

# Scotland... Dancing Again!

The Story of  
The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society



**NARRATION**

Written by

**Dr. Alastair MacFadyen**

# Scotland...Dancing Again!

## The Story of The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society

### Introduction

A warm welcome to the MacRobert Arts Centre in Stirling. These dancers and musicians are gathered together to present the story of The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, through its dances - at the start of this New Millennium.

The parts played by Mrs. Ysobel Stewart and Miss Jean Milligan in the formation and early years of the Scottish Country Dance Society cannot be overestimated. Without them this story could not be told. The details of their roles as co-founders have been well recorded in their respective biographies - 'Dance With Your Soul' for Miss Milligan, and 'An Album for Mrs. Stewart'.

It is, however, very fitting for us to celebrate their courage and determination in pursuing their aim to form a society to revive, conserve and promote the Scottish country dance. In its very early days, the Society did have its critics and it is greatly to the credit of the co-founders and of the other enthusiasts who joined them, that they were not deflected from their objective, so strongly did they believe in the value and purpose of their Society.

It is, therefore, entirely appropriate that our first two dances pay tribute to the co-founders.

They are the Reel  
**Mrs. Stewart of Fasnacloich**  
and  
**Miss Milligan's Strathspey**

The dancers are accompanied by David Cunningham.

### In the beginning...

The Society was formed on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1923, and Book 1 quickly followed. It was available early in 1924 with its 12 dances - all reels and jigs and no strathspeys. The lack of strathspeys is easily explained. While dancers in Scotland in

the 1920s were still very familiar with the Highland Strathspeys and Reels, strathspey country dances had long since fallen out of favour in the ballroom. The one exception to this was The Glasgow Highlanders. The fact that we now have many popular strathspeys, both traditional and newly devised, with many fine tunes to accompany them, is entirely due to The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

This revival of the strathspey country dance did present the fledgling Society with some problems - which steps to use, for example? The strathspey travelling step of the 1920s and 30s was rather brisk and staccato in character, very reminiscent of the strathspey stepping of the Highland reels.

The slower, smoother strathspey, with which we are now familiar, emerged from a process of evolution. Such evolutionary changes are inevitable when a tradition like ours is living and growing. Furthermore, it was not until 1926 that the matter of the strathspey setting step was finally resolved at a special conference of the Society held in Edinburgh.

I read from the report of the conference -

"The setting step in slow time should not be a pas de basque, but should be a step that is suitable to 'Strathspey' music. That recommended is the 'Common Schottische' step."

In the early days, the predominance of the ladies and the rare sighting of a male dancer, inevitably, provoked some humorous commentary. There was also an article by the late Miss Alison Downie, a Glasgow journalist, in which she wrote amusingly about her experiences at a country dance class where there was a great want of gentlemen. She entitled the article - "Am I a Man Tonight?"

It was a claim often made by Miss Milligan that the success of our Society in its early days was, in part, due to the fact that it fulfilled a social need. Because a class or evening of country dancing could be attended without a partner, it was a pastime which appealed to a generation of women who had been deprived of male partners by the devastation of the First World War.

The dancers will now dance - Dance 1 from Book 1 -

### **Petronella**

We now conclude our celebration of the beginnings of the

Society and our tribute to the co-founders and others, whose efforts gave the Society a firm foundation on which to grow and develop. Doreen Thom is at the piano, and Johan MacLean will accompany the dancing

from Book 2 **The Glasgow Highlanders**

and from Book 1 **The Triumph**

### Our Traditional Heritage

In this year 2001, The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society is in its 78<sup>th</sup> year. The country dance which it aims to promote has a considerably longer history. Throughout that long history, it has proved to be remarkably resilient and adaptable, and despite competition from other forms of popular social dance, it has endured.

It has happily absorbed new formations, adapted to the new styles and fashions of the time and taken on board new musical rhythms such as the strathspey tempo, unique to Scotland, of the eighteenth century, and the waltz and polka rhythms of the nineteenth century.

It was the professional teachers of dancing who were chiefly responsible for ensuring the survival of the country dance. The tradition of the dancing master was well established in most European countries more than 200 years ago and in Scotland it persisted until the years between the two world wars. One of the best known of Scotland's peripatetic teachers of dancing was Donald R. Mackenzie, based here in Stirling. Mrs. Stewart consulted him early in 1921 about how to dance the pousette. His reply to her has survived and is conserved in The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society Archives.

“ In the meaning of the old French word ‘Pousette’, the two couples at the top of the dance chassie round after each other in the way of a two-step waltz. In pousetting, eight bars of the music is required in making four waltz turns. ”

The dancing masters were gifted teachers and musicians. They had an extensive teaching repertoire - country dances, Highland solo dances and Reels as well as the other popular social dances of the time. As skilled exponents of the fiddle, they were able

to provide their own musical accompaniment for their classes.

We now pay tribute to the dance and musical heritage we have inherited from the past. It is good that we cherish and respect our traditional heritage. On the other hand, we cannot afford to be trapped by it. If we wish to bequeath a dance and music heritage to future generations, we, like the dancing masters of old and like the country dance itself, must be ready and willing to respond positively to present and future challenges.

The first two dances are

**The Guidman of Balangh** Jig

**There's nae luck about the Hoose** Strathspey

once again to the piano, with the second dance accompanied by Johan MacLean

We conclude this section with two more dances -

**Red House** Reel

**The Jimp Waist** Strathspey

### A Highland and Island Fling

For such a small country, Scotland has an amazingly rich heritage of traditional dance and music. As we are all aware, country dancing is only one of Scotland's traditions of dance. No doubt the best known of those other traditions is the Highland one with its solo step dancing - such as the Highland Fling and the Sword dance - and its reels, characterised by alternate stepping and reeling and danced to medleys of strathspey and reel.

Inevitably, there has been an exchange of influences between the different traditions. The country dance, for example, incorporated setting and reeling into its formations and also adopted the stirring music of the Highland bagpipes and of Gaeldom.

Another form of social dancing, the quadrille, danced in Scotland for the past two centuries, has had its influence on both country and highland dancing. The square formation

of the quadrille is now well established within the country dance repertoire, as are the quadrille terms, pas de basque and poussette. Some recent research has shown that Highland solo dancing, as we know it today, owes much to the influence of the solo stepping which, at one time, was an essential component of quadrille dancing.

In this section the dancers commemorate and celebrate those elements of the country dance which have derived from the dance and music of the Highlands and Islands and they pay tribute to those other traditions which have helped to shape the style and form of Scottish country dancing now enjoyed by us at the beginning of a new century.

We begin with the **Hebridean Weaving Lilt**

We conclude the section with

**The Axum Reel** collected in Orkney

and with **La Russe** which began life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a single figure quadrille, but is now danced in our Scottish country dance style.

### St. Andrews

“The jewel in the crown”, is how Miss Milligan once described The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society Summer School. This was no exaggeration, because in many respects, the Summer School is quite exceptional. I doubt if there is any other form of dance, anywhere in the world, which can bring together 800 to 1,000 dancers every summer. The first Summer School was organised in 1927, and apart from one year in Edinburgh, and with the exception of the war years, has been held each year since then in St. Andrews.

There can be no doubting the significance of what the Summer School has done for The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society and for Scottish country dancing. By offering classes for all levels of ability, including teacher training, the School has successfully achieved a worldwide acceptance of the style and standards of dancing advocated by the Society. The success of the Summer School has not been confined entirely to Scottish country dancing. Other dance traditions have also benefited. The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society,

at its Summer School, has done as much as any organisation to keep alive the interest of male dancers in Highland dancing.

The first teacher of Highland stepping at St. Andrews was the famous Angus teacher, ‘Dancie’ John Reid of Newtyle, who was himself a pupil of the equally famous ‘Dancie’ James Neill of Forfar, who taught the Queen Mother to dance at Glamis Castle. ‘Dancie’ Reid is remembered for his ability to dance and play the fiddle at the same time. His successor at the Summer School in the post-war years, another eminent dancer and teacher, had the same talent - he could dance and play the pipes at the same time. I refer to the unforgettable Bobby Watson.

It was at the Summer School that The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society has been able to revive and popularise another of Scotland’s dance traditions, namely Ladies’ Step dancing. This is a distinctive style of solo step dancing which can trace its origins back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the dancing masters choreographed special dances for their female pupils to perform at the end-of-season assemblies. It is thanks to the researches and teaching, principally at the Summer School, of the late Mrs. Tibbie Cramb, that Ladies’ Step dancing is now recognised and enjoyed throughout the world.

It was the discovery in Aberdeen in the mid 1940s of the Hill Manuscript which was the inspiration for Mrs. Cramb’s revival of Ladies’ Step dancing. The Manuscript, dated 22 March 1841, records, along with other popular social dances of the time, several hitherto unknown solo step dances.

The dancers now acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of the Summer School at St. Andrews, with

**The Summer Assembly Reel**

Now, a Ladies’ Step dance danced by Janet Johnston

**Blue Bonnets** from the Hill Manuscript,

And now a **Highland Fling** danced by Alasdair Brown

### Personalities