddlers. This last group has toured extensively, made recordings and had numerous television appearances both with Tom Anderson and on their own. The success of the fiddle teaching programme is a tribute to Tom Anderson and the crowning culmination of his work in reviving Shetland music. His love and dedication to this cause cannot be emphasised strongly enough.

What effect has teaching fiddle in school had on the tradition? That's more complicated. Shetland music would possibly sound quite different today if teaching had been through aural transmission, and regional styles of playing had been taught. Similarly, if it had been revived as dance music, it also might have a different character, and also play a very different cultural role. The way that Tom taught fiddle has reshaped the tradition. Did Tom succeed, as he put it, in 'instilling a part of the culture that they won't forget?' What is the meaning of playing Shetland tunes for his students? It may not be possible to answer these questions, in part because meaning is often not easily articulated, and may change from year to year, even day to day, or from one time of playing a tune to the next. One hopes, in fact, that there is a rich vein of meanings associated with the tunes the students learned in their lessons. It would be restrictive and limiting for them to be played for just one reason.

What Tom accomplished *par excellence* was to impart a passionate love of making music to his many students. I watched, at times in awe, as students began to play tunes when just weeks earlier they had struggled to draw a bow across the strings. I met pupil after pupil well on their way to becoming very accomplished musicians. It is remarkable and noteworthy that many of the students who learned fiddle in school continue to play. Fiddle music in Shetland is very much 'yet alive'. And if a tradition of playing fiddle music in Shetland is to continue, it is vital that there be many fiddlers who play because they love to play, for whatever reason.

Addendum

While attending NAFCo 2012, I learned that the Shetland fiddle teaching programme, along with the entire instrumental teaching programme, might be eliminated due to educational budget constraints. I wrote a petition, signed by 44 NAFCo attendees, to Malcolm Bell, Convener of the Shetland Islands Council, asking that the programme be retained. I travelled to the Shetland Islands that fall and met with Shetland Island Councillors, Education administrators, members of non-profit arts agencies, fiddle and other instrumental

instructors, and Tavish Scott, Member of the Scottish Parliament, to see if a solution could be found. I quickly learned that Shetland's overall financial difficulties were indeed a challenge. Nevertheless, there was support to keep the programme going if at all possible. I explored various options to find outside sources of funding, but left without reaching a conclusive outcome. Subsequently, a 'working group' was formed under the auspices of the Shetland Islands Council. It was comprised of individuals drawn from all of the above groups. They met for eight months. Their proposal was to cap cuts to the programme at 75%, in return for which they would make the programme work within that budget. This proposal was passed by the Shetland Islands Council. The instrumental teaching programme continues to thrive.

Notes

¹ This was not true. Tom Anderson had been promoting this idea for years, as can be seen in the following quote from an article about the Shetland Fiddlers' Society: 'Tom Anderson feels that if we want our folk music to survive, traditional music as well as classical music should have a place in the school curriculum as it does in other countries, particularly Norway'. See Margaret Henderson, 'The Forty Fiddlers', *The Scots Magazine* (April, 1969), p. 25.

² Pamela Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland Isles Schools, 1973–1985' (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1991), p. 78.

³ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 323.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 127.

⁶ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 67.

⁷ I assisted Tom Anderson for the spring and fall terms of 1974. I returned to Shetland in 1976, and Tom Anderson and I began work on a book about Shetland music, which was never completed. We also started work on a book of fiddle tunes to be used in the schools, which was published in 1979 – see Tom Anderson and Pamela Swing, *Haand Me Doon da Fiddle* (Stirling: Department of Continuing Education, University of Stirling, 1979). In 1984–1985, I returned for seven months to do doctoral fieldwork. I observed fiddle lessons and interviewed the three instructors – Tom Anderson, Margaret Robertson (now Scollay), and Trevor Hunter, as well as many of the fiddle students; Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland'.

⁸ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 98.

⁹ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 98.

¹⁰ Tom Anderson and Tom Georgeson, eds, *Da Mirrie Dancers: A Book of Shetland Fiddle Tunes* (Lerwick: *Shetland Times* for the Shetland Folk Society, 1970).

¹¹ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 95.

¹² Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 289.

¹³ Anderson and Swing, *Haand Me Doon da Fiddle*.

¹⁴ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 170.

¹⁵ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 289.

¹⁶ Swing, 'Fiddle Teaching in Shetland', p. 290.