

Mrs. Thomas Bingham--A Pioneer of Canadian Dancing

Scottish country dancing in the Vancouver area began remarkably early, a mere seven years after the revival of country dancing in Scotland led by Miss Milligan and Mrs. Stewart. Among the many Scottish immigrants to Vancouver in the 1920s was Mrs. Isabella Bingham (or Mrs. Thomas Bingham as she preferred to be known). Mrs. Bingham was a woman of no mean intellectual ability and drive. Over her long life she worked tirelessly on behalf of a number of social causes, including the Scottish country dance "movement," as she called it. She was at once teacher, organizer, and publicist, and she dominated Scottish country dance organizations in Vancouver right up to the formation of the Vancouver Branch in 1964.

Mrs. Bingham graduated from Glasgow University with a Master of Arts with honours, in an era when only women of unusual resolution went to university. Later, she did post-graduate work in languages at Heidelberg and Geneva and taught languages in Europe before immigrating to Vancouver in 1924 with her husband, a shipping agent. By November 1928, she was organizing practices of the Eightsome Reel for the annual ball of the Vancouver Scottish Society. After that, Mrs. Bingham was invited to give a lecture/demonstration to the Society and later to the Overseas League. On 24 October 1930, she organized a "Scottish Country Dance Recital" at the Hotel Vancouver at which nine dances from the SCDS books were presented, including a sixteensome reel, interspersed by songs.

The following Wednesday, eight of the dancers met at Mrs. Bingham's home and agreed to form a Branch of the Scottish Country Dance Society in BC "with this present company as the first local Vancouver unit." So a province-wide organization was envisaged from the start. Although the group was not a branch in the official sense, its constitution was closely modelled on the parent Society in Scotland. Needless to say, Mrs. Bingham was elected as its first president and instructor. She issued a public announcement under the heading "British Columbia Branch (Vancouver) of the Scottish Country Dance Society" and beginning "A branch of the Country Dance Society of Scotland has been formed under the above title with the object of studying, practising and reviving the beautiful Scottish National Dances which were in danger of being allowed to die out." The group's first working by-law read, "That those ladies and gentlemen who had taken part in the demonstration of Scottish Country Dancing at the Hotel Vancouver on Friday, October 24, 1930, should be accepted as charter members in recognition of the work they had done in introducing the SCDS and its work to the public of Vancouver and to the province generally."

The Seaforth Regiment played a prominent part in the public life of Vancouver, and Mrs. Bingham immediately forged links with them. One of her early members, William Fiddes, was a sergeant in the Seaforths. He organized a series of practices of the Eightsome Reel for the Seaforths' ball held on 28 November 1930, and these were probably led by Mrs. Bingham, as she was invited to dance in the same Eightsome set as Lieutenant-Governor Randolph Bruce. Bruce (a Scottish-born former mine owner) was promptly invited to become the Patron of the Vancouver dance group. Pipe-Majors Gillies and Esson of the Seaforths played for SCD demonstrations at various Folk Festivals during the 1930s, and were rewarded with honorary membership.

Mrs. Bingham was indefatigable in promoting Scottish Country Dancing throughout the region. Long-time dancer Mary Wattum saw this energy at first hand, writing "From late 1929 onwards Mrs. Bingham continued what had become her life's mission, to spread the gospel of Scottish Country Dancing. Nearly every night of the week she travelled by streetcar . . . to several centres in Vancouver, to North and West Vancouver and to New Westminster, constantly increasing the size of her groups" (*St Andrew's-Wesley Church News*, December 1989). Scottish Country Dancing was more than a diversion to Mrs. Bingham. At the May 1931 General Meeting of the Vancouver group, for example, she "spoke of the cultural advantage of the movement in keeping alive the traditions of the Folk Dance which would enrich, in time, the cultural traditions of the new land." This serious approach was reflected in a high degree of organization--each local group or "branch" sent representatives to the Provincial Executive of the Scottish Country Dance Society of B.C., which acted as the prototype of the parent organization in Scotland.

The early Minutes of the Vancouver group show Mrs. Bingham present at virtually all the fortnightly meetings, where matters of technique and teaching policy were discussed in detail, and new dances carefully selected to build a systematic repertoire. The dances taught on 6 December 1930, for example, were "Petronella," "Triumph," "Prince of Orange," and "Waltz Country Dance," all newly published by the SCDS. Membership in the society was carefully controlled, with new active members approved at each meeting, and others placed on a waiting list to ensure equal numbers of men and women. These early members were idealists--dances were introduced to the general membership by demonstration, and a motion on 3 February 1931 resolved

"That all demonstrations be perfect, the Director having the power to say when the state of perfection is reached." The committee frequently discussed the interpretation of dances. Mrs. Bingham seems to have worked towards standardization of the dances along the lines laid down by the SCDS, despite the objections of some members of the Committee who argued for greater independence from Edinburgh.

Mrs. Bingham cemented the link with Scotland by obtaining her teacher's certificate at St. Andrews in 1938. She continued to work for the BC Society as treasurer and secretary, as well as instructor; her many literate Secretary's Reports give a taste of her wit and elegant turn of phrase. She kept Scottish country dancing in the public eye through her frequent press releases to the Vancouver newspapers, and established close ties with kindred Scottish organizations as well as other folk-dance groups, playing a key role in the Folk Song and Dance Festivals held in Vancouver in the 1930s.

A note in the 1936 Festival Program probably written by Mrs. Bingham reveals the sense of moral and social purpose which motivated her. She writes, "The community spirit of the Scottish national dance is strongly accentuated in contrast with the individualistic spirit of the modern dance." The primary objective of her Vancouver SCD group as listed in the Scots Directory for 1935 was "To study, practice and revive for social purposes the Scottish National and Country Dances in accordance with the accepted standard of the SCDC of Scotland." Like the founders of the Scottish Country Dance Society in Scotland, her attitudes were anti-modernist: she saw the revival of traditional dancing as a reaction against the individualism and disorder of modernity. But she was also forward-looking, seeing the revival of the traditional arts as a way to build a new Canadian society.

This wish to improve society while working within "establishment" organizations typifies all of Mrs. Bingham's life. Her involvement in the life of the city went beyond her work for Scottish country dancing, and utilized the talent for public speaking which helped spark public interest in Scottish country dancing in Vancouver. In 1937-38 she served as President of the Vancouver Branch of the National Council of Women, an organization based on the precept "no action without study, and no study without action." During her presidency, the Council passed resolutions urging the establishment of vocational training schools for young adults, the establishment of a degree-granting school of Home Economics at UBC, the imposition of economic sanctions against nations waging aggressive warfare, and the establishment of Cancer Clinics in B.C. After Scottish Country Dancing was adopted as a special project of the Council in 1938, some of the dancers formed the Lady Aberdeen group, named for the founder of the National Council of Women (and wife of the Governor-General).

Vancouver dancers who remember Mrs. Bingham still associate her name primarily with the Night School classes. These came about through an expulsion:

One evening, while the Vancouver group were dancing in their original hall, the hall committee were dining downstairs; and the noise of the dancing so alarmed them that they cancelled the dancers' lease. Someone suggested a school gymnasium. To use this, however, the dancers had to form an official class under the school board. Not everyone liked this. Those who didn't managed after a while to find a hall and re-form their own group. Those who did formed the nucleus of the "night-school classes" which [met] three times a week, with Mrs. Bingham teaching. (*The Thistle* No. 8)

Up to the formation of the Vancouver Branch of the RSCDS in 1964, Mrs. Bingham's night school classes provided most of the formal teaching in Vancouver, and were the only group to be divided into three levels. Mrs. Bingham followed the SCDS tradition of having her own regular and devoted pianists: Mrs. Grace White, Miss Mary Hood, and Mrs. Nettie Stuart.

As well as her organizing and teaching ability, Mrs. Bingham had a talent for devising a varied and effective public display. For many years, she organized annual events at the Seaforth Armouries, and planned them in minute detail. The programs for 1952 and 1953 show the scale and variety of these events. They start with the modest headline "A Program of Scottish Country Dances, Massed Pipe Bands, Drill Displays, Regimental Dances . . . with Vancouver Night Schools Scottish Country Dancing Classes, Mrs. Thomas Bingham, Instructor." The programs included songs (solos and duets), modern Scottish country dances like Robertson Rant and various MacNab dances, and the Quadrille "as danced at the Duchess of Richmond's Ball on the eve of Waterloo" (performed by Seaforth officers and ladies in early 19th-century costume). A photo in *The Province* for April 26, 1952, shows Hellen Stephen and Annabelle MacPhee as demure Hebridean fisher girls, with Betty Forbes dancing between them.

Mrs. Bingham's other achievements reflect her interest in public relations. Dancing in Stanley Park began in 1950, directed by Mrs. Bingham, standing on a table so she could be seen. Mrs. Nettie Stuart played the piano which was somehow transported to the Park tennis courts. Typically, she sought official endorsement. She invited the Mayor of Vancouver to attend Dancing in the Park in 1952, and when he declined she wrote back stressing the benefits of her dance sessions in promoting tourism: "Vancouver is the only city on the whole Pacific coast that presents such an entertainment program."

The first Betwixt and Between party was held in 1959, planned by members of the Night School classes, who formed a social club for this purpose, reasoning that "if we could arrange a party for class members and friends to take place between Christmas and New Year, this would be good publicity." Stanley Park dancing and the Betwixt and Between party have been held in Vancouver ever since.

Mrs. Bingham showed typical fortitude after she was struck by a car in 1963. She refused to let herself be taken to hospital until she knew a substitute could be found for her classes. In 1966 she was appointed as PR officer for the Vancouver Branch; not until 1967 did she retire from Night School teaching; and until 1970 she continued to serve as chairman of the B.C. Government's motion picture appeal board. In November 1970, at the age of 91, she died.

In person, as an elderly woman, Mrs. Bingham was diminutive, her delicate dancer's feet poised in high-heeled sandals. But the strength and resolution of her character may be seen in many sets of minutes: she maintained firm control, and the early committees functioned largely in an advisory capacity. The Scottish Country Dancing calendar in Vancouver still bears her mark in the Armistice Day Tea Dance, the Betwixt and Between party, and summer dancing in Stanley Park. The letter from the Branch Committee inviting her to become Honorary Vice-President, together with Mary Isdale MacNab, sums up her enormous contribution: "Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver owes its inception and flourishing success to your foresight and energy."

Rosemary Coupe

Photo captions:

#1 Group of c. 1937-38: Mrs. Bingham (2nd from left in 2nd row) and dancers dressed for a demonstration. Back row includes Pipe-Major Gillies (3rd from left) and Pipe-Major Ed Esson (5th from left). [donated by Sid Dyke, nephew of Fiddes]

#2 Mrs Bingham in 1938

