

NOTES  
ON THE ORIGINS  
OF  
HIGHLAND DANCING

## Notes on the Origin of Highland Dancing

One may claim to determine the origin of a dance by its characteristics as the majority of National dances are characteristic of the manner of living etc. at the time of their inception. This of course cannot apply to present day dances as they are cosmopolitan.

To support this claim I shall give a few examples, the first being our own Sword Dances - up to about 150 years ago the majority of our people lived by the sword; we had the Border Reivers who raided the north of England for cattle, in warlike attire, and at the same time the Highlanders raiding each other and also the Lowlands. Another example but of a more peaceful nature is the Swedish dance called the 'Homespun', and if my information is correct i.e. that practically every household has a hand loom by means of which the Swedish housewife weaves a great amount of her household fabrics, it is not surprising then that a dance of this nature is popular in that country. Now from these examples one can see how the dances evolved.

### Adopted Dances

My opening statement in this lecture was 'One may claim to determine the origin of a dance by its characteristics'; well I wish to amend that to read "that one can very near determine the country of its origin by the characteristics of the dance" as for example - when I attended the Girl Guide International Dancing Festival held in London in July 1933 I saw the Belgian Team performing a dance which I am very sorry to say the name of which has escaped my memory, but from a description of the dance I think my point will be clearly followed.

The dancers wore bright coloured clothes to which a great number of small bells were fastened. They wore very tall hats which at first appearance looked like large bouquets of white chrysanthemum but were really large ostrich feathers. To complete the outfit the performers carried a basket containing paper balls. The dancers moved around the stage in file, with a snake like movement to the accompaniment of a Tom-Tom and whistle reminding one of snake charming. The paper balls were thrown to the audience. Now what do we make out of this, here we have a dance which is mainly connected with snakes so we decide that it cannot be a Belgian dance, in fact not even a European one. Well the history is as follows:- when Belgium was part of the Spanish Empire, an annual festival was held, to commemorate the conquest of Mexico; where all the Noblemen dressed up in the Aztec costume and performed the 'walk' or dance. If one reads the history of the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards it will be clearly seen that this dance is absolutely Aztec. We read of the 'Plumed Guard or Plumed Serpent' we also read of the refined torture where a prisoner is placed in a dark cell with a snake whose fangs have already been removed, but has a bell attached to its neck, the wretched prisoner is lying bound awaiting the death puncture by the snake which is of course harmless, he hears this bell here and there making him more terror stricken every second until eventually he goes off his head.

Before attending the festival I was informed by an American lady that I would probably see a very marked resemblance to Scottish Folk Dancing in some of the American dances; I believe that the Virginny Reel was one she mentioned - unfortunately the U.S.A. dancers were unable to attend. Here again we have a National dance which has been adopted. This resemblance can be traced to the fact that after the '45 rising a great number of Jacobites were transported to the Southern States of America (to work on the cotton fields) then a part of the British Empire. The Covenanters were also transported in batches so they also would keep up the customs which would be handed down through the generations to come.

### Tempo

With reference to the rhythm or tempo of the dances, I am convinced that this has been determined by the climatic conditions of the country, as for example where the climate is cold we have a good speed such as we for our own dances. Then as a contrast we have the slow sleepy Tango from 'Sunny Spain' where it is the custom owing to the heat to have a mid-day siesta usual in hot countries.

### Origin of the Scottish Dances

Very little authentic information is available to-day on the origin of the majority of our dances, ~~but the information given below although of a traditional nature, cannot be far from the truth.~~ Further, some of them may not be absolutely "Scottish" as for instance, the first time I ever saw 'Strip the willow' danced was in a small Wiltshire village. The 'Flowers of Edinburgh' and several other well known Scottish Country Dances are common in the counties of Northumberland and Cumberland. This may be due to the proximity of these counties to the Scottish Border and again may be due to the fact that at one time these counties along with the Scottish Counties as far north as the Forth were at one time a country in themselves called Northumbria. It is possible of course that some of these dances may have originated in the South and spread northwards and finally disappeared from the south of England the new conquerors each bringing their own dances with them, but that is going back too far. The true solution is the nearness of these counties to Scotland, as I am positive that they are of Scottish origin because of the fact that the basic steps and movements ~~are practically Scottish and similar to those for Highland Dances~~ therefore I am of the opinion that Scotland has the prior claim.

### Highland Dancing ----- General Notes

With the exception of the Highland Schottische they can all be actually classified as 'Display Dances' - I include the Foursome and Eightsome in this class, although both are first and foremost Community or Ball-room dances. Possibly all the Highland dances in their original form were of simple nature but have since developed into the intricate forms as now danced by the 'Professionals'; by that I mean that only those who have a special course in Highland dancing can hope to perform them correctly, and only the expert to do them accurately. Take as the first example 'Shean Trabbhas' (Shabby trows or Shoddy breaks) as now danced it is the most graceful of all the Highland dances besides being the acid test for Highland Dancing. In its original form it was meant to symbolise a protest against the banning of the kilt by law after the '45 rising - the trows being ridiculed in the performance. With reference to the Heels mentioned above - how many of the people one sees taking part in a reel, have even an elementary knowledge of what they are trying to do. I admit they are probably enjoying themselves, but Ball-room etiquette demands more than that - one should be able to enjoy oneself without interfering with the enjoyment of the other dancers in the set by bumping and lastly but ~~not~~ by no means least, by being rude. I wish to stress this last point and give as an example the deportment of a good Highland dancer - he is graceful with abandon but the abandonment is of a disciplined kind. How often does one see ladies throwing their legs up like girls in the chorus, and at the same time attempting to clap their hands below the leg raised and the gentleman cutting an awkward figure by trying to imitate a snake or some such reptile when going through the 'figure of eight' - I say going

going thro' the figure purposely, as there would be no figure if the dancers able to do this part of the dance, did not keep out of the way of these acrobats.

I shall now give some points of controversial nature:

An official at an eliminating competition at which I was present gave his decision against the teams who used their hands when dancing the reel. His explanation was that they should not be used as it is only at Highland Gatherings that they should be used. Personally I do not agree, as I think that it is again going too far by having one kind of standard for Highland Gatherings and another for other occasions. Possibly he may have meant to differentiate between Country Dancing and Highland Dancing. Whilst I am on the subject of hands, I may as well give my own personal views on the matter and that is 'I do not agree with ladies holding their hands up above their heads in the same manner as the gentlemen; that is symbolic of the Stags' antlers, but should have them akimbo or holding the folds of skirt as for giving a curtsy. Female competitors at Highland Gatherings or such like competitions would of course be expected to hold up the hands for standardisation purposes and of course they are suitably dressed to do so. Just picture ladies with long dresses trying to use their hands like antlers, what would be the result, torn dresses or suddenly minus a froc resulting in a very hurried dash for the ladies cloak-room.

Another point on which there seems to be a difference of opinion is 'Hooching' - I heard this being described as an invention of English Officers stationed at Edinburgh Castle - why blame Army Officers or Generals for this, I think they get blamed for enough without adding any more. ~~It is more natural when one is dancing a dance which is full of personified than to express one's pleasure in the same~~ same when you attend an International Rigger Match if Scotland scores. I admit it may not appear at first glance to be very dignified, but each of the dances are differently expressed, for instance in a dance of the ceremonial type the atmosphere would be spoilt if the dancer hooched, but in a dance of victory 'NO' 'NO'.

Now for a further point - Clapping the hands: I am now/rather dangerous ground but I am out to try to give the origin of everything relating to Highland dancing. I take the view that it would not be out of place for one to keep time by means of clapping in the 'Reel o' Tulloch' but can see any necessity for it in the other dances. My reason for seeing objection in this dance, I hope to make clear in describing this dance.

My last point - Syncopation of rhythm - this accentuation of beats when cutting the figure of eight, is done to give the dancer appearance of lightness and gracefulness, but is condemned by others as incorrect as they maintain that the dancers lose their state of grace - here again I remind one that It is a Dance of Joy that is performed and not one of a ceremonial stately nature.