

THE HISTORY OF "THE FROG'S COURTSHIP": A Study of Canadian Variants

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Surely all English-speaking children at some time or another have sung a version of the 'Frog's Courtship.' When I began my hunt for the origins and history of the popular tune, I had no idea what a large and complex task this was, nor how many variants would turn up in Canada alone. This is a brief history of the tune in its many forms; indicating what research has been done to date.

Probably the earliest recorded mention is a tune sung by shepherds in Wedderburn's *Complaint of Scotland* of 1549¹ called "The frog came to the myl dur."

In 1783 Pinkerton commented on the song in *Select Scottish Ballads*: "I am told that no. 17 (the frog came to the myl dur) used lately to be sung on the stage in Edinburgh and contains a mock courtship between a frog and a mouse of some satirical merit."²

In 1580 "A Moste Strange Weddinge of the Ffrogge and the Mowse" was entered in the Stationers Hall Register, but not until 1611 do we find an extant version: among the "Country Pastimes" of Ravenscroft's *Melismata*, after which "there is increasing printed evidence of the song's popularity."³

The first example is of "It was the Frog in the Well." It has a simple structure of four short phrases and a clear outlining of the tonic triad (a feature of many). If the opening D is included the range is a ninth, but this pitch is never repeated and the rest stays within a fairly narrow sixth. The hexatonic scale 6B could possibly be an indicator of the antiquity of the tune, although this is not necessarily the case.⁴

Example 1. "It was the Frog in the Well" with tune from *Melismata*.

The frogge would a wooing ride
Humble-dum, humble-dum
Sword and buckler by his side
Tweedle, tweedle, twino

Structure:
A A₁ B C
[b] [r]

When upon his high horse set
His boots they shone as black as jet

But when supper they were at
The frog, the mouse, and e'en the rat

When he came to the merry mill
Lady Mouse beene you within?

Then came in Gib, our cat
And caught the mouse e'en by the back

Then came out the dusty mouse
I am the lady of this house

Then did they separate
The frog leapt on the floor so flat

A B A C(B) D E A C
 / | \1/
 [b] [b] [r]

This melody has eight phrases with the peak in the D phrase. It has three basic phrase contours, two repeated three times and one twice. The opening leap of a minor sixth happens twice more and the overall range is a major tenth. Structurally, it contrasts several simple ideas effectively. The rising A phrase is juxtaposed with the descending motif of "Kitty alone", the two middle phrases possessing nearly the same intervals. The melody seems quite distinct from that of Example 1, although the rhythmic ties between the burden material are still present.

The first American example Dr. Creighton cites has nearly identical structure although the melody is different, more closely related to the popular version "Froggie Went A-Courting." The second one shows less building on earlier melodic ideas, yet there is still a surprising rhythmic cohesiveness. All three versions use a distinctive motif in their burdens, the overall structures are eight phrases, and the placing of lines of the verse and burdens stays the same. For example, there are always three repetitions of the opening line of text.

Two more Canadian variants have this "Kitty alone" burden. Helen Creighton collected one in which the burden is altered to "Kitty in the kimeo" and another where it is "Kitty me love." In both cases the informants remembered only one verse.⁸

Because of the great number of tunes found under the heading "The Frog's Courtship", and since all have some sort of burden or refrain, it is easiest to classify them according to their burden type. There are countless nonsense syllables other than "Kitty alone" and "humble-dum." These absurd expressions sometimes have an original meaning. "Diddle-diddle," for example, means to make music without the utterance of words; "fiddle-faddle" is simply to have no sense, whereas "fiddling" means fussing or being idle and frivolous. These turn up time and time again in nonsense songs, many having to do with animal weddings:

Fiddle dee dee
 Fiddle dee dee

The fly has married the bumble bee.

The following is possibly from a Twelfth Night revelry and is associated with dancing:

A cat came fiddling out of the barn
 With a pair of bagpipes under her arm
 She could sing nothing but fiddle cum fee
 The mouse has married the humble bee
 Pipe, cat, dance, mouse
 We'll have a wedding in our good house.⁹

This is interesting because many variants of "The Frog and the Mouse" have animals with instruments present at the wedding, usually a bee with a banjo or "fiddle on his knee," and sometimes a snail brings in "bagpipes with its tail." The guests dance and it is almost always a musical occasion.

The owl did hoot, the birds they sang
 And through the woods the music rang

Several Canadian versions use burdens of this nature. Elizabeth Greenleaf gives

the text of one from Daniel Endacott of Sally's Cove in Newfoundland.

The first came in it was a rat
 With a long-tailed coat and a beaver hat,
 Rickety rol de rue de dee
 Right fol oo dee.

It has only four stanzas and they are somewhat confused.

The next Canadian example, "Within the Well," has musical instruments as well as the "ay-hum" burden that seems to have slipped in from another tune family. This is a good example of the confusion that can occur when tracing or classifying music from the oral tradition. Another unusual feature is its asymmetrical structure of five unequal phrases. I found no British or American version closely related to this tune:¹⁰

Example 3. "Within the Well".

with in a well there came a flea Ay-hum within a

well there came a flea bringing with her a dish of tea

And lashed up oo ol yd oo. And lashed up ay fl yd um.

A, B C D, E
 [b] [r]

Within the well there came a fly
 She gulped so much it made her die

Within the well there came a snail
 He had the bagpipes on his tail.

Within the well there was a tick
 She ate so much it made her sick

Within the well there was a bee
 She played the fiddle on her knee.

Another version, from *Ring Around the Moon*, has some similarities with "Within the Well," notably the shape of the first phrase. Here the story is complete, with the courtship approved by the rat, wedding supper, arrival of the guests, and finally...

The old black cat jumped over the wall
 And ate the rat, the mouse, and all.

If you want any more you can sing it yourself
 The book lies on the pantry shelf.¹¹

The last stanza is especially common in American variants and often reads, "there's bread and cheese upon the shelf," but sometimes becomes "the wedding cake sits on the shelf."

On December 1, 1948, the Montreal Family Herald and Weekly Star printed a fragment of "The Frog and the Mouse" on their "Old Favorites" page

noting, "this is another British version of the old nursery rhyme." No music was included, but it is yet another example using nonsense words. The structure is odd too, with what is normally found as the first and second verses combined without the burden.

Perhaps the strangest version I found is an American one from Mrs. Ford Kent of New York. What makes it unique is the irregular sequence of phrases, indicated by the numbers in parentheses, which correspond to those of the bracketed phrases of the tune.

Example 4. "The Frog's Wedding".

1. A frog he would a - woo-ing go, A - too-re-lal, a - too-re-lal, He
 went in - to Miss Mouse'-s hall, And there he loud - ly rapped and called, He
 said, Miss Mouse, are you with - in? She said, I sit and spin.
 (4) When Un - cle Rat came home, (9) A - too, ad - dle - de - day.

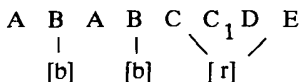
1. A frog he would a-wooing go
 A-too-re-lal, a-too-re-lal,
 He went into Miss Mouse's hall
 And there he loudly rapped and called,
 He said, Miss Mouse, are you within?
 She said, I sit and spin.
2. He took Miss Mouse upon his knee (1)
 And said, Miss Mouse, will you have me? (4)
3. She said, I cannot tell you, Sir (1)
 Till Uncle Rat comes home. (6)
4. When Uncle Rat came home, (7)
 He said, Who's been here since I've been gone? (1)
 A-too-re-lal, a too-re-lal, (2)
5. There's been a worthy gentleman (1)
 Who says he'll have me if he can. (4)

6. So Uncle Rat he went to town, (1)
To buy Miss Mouse a wedding gown. (4)
7. First came in it was a bee, (1)
He carried a Bible on his knee. (4)
8. The second came in it was a snail, (1)
He carried a fiddle on his tail. (4)
9. The frog came swimming across the lake (1)
A-too-re-lal, A-too-re-lal, (2)
And there got swallowed by a snake, (1)
A-too, ad-dle-de-day. (8)

Closely related to the previous variants are all those using "Kimo" burdens. Several have "Kitty kimo" suggesting a direct offshoot of the earlier type. I found two of these in the Canadian collections, but only one (from New Brunswick) with the delightful meaningless verse so common in American examples:

Example 5: "Frog in the Well".

Handwritten musical notation for "Frog in the Well". The music is written on three staves in G major. The lyrics are: "There was a frog lived in the well. To me ri qum bob me kimo. And he had corn and meat to sell. To me ri qum bob me kimo. Kimo learo kearo idimo kimo learo kimo. Slim slap pure diddle ana hobba ri qum, Ri qum bob me kimo." Above the first staff are chord markings A, G, and A. Above the second staff are G, C, and C1. Above the third staff are D and E.



Tolman and Eddy give a detailed list of the published variants of this family and mention several developments. A burlesque using the 'kimo' burden was once popular on the African-American minstrel stage, and there is a different song, but still "Keemo kimo," on a British broadside, though obviously American in origin. Perhaps the most familiar variant today is "Anthony Rowley," which a correspondent to *Notes and Queries* said was first inserted in the old song by the English comic actor Liston:

The frog in the cocked hat, or the rat, the mouse, the duck and the cat and her kittens. Sung by Mr. Liston at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden and by Mr. Johannot at Astley's amphitheater with universal applause.¹²

The burden can be traced back to 1809 and the installation of Lord Grenville as

Chancellor of Oxford when a song about him had appeared:

Mister Chinnery then an M.A. of great parts
 Sang the praises of Chancellor Grenville
 Oh! he pleased all the ladies and tickled their hearts,
 But then we all know he's a Master of Arts
 With a Rowley, powley, gammon and spinach,
 Heigh Ho says Rowley.

The question of how these last two lines end up in the "Frog's Courtship" invites pleasant speculation. It might be Liston simply drawing on a current rhyme, but a second possibility leads back to the songs that had animals playing instruments. One version begins:

There was a frog lived in a well, Heigho crowdie,
 And the merry mouse in a mill, With a howdie, crowdie..

The expression "heigho crowdie" is a call to strike up the crowd, the oldest kind of British fiddle with no neck and only three strings. "Crowdy" used as a verb means scenes of revelry "at which folk-humour pictured the cat making music."¹³

Come dance a jig to my granny's pig,
 With a rowdy, howdy, dowdy.
 Come dance a jig to my granny's pig
 And pussy cat shall crowdy.

Somewhere here may lie the answer to the mystery; a substitution of "Anthony Rowley" for "Heigho crowdie" seems quite in keeping with the interchange that occurs in the oral tradition. No one has yet traced the identity of Anthony Rowley (spelled Roly sometimes) if such a person existed.

Many examples of this version have been found in Canada. A good illustration of the text is in Mackenzie's *Ballads and Sea Songs of Nova Scotia*. This one collected by Helen Creighton gives the following tune:¹⁴

Example 6: "The Frog Went A-Courting".

A frog he would a wooing go
 Heigh ho says Roly
 A frog he would a wooing go
 whether his mother would
 let him or no
 with a roly
 powly
 gammon and
 spinach,
 Heigh ho says Anthony Roly

A B C C D E
 | 1 //
 [b] [r]

phrases A B C

The variations I found are all in 6/8 with fairly undulating phrases, and the scale 7A is standard. Often there is no list of wedding guests, because the cat and

her kittens interrupt the courtship, pulling the mouse down while Mr. Frog is gobbled up by a duck. The final stanza is usually “and that’s the end of one, two, three, the rat, the mouse, and the little froggie.”

Come a Singing! has one worth mentioning because of its slightly different structure, there being two unrelated phrases in the middle:¹⁵

A	B	C	D	E	F
				\	/
	[b]			[r]	

It also has Scotch snaps on “whether his mother...”; it is reprinted in *Folk Songs of Canada*.¹⁶

Ira Doan’s 1830 manuscript from Sharon, Ontario, contains a song “The Lovesick Frog” that comes from this family of tunes. No text is given, but the melody resembles Example 6.

Cecil Sharp gives four English versions with the “Anthony Rowley” burden. In one from Somerset the text is more repetitive and the return of references to “the mouse in the mill” may show a more direct influence from the older song. Also we have lord frog, lord rat, lady mouse, and a Miss lady duck who swallows them all in the final verse¹⁷ which shows how the English versions tend to keep their ties right back to *Melismata* more firmly rooted. In Canada strong countervailing forces allow for the growth of new and exciting versions.

The last tune family to be considered, is the American “Froggie Went A-Courting.” Some 17 to 20 variants were examined, and because there were more tunes in this family than any other, only their salient characteristics will be discussed. Almost all possess an “ah-hum” burden of some sort. A few might be considered nonsense rhymes, but in cases like these the nature of the tune settled the dispute. Sometimes deciding on a tune family is hard. “It was a Mouse” that Creighton collected is one that was awkward to classify because of overlapping, containing both the “ah-hum” and a refrain “lickedy loo de fall de dey Whack fall de dum.” Likewise, half the tune is clearly a relative of the American one, while the rest is different.¹⁸

Far more typical is the next example from New Brunswick.¹⁹

Example 7. “Froggie Went A Courting”.

hexatonic.
no 7th.

Froggie went a courtin and he did ride ha-ha,

Froggie went a-courting and he did ride with a rood and pistol by his side

A	B	C
[b]		[c]

Most of these tunes were pentatonic (mainly 5A), a few were hexatonic, and a new hexatonic scale discovered lacked the third. The greatest emphasis is placed on the first, third, and fifth degrees of the scale as in the other versions. The burden

is usually a fourth leap here, is isometric, but heterometric ones turn up more often than in the other tune families.

These are always enumerative texts and the wedding guests can include a garter snake, bug, cow, moth, bee, tick, fly, snail, chick, hen, goose, or gnat. This can be prolonged indefinitely until the singer runs out of rhymes. The average wedding feast is “three green beans” or “two soup beans” and a “black eyed pea,” sometimes a “cup of tea and a cake of yeast.” A Canadian version takes the story on to the honeymoon:²⁰

Now they are married and into bed
They get the covers all over their head,

and another even describes Miss Mouse’s children:²¹

Two of them croaked and one of them squeaked
They had long tails and webbed feet.

Generally, they all come to a bad end, most often Mr. Frog is swallowed by a black snake. Several versions continue with the snake in turn being killed by a black man:

The big black snake he swam to land
And there he was eaten by a Negro man.

This is but a fraction of what can be said about the countless versions of the “Frog’s Honourable Courtship,” and it is obvious that much more can be done with the subject. There seems to have been nothing major written since Tolman and Eddy’s cataloguing and brief discussion of 1922, and despite Fowke’s comment that “next to ‘Alouette’ this is probably the most widely known folk song in Canada,” little has been done here outside the Maritimes. We possess a remarkably rich number of versions drawn equally from all the tune families.

In the English collections examined none had versions of American origin, and, more surprising, the reverse was true for the American versions. Canada’s unique position, however, has left us with fascinating songs from both sources, which in turn develop and change.

Fully in keeping with the neglect, only two composers appear to have recognized the tune since Dowland wrote the *Froggies Galliard*. Paul Hindemith did a set of variations on it for cello, and Christopher le Fleming incorporated some material into his *Tales of Beatrix Potter* for woodwind quintet.

The text of “Froggie” has been the object of considerably more research than the music. A truly in-depth analysis of this nursery tune should not confine itself to English folk music, but must explore the possibility of there being thematic ties with other European countries. Nor why should we even limit ourselves to Western culture. One of the most notable fairy-tales of Japan relates the story of a mouse’s wedding.²²

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ENDNOTES

1. William Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*. 2 vols. (repr., New York: Dover, 1955) 1, 88.
2. Albert H. Tolman and Mary O. Eddy, "Traditional Texts and Tunes," *Journal of American Folklore* 25 (1922): 324. This is the most extensive list of versions of the song to that date. They are almost entirely Scottish, English and American; no study of Canadian collections has been made.
3. Vincent Jackson, *English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th Century* (1919; repr., London: Dent, 1976), 32.
4. The symbol [b] indicates internal burdens; [r] is refrains.
5. Lina Eckenstein, *Comparative Studies in Nursery Rhymes* (1906; repr., London: Duckworth, 1911), 30.
6. Evelyn Wells, *The Ballad Tree* (New York: Ronald, 1950 repr.), 160.
7. Helen Creighton, *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick* (Ottawa: National Museum, 1971) 178.
8. National Museum Centre for Folk Studies, Tapes CR 102-1053-54.
9. Eckenstein, 34.
10. Elisabeth Greenleaf and Grace Mansfield, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1933), 90.
11. Edith Fowke, *Ring Around the Moon* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 44.
12. Eckenstein, 31.
13. Eckenstein, 32-33.
14. Helen Creighton and Doreen Senior, *Traditional Songs of Nova Scotia* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1950), 253.
15. Barbeau, 35.
16. Fowke and Johnston, 86.
17. Cecil Sharp, *Cecil Sharp's Collection of English Folksongs*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1974), 388.
18. Helen Creighton, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia* (Toronto: Dent, 1932), 89-90.
19. Creighton, New Brunswick, 176.
20. Creighton and Senior, 250.
21. Creighton and Senior, 251.
22. Percy Green, *A History of Nursery Rhymes* (London: Greening, 1899), 102.