

THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF MY LIFE by David Currie
Part 1: Scotch Circle May 2009

Scottish Country dancing has been a big part of my life, for more than half of my 85 years and I have enjoyed every moment of it. When I look back there have been many decisions I have made which would have steered me in the wrong direction if I was to become a Scottish Country dancer. One such occasion was in Queensland in 1942 when I had to give a yes or no answer to a simple question which was to change my life.

Let me tell you my story from the beginning. I was born in Melbourne in 1922. Until I went to school, they tell me, I had a Scottish accent which was not surprising as I had Scottish parents. School days were not very exciting for me. The simple reason I guess was that I wasn't clever enough. At 14 ½, in one of the great depression years of 1937, my father took me out of school. Not long after that I became an apprentice compositor in the printing trade.

World War II had broken out when at the age of 19 I was called up for service in the Australian Army. My infantry unit took me to many places around the country eventually moving to Queensland. At one of the camps near Nambour, we had a visit from a group of Royal Australian Air Force people. They wanted to know if any of us wanted to transfer to the air force and train to become air crewmen. Air crewmen were never conscripted; they were all volunteers.

We had completed roughly nine months of army training and I decided a change to the RAAF might be a good idea. A few volunteers stepped forward and we were all given an aptitude test. We were all called before the Squadron Leader following the test and when it came to my turn I was asked if I really wanted to join the Air Force. I said "yes" to the Squadron Leader's question feeling they must have been undecided whether to accept me or not.

Weeks went by when we almost forgot about the visit by the RAAF. Then after returning from Christmas home leave in early 1943, we discovered our transfer to the Air Force had come through. So we were off home again to prepare for a new type of training. This commenced with classroom training. It was a case of back to school at Somers in Victoria. They decided I was to be a wireless operator.

I was posted to Parkes in New South Wales to do a six-month wireless course. I would venture to say that the long course was not so much about wireless but enough to acquire a desired speed of sending and receiving Morse code. I passed my course at Parkes then it was off back to Victoria again. My official listing was Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, so I had to complete a short course at West Sale before I was awarded my wings.

The next thing on the agenda was embarkation. All top secret of course, but we were all sure it was the UK we were bound for. In late January 1944, we boarded a liner called Nieuw Amsterdam and headed non-stop for Durban, South Africa. With short stops at Cape Town and Freetown in West Africa, we then found ourselves in Gourrock on the River Clyde in Scotland. We were taken in a troop train on an overnight trip from Glasgow to Brighton in the South of England.

Well, here I was in the UK. I doubt whether that possibility ever entered my head when the Squadron Leader asked me that, now important, question some months earlier. Discovering Scottish Country dancing was still very much in the future. We had a fair bit of free time on arrival at Brighton and I chose to take a leave pass and head for Scotland where I had many relatives I had never met including my grandmother (my mother's mother, who my mother had not seen for more than 20 years).

It was exciting meeting these relatives especially my grandmother and she must have been thrilled to meet a grandson from Australia. I often wonder about my mother's inner thoughts when she read my letter about the meeting with her mother. They were never to meet again. Grandma died in 1944 and I was able to get special leave to attend her funeral. My mother only lasted another three years herself.

During that same visit to my grandmother, I went to see an uncle. Visiting him and his wife was a young lady called Agnes Hay. Her aunt was married to my uncle. We were introduced during that meeting and that was about all. It wasn't until the next leave that something happened. I am talking of course about the lady who was to become my wife. Needless to say, every time I got a leave pass from then on, and I received a few, I took the train to Scotland. We became engaged in September '44 and married in Perth, Scotland on 9 June '45.

I returned home to Melbourne at the end of '45 and Agnes followed me six months later on a bride ship, the Athlone Castle, specially chartered by the Australian Government. Agnes had plenty to interest her in the early days in Melbourne but we failed to get a house of our own and friends gave up their front bedroom for us and we shared their kitchen. We decided to start a family and Robert was born in June '47. Still with no house of our own, things were not getting easier, especially with a baby in our limited accommodation. I would have to say that at this point in time Agnes was far from settled in her new country.

One day in early '48, Agnes startled me with a request she made. The request was simple and straightforward: "Take me back to Scotland". Things were difficult I knew but they were bound to improve. I soon realised what the trouble was. Agnes was an only child who lost her father when she was only four. Until she married me and came to Australia, she had been living with her mother for something like 16 years. She was still caring about her mother like my mother did. Ships used to take a month each way so my mum could never do that. Agnes, Bob and I did have enough money for the trip, but only just. If I say yes to this request, will I simply be reversing the problem by making Agnes happy and upsetting me? After a few weeks thought, I decided to go in the hope we could be happier in Scotland.

My father was very much opposed to us going to Scotland. One particular evening there were tears in his eyes as he tried to talk me out of what we were doing. Sadly, he failed to show up at the wharf to wave us goodbye. The decision to go to Scotland was by far the most important decision of my life. Scottish Country dancing was still in the distant future and at least by going to Scotland I was pointing myself in the right direction.

In June 1948, we set sail for the United Kingdom in the P&O Strathaird. Agnes found before we left she was pregnant which didn't make her happy with a long sea voyage ahead. She had a young baby to look after as well. I helped wherever I could but for me, I enjoyed that month on board ship. After such a lovely holiday, arriving in Scotland dropped me into the real world. While Agnes was glad to be home and reunited with her mother, I began to repeatedly ask myself "What have I done?" For the first fortnight it rained every day.

I soon realised I was here in Perth for keeps and there was no way out. I was a printing tradesman and thanks to Agnes I had a job lined up in Perth before I left Australia. She had written to a friend who owned a printing office in Perth. After the rain stopped I decided I had better find this place and start working to earn some money.

Fortunately, I didn't sit around feeling sorry for myself. I made many nice new friends among workmates and church people. My workmates seemed to enjoy visiting each others houses and we took our turn at inviting them. I had never played badminton before but I decided to join the church badminton club.

We had chosen a time to travel when we were leaving one winter to enter the start of another, well almost. Scottish winters are real winters and I managed to survive the first one. Meanwhile, it was time for the birth of our second child. Helen Mary was born on 2 January 1949 which, from memory, was a nice winter day.

I said at the time that the summer of 1949 was the best I had spent anywhere. Day after day the sun shone, the temperature never above the mid 20s and next to no rain. I wasn't long in buying a bike which I would often ride after work out along the Edinburgh Road to Glenfarg on those wonderful twilight evenings. It was great tennis weather, another sport I took up. I even played lawn bowls. My feeling of depression had disappeared in the lovely summer of '49 and I guess it helped me settle down in my new country.

In the early days of our new life in Perth, television was yet to start transmission and everyone had to content themselves with radio. There were two half-hour programs of Scottish Country dance music on the BBC every week with the well known bands of the day taking their turn. For a young bloke brought up on Bing Crosby and the like, the music didn't turn me on at all – at first that is. I eventually came to enjoy the music and started tapping my feet in time like everyone else. One particular night in the '50s, a dance was to be held in the Perth City Hall. I said to my Scottish workmate and friend Ronnie Macfarlane, how about we go along and listen to the music live? For the small sum of five shillings, we could sit in the balcony.

I wasn't interested at all in the dancing but they came to this dance, I now know was the Glasgow Highlanders; I sat up in my seat when I noticed all the dancers dancing down the hall in step together and back. I was so impressed with what I saw, I immediately said to Ronnie, how about we go to a class and learn this dancing? I wish I could remember the date in the early '50s but this was the evening that set me on the road to 50 years of happiness as a Scottish Country dancer.

Ronnie and I found a class at Hillend on the Edinburgh Road south of Perth and we very soon became good enough to join the dancers on the floor of the Perth City Hall, dancing to all the bands of the day including Jimmy Shand and Ian Powrie.

Television eventually arrived in Scotland and I first watched TV like many others in a shop window. The BBC was televising the funeral of our Queen's grandmother Queen Mary. We eventually bought a TV set and as we were one of the first in the street to own one, we invited neighbours and relatives in to watch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. We soon had another houseful to watch the first televised football match – the FA cup final starring the great Stanley Matthews.

THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF MY LIFE (Part 2), by David Currie.

This is the final of two instalments of this account of the author's life and his involvement in Scottish Country Dancing. The first part was published in the May 2009 issue of Scotch Circle

A sad event happened in our household early in 1954. Agnes' mother died rather suddenly. We were in Scotland because of Agnes' wish to be with her mother and now she wasn't with us anymore. It was stupid thinking about going back to Australia because our lives were settled where we were and Agnes would never agree to it anyway. However, after a few weeks had elapsed I brought up the subject with Agnes: how would you like to go back to Australia? To my great surprise she was in full agreement.

The next question was where to get the money? I have always remembered what our boat tickets cost in 1948 – 110 pounds each – and they were bound to cost more now and this time we had two children as well.

A few days later I started to wonder if they would take us as migrants with me and Bob being Australian born. I decided to send a letter to Australia House in London with the all-important question. All we got in reply was a form with no answer to my question. While they didn't say yes we'll take you they didn't say no either. So I filled in the form and sent it back to London.

After a few weeks, we received a letter from Australia House requesting that we go to Dundee to be interviewed. All four of us made the trip to Dundee, some 20 miles away. Still feeling all this was not for real, I straight away told the interviewer I was an Australian. With a slight pause while he looked at our papers, he said "you've been here more than five years". They must have been the nicest words anyone ever said to me. I wondered at the time how many more Australians might have been living in the UK for more than five years and unaware that they could return home for 10 pounds as migrants.

As I said earlier, everything was going pretty well in Scotland and I made many nice friends in Perth and could have stayed there for the rest of my life, but I was in no doubt Australia was the best country for our two young children, now aged 8 and 6.

We left Tilbury in March 1955 and landed in Melbourne on Anzac Day. One of the most pleasing sights of my life was to see my father on the shore waiting to welcome us home. The Government Printing Office in Canberra was advertising for printers in Canberra, offering a house with the job. I applied for and got one of the positions. I travelled alone by train to Canberra leaving Agnes and the children at the migrant hostel in Melbourne. As soon as I got the keys to the house they flew up to join me.

With plenty to do and think about in our new town, it would be two years before I started to wonder if there was any SCD in town. I met a workmate called David Ross who was a dancer. David, who died a few years ago, was once teacher of the Burns SCD class. I went along to a class he put me on

to in a hall at the rear of the Royal Canberra Hospital car park. It was there that I met David's wife Ella for the first time.

As a shift worker, it was difficult to attend a regular class. The next class I remember attending was in a Riverside hut in Barton. The teacher was Stewart McKenzie who had to find tracks on gramophone records for his music. I got off shift work and was free to attend a class taught by Les Cumming in the early 60s in Hughes Community Centre and, when Les closed this class, I had another break from SCD. I am scratching my head to get the sequence correct but the next class I attended was at Lyons taught again by Stewart McKenzie. The next one must have been the class at Royal Canberra Hospital where the teacher was Jean Conway with music from Hugh McKenna. I feel sure I was attending two weekly classes about that time, the other being the Burns class at Forrest.

The year 1987 was an eventful year for me. Early that year the Burns SCD class teacher's job became vacant and I was nominated for the job. In September that same year, my wife Agnes was badly injured in a car accident which brought on a long illness including dementia. I was informed later that she also had osteoporosis. I also retired in 1987 from my day job.

Although I had now given up working for a living I was now to be fully involved with Scottish Country dancing. Not only did I have a weekly class with the Burns Group, I was involved with a class in Queanbeyan. I was asked to teach a SCD class in Wagga Wagga. This involved 15 classes on Friday evenings spread over three years in 1988. I also became secretary of the Branch which lasted for three years. So much for retirement. I had plenty to keep my mind occupied.

In the early 90s the Burns Group were fortunate to have as their president the late Arnold Arthur. At the time they only had the White Heather Ball outside of weekly classes. I have been unable to find when we actually took over the running of the St Andrew's Night after the Hospital class folded. But Arnold thought we should have more social activity throughout the year. The "Spring Hop" was introduced and was usually held in late August.

Arnold suggested we have a social evening to celebrate the life of Robert Burns. January 25 was not a good time to be celebrating in a hot hall with only fans to try to keep us cool in the middle of an Australian summer. Arnold himself addressed the Haggis and George Laburn took over latterly. But we celebrated with dancing, haggis, neeps and tatties – and apple juice (no whisky allowed).

Hugh McKenna and Mike Heaney provided most of the music for these events.

One of the most pleasing activities of my life has been arranging entertainment for the residents of Nursing Homes, and Retirement Villages etc. Since 1991 we have chalked up over 550 performances in Canberra, Queanbeyan, Young and (two at) Boorowa. I have to thank all the dancers who have supported me over the years. Illness has slowed me down in the past year, however we managed to squeeze in eight more in 2008 when I kept out of hospital. I must thank Jim Lowe who assisted me when I was overseas and at other times when I was unavailable. Jean Clark enjoyed very much going with me every week to watch in the latter three years of her life. It has always been nice to see the smiles on the faces of the residents and [to hear the] words of appreciation at the end of the shows. One of the nicest was after our most recent dancing at the new Ainslie Goodwin Village in November 08. I was busy packing up when a little old lady came up to me and told me that she enjoyed the dancing and seemed a little reluctant to admit there was a tear in her eye.

The greatest thrill of all for me was the awarding of the Order of Australia Medal in the Queen's Birthday Honours of 2005. The award was for all the entertainment I arranged in Canberra and district over the 14 years as at that time. One of the nicest congratulatory words I received was from a friend who said: "a lot of people get these awards for simply doing their high-salaried daily jobs".

If I had never discovered Scottish Country dancing, I would have missed something really great in my life. As you will see if you have read this story from start to finish, I nearly did miss out.

In the early part of this story, I said my wife Agnes was involved in a bad car accident. I am pleased to say that after a long illness she is very stable at the moment. She is very happy and contented, which might seem a strange thing to say when she can't move her arms or legs and can't talk to me. To me she is very lovely and I just want to be with her as much as I can.