

Early Balls in Vancouver



This May's Thistle Ball, marking the 40th anniversary of the Vancouver Branch, follows a long tradition. In fact, the beginnings of Scottish country dancing in Vancouver were associated with a ball.

In November 1928, the Vancouver Scottish Society were planning their annual ball. The program contained only one Scottish dance—the Highland Schottische—and Mrs. Thomas Bingham, then a newcomer from Scotland, found this slightly shocking. "Where is the eightsome reel?" she asked. "Nobody knows it," she was told. So she decided to arrange some practices. At this point Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver, as an organized activity, began. (The Thistle, November 1962)



The Grand March at the Gleneagles Ball, 5 December 2004

Social pleasure was not Mrs. Bingham's main concern, however. She felt she was called to the task of making Scottish dancing an integral part of the cultural life of Vancouver, where a significant proportion of the population had Scottish roots. She and the group she assembled around her were serious in their approach; the term "work" appears no fewer than seven times in their first set of minutes (2 December 1930), and they often referred to the country dance "movement." Dances from the early Scottish Country Dance

Society books were systematically introduced at their biweekly meetings. They were demonstrated by a handpicked team before being taught to the members, and the interpretation of the dances was submitted to the committee in advance. Standards were set high: a resolution was passed on 3 February 1931 "That all demonstrations be perfect, the Director having the power to say when the state of perfection is reached."

The minutes of 25 March 1931 mention a proposed Highland Ball. It was not held, but instead a social evening took place on Friday 1 May 1931. The program consisted of dances from SCDS Books 1 to 6: "Circassian Circle," "Petronella," "Eightsome Reel," "Flowers of Edinburgh," "Perth Medley," "Sixteensome Reel" (extra), "Foursome Reel," "Glasgow Highlanders," "Waltz," "The Nut," "Queen's Welcome," "Prince of Orange," "Waltz Country Dance," "Triumph" (extra). As this program indicates, the repertoire of the group was strictly limited to SCDS dances.

The "Provincial Executive" to which the groups in Vancouver and elsewhere sent delegates was set up in 1932, although its surviving minutes date from 1954. This Provincial Executive ran 19 balls, usually in late October. The earliest extant program is for the 10th annual ball in 1954, held in the Aztec Ballroom, Hotel Georgia, and the program is remarkably conservative. Dances like the Quadrilles and Lancers are interspersed with country dances as they were on nineteenth-century dance programs, and several of the dances on the 1931 program appear again. Here is the program: Grand March, "Circassian Circle," Quadrille, "St.

Bernard Waltz," "Petronella," "Monymusk," "Eightsome Reel," French Minuet," "Reel of the 51st Division," "Birks of Invermay," "Waltz Country Dance," "Duke of Perth," "Dashing White Sergeant," Lancers, Canadian Seaforth Twostep, "Ninesome Reel," "Rory o' More," "Gay Gordons," "Glasgow Highlanders," Quadrille, Home Waltz.

The sole modern dance among all these traditional dances is "The Reel of the 51st Division." Its patriotic associations and the fact that it had received the late Queen Mother's blessing had led the SCDS to publish it in Book 13, published just after World War 2. (The early 1950s marked the adoption of the title "Royal" by the SCDS.) Royal associations also applied to "The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh," another modern dance, which made its first Vancouver appearance on the 1957 ball program. Before 1960, the only other non-RSCDS dance on our ball programs was Mary Isdale MacNab's "St. Andrew's Night," which a member of Mrs. Bingham's committee especially requested her to teach. One or both of two other MacNab dances, "McLaine of Lochbuie" and "Bonnie Anne," appear on every ball program from 1965 to 1973, but then disappear.

From 1965 on, dances by modern devisors such as McConachie, Duthie, and Drewry appear on programs in large numbers. Here, for example, is the program for the Second Annual Ball of the Vancouver Branch, held on November 20, 1965, with the Teuchters playing: "La Tempete," "Merrily Danced the Quaker's Wife," "Ca' the Ewes tae the Knowes," "Montgomerie's Rant," "Haughs of Cromdale," "Eightsome Reel," "St. Bernard's Waltz," "Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh" (Allie Anderson), "Rory o' More," "Glasgow Highlanders," "Rest and Be Thankful" (Jack McConachie), "Gala Water" (John Duthie), "Reel of the 51st Division," "Machine Without Horses," "General Stuart's Reel," "The Lad wi' the Plaidie" (Hugh Thurston), "McLaine of Lochbuie" (Mary Isdale MacNab), "From Scotia's Shores" (Bob Campbell), "Hamilton Rant" (Bob Campbell), "Peggy's Love", "Cadgers in the Canongate," "Back o' Bennachie" (John Duthie), "Waltz

Country Dance." Mrs. Bingham, together with Mrs. MacNab, was a guest of honour at this ball, and one wonders what she thought about the inclusion of so many non-traditional dances.

The trend towards more modern dances may simply reflect the change from the conservative 1950s to the experimental 1960s. A more immediate factor, however, may have been the introduction of new dances at the annual dance "camps." The annual camp, like the annual ball, was the brainchild of the Provincial Executive; the first one was held at Camp Alexandra, Crescent Beach, from September 9 to 11, 1960. Stewart Smith of San Francisco taught at the 1963 Camp, and clearly became a favourite instructor in Vancouver, as he was invited to return several times. A handwritten letter from Stewart Smith now in the Archives outlines his plans to teach "Angus MacLeod," "Garry Strathspey" and "White Heather Jig"—all popular in San Francisco, and all appearing on Vancouver ball programs of the 60s. Also, *The Thistle* for February 1966 mentions that "Rest and Be Thankful" has been a favourite in almost every group since Stewart Smith taught it at the 1965 camp. Indeed, it appeared on every ball program from 1965 to 1970.

Some traditional dances stayed popular, however. "The Eightsome Reel" appeared on every Vancouver ball program until 1970, when it was displaced by "The Buchan Eightsome" from Book 21. "Round Reel of Eight" took over the opening spot in 1976, and kept it for several years. "Glasgow Highlanders" was danced at every ball up to 1968.

The locations for these balls read like a litany of once glorious Vancouver institutions: the Hotel Georgia, the Astor Hotel, Oscar's, and the Coach House, as well as the Hotel Vancouver and the Bayshore. A report in *The Thistle* for December 1965 runs, "The recent most successful ball at the Coach House, North Vancouver, will have evoked many memories among the old-stagers of earlier balls at the Astor, Oscar's, and the Georgia. And it is indeed most gratifying that at long

last an appropriate setting should have been found for this highlight of the social season." That setting too is now dust.

The prices for the balls--\$2 reluctantly increased to \$2.25 in 1954—are another temptation to nostalgia. The Ball Fund was kept separate from the General Fund, and many balls ran up a worrisome deficit. Music for the early balls was provided by Mrs. Stuart, Mrs. Bingham's regular pianist, augmented by a violinist and drummer. When Murray Black of Powell River offered his band in 1963, the Committee decided that the fee of \$86 was more than they could afford, "even though the players themselves would probably provide quite an attraction." Also applying to play was the "Vancouver Scottish Orchestra" with piano, accordion, violin, and drums. They were willing to have Mrs. Stuart play with them, and they got the job—the first time an established band, rather than a group of individual musicians, played for the ball.

For several years from 1965, "The Teuchters" of Powell River did play for the ball, and they were followed by Jack Rennie's "Thistle Band" from Los Angeles and eventually by Vancouver-based "Schiehallion." The musicians and dancers coped with marathon programs: the 1972 ball had 25 dances and 6 extras.

Under the Provincial Executive, the local dance groups in Vancouver, West Vancouver, New Westminster, and White Rock cooperated with one another, attending each other's events and sharing ideas. Our new Thistle Ball, based on cooperation between three Branches of the RSCDS (Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle) continues that tradition too.

Rosemary Coupe
Editor, *The White Cockade*

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