

Joining the Dance



If you've just signed up for your first Scottish Country Dance class, *ceud mile failte* (that's Gaelic for "welcome"). What follows is an attempt to answer some questions you may have.

Q: The organization and fee structure seem complicated. How do they work?

A: You may be surprised to learn that your membership applies on three different levels. First, if you have paid a class fee, you have joined a particular class or group - for example, Gleneagles, Deep Cove, Delta, or a Vancouver Branch class. Your fee enables you to attend a weekly class for one complete dancing season, usually September through to the following April. (Some clubs, however, have a half-yearly fee.)

Second, you may also have paid for membership in the Vancouver Branch. Besides running its own classes in the Scottish Cultural Centre, the Branch acts as an umbrella organization for all dance groups in the Lower Mainland and the Bellingham and Skagit areas of Washington State. The Branch sponsors events for all dancers in the region, including the *Betwixt and Between*, the Burns Supper, the annual Love to Dance Workshop and organizes informal summer dancing in Stanley Park. The Branch also sends out information about all local Scottish country dancing events through *The White Cockade* and maintains a web site with current dance information.

Third, your Branch membership automatically makes you a member of the parent organization itself, the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society with its headquarters in Edinburgh and about 23,000 members around the world. As a member, you will receive the twice-yearly magazine *Scottish Country Dancer*, which carries articles about dancing and news of groups around the world. So if

you move or go on holiday, you can still enjoy your favourite hobby - just remember to pack a pair of dancing shoes! Since its formation in 1923, the Society has published 45 books of dances with music, and many of the dances we do come from these publications. Ask your teacher for advice if you are interested in buying any of these books.

An equally important function of the RSCDS is to ensure that the steps, figures and dances are done everywhere in the same way. This makes it possible for dancers to visit groups everywhere and join in the dancing, and it also ensures that the traditional dances are preserved. The RSCDS does this through its system of teacher training and certification.

Q: Where does the dancing come from?

A: Like square dancing and contra dancing, country dancing has its earliest known roots in the communal dancing of medieval villages. It became fashionable during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when it was called "country dancing" to differentiate it from the dancing of the court. During the 17th and 18th centuries, country dancing became popular throughout Britain, and many collections of dances were published. The dances were performed in the polite "assembly rooms" or ballrooms of the 18th century, including those in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and young ladies and gentlemen attended dancing schools to learn them. As time went on, the dances spread to the towns and villages as well, blending with the social dancing of the Scottish people (Robert Burns attended a dancing school in Ayr).

Other new dance fashions from the Continent, like the waltz, gradually eclipsed country dancing in England during the 19th century, but the older dances remained popular in Scotland. Their "Scottish" flavour was accentuated by the exciting music of the reels,

jigs, and strathspeys, and the steps and figures of many of the dances were influenced by the native Scottish threesome and foursome reels. Sadly, however, by the early 20th century only a handful of the dances were still performed.

Enter, in 1923, the Scottish Country Dance Society (later "Royal") led by Jean Milligan of Glasgow. Determined to revive the traditional dancing before it faded away completely, the SCDS organized classes, standardized the steps, and began publishing books of the surviving dances as well as those preserved in earlier books and manuscripts.

Scottish emigrants took the dancing with them to countries like Canada, New Zealand, and the US. In Vancouver, organized Scottish Country Dancing began only six years after the formation of the SCDS, under the leadership of Mrs. Thomas Bingham, a former Scot. Mrs. Bingham's enthusiasm is legendary: in the early years she traveled by streetcar to teach dancing groups from White Rock to the North Shore.

The past 80 years have seen Scottish Country Dancing not only come back to life, but develop and grow as a living tradition. Many new dances have been devised, often adding new variants to the traditional patterns, and a typical dance program consists of a combination of old and new. The number of published dances now exceeds 13,000, with new dances being written all the time, so ours is actually a great era of SCD.

Q: How will I learn so many dances?

A: Relax - you don't have to learn all the dances by heart. As a new dancer, you will learn the building blocks of the dances: the steps and figures (or patterns) and the way these fit to the music. In your first year of dancing, you will probably learn about a dozen basic figures, and these should enable you to dance the beginner level dances if you go to a party. (At most parties, you can pick up a sheet listing the figures in each dance.) You are most welcome to attend any party or workshop, but please ensure your own enjoyment by standing up only for dances you are sure you can do.

Most of us addicts enjoy Scottish country dancing because it's a disciplined form of dance which is also great fun. Precision of footwork, handing, and phrasing can take a while to acquire, but there's nothing like the pleasure of dancing together in harmony. Scottish country dancing is a highly social form of dancing: you are interacting with seven or so other people in the set as you give hands and greet each other. The more you smile, the better!

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