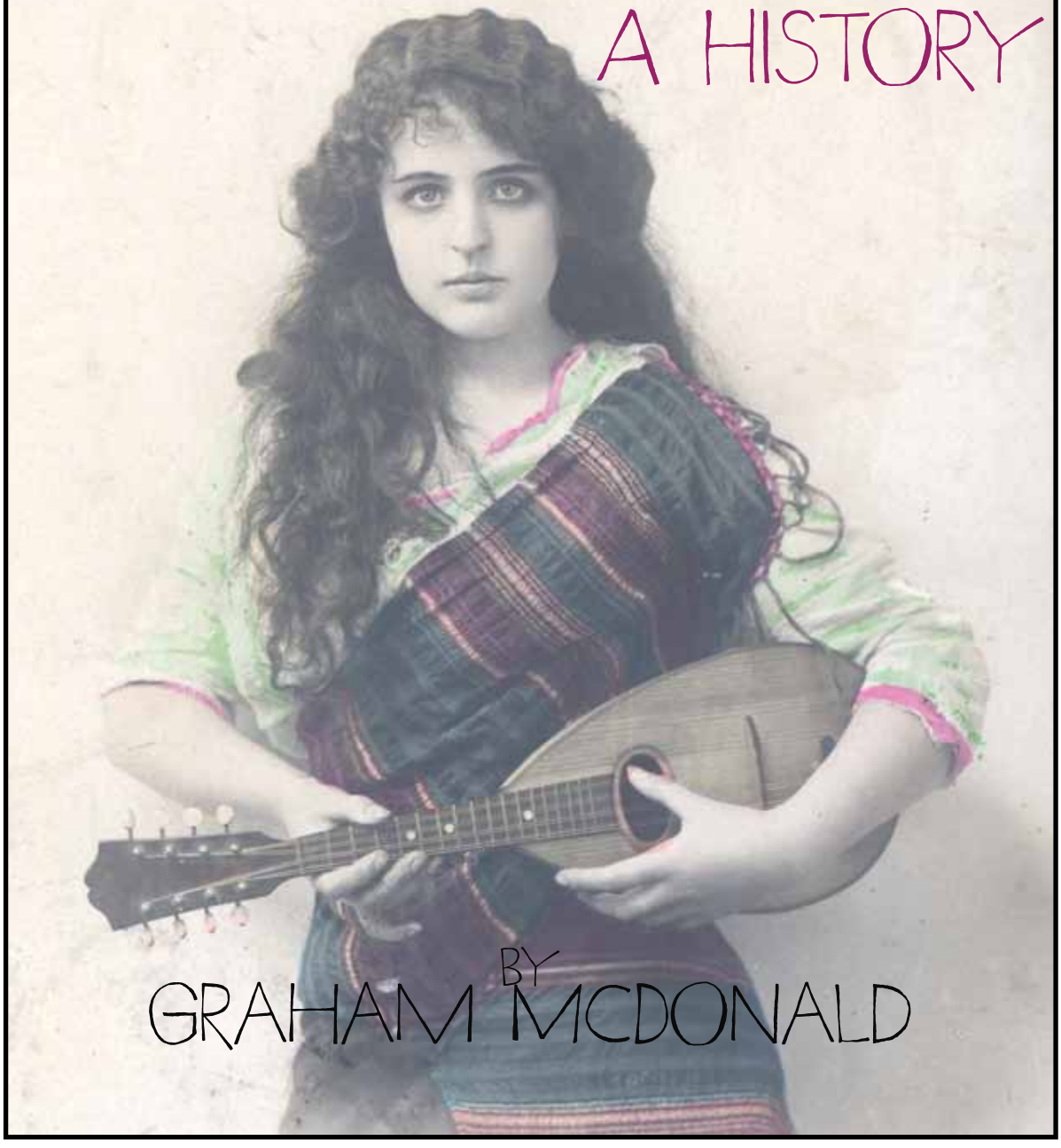
THE MANDOLIN

A HISTORY



BY

GRAHAM MCDONALD

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INTRODUCTION

I bought my first mandolin when I was 20. It was a flat-back 12-string mandolin, probably made in Germany in the 1920s and with a wonderfully exotic label stating it had been sold by G. de Liso, a Music Dealer in the Egyptian city of Port Said. It was covered in brushed-on brown paint, which I removed and then spent several weeks refinishing the spruce and maple with a bottle of French Polish. I played it for many years until it became just too hard to keep in tune, and it now hangs on the wall next to my desk.

That was the beginning of a fascination with mandolins which has continued for over forty years. This book is an expansion of an introductory chapter I wrote for *The Mandolin Project*, my 2008 book on building mandolins. What was going to be a short essay on the history of mandolins became 30 pages, which I realised had barely touched on the stories that could be told. The evolution of the mandolin is just one part of the history of stringed instruments, many of those stories overlapping and interweaving over the centuries.

This is a book about the instruments and how they are and have been built, rather than the music played on them. You might think of it as *"A Field Guide to…"* or *"An Observers Book of …"* as much as any other style of book. I am an instrument builder rather than a musicologist and it is the almost endless variety of mandolin shapes and forms that have been an ongoing delight to discover. I cannot think of another instrument which exists in such a variety, though the guitar might be a contender.

A mandolin is a small stringed instrument of the lute family, with double courses of wire, or wire wound, strings; a string length or scale - the distance from the nut to the bridge - of between 33-35.5cm/13-14" and a tuning of g-d'-a'-e", the same as a violin. Outside these basic parameters almost anything is possible and I have tried to show as much of this diversity as I have been able to find.

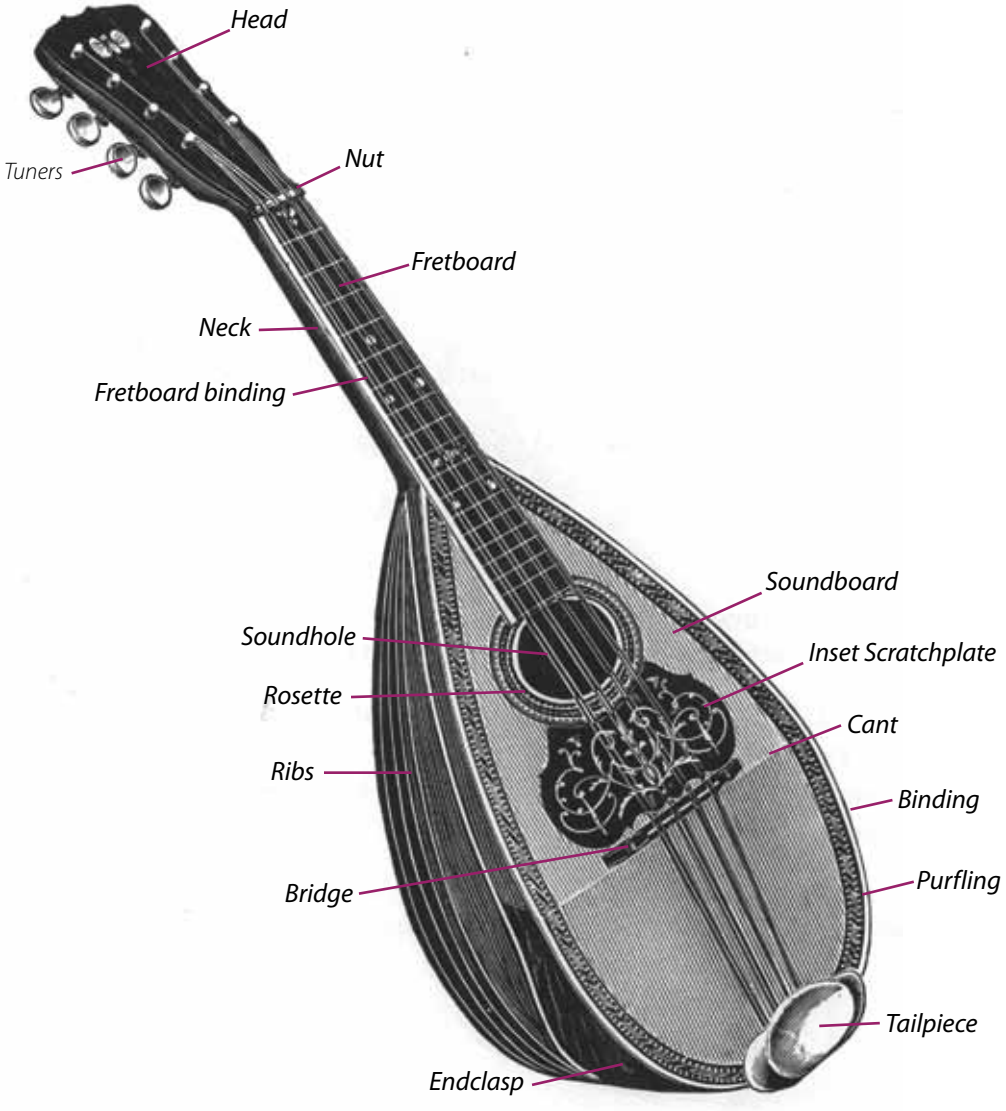
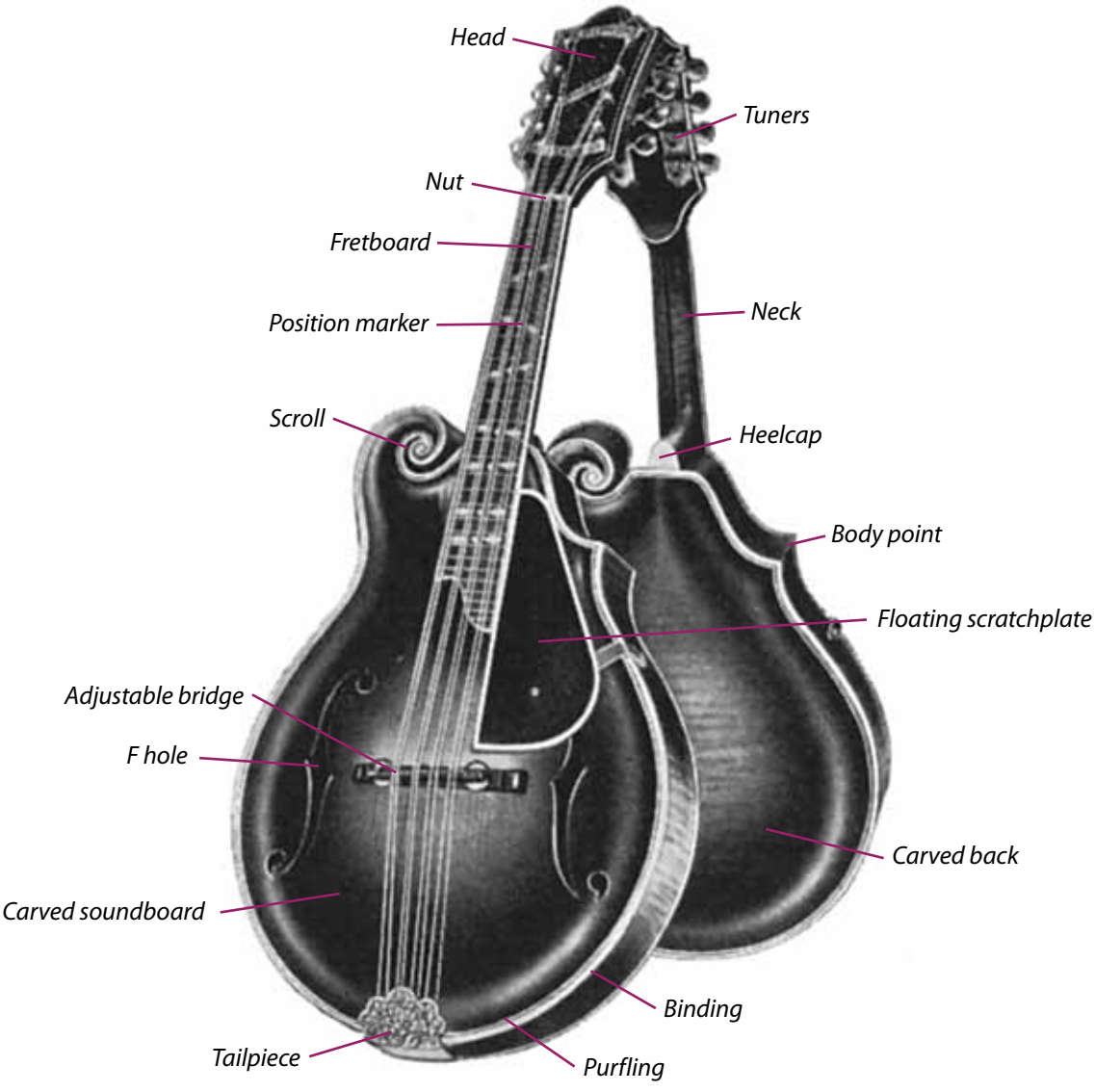
In the chapters on mandolins from the western side of the Atlantic Ocean, I have tended to use 'US' and 'American' interchangably. My apologies in advance to my Canadian friends.

There are several chapters on other double-course wire-strung instruments that have developed from the same ancestors as the mandolin. Wherever possible I have included string length and tuning, using the Helmhotz system of pitch notation. This indicates the pitch using letters, upper and lower case, using apostrophes and commas to indicate the octave, each starting at c. Middle C is shown as c', with a' being at 440hz. The mandolin is then g-d-a'-e". I can only hope I have managed to get the octaves correct!

I was inspired a few years ago by an interview with the Australian writer Clive James. He said his approach to writing is to *"turn a phrase until it catches the light"*. I can only hope I have caught a little.

Canberra, Australia
May 2015

THE PARTS OF A BOWLBACK MANDOLIN



THE PARTS OF A CARVED MANDOLIN