SOCIAL DANCING IN SCOTLAND, 1700-1914

J. F. and T. M. Flett *

Some fifty or sixty years ago, the older social dances of Scotland, the Reels and the Country Dances, were gradually losing the place they had once held in our social gatherings. Their decline was accelerated by the disruption of social life caused by the first World War, and by the introduction of jazz, so that, by 1920, they were rapidly dying out. The story of the formation of the Scottish Country Dance Society and of its success in reviving interest in these dances is now well known, and has been told by several writers (Milligan, 1954). Little, however, has been written about social dancing in Scotland during the period immediately prior to the formation of the Country Dance Society, although some knowledge of this period is essential for a proper appreciation of the character of the traditional dances collected and revived by the Society. In this article an attempt is made to give a picture of social dancing in Scotland prior to the first World War.

To fill in the background of the picture, one must go back to about the year 1700. For a hundred years before this date dancing was a very unusual pastime in the Lowlands of Scotland and in those parts of the Highlands which came under the influence of the Presbyterian Church: dancing was a sin, and greatly condemned.† There are remarkably few references to dancing in Scotland during this period, and most of those which do occur (*Records of Elgin*, 1908) are records of the occasions when some miscreant appeared before a Church Session for daring to celebrate Hogmanay in the manner of his forefathers, or for being so forgetful of the good of his soul as to invite all the neighbourhood to dance at his wedding.

* Dr T. M. Flett is a lecturer in mathematics at Liverpool University. He and his wife are both keen dancers, and for the past seven years have been studying the subject of Scotland's dances, on both the historical and traditional sides.

† Even Royalty had to conform. In 1681-82, when the Duke of York (later James II) resided in Edinburgh, "a splendid court was kept at the Palace of Holyroodhouse, to which resorted the principal of the nobility and gentry. . . . Balls, plays, and masquerades, were introduced: These . . . were soon laid aside. The fanaticism of the times could not bear such ungodly innovations" (Tytler, 1798).

The hardier spirits among the ordinary Lowland country folk probably continued to dance in secret, although the majority seem to have supported the Church in its condemnation of all forms of frivolity. The upper classes probably did not dance at all, for, even if they wished to dance in secret, they would have found it impossible to do so in those days of numerous servants.

By 1700, when the Church was beginning to take a less narrow view of the lighter pleasures, polite society in Scotland had not danced for over a hundred years. The Court dances of the sixteenth century, which showed very clearly the strength of French influence at that time, were long since dead. English influence was now paramount, and it was therefore natural that Scottish society, just beginning to dance again, should learn the dances fashionable at that time in English society, the Minuet and the Country Dance. And, since these were perhaps a little dull for Scottish tastes, they also took the Reel, which had been preserved in the remoter parts of the Highlands.

It may be as well to say a little here concerning the Country Dance, since this is sometimes erroneously claimed as of Scottish origin. The earliest "Country Dances" seem to have been the ordinary social dances of the village people of the English countryside. These countryside dances were introduced into English society during the late sixteenth century (Wood 1936-9; Nicol and Dean-Smith 1940-5), probably losing a good deal of their simplicity in the transition from a rustic to an urban dancing-ground. They may also have been influenced during this period by dances introduced to England from Italy. The early Country Dances were of various types, round, square and longways. During the late seventeenth century, however, all but one of these, the longways progressive type,* died out, and from 1700 onwards the term "Country Dance" referred exclusively to dances of longways progressive type.†

So far as we are aware, the first record of a Country Dance

* That is, a dance in which the dancers form two parallel lines, the men in one, their partners opposite them in the other, and every couple comes to the top place in turn.

† It is usual nowadays to include Reels under the heading of Country Dances. In this article, however, we shall follow the older usage—which is also the traditional usage in Scotland—in which a Country Dance is a longways progressive dance. We use "Reel" to mean a dance of the same general form as a Foursome Reel. Descriptions of most of the Country Dances and Reels mentioned in this article are given either in the books published by the R.S.C.D.S. (1923-55) or in the *Border Book* (1932), and we give references only when this is not the case.

in Scotland occurs in a MS. dated 1704 (National Library of Scotland). This contains the description of a longways progressive dance, John Anderson my jo. The MS., however, does not use the term "Country Dance", and the first explicit reference to a Country Dance in Scotland known to us is in 1723. In that year the first public dancing assemblies to be held in Scotland were opened in Edinburgh, and Country Dances and Minuets formed part of the programme.

Immediately after the introduction of the Country Dance to Scotland, Country Dances were set to Scottish tunes. Only a little later, a truly Scottish type of Country Dance evolved, the distinguishing mark of which was the ending *set to and turn corners and reels of three with corners* (a sequence probably inspired by the Scottish Threesome Reel). But in spite of these Scottish contributions, the Country Dance remained the "*English* Country Dance" for nearly a hundred years, and only towards the end of the eighteenth century did it attain anything like the same popularity as the native Reels.

By 1800, then, the Country Dance was firmly established in Scottish Society. In 1816 a new rival appeared on the scene in the form of the Quadrilles, which were introduced to Edinburgh directly from Paris (E. Grant 1950). They immediately became popular, and for a year or two the Country Dances and Reels suffered a slight setback. But after this initial period the Country Dances and Reels recovered, and for some thirty or forty years all three forms of dance, Quadrilles, Country Dances and Reels, seem to have been equally popular.

Shortly after the introduction of the Quadrilles, the Waltz followed, but it seems to have found little favour in Scotland (though it had some effect, for a waltzing step was introduced almost immediately into the Country Dance figure *pousette*).

It is interesting to compare this state of affairs with that in English society. There the Quadrilles and the Waltz combined to oust the Country Dance from the place it had held for over two hundred years, and after 1820 the popularity of the Country Dance in England declined very rapidly.* This difference between England and Scotland is easily explained,

* This may be seen from various nineteenth-century English ballroom guides. Thomas Wilson's *Companion to the Ballroom* (London, 1815) contains the descriptions of several hundred Country Dances, while *The Ballroom Preceptor and Polka Guide* (9th edition, London, 1854), *The Ball-Room Instructor* (London, 1855) and *The Ball-Room Guide* (London, 1874), include only four Country Dances between them. *The Ball-Room Instructor* says that "Country Dances, since the introduction of the Quadrilles, have not been so much used as formerly"; while *The Ball-Room Guide* remarks that "a country dance is often tolerated as a finale; but . . . only tolerated".

for in England the Country Dance was already declining when the Quadrilles were introduced. In Scottish society, on the other hand, the Country Dance was more or less at the peak of its popularity at the time of the introduction of the Quadrilles and was therefore much less likely to have been completely eclipsed by the newcomer.

After 1800 there was a good deal of interaction between the three forms of dance, Quadrilles, Country Dances and Reels. Already before the introduction of the Quadrilles in 1816, new Reels were composed incorporating Country Dance figures, and after 1816 Quadrille figures were also used. Most of these "new Reels" had only a short life, but one, an Eightsome Reel using Quadrille figures (National Library of Scotland), survived through the century and was ultimately incorporated into the modern Eightsome Reel. After 1816 Quadrille figures were used increasingly in the Country Dance. The "figure 8" of the Foursome Reel also found its way into the Country Dance, while late in the nineteenth century we find Quadrilles composed in the Scottish style, incorporating both Reel steps and the Reel "figure 8".

From about 1870 onwards the Country Dance lost favour to a certain extent in Scottish society. It was never entirely eclipsed, however, and all three forms of dance, Quadrilles, Country Dances and Reels, still form part of the programmes at such meetings as the Perth Hunt Ball. The variety of Country Dances performed within recent years, however, is less than formerly, only some half dozen or so remaining in favour.

So far we have been concerned only with dancing among the upper classes. To complete the picture the social dances of the ordinary working people should be considered. Here two main traditions have evolved, Highland and Lowland, quite distinct from each other.

The Highland tradition is found in its purest form in the West Highlands and the Hebrides. There, until about seventy years ago, the most popular dance in an evening's entertainment was the Foursome Reel. The Country Dance and the Quadrilles did not reach these parts until about 1850,* and it was not for some years after this that they became popular—even to-day old people in the Hebrides refer to them as "modern" dances. As might be expected, therefore, the Country Dances to be found in these districts are those which

* Or later: old people in the Benderloch district of Argyllshire, for example, can remember the first introduction of the Quadrilles to their district, about seventy years ago.

were in common use elsewhere from 1850 onwards. Thus *the* traditional Highland dance is the Reel, and the Country Dance is here a very recent immigrant.

In the Lowlands the state of affairs was very different. Here, as in the Highlands, the Reel was firmly established, though whether it was indigenous, or was imported from the Highlands, it is now impossible to say. In addition to the Reel, however, the Country Dance may also be regarded as traditional to this region. For in the towns the Country Dance passed from the upper classes to the ordinary people, and from the towns it spread into the neighbouring countryside. Possibly also it spread directly from the country houses of the landed gentry. At any rate, it had reached the country districts of the Lowlands well before the end of the eighteenth century.

The Lowland townsfolk tended to follow the lead of the upper classes and, by 1900, only a few Country Dances remained in use in the bigger towns.* In the country districts, however, the Country Dance remained in favour until the first World War, with little or no diminution in popularity.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the country folk of the Lowlands performed, in addition to those dances popular in polite society, many dances which were (at that time) peculiar to their own districts. Among these were the Country Dances in strathspey tempo, representatives of a type of Country Dance which had not been performed in polite society for some years prior to 1850. Most of these Country Dances in strathspey tempo have been found among the ordinary working folk of the Border countryside. Some of them doubtless descended to the country folk from the eighteenth-century ballroom. Others, more recent, were created by the country folk themselves, and these are true folk dances.†

Even after 1870, when the Country Dance was declining in polite society and in the towns, new dances were composed in the country districts. These usually contained figures drawn from the Quadrilles, sometimes combined with the "figure 8"

* There may also be other reasons for the disappearance of the Country Dance from the towns. William Lamb, in *The Peoples' Ballroom Guide* (Dundee [?], 2nd edition, *c.* 1910), remarks that Country Dances "were very popular long ago, when . . . all classes could mix quite freely. The growth of wealth and the development of style and fashion have deepened the lines of social cleavage, with the result that it is now more difficult to get people to forget differences of rank and position and join in any form of social amusement where all meet and mix for the time being on terms of equality".

† For example, the Haughs of Cromdale, a Country Dance collected in Galloway. This incorporates the Highland Schottische, and so cannot be earlier in date than that dance, i.e. about 1860.

of the Foursome Reel. These dances using Quadrille figures were admirably suited to the style of dancing of the country folk, which was less polished and more vigorous than that of the refined ballroom.

The Highland tradition was dying even in 1900, but the tradition of the country folk of the Lowlands, with its easy natural style, was still vigorously alive, and indeed remained a creative one almost up to the first World War, and certainly long after the Country Dance had lost its popularity in polite ballrooms.

It is difficult to assess the effect on social dancing of that great wave of religious enthusiasm which swept Scotland in the nineteenth century. Starting in Sutherland about the beginning of the century, the religious revival gained tremendously in momentum after the Disruption (Brown 1884). Certain regions, notably in the North-west, were affected by an almost puritanical spirit, and there dancing seems for a time to have disappeared almost entirely.* But it may well be that religious feeling against dancing lasted for too short a period in many places to cause the complete disappearance of all the existing social dances there. Certainly we have found old dances in Skye (T. M. Flett 1952), one of the regions affected earliest by the revival. It is possible that a thorough search in the North-west might bring to light old dances similar to those still preserved in the Catholic regions of the Highlands and the Western Isles (J. F. Flett and T. M. Flett 1952).

The local traditions of Orkney and Shetland also deserve mention. In Shetland the most popular dance until recently was a Sixsome Reel, of a type not found elsewhere in Scotland (MacLennan 1953). Unlike the traditional Foursome Reel of the mainland of Scotland, it has no part in strathspey tempo, being danced only to reel or jig tunes. The Orkney tradition is intermediate between the Shetland and the Highland traditions (T. M. Flett 1956). Here the popular dances were a Sixsome and one or more Eightsome Reels. The Orkney Sixsome Reel is somewhat similar to the Shetland Reel in construction, but resembles the Foursome Reel in that it is danced to both strathspey and reel tunes, and Highland setting steps are used.

These traditions remained in a very pure state until quite recent years. In Orkney, for instance, the Country Dance and the Quadrilles first reached the smaller isles and the

* Alexander Carmichael (1900) records a conversation between himself and a lady in the Isle of Lewis which shows the extent to which the Church there suppressed music and dancing.

country districts of the Mainland well within living memory. They were first performed on Flotta, for example, as late as 1891.

No survey of traditional dancing in Scotland can be complete without some reference to dancing teachers. Prior to 1914 it was usual in Scotland for almost everyone to attend dancing classes. In the bigger towns there were permanent dancing schools, often run by famous professional Highland dancers. After 1870, when the popularity of the Country Dance in polite society was declining, the dances taught at these schools included only the half dozen or so Country Dances which remained in favour, Petronella, Flowers of Edinburgh, Rory O'More, Haymakers, Strip the Willow, etc. They also included the Foursome Reel and Reel of Tulloch, Quadrilles and Lancers, and some "couple" dances, both those of the older type such as the Polka and the Highland Schottische, and also those new dances, such as the Pas de Quatre, which were rapidly coming into fashion.

The teachers at these big schools would sometimes also serve the smaller towns and villages around them. For instance, David Anderson, a famous Highland dancer, who taught in Dundee from about 1870 until about 1905, had dancing schools also in Brechin, Broughty Ferry and Tayport, and also in some of the smaller villages about Dundee (Stewart). In such places, more conservative than the bigger towns, the Country Dance was still in favour, and there these teachers would teach Country Dances which they had long since discarded at their central schools. David Anderson actually composed a number of Country Dances for the rural communities in his neighbourhood, naming them after the places where he held his classes, Brechin Fancy, Broughty Ferry Castle, Monifieth Star, and the like.

Such teachers would also hold classes in towns far away from their own headquarters. Thus Anderson had schools in Alford, Dingwall and Inverness, as well as in those places already named.

The remoter country districts were served by itinerant dancing-masters. These men would usually stay in one village for eight or ten weeks at a time, teaching there on one or two evenings a week. If possible, they would also teach in neighbouring villages on the other evenings of the week. If no hall were available, they hired a farmer's barn. They were usually expert fiddlers, and provided the music for their classes

themselves, often playing and dancing simultaneously. In the Lowlands such teachers would have a large repertory of Country Dances.

In the Border counties, as I have found from discussions with many, the best known of these itinerant teachers was "Professor" R. F. Buck. He usually stayed in one village for ten weeks, and held classes on two evenings a week, from 7 p.m. until 10 p.m. His classes normally consisted of tuition for the entire period (as opposed to tuition interposed between periods of general dancing), but on the last evening of the session he held a ball, when his pupils could show their paces. People other than his pupils normally joined in this ball.

To begin his first lesson he selected either a simple Country Dance such as The Nut, or a "couple" dance such as the Common Schottische or the Polka. The Country Dances he taught included Blue Bonnets, Bonny Breastknots, Bottom of the Punchbowl, Corn Rigs, Cumberland Reel, Drops of Brandy, Duke of Perth, Flowers of Edinburgh, Haymakers, Highland Laddie, Jessie's Hornpipe, Meg Merrilees, Petronella, Rifleman, Rory O'More (also known as the American Dwarf), Roxburgh Castle, Speed the Plough and the Duchess of Gordon's Fancy. Many of these were afterwards collected by the late I. C. B. Jamieson and others, and published in *The Border Book* and the R.S.C.D.S. books.

In addition to these Country Dances, Mr. Buck also taught the Foursome Reel and the Reel of Tulloch (the latter either in sets of two couples or in one large circle round the room), the Highland Fling, the Sword Dance and the Sailors' Hornpipe. He taught also Quadrilles and Lancers (giving his pupils one figure of these each evening until they knew the entire dances), Circassian Circle and a number of "couple" dances.

Mr. Buck also held classes in towns like Selkirk, but there he restricted himself to the standard half dozen Country Dances. His complete repertory was given only to the country folk who would appreciate it.

It is noteworthy that among the Country Dances taught by Mr. Buck are some in strathspey tempo. The travelling step which he taught for these dances was the normal Highland one, that is to say, "step forward on right foot, close left behind right, step forward again on right foot and hop on it, bringing the left foot up in front of the right leg, then the same with left foot". Among the Border people, however, it was more usual just to swing the left foot straight through on the hop,

ready to step forward on it. These are very different steps from the polished gliding step taught to-day by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. We do not know where their step comes from, and have certainly not met it among traditional dancers. It seems to require soft heelless shoes * in order that it may be performed properly, yet the country folk from whom the strathspey dances were obtained wore ordinary shoes, while even in the nineteenth-century ballroom patent leather shoes were worn. Mr. Buck also played the strathspey music much faster than it is now played by the Society's musicians. This is also true of every traditional fiddler we have encountered, and we do not know whether the Society has any traditional evidence for the slower tempo.

We have collected information about a dozen or more of these itinerant dancing-masters, and so far as the organisation of their classes was concerned they nearly all resembled Mr. Buck. One exception to this seems to have been the famous Scott Skinner, who was an itinerant dancing-master before he made his name as a fiddler. He taught in the North-east, and his repertory seems to have been typical of the region, being similar to that of the teachers in the bigger towns.† Information about him is rather difficult to come by, since he ceased teaching about seventy years ago, and we have a record of only one of his schools. This was at Rothes, where he stayed for four weeks, teaching six evenings a week. His classes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, were for the well-to-do, and his fee was a guinea for the four weeks. For the classes on the other nights, which were attended by the ordinary working folk of the district, his fee was only 7s. 6d. But both sets of pupils were taught exactly the same set of dances.

Our informant, Mr. David Grant (1955), a lad of 17 at the time, was coachman to an advocate in Elgin, and drove his employer's family to the guinea classes. His employer paid for him to attend the classes, but when he first entered the room where the classes were held, Scott Skinner approached him and suggested that perhaps he would be more at home on the other evenings. However, when Scott Skinner learnt that his fee was being paid by his employer, he accepted him without further demur. By attending the guinea classes

* Such as the Highland dancing pumps, which have become increasingly popular since the formation of the Scottish Country Dance Society. In the old days these were worn only by professional Highland dancers.

† It did, however, include the Dashing White Sergeant, a longways Country Dance, which was not normally taught in the towns at that time.

Mr. Grant was put to the expense of obtaining white gloves. These were considered essential there, but were unnecessary for the classes on the other evenings.

In addition to the Reels, Country Dances and Quadrilles, Scott Skinner taught all his pupils the Highland Fling. He also taught the Sword Dance and Seann Triubhas to those who wished to learn them. The latter dance seems to have been rather uncommon, and few of the itinerant teachers included it in their repertory.

Even in the remote country districts, where the "ballroom" was a barn, the itinerant dancing-masters taught their younger pupils the normal etiquette of the ballroom. A Mr. Lilly, who taught in Kincardineshire some seventy years ago, was perhaps more strict than usual in this respect, but not greatly so (Milne). He held classes for the 10-14 year olds in the afternoon. At these classes the boys were taught how to make a bow, and how to ask the girls to partner them. At the end of the session (three months, with one class a week) there was a ball. Each boy had to find his own partner for this, and had to go some days before the ball to the home of the girl of his choice, and ask her mother for permission to take her daughter to the ball. This must have been no small ordeal for a country boy of 12 or so!

In spite of such strictness, these old dancing-masters do not seem to have put great emphasis on technique. It was much more important to learn the figures of the dances, and, while they taught steps, they were not greatly worried if their pupils could not attain great precision or polish. Indeed, great precision was impossible since many of their pupils wore ordinary outdoor shoes. The emphasis throughout traditional dancing in Scotland was, as one would expect, much more on enjoyment than it was on technique.

In addition to the dances taught and spread by the dancing-masters, there were also a number of social dances which were rarely or never taught by the professional dancing teachers, but were passed on in the traditional manner. Usually these were peculiar to particular localities, for example, Cath nan Coilcach and Ruidhleadh nan Coilcach Dubha in Barra (J. F. Flett and T. M. Flett 1952), The Eight Men of Moidart in Moidart,* the Sixsome and Eightsome Reels in

* Two versions have been collected by one of the authors and Dr. F. Rhodes, both being different from the longways Country Dance of this name published by the R.S.C.D.S. One version has been published in the *Oban Times* for 30th June 1956, the other is so far unpublished.

Orkney (T. M. Flett 1956) and the Sixsome Reel in Shetland (MacLennan 1953). But there were also a few which were very widely distributed. One which we have found from the Border to Orkney was the Threesome Reel in which the dancers were linked with handkerchiefs. Another was the kissing dance known by various names, in the Lowlands and the North-east as Babbity-Bowster (Bob at the bolster), in the Highlands and Western Isles as Ruidhleadh nam Pòg, Blue Bonnets, Pease Strae or The White Cockade, and in Orkney as the Lang Reel or The Swines Reel (T. M. Flett 1952; 1956; J. F. Flett and T. M. Flett 1952). All these dances are true folk dances, owing little or nothing to the polite ballroom. They are perhaps the only truly traditional Scottish dances, passed down and preserved without the intervention of professional dancing-masters.

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