



## **Royal Scottish Country Dance Society**

### **Sacramento Branch**

#### Scottish Country Dancing

In the beginning....

When the question is asked, “what is Scottish Country Dancing,” the most common answer is, the traditional ballroom dancing of Scotland.” This is a very simple answer to a question that spans 300 years of Scottish history. Scottish Country Dancing did not just appear one day in the ballrooms of Scotland (actually called Assembly Rooms). The dance evolved over the centuries.

English Country Dances were known to the English Royal Court by the 1600’s. The royalty and nobility of Scotland were introduced to the tradition when they were invited to these private occasions.

There is little recorded information of country dances being taught in Glasgow or Edinburgh dance schools of the time. Not until after 1710 did regular dance assembly rooms appear in any Scottish town. The appearance to the assembly rooms is the first evidence that country dancing had started in Scotland.

Many of the early dances were English Country Dances done to Scottish music. The English Country Dances had unusual body movements that the Scots did not favor. George S. Emmerson states in his book, *A Social History of Scottish Dance*, “Another feature of the country dance in Scotland is the absence of game dances or dances introducing the frivolous nonsense familiar to English dances of the period. The Scots had evidently a greater respect of dancing.”

A sample of the strange movements comes from G. Waylett's *Country Dance Collection (1749-1751)*. "clap hands - strike hands across - snap fingers - beckon your partner - stamp four times - give three jumps - hold up finger - pull your partner - peer three times - peer down and up - hit your right elbows together and then the left - act the cobbler."

The country dancing in Scotland did incorporate many traditions from the English Country Dancing, but they used their own steps and formations. The dances at this time were known more by the tunes played than by the steps and formations used. The same formations and steps may not have been used every time the dance was done. The name of the dance was usually the name of the tune that the musicians played. Today we know a dance by the steps and formations that make up the dance.

One formation that is of true Scottish origin is "set to and turn corners". This formation does not appear in any English Country Dance, so it is probably a product of a variation to turning corners.

The introduction of the Strathspey rhythm from the Highland Dancing added a new variation to Scottish Country Dancing. The Strathspey traveling steps and setting steps come from this highland tradition. The Strathspey rhythm is uniquely Scottish, giving country dancing in Scotland a whole new repertoire of dances.

The English and Scottish Country Dance techniques were quite different, but so was their music. With the fiddle being the preferred instrument, the music of the reel had an electrifying effect on the Scots. This response caused the Scottish Country Dance to take on strength and grace in contrast to the "frivolous nonsense movements" of the English Country Dancing.

Country dancing in Scotland was also influenced by the long relationship with France through the Auld Alliance. Dance teachers brought back steps and rules of etiquette from the French Court dances. This influence is noted by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society in its *Scottish Country Dance Manual*, Chapter 1: "The rules of ballroom etiquette, still observed by the Scottish country dancers, can probably be directly linked to the example set by French dancers and teachers, especially those at the Court."

Scottish Country Dancing evolved and grew through the 1700's and 1800's to closely resemble the form that we dance today. Its popularity was very wide spread in Scotland. From royalty and nobility, to the ordinary people of the land, it was enthusiastically embraced and incorporated into the social fabric of Scotland.

Two new forms of dancing spread throughout Europe by 1815, the waltz and the quadrille. Scottish Country Dancing absorbed elements of each of these dances. The Waltz Country Dance and the square set of the quadrille are examples.

By the late 1800's the cotillion, quadrille, waltz, polka, lancers, and their relatives started to replace country dancing in Europe and the British Isles, but not in Scotland. Country dancing survived there into the 1900's, but the traditions suffered.

Country dancing had deteriorated to what resemble a brawl by the 1920's. Women were said to remove their jewelry for safe keeping before they went out on the dance floor. The beautiful and elegant social dancing of Scotland was disappearing and would soon be forgotten. Fortunately for Scotland and the rest of the world, two Scottish ladies in the 1920's decided they would not let this happen. Mrs. Ysobel Stewart of Fasnicloish and Miss Jean Milligan combined forces to form the Scottish Country Dance Society.

#### The Meeting.....

Mrs. Ysobel Stewart was Commissioner of the Girl Guides for Argyll in 1923. The Girl Guides (the female equivalent of the Boy Scouts in Britain) were being taught English Country Dances from books published by the English Country Dance Society. Mrs. Stewart thought it would be more appropriate for the Scottish Girl Guides to be taught Scottish Country Dances.

There was no society in Scotland to collect and publish these dances. Mrs. Stewart took it upon herself to put together a notebook of Scottish Country Dances that she had danced all her life. She took this notebook to Mr. Michael Diack of Pattersons, the Glasgow publishers. Mrs. Stewart wanted to have them published so they could be distributed to the Girl Guides, and Mr. Diack agreed to her idea if the dances were verified. He knew of a lecturer in Physical Education who used Scottish Country Dancing in her work with student teachers, a Miss Jean Milligan.

Mr. Diack arranged a meeting between Mrs. Stewart and Miss Milligan in the autumn of 1923. They decided to publish a book of 12 dances after verifying their correctness and to form a society to give support to the new publication.

The Scottish Country Dance Society (SCDS) was founded on the 26th of November 1923 at a meeting in Glasgow. The 27 interested people who attended the meeting became the core of the new society.

Mrs. Stewart and Miss Milligan both brought their talents, energy, and, most important of all, their love of Scottish Country Dancing to the forming of the SCDS. Before covering some of the history and accomplishments of the SCDS, let's take a closer look at the lives of these two remarkable Scottish ladies.

Mrs. Ysobel Stewart, born in 1882, and Miss Jean Milligan born in 1886, grew up in Scotland during the Victorian era. They were products of two different parts of this society where Scottish Country Dancing was still very popular.

Mrs. Stewart of Fasnicloish.....

Mrs. Stewart was born a Campbell. Her father was Duncan Campbell of Inverneill, a branch of the Argyll Campbells. She married Captain Ian Stewart of Fasnicloish. This was a cadet family of the Royal Stuart line.

The music and dancing of the Gaelic Highland society in which she grew up instilled a deep love for their traditions. Mrs. Stewart was involved with many project and organizations during her life that were concerned with these traditions.

One of these organization, An Comunn Gaidhealach (The Gaelic Society) gave her contact with Scottish nobility that would provide invaluable help with the formation of the Scottish Country Dance Society. Alastair MacFadyen describes her involvement in *An Album for Mrs. Stewart*: "As representative of her local branch in the National Executive of An Comunn, Mrs. Ysobel Campbell would have had the opportunity to meet the other leading supporter of the Gaelic movement in Scotland, amongst them the family of the seventh Duke of Atholl. Strong in their support of An Comunn were the Marquis of Tullibardine, the eighth Duke of Atholl from 1917, who was President of An Comunn from 1898 to 1904, his sister Lady Helen Stewart Murray and his brother, Lord James Stewart Murray, the ninth Duke of Atholl from 1942 and President of the Scottish Country Dance Society from 1924."

When Mrs. Stewart met Miss Milligan in 1923, she had the experience necessary to help form and guide the SCDS. Her contributions to the society's success are still evident today.

## Miss Jean Milligan.....

Miss Jean Milligan was born near Glasgow to a middle class academia family. Her father, James Milligan, and his sister Margaret, were teachers. Growing up in this family of educators influenced Jean and her sisters, Margaret and Gertrude, to enter the teaching profession. Her three brothers also received good education's and had very successful careers.

When Jean Milligan was 23, she received an appointment to Dundas Vale College as a teacher for Physical Education student teachers. She was not much older than many of her students at the time. This appointment started her long career as a teacher in which she used Scottish Country Dancing as a physical education method in her classes.

Isabella Milligan, Jean's mother, had been a life long country dancer and had passed on the love of dancing to her family. She involved her family in dancing whenever there was an opportunity. During summer holiday visits with her cousin, Isabella Barnes, in the Midlothian village of Cousland, Mrs. Milligan would organize dances in the kitchen of the Cousland school house. An evening of dancing is described in *Dance with Your Soul*, a biography of Jean Callander Milligan by Alastair MacFadyen: "Under Mrs. Milligan's direction, the neighbours were invited to join in an evening of dancing. They danced 'Scottish dances' and accompanied themselves by 'diddling (keeping time with the feet).' In view of Mrs. Milligan's life long devotion to dancing, it is not surprising that her daughter, Jean, should have been equally enthusiastic."

Miss Milligan was called upon many times in her life to use her skills as a teacher and dancer. She was involved with many events and organizations through the years. This invaluable experience was put to good use in the part she played in founding and guiding the Scottish Country Dance Society.

Mrs. Stewart and Miss Milligan grew up and lived in different parts of the Victorian Scottish society, but their lives prepared them for their leadership roles. *An Album for Mrs. Stewart* states that "whilst Miss Milligan's professional experience of teaching and teacher training, and also her association with Musical Festivals, were undoubtedly of great help to the newly formed Scottish Country Dance Society, it is possible to detect, amongst those people who gave their support to the Society in its early days, the influence of Mrs. Stewart's other interests, especially An Comunn Gaidhealach and the Girl Guides."

The Scottish Country Dance Society is formed.....



Mrs. Stewart and Miss Milligan had put an advertisement in the *Glasgow Herald* on Monday, 26th November 1923, inviting all interested in “Scots Country Dances” to attend a meeting. They worried that no one would come. Their worries were unfounded because 27 did attend. From this small beginning, the Scottish Country Dance Society began to grow. An interim Executive Committee was appointed at the meeting. The members included Miss Milligan, Miss Lilian Ross, Mr. Diack, Mr. Besset and Mrs. Stewart as Honorary Secretary. The Society grew quickly and by the end of January 1924 Book 1 was published. According to the first Annual Report, 1,165 copies were sold.

Miss Milligan began teaching a class in Glasgow. This class was very successful with over 60 members. During its first 60 years the class had only 2 regular teachers, Miss Milligan and Miss Florence Adams. Glasgow formed the first branch in 1923 and Edinburgh followed in 1924. New branches were soon formed in other cities in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom.

The Society continued to grow through the 1930's. World War II slowed class activities because of blackout requirements. During these war years the Scottish regiments overseas were taught Scottish Country Dances by teachers who had been students of Miss Milligan.

The popularity of Scottish Country Dancing with the Forces was very encouraging and gratifying to the Society. There were also reports of troops in German POW camps who relieved the tedium of imprisonment with country dancing.

One of the most popular Scottish Country Dances ever written came out of this POW camp dancing. Most of the 51st Division was captured by the Germans as they fought a holding battle to allow the British Army to be evacuated from Dunkirk. Following is an account supplied by Alan MacPherson, the Archivist for the RSCDS.

*"Three people are generally credited with the devising of the dance. The original idea was that of Lt. J. Atkinson of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, assisted by Lt. A. Oliver of the 4th Seaforths (London Scottish) and Lt. Col. T. Harris, 51st Division, RA.S.C., who were POWs in Oflag VIIC at Laufen in Bavaria in the winter 1940. They were subsequently dispersed to other camps but rejoined each other about a year later at Oflag VIIB at Warburg in Westphalia. It was here that the dance was first performed before Major General Victor Fortune, the Commander of the 51st Division, who approved the dance and its name 'The 51st Country Dance (Laufen Reel)'. The first tune (now lost) was composed by a fellow prisoner, Hector Ross of the 4th Seaforths.*

*Lt. Col. Harris Hunter sent the dance instructions home to his wife in Perth. Perth branch printed it and sold copies to raise funds for the Red Cross. Miss Milligan is believed to have raised over 160 (pounds sterling) herself from selling copies. It seems that about this time the name was changed to 'The St. Valery Reel' but little detail is recorded.*

*The dance as originally written was for five couples and first four bars consisted of set and cast off three places. The Society published in Book 13 (The Victory Book), changing the first four bars to set and cast off two in order to make it suitable for four couple sets. It was at this time that the present title was adopted after consultation with Lt. Col. Harris Hunter. The title "Reel of the 51st Division" was perceived to be more fitting than one having overtones of a military defeat. It was at this time also that the present tune, 'The Drunken Piper' was adopted as the original".*

The ending of World War II saw the Scottish Country Dance Society activities renewed. HRH Princess Elizabeth became the Patron of the Society in 1947. She graciously remained Patron on her succession to the throne.

The Society expanded overseas in 1951 with Boston and Cape Town forming Branches. This same year King George VI bestowed the title "Royal" on the Society. Membership by then had grown to 11,500.

The office holders of Secretary had been conducting business from their homes since 1923. By the 1950's the duties had grown to the point where a permanent office was required. 12 Coates Crescent, Edinburgh, was purchased in 1955. Now the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society had a headquarters.

The Society continued to grow and expand. Scottish Country Dancing became popular all over Europe and as far away as Japan. Branches were also being formed throughout the British Commonwealth and North America.

Mrs. Stewart moved to South Africa in 1955 where she had cousins and a niece. Her move was prompted by problems with rheumatism aggravated by the climate of Scotland's west coast. She died in South Africa in 1963.

Miss Milligan continued her close association with the Society as a teacher, teacher certification examiner and 3 times Society Chairman. She also directed the annual summer school at St. Andrews. This was the love of her life from the first summer school in 1927 until her death in 1978.

The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society celebrated its 50th year with a Golden Jubilee in 1973. A Jubilee Ball was held in the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, on Thursday, 12 July. The Ball was attended by HM The Queen, with HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and HRH Princess Ann.

The Society celebrated 75 years of dedication to Scottish Country Dancing in 1998. By 1999 the Society membership had grown to over 25,000 world wide with 170 Branches and 500 affiliated groups.

---

This has been a very brief historical summary of Scottish Country Dancing and the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. The centuries leading up to the emergence of English and Scottish Country Dancing are very interesting, but also very involved. Keeping this article to a reasonable length allows mentioning only the highlights. Several books have been written covering the history of country dancing and the Society in detail. Listed below are the references used for this article. They are available through the Branch Book Store or from book vendors at Highland Games.

The Sacramento Branch was formed in 1981 from an Affiliated Group started by Jean Patrick. A history of the Branch entitled, *Sowing The Seeds of The Sacramento Branch 1957 to 1991*, written by Dorothy Carr and edited by Susan McHale covers the years from the start of the Affiliated Group until 1991. This book is also available through the Branch Book Store.



## References

*The Manual of Scottish Country Dancing* by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

*A Social History of Scottish Dance* by George S. Emmerson

*Traditional Dancing in Scotland* by J. F. and T. M. Flett

*Balls and Village Halls* by G. W. Lockhart

*Scotland's Dances* by Hugh Thurston

*An Album for Mrs. Stewart* by Alastair MacFadyen

*Dance With Your Soul* by Alastair MacFadyen & Florence H. Adams.

*1923 - 1998 75th Anniversary Booklet* by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society

*Sowing The Seeds of The Sacramento Branch 1957 to 1991* by Dorothy Carr and edited by Susan MacHale.

A more detailed account of Scottish Country dance history can be read by going to the Stirling Branch web site. This site is maintained by Alan MacPherson, the RSCDS Archivist. The URL is <http://www.btinternet.com/~rscds.stirling/homepage/index.html>