

A Brief History of Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver



In the Beginning Was Mrs. Bingham

Scottish country dancing in Vancouver had a remarkably early start, only a few years after the revival led by Ysobel Stewart and Jean Milligan in Scotland. In November 1928 Isabella [Ella] Bingham, a recent immigrant from Glasgow, held practices for the Vancouver Scottish Society's annual ball. Soon afterwards, she gave several lectures and demonstrations, leading to the formation of the first Scottish country dance group in Vancouver, with Mrs. Bingham as both president and instructor.

From the start, the Scottish Country Dance Society of BC maintained close links with the parent Society in Scotland. Formal affiliation with the SCDS was granted by Mrs. Stewart, then Secretary, and Miss Milligan showed "unflagging interest" in the progress of the Vancouver group. Dances from the early SCDS books were systematically introduced at Mrs. Bingham's fortnightly meetings. Before being taught to the members, they were

demonstrated by a handpicked team. Letters went to and fro across the Atlantic to ensure that the finer points of the dances as taught by Mrs. Bingham matched Miss Milligan's standards exactly. These early members were idealists - on 3 February 1931 they resolved "That all demonstrations be perfect, the Director [Mrs. Bingham] having the power to say when the state of perfection is reached."

The Groups Proliferate

Mrs. Bingham's flair for publicity and her skill as an organizer soon led to the formation of other groups. Mary Wattum saw Mrs. Bingham's energy at first hand: "From late 1929 onwards, Mrs. Bingham continued what had become her life's work, 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." 1932 marked the foundation of



Group of c. 1937 - 38: Mrs. Bingham (2nd from left in 2nd row) and dancers dressed for a demonstration, with Seaforth officers. Pipe-Major Gillies is 3rd from left in back row, and Pipe-Major Ed Esson 5th from left in back row.



A group of Vancouver dancers including Nellie Forbes (later McKenzie), in front row 2nd from left, and Mrs. Bingham, in centre of front row wearing dark skirt.

the Provincial Executive of the Scottish Country Dance Society of BC. Each local group sent delegates to this body, which ran an annual ball and also sent questions about the interpretation of dances to Scotland.

Relations with the Regiments

Mrs. Bingham and her dancers enjoyed cordial relations with the Vancouver Highland regiments, particularly the Seaforths. The Pipe-Majors of the Seaforths played for demonstrations at Folk Festivals during the 1930s, and were rewarded with honorary membership. The regiments danced foursome and eightsome reels in the Highland way, with pivot turns and men's arms aloft, and in 1933 the Provincial Executive agreed to let the Highland style prevail in the reels.

The Lady Aberdeen Group

In addition to her work for country dancing, Mrs. Bingham served in 1937 - 38 as President

of the Vancouver Branch of the National Council of Women, a progressive group active in many social causes. After Scottish country dancing was adopted as the Council's special project 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. Thus was born the dance group with the longest continuous existence in Canada, as well as the traditional Lady Aberdeen Armistice Day Tea Dance. This intentionally all-female group may have helped country dancing survive the dearth of men during World War II.

Dancing in the Park and Betwixt and Between

In the postwar period came more new developments which have since become Vancouver institutions. On 3 July 1950 Mrs. Bingham's heroic pianist, Mrs. Nettie Stuart, agreed to play on the Stanley Park tennis courts, and Stanley Park has echoed to our dance music every summer since then. Then in

1959 the members of Mrs. Bingham's night school class decided to hold a dance between Christmas and New Year, now the annual Betwixt and Between dance for which Alex Jappy provides the music.

The Early Balls

Under Mrs. Bingham's leadership, the Scottish Country Dance Society of BC sponsored annual balls, usually in late October. Their programs are a reminder that the repertoire of dances was much smaller than today: "Glasgow Highlanders," "Petronella," and "The Duke of Perth" appear often, and the country dances are interspersed with Quadrilles, Lancers, and Gay Gordons. The locations read like a litany of once glorious Vancouver establishments: the Georgia, the Astor, Oscar's. And the prices - \$2.00 reluctantly increased to \$2.25 in 1954 - are a temptation to nostalgia.



Outdoor dancing at Crescent Beach, 1960: The Surrey Leader published this photograph of four determined dancers attempting the Foursome Reel on the grass: June Gow, Rodger Shoolbraid, Charlie Elliot, and Una Bain.

New Arrivals

New, influential people arrived in Vancouver in the late 1950s. They included Mary Shoolbraid, freshly qualified as a teacher in Scotland, and Hugh Thurston, already the author of a book on Scottish dance history, who started a group at the University of BC. New ideas started to influence the local scene in 1959, when Hugh Thurston, Mary Isdale MacNab, and Andrew Shawyer visited Pinewoods Camp near Boston and resolved that Vancouver should have its own weekend of concentrated instruction. The result was the camp held at Camp Alexandra, Crescent Beach, in September 1960. Forty dancers

from White Rock and Vancouver attended three days of classes in Scottish country dancing, men's Highland, women's solo, and "miscellaneous international." The dancers of those days certainly had stamina!



Stewart Smith of San Francisco often came to Vancouver to teach at the Vancouver Camps and Weekends. Here Flora Thompson, Denys Lloyd, Sheila Brown, and Josie Sleightholme perfect their strathspey steps under his watchful eye.

Early Camps

The Camps were so successful that larger quarters were soon needed, and the 1964 Camp was the first of many to be held on the University of BC campus. Music for the Camp balls was provided by the first Scottish country dance band on the west coast of Canada, Murray Black and the Teuchters of Powell River. Successors to the Teuchters have included the Schiehallion Band with its "West Coast Sound" and the Vancouver Fiddle Orchestra, currently directed by Janet Wright.

Enter Miss Milligan

Up to the early 1960s, the Annual Balls and Dance Camps were still run by a confederation of local groups under the Provincial Executive. The catalyst in changing the status of the Vancouver organization was probably Miss Milligan herself. As president and senior examiner for the RSCDS, Miss Milligan went on many whirlwind tours, "determined to ensure that as the world learns to dance, it dances properly," according to the *Glasgow Herald*. These tours regularly included the west coast of North America, and on October 24, 1961, she arrived in Vancouver. The report by Nellie Forbes (later McKenzie), who

chaired the committee organizing the visit, shows that Vancouver welcomed Miss Milligan in style:

Mrs. Forbes, together with Mrs. Bingham, Mrs. MacNab, and Mrs. Kerr, went out to the airport to meet Miss Milligan. Mr. Miller from White Rock had come to pipe Miss Milligan off the plane. He was not able to get out to the plane, but he did pipe her through the waiting room and out to the car. We know that she appreciated and enjoyed this very much.

The Branch Is Born

On this and later visits, Miss Milligan imbued the Vancouver dancers with her enthusiasm, and strongly encouraged them to form their own Branch of the Society. On 14 April 1964, representatives of the groups met and voted in favour of forming a Branch. On 7 July, the first AGM was held: Bob Simpson was elected as the first Chair, Alistair Ross as Treasurer,

and Beryl MacMillan as Secretary. Classes were organized, a demonstration team was formed, and teacher training classes were held. When Miss Milligan next visited in October 1965, Vancouver gained five new teachers with preliminary certificates and two with full certificates.

The Vancouver Branch Today

Since 1964, the Vancouver Branch has grown to become one of the largest North American Branches of the RSCDS, with 350 - 400 members. Flourishing dance groups span the Lower Mainland, from White Rock to Fort Langley to Deep Cove. The early Camps have evolved into the more formal "Vancouver Weekends" held first at the University of BC and later at downtown hotels. In August 1986, the Branch sponsored a week-long workshop at St. George's School, held in conjunction with Expo 86, with instructors including Vancouver's own Mary Murray and Simon Scott. In the 1990s, three weekends at the Whistler Convention Centre attracted dancers



The Vancouver Branch Demonstration Team has actively promoted Scottish country dancing under its successive directors: Mary Shoolbraid, Paulina Barnes, Margaret Zadworny, Mary Murray, Dorothy Hargreaves, Simon Scot, and currently Rebecca Blackhall-Peters. Here the Team perform at the Planetarium on 1 June 1969.

from far and wide. Currently, the annual Vancouver workshop is a more intimate affair called "Love to Dance" held close to Valentine's Day.

Endowments

Recently, significant endowments received by the Branch have led to great benefits for both dancers and musicians. The bequest of the late Pearl Holmberg enabled the Branch to offer several major workshops for teachers and musicians, and continues to support live music at our events. Generous gifts from the late Mary Wattum helped to fund a memorable Millennium Ball with the John Ellis Band and the Pacific Spirit Ball with the David Cunningham Band. Mary also supported the Betwixt and Between Dance, and brought the Marian Anderson Band from Scotland for the inaugural Thistle Ball, an event hosted alternately by the Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle Branches. The successor to the Thistle Ball has been the Heather Ball, with music provided by the Scottish Accent. How gratified Mrs. Bingham would be to see the progress of the Vancouver Branch today.

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