

Big John McNeil

A

A E7

A E7 A

B

A E7 A D E7

A E7 A D 1. A

2. E7 *DC. al Fine* A *Fine*

"Big John McNeil" also known as "John McNeil's Reel" is a Canadian, American and Scottish reel in A Major. It is played in standard (or infrequently AEae) fiddle tuning. The parts are played AABB (Gibbons, Messer, Sweet), AABB' (Miller & Perron) or AA'BB' (Bégin, Perlman, Phillips).

Though now known as a Canadian standard it originally was a reel composed (as "John McNeil") by the brilliant Scottish fiddler Peter Milne (1824-1908), one of J. Scott Skinner's teachers and early playing partners, who earned his living playing in theaters until his opium addiction (he abused laudanum, originally prescribed for rheumatism) reduced him to busking on ferry-boats crossing the Firth of Forth. He died in unpleasant circumstances in a mental institution.

John McNeil was a famous Highland dancer of the mid-to-later 19th century. The melody was in the repertoire of Cyrill Stinnett, a fiddler who epitomized the 'North Missouri Hornpipe Style' of playing, who apparently learned it and other tunes from listening to Canadian fiddlers broadcasting on the radio from Canada.

An influential recording of the tune was made 'Down-East' Canadian fiddler Don Messer with his group the Islanders, early in the 1940's-among the first of the sides the group waxed. A very similar melody, or a version, is "Lord Ramsay's Reel".

Perlman (1996) notes the tune is a popular tune on Prince Edward Island and a favorite vehicle for step-dancing in Prince County, PEI, on the western part of the island.

Irish fiddler Sean Maguire recorded the melody in the 1960's under the title "Betty's Fancy". The banjo tablature is by John Letscher. His note: From numerous sources. Initially John Hartford.

It was printed in Bégin's **Fiddle Music in the Ottawa Valley** (1985), Feldman & O'Doherty's **The Northern Fiddler** (1979), Gibbons' **As It Comes: Folk Fiddling From Prince George, British Columbia** (1982), Messer's **Anthology of Favorite Fiddle Tunes** (1980), Miller & Perron's **New England Fiddlers Repertoire** (1983), Perlman's **The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island** (1996), Phillips' **Traditional American Fiddle Tunes, vol. 1** (1994), Silberberg's **Tunes I Learned at Tractor Tavern** (2002) and Sweet's **Fifer's Delight** (1964).

It was recorded by Earl Mitton and the Valley Rhythm Boys on **Down East Fiddle Favourites** (1958), Graham & Eleanor Townsend on **Graham & Eleanor Townsend Live at Barre, Vermont** (1981), Jay Ungar, Evan Stover and Matt Glaser on **Fiddle Fever** (1981), The Campbell Family on **Champion Fiddlers** (1971), Ward Allen on **Ward Allen Presents Maple Leaf Hoedown, Vol. 1** (1969) and **The Best of Ward Allen** (1973), Don Messer on **The Very Best of Don Messer** (1994) and Bob Carlin & John Hartford on **The Fun of Open Discussion** (1995).