



South East Region Teachers Association

Rediscovering Scottish Country Dances

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Photo: Stephen Webb

Introduction

Reconstructing dances from the past is a process. There are no rights or wrongs: it is impossible to know exactly how steps were danced, or how instructions were interpreted. The best we can do is attempt to marry a dance with contemporary dance manuals and, when possible, the music used, and arrive at a performance which pays due regard to all the sources. It is difficult to come to historic dances without preconceptions based on our RSCDS experience. We think of this as dating back to 1923, but a quick look at the first edition of Book 1 shows us that the RSCDS tradition has also been one of development. In the introduction to Book 1, we start with a 5-couple set, not a 4-couple one. "When tripping down the middle, advancing and retiring, the step used is the Polka (one, two, three, hop)." In "set and turn," both hands should be given for the turn, the



elbows bent as before, and the Polka step used.” In the poussette, “the modern form is to waltz round each other”. It comes as a surprise to many RSCDS teachers that in this first edition The Triumph finished not with the one-couple poussette which today we call ‘The Triumph Poussette’ but with 1st and 2nd couples dancing a 2-couple poussette, thus making it an 8-times through reel – much more satisfying than the dance we do today, which is all over in 1 minute 52 seconds.

The main aim of the two workshop sessions was to understand the process of dance reconstruction. We were very lucky to have several dancers from the Quadrille Club (QC) whose contributions were invaluable. The musicians for the day were Ian and Meryl Thomson and Caroline Sloan of Green Ginger who themselves have done an enormous amount of research into the music of the period and without whom the day would not have been possible. Morning Session: Looking again at published dances

The Frisky

The morning session began with The Frisky from Book 26, credited to ‘Bremner’. Bremner was a music publisher, not a dance deviser. In his most famous collection of dance music of 1757 there is no mention of The Frisky. At least two ‘Friskies’ were published in London, the first in 1774 by Thompson, the second in 1775 by Straight and Skillern. The former bears a striking resemblance to our Frisky, the latter is totally different. Both share the same tune, which I assume is the original, and is an excellent jig. There is no explanation why the RSCDS did not use the original, but used the nursery rhyme tune ‘Humber Jumber’ instead. We began by dancing the popular RSCDS version, then the 1774 version. The main difference is that the first 8 bars takes 16 in the manuscript version: four bars to turn, four to cast, four to turn again, then four to cast. The next 8 bars are the circle. The dance finishes with the dancing couple leading up to the top, setting then casting off one place. By compressing Bars 1 -16 into 8 bars, our modern version is brisker

and more muscular. It also means something has to be added to fill up the 32 bars! This could be where the final 8 bars of the RSCDS version have come from. The manuscript version is a much more 'sedate' dance. What is clear is that the Book 26 dance is based on an 18th century original. Whether it is still the same dance is arguable. By today's standards, and according to the workshop participants, our Frisky is more fun! There was general agreement that the original tune was better than Humber Jumber.

Fife Hunt

Fife Hunt is unique among RSCDS dances in that the identical dance was published in the Graded Book as Wedderburn's Reel. Wedderburn's Reel has the original tune Duncan Gray while Fife Hunt in the new edition of the Miscellany has acquired a 'customary tune' – The Aberdeen Town Council by Nan Main. We danced it and everyone found it tricky to end up in 2nd place on opposite sides in the last two bars of corner partner. No source is given for either dance. However, a dance called Fife Hunt was published in 1800 in 'Dale's Selection of the most favorite Country Dances and Reels'. The first 24 bars are virtually identical to ours. In the RSCDS dance the dancing couple have a very difficult turn on bars 23 and 24. Instead of crossing over to 2nd place own sides, they have to turn one and a half times with the left hand to finish on opposite sides, between their corners, ready to advance and retire, then turn one and a half times back to their own sides. Anyone, with even a cursory knowledge of 18th century country dances would be suspicious of this. To finish a formation 'improper' i.e. on the opposite side, would not be conventional. The last 8 bars of the 1800 version are 'lead outsides' – a common ending to many dances of the period. The final left hand turn of the corner partner movement would be a comfortable three quarter turn to leave the dancing couple side by side in the middle facing the men's side, nearer hands joined, ready to dance out between the men, cast back into the middle, dance out between the women, and cast back to 2nd place on sides. It is not easy to find instructions for the formation 'lead outsides', but

'Country Dancing made plain and Easy' of 1764 is explicit about it. The other disappointing feature of this dance is that the 1800 version was published with the excellent Gow tune of the same name. Fife Hunt is seldom seen on dance programmes. This is a case where the 1800 version is more danceable than the RSCDS version. And why Miss Milligan did not stipulate the eponymous tune is a mystery.

The other dances in this session were Madge Wildfire's Strathspey, The Laird of Dumbiedyke's Favorite, Espie Macnab, Montgomerie's Rant and Caberfei. To readers of The Reel the most interesting of these is probably Montgomerie's Rant, one of the most popular dances worldwide. The most controversial issue with this dance is tempo. We dance it as a reel. In the Castle Menzies Manuscript (I am indebted to Jim Healy for a copy of this ms) the dances have no music and no indication of tempo – except for The Montgomerie's Rant and Couteraller's Rant. Both are described as 'Strathspey Reeles'. Apart from moving the apostrophe to after the 's' in Montgomerie's, the RSCDS has published the former as a reel and the latter as a strathspey. We published the dance with two so-called original tunes: the popular Lady Montgomerie and the almost-never-played Lord Eglintoune. Green Ginger must be one of the few bands, who, when asked to play Lord Eglintoune with no warning, take it in their stride! Most bands refuse point blank. The dancers had fun dancing to a very interesting historic strathspey arrangement of Lady Montgomerie and the dreaded Lord Eglintoune as a strathspey. However, our modern instructions differ significantly from the Castle Menzies source. Bars 1 – 8 are: 1st couple dance back to back, cast off, dance back to back again then 1st man casts off while 1st lady casts up. The Quadrille Club EFDSS dancers present confirmed that in 1749 the back-to-back movement would have been different from the RSCDS movement. Bars 9 – 24 are virtually identical to the dance we dance today. However, the final 8 bars are not a 6-bar reel then cross over. They are the 'lead outsides' formation, which we danced in Fife Hunt. So, we have to conclude that only half of our Montgomerie's Rant is original and it should be a strathspey – if we want to be authentic.

The morning session finished with a non-RSCDS dance, Caberfei from Jack McConnachie's Imperial book of 18th Century dances, based on the 1740 Young manuscript, a copy of which is in the National Library of Scotland. Bars 1 – 16 are similar, but the McConnachie version departs from the original in bars 17- 32. His half-setting and reel of 4 and circle are pure inventions.

Dancing popular dances then dancing reconstructions based on contemporary dance manuals makes us think more about the process of reconstruction, different styles of dancing and raises the whole issue of authenticity.

Afternoon Session: Reconstructing unpublished dances

From the 18th and 19th centuries there are thousands of country dances which have never been published in the modern era. The afternoon began with a neglected country dance form – the waltz country dance – longwise country dances in waltz time. The QC dancers present demonstrated the simple travelling step used and we danced Lady Charlotte Campbell's Waltz, a delightful three-couple dance which would be an excellent starter for any Scottish ball.

The first jig we danced was Reuben Butler from the neglected 1820 manuscript of dances connected with Sir Walter Scott. Of the six dances in the booklet the RSCDS has published two: Madge Wildfire's Strathspey and The Laird of Dumbiedyke's Favorite. It is a straightforward dance with a great tune. We then danced Jeanie Deans' Strathspey. It contains the common 8-bar setting formation where the first three couples are arranged facing up and down the set, 1st man between the 3s and 1st lady between the 2s. The RSCDS formation normally has the 1st couple dancing a petronella step to end in 2nd place on the opposite sides on bars 3 and 4. Contemporary dance manuals have the 1st couple cast back to 2nd place on their own sides on bars 3 and 4, thus applying the rule that dancers finish formations on their own sides. Finishing in the middle facing 1st corners or on opposite sides seems to be

an innovation which the Society introduced in its early years. The strathspey ends with 'lead outsides'. One of the reasons many dances have been neglected has been the unwillingness to publish relatively simple dances with similar groups of formations.

We then went on to dance two dances from a book of country dances published in 1785 in Bath, 24 American Country Dances as danced by the British during their Winter Quarters at Philadelphia, New York and Charlestown. One of the most entertaining features of the two reels, The Yager Horn and Laurel Hill, is the music. We practiced the rigaudon step, which is a feature of Laurel Hill. This was a common setting step in country dances, but which was not picked up by Miss Milligan or Mrs Stewart. We then danced The Earl of Northesk's Strathspey and finished with the jig, Lord Cathcart's Welcome to Scotland.

There is no question that the RSCDS is and has been an incredibly successful organisation. Its success is in great part due to the early teachers whose enthusiasm spawned clubs and branches worldwide. This was based on the repertoire of both dances and music, and the steps and formations which were standardised by our founders. Sometimes Miss Milligan and her contemporaries took an old dance, changed it, and made it more fun. Montgomerie's Rant, the reel we have today, is more fun than the Castle Menzies 'strathspey reele'. But sometimes a perfectly good dance was changed and made more difficult; sometimes a good traditional tune was dropped. I am left wondering why the two-couple poussette was changed to the much more difficult one-couple version we have today in The Triumph. And to ditch the great original jig for The Frisky and replace it with Humber Jumber must rank as a crime! I hope it will make us much more careful when we use the word 'original' in future.

Jimmie Hill