



The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust

**4th Annual General Meeting
Northmuir, 2nd September 2000**

Souvenir Booklet

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This booklet has been published in conjunction with the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust's AGM and Dance Display in Northmuir, Angus.

The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust's Project in Angus and the Borders is supported by the Scottish Arts Council's National Lottery Fund as part of the New Directions programme.



Jim Kirkpatrick Remembers “Dancie” John Reid

In 1973 and 1974 I was researching the story of dance in Scotland for a series of television programmes, which were produced by Grampian Television with the title, Scotland’s Dances. I had been aware for a number of years of the importance of John Reid of Newtyle in the story of the revival of Scottish Country Dancing in the 1920s and in the broadcasting of Scottish dance music on BBC radio in the 1930s.

However, it was only after I came to live in the county of Angus that I began to appreciate what a remarkable and respected teacher of dance he had been on his home ground. I recall once at a dance in Ruthven WRI hall watching a Lancers being danced most beautifully by a set of not-so-young folk. When I asked where they had learned I was told that it had been in the local schoolroom and their teacher had been John Reid. An appeal I made in my column in the People’s Journal for further information and memories of John Reid for inclusion in the Grampian Television series brought many responses and amongst them the following memoir of John Reid from James (Jim) Kirkpatrick of Alyth.

Since the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust’s Lottery funded project dance! Dance!! DANCE!!! began in Angus two and a half years ago, our Development Officer Mats Melin and his assistants, first, Maggie Patullo and, later, Marion Robson have been gathering information on the dance traditions of the county. In interviews with older folk the name of John Reid crops up again and again, and many of the stories in Jim Kirkpatrick’s Memoir have been corroborated by others.

Jim, who died in 1976, had known John Reid since childhood, was a dedicated leader in the Scout Movement, a lifelong enthusiast for Scottish dance, and, as no mean musician himself, played occasionally with the Reid Orchestra.

The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust are most grateful to the Kirkpatrick Family for their kind permission to reproduce this memoir.

Evelyn Hood

"DANCIE" JOHN REID OF NEWTYLE, 1869 - 1942

Jim Kirkpatrick

John Reid started his working life first as a loon and then as a horseman in the Newtyle-Eassie district. He had a fiddle in his kist, a song in his heart, the gift of music in his soul and a penchant for practising his dancing steps at any odd moment - atween times as country folk say. One of these times being having turned his horses at the end of a round of the plough on the endrig of the field - corduroys, nicky tams, tackety boots and all!

Ploughmen were not averse to playing tricks on one another, especially if they thought someone was needing taking down a peg, but there was no malice or vice in them and vandalism was unheard of in those days.

To relate only one instance: one of the lads on the farm boasted that he had his horses so well trained all he had to do on a summer morning to get them to come to the gate of the field they had been in overnight, was to stand at the gate, give them a whistle, crack his whip and they would come running. A £1.00 bet on this was struck - untold wealth to ploughmen in those days. John accepted the bet although he well knew he would lose - unless something was done about it.

Six o' clock the next morning saw all the farm staff lined up at the gate to see the fun but, alas, though the boasting ploughman stood at the gate and whistled and cracked his whip, he did so in vain. Crestfallen and puzzled he had to wade through the wet dewy grass and bring them in unwillingly - and part company with the £1.00 no doubt.

Of course, he was not to know that John and a pal had got up at the crack of dawn and with their whips had given the horses a good chase around the field by way of warning.

When Alyth Town Hall was being built all the farmers in the district, as a love darg, in a rota, sent carts to drive building stones from the quarry to the new building. John could point out the ones he drove while engaged as a horseman at West Tullyfergus.

But music was in his soul and as soon as he had scraped up enough to pay the fees, he joined a Professor of Music's class in Dundee. He said members of the class were inclined to hang to the back, "but no' me," said John, "I was there to learn and learn fast. I just had to get my money's worth. I'd earned it the hard way."

He must have worked hard and done well because he soon had a job playing in a cinema orchestra. In this orchestra they were allowed a night off for a special

engagement provided they could supply a substitute. John told the story of the two trombone players. Unknown to the other each had arranged a substitute. One of these substitutes complained to the regular player that he wasn't much good only to be told to just watch the other player and shove out and in your slide when he does. The other substitute was no better a player and had been given the same instructions.

John was afterwards to employ some of his fellow instrumentalists in his augmented orchestra for special occasions and often they spoke of the Bodega in their reminiscences, evidently it was a howff for thirsty musicians.

But his ambition was to be a teacher of dancing and this he set out to be. At first he was obliged to employ a fiddler to play while he taught the steps at his classes, but the day came when he could do both himself. He could play, alter the tempo to suit the skill of the dancer, watch and instruct the dancer and demonstrate the steps all at the same time. In his mid-sixties at a Gaelic Mod in the St. Andrews Halls in Glasgow at one of their Saturday afternoon concerts, he danced the Highland Fling to his own accompaniment on the fiddle. The audience thought it wonderful but they only knew the half of it.

But, back to his early days. John had married a Miss Lindsay by whom they had four of a family - John junior, Bess and the twins Jim and Madge. Whilst the children were still young he had the misfortune to lose his wife and it was his second wife who brought up the young family. She was a Miss Coventry from the Kingoldrum area and the day was to come when John Reid junior was to marry her sister - thus becoming his father's brother-in-law!

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Besides being a teacher of dancing, John senior, gave private lessons on the fiddle and also had a class into which he roped relatives and neighbours' and friends' children who came with all the variations of willingness! Mrs Davie, late of Leitfie, a sister of the Mesdames Reid, senior and junior, was one of those "shanghaied" and she tells that her brother-in-law was a bit of a martinet as far as music was concerned. At a guess, for her there was a young man, a fellow member of the class who made the class more attractive to her!

John Reid was keen to get results. As soon as his children's fingers could reach the notes they started training to play their instruments: John junior, the piano; Bess, the flute and piccolo; Jim, the clarinet and Madge the glockenspiel. Mrs Reid played the bass fiddle. As I mentioned, he was out to get results and that meant training and practice. As they grew up the children were putting in 3 hours practice a day - one hour before school and two hours after. The sons used to see their chums go past the window on their way to the play field but Dad saw to it that the practice was put in first before they got off the chain.

Having inherited the gift of music and with all that training and practice can you

wonder that the end result was so good.

At his dancing classes John Reid taught his juvenile pupils the Highland and other traditional step dances. The seniors were taught traditional Scottish dances and modern ballroom dancing.

Classes were held in the towns and villages of South Angus and North-East Perthshire and because these were the days before cars, buses and WRI Halls, out in the country districts like Drimmieburn and Airlie, in an obliging farmer's granary. These last he thought were as enjoyable as any.

He also gave private lessons in mansions and at private schools. He was a strict disciplinarian and any too active, high-spirited gentleman found his antics checked in the bud and it wasn't with the hair side of the fiddle bow.

The juvenile classes started invariably at 6pm. That was one night of the week all the youngsters with household dargs to do, accomplished them without prodding.

The seniors' Finishing Assembly was the highlight of the class. The programme made up of Eightsome Reel, Broon's Reel, Rory o' More, Lancers, Waltz Country Dance, Scottish Schottische, Triumph, Scottish Reform, Quadrilles, Strip the Willow, La Russe intermixed with one step, two step, foxtrot, Circassian Circle, waltz, Valetta, Gay Gordons, Military two-step, and so on. There was one rule strictly kept - no encores, but, of course, there was no time for any. Everybody got up and danced, and there was no bar.

The hall-keepers had a canny way of getting the dancers away by 3 o'clock. They kept their clocks ten minutes fast. That way they could allow a little latitude and everyone was happy.

John Reid's home was at Craigmyle, Newtyle. How did his band travel in the early days? If they were playing anywhere near the Dundee-Blairgowrie railway line they did not have so very long a wait for the first train in the morning, otherwise they hired a horse brake.

On one occasion they had a hire from the Airlie Arms Hotel in Alyth to Parkhead Farm in Kilry to play at a Harvest Home there. Towards the end of the dance, when the coachman went to yoke the horses he found one of them dead in the stable. This was in the days when there were few telephones, so they were in a fix indeed.

But John Reid hadn't been a horseman for nothing. But first an explanation for the under 50s is necessary! A brake has a long pole running the length of the horses and they are yoked to either side of it. Across the front and fixed to it is a breast pole by which means the horses, attached to it by a strap from their collars,

can hold the brake back and prevent it over-running them. To assist them in this task the vehicle is fitted with a handbrake - from which it gets its name.

They got the living horse yoked, mounted the brake and off they went along the level. When they had to climb a hill they all got down and walked. Going downhill two of the men had to get down and run alongside the horse's head acting as a counterbalance on the empty end of the breast-pole. Picture the scene next time you are on the Glenisla - Newtyle road.

In the motor age John Reid once took his band to play at a Highland Ball in Manchester. The car battled over Shap in a snowstorm. In Manchester it skidded under the tail end of a big lorry. The band played at the ball. The car, with a malabraized mudwing and headlight crept back up Shap behind a road metal gritting lorry and so home.

One wee chuckle. The band always travelled in a Rolls Royce. On the way to play at a dance at Hamilton John found he's forgotten his specs. At Perth the big Rolls glided to a halt at Woolworth's door and a distinguished gentleman in Highland regalia emerged from the car and made for the counter where spectacles were sold - was it 6d a time in those days? - and was fixed up with a temporary pair. All over in five minutes!

And sharing a moment in history, the band was playing at a Highland Ball in Fisher's Hotel, Pitlochry, when King Edward VIII's speech came over the air, announcing his abdication.

Perhaps the most unusual occasion was a wedding reception at Kindrogan on a perfect midsummer's night when the dance was held down on the tennis court which is enclosed by a semicircle of trees and shrubs abutting a high garden wall. The sun saw dancing start and allowed a perfect gloaming to take over. This in turn gave way to the moon, faint stars and lots of tree-hung Chinese lanterns. The dawn came creeping in ever so gently - light came in to start a new day and let the band home with the milk in the morning.

John Reid had no time for the then modern dance music - "Tippety, tippety, damned muck", he called it. It was with difficulty his sons persuaded him to play the best of the popular numbers for the Alyth Farmers' Dances.

In the late 1920s when Scottish Country Dancing was being re-introduced, he scrapped his adult ballroom dancing classes and concentrated on that style of dancing which was eminently down his street as a teacher and also for his band. Perhaps his greatest success was when his band was invited to play in the Albert Hall, London, to the Scottish team of dancers in an International Festival of Dancing.

[] As a youngster John Reid, with his fiddle, took part in (musical evenings on the farm.) Sometimes they were held in the bothies, but oftener where the farmer was himself musical they were held in the farmhouse kitchens, and great nights they were. Before the end of the evening a tryst always was made to meet at another neighbour's on another night - and so it went on round. John spoke of the late Robert Pattullo, Bankhead of Alyth who was specially keen and also of the Moncurs at Eassie - places far apart when you remember the bicycle was the only means of transport in those days.

It is to be assumed that the Strathmore Reel and Strathspey society grew out of these nights. South Angus, Glamis, Kirriemuir and Forfar especially were always famed for Scots homespun music. John Reid played an active part in its founding, the members of his band playing in its ranks, too.

In the 1930s he played the leading part, ably seconded by the late D. L. Reid as secretary, in running the Alyth Fiddle and Accordion Music Festival. The first prize was a trip to London to record for the Edison Bell Gramophone Company. This attracted players from all over Scotland and drew packed audiences who were entertained by the cream of Scots musicians.

But a far better show went on behind the scenes where the players were warming up and a frantic man was stationed at the door to keep it shut and keep the noise in.

Among the competitors were pupils of John Reid, Adam Rennie and the three Cameron Brothers. (Will went on to win the prize). Amongst the others were the young Jimmy Shand, and the Powrie brothers. Bedlam it was in the room as they gathered in little groups trying out their pieces with one another. And, although each was there to do his utmost to win, there was a warm sense of camaraderie in the atmosphere.

Some of them played only by ear but these men had the gift that they had only to hear a tune played over a time or two and it was captured for life. Some were not too sure of the bass notes and a few approached Jimmy Shand - "Hey, Jimmy! Let's hear the bass for this tune!" and he would oblige and play it over a time or two for them till they had it. Great sportsmanship! Great nights! Those mentioned went on to form their own bands and have played on radio and appeared on TV.

John Reid and his family went down to London with Will Cameron to record too and had a wonderful time. As is understandable and easily overlooked, someone must have worked very hard to entice a gramophone company to come to Alyth to give auditions and credit must go to the John and to D. L. Reid.

Then a few years later he took his band to Megginch Castle to record country

dances for Great Scott Records in a studio built and owned by Capt. Drummond there.

John Reid's great ambition was to get his band on the radio to play country dance music. He felt the BBC's Edinburgh studio's Country Dance orchestra's style of playing lacked the Scottish idiom. It took John several years' besieging with the fiddle bow before he stormed the citadel and opened the way for the Scottish Country Dance bands you now hear and see on the BBC.

Before the citadel finally fell he gave a countryman's talk on the wireless. Amongst other things, he told of the directions to a place he got from a shepherd.

"Mak' East the dyke till ye come fornent a wid, syne haud North ower the riggin'. When ye can see doon the ither side, keep ga'en Wast ee mune, loup the burn and yer there." What could be clearer?

John Reid was also in attendance at the St. Andrews Summer School of the Scottish Country Dance Society to which came teachers of dancing from the ends of the earth, so that he was known and respected well furth of Scotland. It was interesting to see him in the company of Miss Jean Milligan and other leading lights of Scottish Country Dancing discussing and trying out the finer points of dances. As the Scots say, "He was nane blate" in that august company of Country Dancing women. It gave him great pleasure to have his band play in later years to the class's Finishing Assembly.

As more books of new Country Dances came out, for him more tunes were needed, because after playing the particular dance's own tune for the first couple he delighted in having other suitable tunes for each of the next three couples. Tunes were recommended him by his Country Dance colleagues, but for others he searched the old manuscripts for ancient tunes.

Some he named after Country Dance personalities - "Miss Jean Milligan" and "Miss Dow of Dundee's Favourite" are two that spring to mind. "Miss Wedderburn Ogilvy" is another tune. There was only one tune he didn't like and that was "The Duke of Perth" and because he had an ill-will at it, he played that one tune for the whole of the dance.

It should have been mentioned before this that John was in demand for many years to act as judge of dancing and piping at shows, gatherings and festivals over a wide area. It seemed to come natural to him to take on the role of foreman of the jury on these occasions. It was an education to hear him summing up the performances at the end of each session and give reasons for his decisions - plain to see once he had pointed them out. He could carry in his head the names of all the winners and as the afternoon wore on he would say "there's an up-and-coming young dancer shaping well." Or, "we ought to put her somewhere on the prize list

and give her some encouragement. Or, "she'll star some day."

Similarly towards the end of the piping competition he would say, "That's a lad that hasn't made the prize list the day, and yet he has played well. We'll put him somewhere on the prize list. That will pay his expenses and encourage [him] to come back another year. He'll play better yet."

His fellow judges might alter the order of merit a little - that's what they were there for - but there was a willingness to give and take amongst them and it was done harmoniously and without fuss or waste of time.

John used to say that the day anyone became satisfied with his standard of musical ability, his hobbies or his workmanship, that was the day he started to die. That day never arrived for John. He always expected a high standard and set it for himself.

The occasions he most enjoyed were his junior classes' Finishing Assemblies. He used to leave the platform and go down and join the youngsters in the dance. It wasn't easy to distinguish who was having most fun - the teacher or the taught. These were also the times the band seemed to be at its very best, playing fairy music for fairy folk.

At the height of the evening, at his Kirriemuir Junior Finishing Assembly, in the middle of a dance, the fingers which had flown so fluently and efficiently over the strings all these years suddenly curled up and called it a day.

When a personality dies it is understandable that it is the relatives, neighbours and friends who are shocked and dismayed. In John Reid's case this applied very much, too, but it also applied to the members of his classes and more especially to those of his junior classes.

What better testimonial to close with than the question they asked, "What are we to do now?"

But, of course, his work lives on in the pupils he taught and the pupils they are teaching and so on it will go - his contribution to Scottish Country Dancing, is what he would most like to be remembered by.

Acknowledgements

The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust would like to thank the Kirkpatrick Family.