

NOTES  
ON  
SCOTTISH COUNTRY  
DANCES

## Some Notes on Scottish Country Dances.

It is surprising how few records can be found of Country dancing in Scotland before the end of the 17th century, indeed most of the "History" is "legendary" before this period. For example, we are told that Mary, Queen of Scots, brought the dance "Petronella" from the Court of France, but there is no documentary evidence of this. Coming from the French Court, so much more refined than the Scottish one, she would naturally favour such a dainty dance, rather than the robust joyousness of such a dance as say the "Country Bumpkin," or "Cut the buckle."

Dancing played but a small part in the social enjoyment at this time, especially in the towns, partly as it was looked upon as unmoral by the Church, and perhaps even more owing to the smallness of the rooms, and the largeness of the ladies' hoops. In the country, however, the more boisterous type of dance was danced, mostly in the open air.

It was in 1710 that the first public Assembly was held in Edinburgh, and it was at these public balls that Society met. Of course they were denounced by the Churches, but in spite of all they flourished, and dancing masters did a great business. The price of the ticket was two shillings and sixpence, and dancing began at 5 and went on until 10 or 11 o'clock. The minuet and country dances were danced in stiffness and state. Later in the Century Miss Nicky Murray, a sister of Lord Mansfield held absolute sway, as Lady Directress of the Assemblies. There she sat at the end of the room, wearing a gold medal, the insignia of her office while at the door stood Lord Kirkcubright, the old glover, selling

white gloves to the gentlemen as they entered. Each gentleman had already chosen a partner, the selection being made at some private party where all the ladies' fans were placed in a cocked hat, and the owner of the fan picked out, became the partner for the Assembly, each gentleman having a shrewd guess who the owner of the fan was. The gentlemen often carried one or two oranges in his pocket for the refreshment of his lady, who sucked them during the intervals of the dance. Oliver Goldsmith in 1753 attended one of these fashionable gatherings, and his description is rather amusing. He says "When the stranger enters the dancing room, he sees one end of the room taken up by the ladies, who sit dismally in a group by themselves and at the other end, stand the pensive partners that are to be. The ladies may ogle, the gentlemen may sigh, but an embargo is laid on any close conversation. At length the lady directress pitches on a gentleman and a lady to a Minuet, which they perform with a formality approaching to despondency. After five or six couples have thus walked the gauntlet, all stand up for a country dance. So they dance much and say nothing, and this concludes the Assembly".

In 1777 the Assemblies forsook the High Street, and met in George Street in the new town, whither the tide of fashion was beginning to flow, and were still continued until shortly before the War.

As to the Country Dances danced at these Assemblies it is difficult to say, but from dancing masters Manuals of the time such dances as "Hoop her and gird her", "I'll make you begin to follow me", "the Three Sheepskins" and of course the Bumpkin and Petronella.

A certain number of Country dances are well known all over Scotland. Su

dances as "Flowers of Edinburgh" Drops o' Brandy, Corn Riggs, Circassian Circle ~~are~~<sup>were</sup> very popular. The Scottish Country Dance Society has already published over 70 dances, and there are still many more, not now danced, but which have been, within a generation. In my part of the country, large sheep farms are numerous. The shepherds are of a very superior well read type, who frequently pass their whole lives in one district, and often following their fathers. For this reason I have found that they can tell me about dances popular in their youth, and in their parents and grandparents time. Such dances as "the Rifleman" Jessie's Favourite" The Duchess of Buccleuch's Favourite" have not been danced for many years but are now recorded., and so preserved.

Some Country dances, again, are of purely local interest as their names imply  $\frac{1}{2}$  "The laddies o' Dunse, The Lassies o' Melrose, The Oxton Reel". These dances are apt to die out, and can only be got from old people, because of their limited radius.

Again, we have the Romantic period of the '45, when Edinburgh was a place of gaiety. We get dances possibly of a more Highland type, and Jacobite names, "The White Cockade, The Eight men of Moidart, O'er the water to Charlie".

It is a moot point whither the pas de basque step which is used in Scottish country dancing, is not a spread southwards of Highland culture, and seized upon in a great wave of national sentiment. It is a step used in pousetting, and my experience is that all the older dances the progression was made by reel of three at the sides.

Country dancing had a real hold on all classes of Society. It is curious to learn how the Scottish Mercenaries of the Thirty years War imposed a dance on Holland. Many of them married and settled down in the country, and today one of the Dutch National dances is the "Skotske

"Trije", which as its name implies is of Scottish origin, and has many features in common with our country dancing.

In the early days of the 19th century, the whaling industry flourished in Scotland. One of the hunting grounds was off Greenland. Today the Greenlanders, ~~the~~ are extremely fond of dancing and dance on any excuse, and their dances show a marked Scottish influence. Two of these much resembled the Eightsome reel and the foursome reel, indeed Miss Isobel Hutchison, the noted botanist, who on several occasions has visited Greenland, told me she saw one man cutting the figure eight, back to back like a true Highlander. The music for these was a kind of Scotch reel, played on the melodeon. The Director of Greenland states that the dances were generally accepted as having been taught by the whalers. This is particularly interesting when one learns that their own national dance the "trommedans" is now extinct.

Those of you who know Scottish Country dances know that the Allemande is one step in progressing. It is interesting to note from a Border ladies Memoirs, that this was a dance done by two persons at a quicker pace than the Minuet, a great deal of going hand in hand and passing the hands over each other's head in an elegant manner.

Now a few notes on some dances.

The country bumpkin ~~was~~ was very popular in the 18th century. It was always the last dance in the programme. Three gentlemen stood in a row, with a lady on each side, one trio before the other. The gentleman in the middle wore a hat, there was a regular figure after the gentlemen had c

changed places, and had each worn the hat, the sets widened. Other three gentlemen sprang forward to form <sup>3</sup>foursome reels, then came the tug of war to see who would keep the floor longest. Neil Gow, the leader of the band, and then so celebrated, would come to the front of the Orchestra, fiddle in hand, as if he would crush it, so excited he always was, and stamping with his feet, and calling high, as the music changed from strathspey to reel alternately. After a while the ladies would beckon to other ladies <sup>to take their places</sup>, and the gentlemen do the same, and it was a relief to hear Neil Gow play his last tune "Goodnight and joy be with you" which was the signal for breaking up.

The Oxton Reel, or as it is sometimes called the Sixsome reel was peculiar to the village of Oxton. Unfortunately for some time back it was never danced, and was in danger of being forgotten. This dance was given to me by a lady in the Oxton W.R.M. who was the only person who knew it.

The Eight Men of Moidart. When Prince Charlie landed in Scotland, he was met in Moidart by seven of his supporters. These were The Duke of Atholl, Sir John MacDonald, Mr Aeneas Macdonald, Mr Strickland, Mr Buchannan, Sir Thomas Sheridan, Mr O'Sullivan and Mr Kelly. One night at the farm house where they were hiding, some one proposed a Country Dance. Naturally Prince Charlie was asked to take the top, but he wished that there should be no precedence. The dance the eight men of Moidart <sup>was evolved</sup>. In it every one dances together, and it is only at the end of the dance where progression is made that the top couple do a little solo work.

The White Cockade. This dance is also of Jacobite origin, and is danced to an old Highland air "A Highland lad my love was born" When Prince Charlie entered Edinburgh there followed great scenes of revelry. At a ball given in the Palace of Holyrood house, Mrs Secretary Murray presented a white cockade, the Jacobite badge, to each guest as they entered, and from this incident the dance takes its name.

The bonny breist-knots. This is one of the oldest, if not the oldest wedding dance. It was a dance before the song of the same name was written to the tune of the dance. The song describes a country wedding, and all its jollities says "and then we danced the breist-knots" This is the dance mentioned

Lennoxlove to Blantyre. There is a story of how the estate of Lethington came in to the possession of the Blantyre family which is interesting. It was in the time, and at the hands of John, Duke of Lauderdale, that the house and lands of Lethington passed from the Maitlands (the Lauderdale family name) to the Stuarts of Blantyre. The story of the sale is romantic and creditable to the wit of woman. Frances Theresa Stuart, a famous hoyden, known as La Belle Stuart, was the daughter of Walter Stuart, son of the first Lord of Blantyre. She married the young and wealthy Lord Lennox, and afterwards became Duchess of Lennox and Gordon. She was one of the beauties of the Court of Charles the Second. Her portrait is represented as Brittania in the coinage of the time. Lauderdale and Blantyre met frequently in London. The former tauntingly offered to sell Lethington to the latter, alleging at the same time that the

7  
bidder was quite unable to pay cash down. Lady Lennox heard of the offer and the taunt. She secretly instructed her father to come to terms with the holder and when witnesses were present to bind him in fulfilment of the same. The sale was offered, fixed and sealed. Along with cash payment, Blantyre received his daughter's love. Both were conveyed to haughty Lauderdale. The debt was paid with Lennoxlove to Blantyre.