

Alan Mair was Chairman of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) from 2000 to 2002, during which time he went to Napier, NZ. He likes to point out that Miss Milligan was Chairman 3 times (1945-47, 1951-54, 1958-61).

“This is nothing like how I imagined it to be”

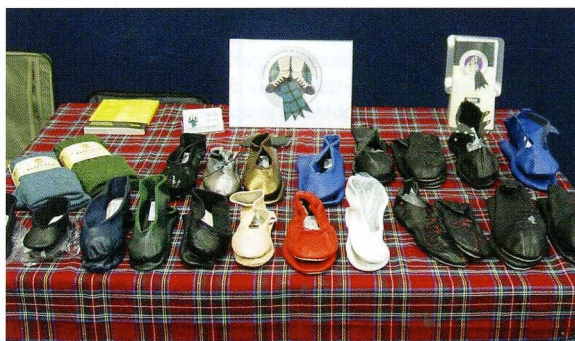


So said Miss Jean Milligan, on a visit to New Zealand in 1974. In those days it was an unusual journey to undertake simply to meet with fellow Scottish country dancers in the furthest outpost of the Commonwealth. But Jean Milligan was no ordinary country dancer and for much of her life it would have been unthinkable to spend six weeks travelling all that way by ship for a short holiday, and then six weeks returning home, unless you had a great deal of time and money to spare. It is likely that, without the rapid communication systems we take for granted to-day, she would have seen very little of what life in New Zealand was like, and thought it was somewhere people went to stay – for good.

Besides, she was much too busy here in Scotland, because even in retirement from her post as Principal Lecturer in Physical Education at Jordanhill College, she still had the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society to occupy her time and, especially, the Annual Summer School in St Andrews. A co-founder of the Society, she had been the first teacher of the Summer School when Mrs Ysobel Stewart had the idea and power of persuasion to arrange a week-long school in 1927. It is believed that was the first occasion when University accommodation was used for a residential summer school. Locals will be familiar with the extent to which St Andrews University now provides for summer visitors to the town, but may be less aware of the extent to which the concept of country dance summer schools has spread around the globe. There are now week-long residential schools in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as countless shorter (weekend) events.

Initially, these schools were meant to provide a substitute for the four-week long Mecca that St Andrews Summer School had become for those who were able to attend on a regular basis. The format in the early days would have been very similar to St Andrews – or, at least, as close as anyone who had been could remember – but our colonial cousins are nothing if not ingenious, so they were never afraid to add their own touches when required. Passing visitors would be few and far between at those early overseas schools, but there was always a wish to be true to the traditions and keep up-to-date, so, whenever possible, invitations would be sent to teachers and musicians to come out to these countries, and that was how Miss Milligan, although 88 years young, came to make her pioneering journey and to discover what New Zealand was really like.

After television programmes, such as Billy Connolly's recent series, “Lord of the Rings”, and other block-buster movies, it is difficult, now, to avoid information and images of New Zealand, and certainly there are many more visitors making the journey to the Antipodes



Sales table

than there would have been in 1974. This has brought a change to these overseas country dance schools because, while they still provide a service for locals who are not coming to the UK – and to St Andrews – they are now beginning to attract significant numbers of travelling dancers from Scotland, as well as the rest of the UK, USA, and Japan – and New Zealanders, Canadians, and Australians certainly know how to make a travelling dancer welcome.

The term “school” may not sound welcoming to everyone but, while classes and even examinations may be on the curriculum, there is another side to these events. There are dances, parties, and ceilidhs (in both the modern and traditional sense of the word), and there is an opportunity to learn more about your hobby and acquire the essential resource materials. To this end, do not be surprised to find, anywhere where there are country dance enthusiasts, the name of James Senior on a counter, or small table, with dance shoes for sale.

Perhaps the most common reason for deciding to journey to such far-off places is to visit relatives, but I did not have that catalyst. Instead, it was country dancing that made me decide in 2001 to fulfil an ambition and visit New Zealand. I enjoyed these three weeks so much that I returned in 2005 for six weeks.

New Zealand Summer School begins in the week following Christmas and carries on over New Year, so visitors from the northern hemisphere are able to bring in the New Year at a Scottish country dance on a balmy mid-summer evening. Just before midnight, the dancing stops and a well-rehearsed ceremony is rolled out. First, the shadowy reaper and sweeper clear away the old year and then, after the bells, a knock is heard and eventually, escorted by a piper, the first foot enters bearing whisky, coal, and salt. Everyone has a drink to toast the New Year and then it's back to the dancing. This year the first foot dropped on one knee and proposed to his girl friend, which represented a break from tradition. Duncan and Miriam are going to be married next February! Visitors from Scotland have pointed out that this ceremony bears only passing resemblance to what really happens back home, but let us hope that they carry on their own tradition. After all,

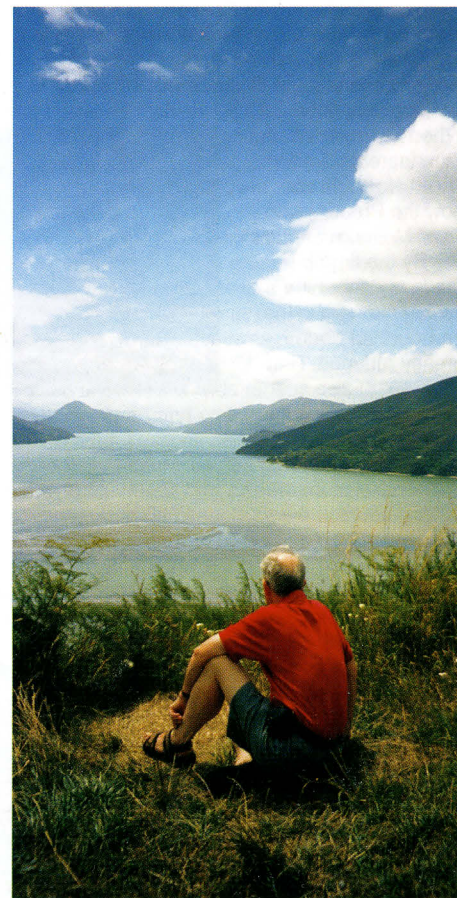
they resume the dancing with “The 32-some Reel” for as many as will – and you don't see that very often in Scotland either!

New Zealand Summer School differs from St Andrews in one major respect. Because Scottish Country Dancing enjoys nation-wide support, but has no spiritual home, the School moves around the country, alternating between North and South Island on a roughly ten-year cycle. This means that, while some traditions are maintained, each school has its own unique features and, because the organisers change, new ideas are introduced – if only because new problems need new solutions.

New Zealand is a fascinating country to visit. Even if you have no wish to jump off every bridge or high building on a length of elastic, there is amazing wildlife, breathtaking scenery, a plethora of vintage cars, steam trains and tractors, the bluest water you ever saw, and very friendly locals. You don't need to do Scottish country dancing to enjoy New Zealand, but there are a thousand friends waiting to meet you if you do.

Indeed, there is much more to being a member of RSCDS than pointing your toes – or making others point theirs. Try it some time – you might discover that it is not how you imagined it to be.

Photos, courtesy Alan Mair



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