FIERY CLOCKFACE, THE. AKA and see “The Pin Reel.” English, Jig. England, Northumberland. D Major. Standard tuning. AABB. Composed by Robert “Bobby” Nunn (1808-1853), according to Peter Kennedy. Nunn was a tradesman—a roofer who worked on slate roofs—who lost his sight following a fall from a roof he was working on. Like many a blind individual, he turned to music to eke out a living, and played fiddle and sang. He composed a number of songs and was a regular at pubs and other venues around the Tyneside area. His songs could be rather risqué, full of (pre-)music-hall innuendo, and include “The Pitman and the Blackin’,” “The Newcastle Lad,” “”Druncken Bella Roy O!;” quite popular even with mixed audiences of his era. His best known song is “The Fiery Clock Feyce”, about the drink-caused illusion of a man passing by St. Nicholas Cathedral, looking at the moon’s reflection in a river. It was originally set in the key of ‘G’ major, although ‘D’ is a more popular key nowadays, to accommodate melodeon players. A quite nice sketch of Nunn appears in Thomas and George Allen’s Illustrated Edition of Tyneside Songs and Readings (1891):

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Besides the attractions of his fiddle he was a good singer, and composed a great number of

local songs, which he sang with great success. Many of his songs, written upon passing

events, and sometimes rather coarse in consequence of the mixed companies he amused,

are now forgotten, but several which appear in this volume have taken their places as standards

amongst Tyneside songs, and are highly popular. He died at Queen Street, Castle Garth,

Newcastle, on the 2nd of May, aged forty-five years…(He) was eminently a Newcastle man

and had the ‘burr’ in all its delightful purity. He could not be considered a man of any intellectual

culture and it is therefore the more creditable that he has produced so many songs. Some of

them will not bear a close inspection, on account of their approaching the questionable. There

were circumstances to account for that; he had some talent as a performer on the fiddle, and

being in the habit of attending women’s boxes or benefit clubs on the occasion of their holding

their head-meeting days, when the old ladies had plied themselves with a plentiful supply of

stimulants they would disport themselves on the ‘lightly-gay fantastic toe’ to the pleasant

scrapings of ‘Bobby’s’ fiddle. To diversify their delight he would entertain them with a song,

and a professor of moral ethics would have got a lesson had he have seen how the more than

innuendos were received. No doubt this would urge him on more in that direction. That was no

reason, however, they should ever have appeared in print.

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‘Bobby Nunn’ as he was generally called, was a heavy looking man, a great favourite at

resorts of which we have spoken, and no party of the kind was considered complete without

‘Bobby’ and his fiddle. The bard, for Nunn is worthy of the name, did not confine his efforts

in supporting his family to his musical abilities only; no honest work came amiss to him. His

musical gifts were generally in demand at nights, and during the day Bobby, for Sopwith and

other turners and cabinet makers, turned the big wheels of their lathes. When not busy with

that he indulged his love of birds, for which, blind as he was, he had a passion in making cages

for them.

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