

## Mary Isdale MacNab

No better material for a Scottish dance performance can be found than the dances of Mary Isdale MacNab. Their variety of formations and footwork is stunning: circles melt into lines, squares into diagonals, and the dancers break from highland stepping into travelling steps. These complex, exciting dances are the legacy of a woman whose vision of Scottish dance was broad and inclusive, and who was a gifted teacher as well as a collector and creator of dances. In her work and through her dances, she helped to cement links between country and highland dancing, and between the Vancouver dance community and the SCDS, later the RSCDS, in Scotland.

Born in Govan, Scotland, Mary Isdale emigrated to Vancouver as an eight-year-old child in 1907, and soon embarked on her lifelong career as a Highland dance teacher. Her students won trophy after trophy and she quickly became recognized as the leading teacher in Vancouver. Those students who did not wish to compete were encouraged to perform at garden parties, teas, concerts, and the school's grand end-of-year recital, "The Gathering of the Clans." Mrs. MacNab had an eye for dramatic spectacle, and she often linked her dances to Highland history and legend. Former student Mavis Pickett describes the elaborate performance of a dance called "The Brooch of Lorne" honouring the brooch wrested from Robert the Bruce in 1306. It was designed to be seen from the balconies of a military armoury, with the dancers making up a colossal Cairngorm brooch. The central "jewel," dancer Bill Elliot, enacted the spirit of Bruce in a "Dirk Dance." Four more men were the "claws" of the jewel, and surrounding them were concentric circles of "rubies," "emeralds," and "sapphires" wearing red, blue, and green caps respectively. First one circle and then another would dance around the central jewel. Lines of other dancers radiated out from them, dressed in white and silver. Dances of this kind were certainly coloured by a romantic vision of Highland history, but they were splendidly conceived.

Piping and dancing were closely integrated in those days in Vancouver, but piping was still a male preserve until Mrs. MacNab founded the Vancouver Ladies' Pipe Band. She toured extensively with the Pipe Band and her team of young dancers, the BC Highland Lassies. Hers was the first Scottish dance team from abroad invited to perform at the Edinburgh Tattoo, where Mrs. MacNab was director of dancing in 1964. Some students, like Irene Donegan, belonged to both Pipe Band and Highland Lassies. Irene also made the kilts and jackets for the Pipe Band, and remembers the huge bolts of MacNab tartan arriving from Scotland. The Vancouver Ladies' Pipe Band continued to wear the MacNab tartan into the 1990s.

Mrs. MacNab's vision of Scottish dance went beyond Highland dancing. Organized Scottish country dancing began in Vancouver as early as 1929, when Mrs. Thomas Bingham (another Scottish immigrant) gave lecture-demonstrations to the Scottish Society and the Overseas League. As the leading Highland dance teacher in Vancouver, Mrs. MacNab was invited to the second lecture. From then on she played a steady supporting role in the country dance movement in Vancouver. She served on the Vancouver group's committee, represented Vancouver on the Provincial Society executive, and led step practices in her dance studio. Later she hosted Miss Milligan on one of her Vancouver visits. In 1960, she was the prime force behind the first weekend Camp at Crescent Beach, where she also taught. She formed the Prince Charles Scottish Country Dance group and led the Braemar group, a demonstration team consisting mainly of the parents of her Highland pupils.

When the Vancouver Branch of the RSCDS was formed in 1964, Mrs. MacNab and Mrs. Bingham were made Honorary Vice-Presidents, "in recognition of the fact that Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver owed its beginnings and success during the past forty years to your efforts." Both attended the Branch's first Annual Ball. Two years before her death, on September 18, 1964, the Vancouver Ballet Society presented an extravaganza of Scottish dance, song, and music to honour Mrs. MacNab after her successful tour of Scotland. The Ladies' Pipe Band paraded down the aisles of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, the Highland Lassies and the RSCDS danced, and Mrs. MacNab received a commemorative scroll from the City of Vancouver.

Mrs. MacNab's work was widely recognized in her lifetime, both in Canada and in Scotland. When Miss Milligan visited Vancouver in 1961, Hugh Thurston wrote, "she saw a performance of Vancouver's own

dances, arranged by Mrs. MacNab. The highlight was the scintillating performance of 'The Eight Men of Moidart' and 'Lovat Star' by sixteen dancers." Mrs. MacNab subsequently taught her dances at St. Andrews; her relationship with Miss Milligan was one of mutual esteem. Miss Milligan taught two new MacNab dances at Summer School in 1964, and she herself wrote the obituary for Mrs. MacNab in the *RSCDS Bulletin* for 1968. She mentions Mrs. MacNab's loyalty to the RSCDS, her enjoyment of Summer School, and her dry sense of humour.

Above all, it was in her dances that Mrs. MacNab brought together the Highland and country dance traditions. The MacNab group dances—MacNabberies, as they were affectionately known in Canada—belong to diverse genres of Scottish dance. These include the threesome reel ("Shepherd's Crook"), the country dance ("Jeannie o' the Witchin' E'e"), the quadrille ("Kelvingrove"), the ecossaise ("St. Andrew's Nicht"), the Hebridean pantomimic dance ("Reel of the Blackcocks"), and the occupational dance ("Hebridean Weaving Lilt"). The structure of many of her elaborate set dances is also based on alternating phrases of setting steps and travelling figures, as in the broad Scottish reel tradition. In this eclectic approach, Mary Isdale MacNab resembles other great teachers of Scottish dance (Peacock, Anderson, MacLennan) who also recorded and taught many forms of Scottish dance.

Mary Isdale MacNab was in part collector and in part creator of her dances, and she would probably have seen no contradiction between the two roles. The traditional dances seem to have been seeds from which her choreographed versions grew. Most are based on dances she originally collected from a variety of sources—some from Scottish emigrants in Vancouver and Nova Scotia, some from sources in Scotland, some from Scottish seamen (Vancouver was a busy port city). She seems to have lent an open ear to anyone willing to teach her a dance, especially old people describing dances they knew as children. Several of her dances were learned from her Canadian teacher D.C. Mather, a piper and dancer, and from Mrs. Bain, a Vancouver high school teacher whom Mary Isdale met during World War I.

Since Mary Isdale MacNab began recording dances while still a student, as many as thirty years might elapse between the collecting and the reconstruction of a dance. Hugh Thurston writes in *The Thistle* from first-hand knowledge of her method: "Mrs. MacNab reconstructed dances from her notes—or, rather, not entirely from her notes (which were very brief) but from a combination of the notes, her memory, and her experience of, and feel for, the kind of movement that is a valid part of Scottish dance tradition." The finished dances evolved also from the collaboration between Mrs. MacNab and her class. Mavis Pickett describes her trying out first one figure and then another until she was satisfied with the result. The dances also owe much to her artistic feeling for dance as spectacle and her flair for organizing an effective and varied performance. She seems to have picked up and accentuated the theatrical or dramatic elements in the traditional dances. In "McNeil of Barra," for example, the traditional Barra ship dance in which a single dancer (the mast) is surrounded by a ring of six dancers becomes a display of dancing prowess by a sole male dancer framed by the six women. The fact that Mrs. MacNab wished to showcase the talents of her outstanding young male dancers, Bill Kerr and Bill Elliot, helped to shape her choreography.

Former pupils remember Mrs. MacNab as a kindly teacher who insisted on high standards of performance. According to Mavis Pickett, she had authority and presence, and like an old-fashioned dancie she taught good manners as well as dancing. She took care of her dancers, providing costumes for them (Mavis still has a cairngorm the size of a saucer) but woe betide the student who went out alone at night while on tour. Irene Donegan remembers her protectiveness towards her students, and the sense of security it gave them. Hugh Thurston saw a different side of her:

Mrs. MacNab was, in herself, a very friendly, motherly person. This statement may surprise anyone who met her only briefly, because she had a certain reserve that had to be broken through before her true character became apparent. But many is the pot of home-made jam or soup that bachelor members of her dance-groups have taken home with them after an evening's dancing in her basement, and many is the party that she has enlivened with her rather dry sense of humour . . .  
 .(*The Thistle* No. 33)

Cheryle Macdonald, leader of the Stave Falls Dancers, remembers that Mrs. MacNab wanted her pupils to

enjoy dancing as much as to succeed in competition. Her horizons were broad, and she introduced her students to many forms of dance, including dances from Sweden, Ukraine, and Ceylon. She encouraged her students to become teachers themselves, and remarkably at least six of them eventually formed their own Scottish dance schools in the Vancouver area. Two current groups in particular, the Stave Falls Dancers and the Inverglenn Dancers, continue her philosophy, stressing the love of dance and exploring the traditions of Scottish dance in all their richness. Both groups have travelled and performed in many parts of the world, taking the spirit of Mary Isdale MacNab with them.



Mary Isdale's Highland's Performance Group "BC Highland Lassies" 1926-27



Mary Isdale MacNab with her performance group "The Braemar Dancers"