

# NIEL GOW – PATRIARCH OF SCOTTISH FIDDLING

By Pete Clark

*Over two centuries after the death of Niel Gow, his music and that of his sons is very much alive and can be heard throughout Scotland and beyond.*

The village of Inver is situated where the River Braan joins the mighty River Tay, opposite the magnificent cathedral of Dunkeld, ancient capital of Scotland. Once a thriving community with an inn bustling with travellers, Inver is now a sleepy backwater, just a stone's throw from the busy A9. Behind the old Inver Inn, now converted into flats, a narrow lane leads uphill to Niel Gow cottage. A brass plate on the wall proclaims Niel Gow's former occupancy, with a quote from a poem written by Robert Burns to commemorate a visit by Niel Gow to Dumfries:

*"Nae fabled wizard's wand I trow,  
Had e'er the magic airt o' Gow,  
When wi' a wave he draws his bow,  
Across his wondrous fiddle-o!"*

Niel Gow could be justifiably called the patriarch of Scots fiddlers is. Born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, 1727, near Inver on the banks of the Braan, he achieved great fame during his long life as a fiddle player and composer.

It is known that, as a young boy, Niel had some guidance in the art of fiddling from **John Cameron**, who worked on the estate of the Stewarts of Grandtully, a wealthy land-owning family. Other than that, he was largely self-taught, and by his late teens had earned a reputation as a fine player. In 1745, he entered – and won – a fiddle competition in Perth. Later the same year, the young Niel Gow played for **Prince Charles Edward Stuart**, "**Bonnie Prince Charlie**", and his entourage when the Jacobite army stopped at Blair Castle on their way south.

Niel Gow's patrons included the **Duke and Duchess of Atholl**, from whom he received an annuity of five pounds for performing frequently at Blair Castle. (The famous portrait by **Sir Henry Raeburn** verifies the high esteem in which the Duke and Duchess held Gow.) Niel's regular performing companion was his brother **Donald Gow**, who played the "bass fiddle" (cello).

One of the foremost celebrities of eighteenth century Scotland was of course **Robert Burns** who, during his tour of the Highlands in 1787, made a point of meeting his musical hero Niel Gow. Burns was a fiddler, by no means as accomplished as Gow, but sufficiently good to acquire a few melodies which he subsequently used for his songs ("Major Graham of Inchbrakie" was the air preferred by Burns for "My Love Is like a Red, Red Rose", and "Lamentation for James Moray Esq. of Abercairney" became the melody for "Where Braving Angry Winter's Storms").

Niel Gow was married twice. His first wife, **Margaret Wiseman**, was mother to all of his children - five sons (William, John, Andrew, Nathaniel and Daniel) and two daughters (Margaret and Grizel). Daniel died in infancy, but the other sons all went on to become fiddlers, the most celebrated of these being Nathaniel.

**Nathaniel Gow** (1763–1831) spent the greater part of his working life in Edinburgh, performing at recitals and dances – "assemblies" as they were once called. In terms of composing, he went on to become even more prolific than his father, and it is largely thanks to Nathaniel's venture into music publishing that many tunes have survived the passage of time. A series of misfortunes, including a stroke, eventually left him bankrupt and unable to earn a living. His final resting place is an unmarked grave in Greyfriar's Kirkyard, Edinburgh.

(Nathaniel's son, **Neil Gow Junior** (1795-1823), a qualified doctor as well as a fiddler, died at the early age of twenty eight. His grave in Greyfriar's *does* have a headstone, and it may well be that his father was interred in the same plot.)

Niel Gow's second wife, **Margaret Urquhart**, was his companion up until her death in 1805. His lament for her is arguably his most poignant and beautiful composition. Niel Gow died on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, 1807, just three weeks before his eightieth birthday. At the time of his death, Telford's great bridge over the Tay was under construction, and the reel "Dunkeld Bridge" was Niel Gow's last composition. His final resting place is in the churchyard at Little Dunkeld. (Little Dunkeld now merges with Birnam, a much younger village which evolved with the arrival of the railway in 1856.)

## **Niel Gow the Teacher**

Perhaps as important as his performing and composing was Niel Gow's role as a teacher. He passed his musical skills on to the younger generation, including his four sons, all of whom followed careers in music in Edinburgh and London.

Niel Gow provided inspiration and guidance for other Perthshire fiddlers, including **Robert Mackintosh**. Born in 1745 at Tulliemet, just a few miles north of Dunkeld, Mackintosh, like Niel Gow's sons, eventually moved to Edinburgh to develop and pursue a successful career as a performer and prolific composer.

Niel Gow also taught **John Crerar** (1750-1840), who worked for the Duke of Atholl, the Duke paying for the lessons. Crerar eventually became head stalker on the Atholl estate, a job which he retained for fifty years. (He features in a painting by Landseer, "Death of a Stag in Glen Tilt", which hangs in the ballroom at Blair Castle.)

One of Gow's later protégés was **James Macintosh** (1791–1879) of Inver. (No relation to the aforementioned Robert Mackintosh of Tulliemet.) Niel Gow was in his seventies when he gave lessons to young James, who lived in a cottage just across the lane from his mentor.

James' brother **Charles Macintosh** (1797-1867) was the father of yet another James and Charles Macintosh, both of whom learned how to play the fiddle. **Charles Macintosh** (1839-1922) was forced to abandon fiddling after losing the fingers of his left hand in a sawmill accident. Charlie, as he was affectionately known, could still get a bass line out of a 'cello, but to earn a livelihood became a postman. In due course he gained a reputation as an authority on the local wildlife. This earned him the epithet "The Perthshire Naturalist", and he shared his knowledge with **Beatrix Potter**, who used to holiday at Dalguise House which was on Charlie's postal round.

Charlie's younger brother, **James Mackintosh** (1846-1937) was a fiddler throughout his life and a founder-member of the Dunkeld & District Strathspey & Reel Society. He also composed a few tunes, fifteen of which were published as a collection in 1930.

## **Memorials**

In 1949, a plaque was installed on the wall of the cottage where Niel Gow spent his life. His headstone in Little Dunkeld kirkyard, was showing signs of age when it was replaced with a new one in 1987. And a carved bench below Niel Gow's oak marks the spot where he is supposed to have sat and played his fiddle. It bears an inscription – a line taken from a song by **Michael Marra** about fiddler and singer **Dougie MacLean**:

*"I sit beneath the fiddle tree, the ghost of Niel Gow next to me."*

However, there is nothing particularly obvious in Dunkeld or Birnam which proclaims "Niel Gow was here!" It was this lack of a prominent and informative memorial to this most significant of Scottish musicians that, in 2004, prompted the birth of **The Niel Gow Festival**, which has gone on to become a living memorial in its own right. The festival is a weekend of recitals, concerts and workshops, presented by some of the finest fiddle players from Scotland and beyond, in celebration of the life and works of one of the most significant yet

often overlooked figures in the history of Scotland's music. The revenue generated by the festival will ultimately be used for the creation of a conspicuous and lasting memorial to one of Perthshire and Scotland's finest sons.

The memorial fund has been growing year by year, and there could be a life-size bronze of Niel Gow installed in Dunkeld by 2020. In 2018, the Niel Gow Festival Society commissioned renowned Scottish sculptor **David Annand** to undertake the work. David is extremely enthusiastic about the project and will be giving a presentation about his work at the 2019 Niel Gow Festival, which will take place over the weekend of 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> March. Details will be posted on the festival web site ([www.niel-gow.co.uk](http://www.niel-gow.co.uk)) as they become available. The web site also has a facility for donating to the memorial fund via PayPal.

Further reading: An excellent book by Helen Jackson called "Niel Gow's Inver" (Published in 2000 by Perth & Kinross Libraries) gives a fascinating account not only of the lives of Niel Gow and other Perthshire fiddlers, but also of the way of life in eighteenth century Inver.