

**Miss Jean Milligan's visit to Canberra 15 October 1974**  
**Transcript taken from a recording made at a Dinner at the Canberra Rex**  
**Hotel. Recorded by Hamish Lindsay.**

**Mr Les Cumming** – Miss Milligan and I are old friends, perhaps I am in a position to say something that others may not be in a position to say. Miss Milligan says if I prepare something I am never able to give of myself. So I thought this is good advice so, therefore, I have prepared nothing.

A long time ago I went to St Andrew's for the first time and as Miss Milligan says, St Andrew's isn't just a home for golf, it is a home for Scottish Country Dancing - and I think I was there on the second day and a little voice behind me said 'Mr Cumming', and I thought good gracious who was that and I looked around and here was this rather short woman and I thought that this must be Miss Milligan. 'Mr Cumming', I will see you at 7.45 in the library. I said 'me, Miss Milligan, what on earth for?' 'We are demonstrating two dances tonight. I said 'Miss Milligan I am not attending your class, I am trying to do my certificate and I am not demonstrating to anyone'. 'Mr Cumming, it is an honour'. So I am afraid I was there at 7.45 and I did dance with Miss Milligan. And believe me it has been an honour to dance for her ever since.

I don't really know what I can say about having such a wonderful person in our midst. It has been my great wish since I came to Australia in 1958 to have this person here to give to the people who are interested in Scottish Country Dancing that joy, that great love for this heritage which is ours, and of all the people I know she is the only one who can get this over to people. I have said that one of the most difficult things in giving to a candidate for a certificate of Scottish Country dancing is background and Miss Milligan only had to speak for a few moments and that background comes over. I could speak for hours and weeks and get nowhere. But when she speaks to you tonight you will know this joy, this love, comes from her heart and I am sure that all of us, even those of us who are not familiar with Scottish Country dancing will go away enriched by her words.

We wondered who might be our special guest on this occasion and Mr and Mrs Snedden were immediate choices. Our choice has been reinforced by speaking to them tonight and I am sure that you will appreciate their wealth when you hear Mr Snedden welcome Miss Milligan to our great capital and our great family. (Applause) It might interest you to know that Mrs Snedden, and I really feel I should call her Joy to you all, Joy went to Melbourne today but she came back to be with us tonight (applause) It seems quite strange that two people who are so much in the public eye should trouble to join us, a comparatively small part of the community, but I am sure their presence here will not be amiss. (applause) I might say something before we part tonight, but now it gives me very great pleasure and still that honour which Miss Milligan bestowed on me many years ago is here when I welcome Mr Bill Snedden to welcome our dear Miss Milligan. (applause)

**Mr Bill Snedden** – Almost Scots and brothers and sisters, I am very glad to be here. Joy and I like these sort of things. You know there are a lot of things you do in public life that you have got to do, but there are some things you do because you want to do and tonight is one of the nights we want to do. I welcome Miss Milligan. The association of which she is a co-founder was established in 1953 when she was 20 years of age, (laughter) at least that is the way it seems to me, and well 1953 – well let's be real – it was 1923. 1923 we had just had a world war, a shattering world war, Paschindale(?) and all that sort of thing, but it seemed as though the Scots were always those fellows up there in the front and there weren't too many Scots men left in 1923 and country dancing which had rather slunk away and nobody was terribly interested in it but it had a great history. Country dancing was just not folk dancing or anything like that, it expressed the spirit of nationalism and the nationalism was of Scotland. It was not the peasant's dance as I don't think there were peasants in Scotland, there were a lot of poor people and my God they were proud people and there was never anybody in Scotland that you would class a peasant. A great cheviot sheep marched over the highlands and people were driven out, masses of people went to North America, to South America, even to Australia but they always went with their heads held high and they built a greater Scotland beyond Scotland and that is true today, a greater Scotland beyond Scotland. Miss Milligan may disagree with me but there must be something xxxxxxxx about it that I would get dressed up like I am, and I feel very, very proud of being a Scot, very, very proud and the reason I have that pride is that nobody ever subjected me to their will, or the people that bore me, they were never subjected to anybody else's will. If they had to fight they fought and they will fight again whenever the occasion is there. They are just not marshal people, they are also people who have a great sense of fun, a great sense of warmth, you must have felt it here tonight sitting here, there is a warmth that country dancing music coming across, some of us tapped our feet and some of us clapped our hands, depends on how fit you are. There is a warmth about Scots and that was a thing which Miss Milligan and Mrs Stewart recognised, that in country dancing you don't have to feel anything else than the spirit of belonging to a group. Having fun, doing what you want to do, with that slight sense of discipline that the Scots always love, and so country dancing is a Scottish invention, the Italians reckon they invented the bagpipes, and even the Irish claim that. As a matter of fact I think the Russians are now claiming it but the Scots invented it and they gave it to the world and those of you who have marched you have never marched to anything better than the bagpipes. And nobody who wants fun and a sense of joy, of just participating with others, the Scots can give country dancing. I think I am right Miss Milligan, that country dancing was originated in the Bonnie Prince's period in France, I think I am right, am I right?

**Miss Milligan** – No, Queen Mary of Scots brought it.

**Mr Bill Snedden** – Queen Mary of Scots. You are right, I am wrong. But I think that the curiosity about country dancing is that if anybody made it popular it was those people who had the sense of restoration and they maintained their morale, and their spirit, in countries beyond Scotland, they brought it back to Scotland. I recently had an interesting experience in Melbourne. I had never seen dancing, it was not country dancing, it was individual dancing, literally individual, one man and he danced to mouth music. I had never heard mouth music before and it is only this year in August, that I have spoken to Miss Milligan tonight and she tells me that the origin of mouth music was when those characters from the Sassenach areas came up and they banned the bagpipes and the kilt, they put them in trews, they have got them back in trews now and I hate that. And that is where mouth music came from. My name is Billy Mackie Snedden. Billy comes because my mother and father couldn't decide whether I would be an Alexander or Andrew, it was an obvious compromise. Mackie is my mother's maiden name and Snedden is an occupational name in Scotland There were Sneddens in every clan and it comes – you can see it most distinctly in that wonderful address to the haggis by Robbie Burns – you know '...your honest sonsie face'. But there is a part where he says 'But mark the rustic, haggis-fed...Clap in his walie nieve a blade, He'll make it whistle; A legs an arms, an heads will sned, Like taps o thrissle'. And that's where the Sned comes from. They were straight mercenary soldiers and damn good swordsmen; they never put one in anybody's back. My wife is a Forsythe and I want you to know there is nothing new about women's lib. The Forsythe's were the first of the women's lib, and she proudly wears her sash. What do they say of the men? They are the peacocks. But if I think I have got it right, the elegant shadow of the wife.

I want to tell you a story. This is a story of a Laird. The Laird was very old, something like jockey's (??) age and he had had a long standing arrangement that on Hogmanay he brought all the crofters up to the big house and they sat down and they drank, and they drank, and they drank and it was the Laird's honour that he would be the last sitting at the table. The Laird died and old Angus, the chief ghillie, he had been waiting for the Laird's death because he knew that the new Laird was a young man. He was at Oxford University, he spoke very punctilious English, and he thought now I haven't been able to put the old Laird under the table but I will put the new Laird under the table. So the old Laird died, the new Laird turned up and he carried on the tradition and they sat at the table and they Slainte Mhath, and they Slainte Mhath, and they Slainte Mhath (and they Slange-ye Va, and they Slange-ye Va, and they Slange-ye Va) and ultimately only Angus the chief ghillie was left and the young Laird. And so Angus said to the young Laird at the end of a wearisome night Slange-ye Va and drank it and the Laird say Slange-ye Va and drank it. Then he stiffened up and his body twisted and twitched and he slid underneath the table and old Angus said 'I've done it, I've done it, I've put the Laird under the table;', and then a voice from under the table said 'Angus if you're coming doon brung the whisky wi' ye'.

I want you to know that this is the most important year of my life because I am the first Vice President of the greatest organisation in Australia, that organisation is the Melbourne Scots. The President – the Constitution doesn't say he is but in fact he is a life President – is Sir Robert Menzies and we have a council, and we have three Vice Presidents and they progress annually, third, second, first and at the end of the year as first Vice President they tiddle over the chasm and they're nothing so I have until March of next year as first Vice President of this organisation I have had the great pleasure of being the Chairman of the Ladies' Night which was in August, I have in front of me the very great pleasure of being Chairman of our St Andrew's Day dinner in Melbourne actually on St Andrew's Day.

A short gap in proceedings.

**Miss Milligan** – (it is for recording purposes) Is it – because I don't like a microphone, I am not accustomed to one. I just don't know what to say, our honoured guest has said far too much about me, I just don't feel that I am worthy really. I have not done so very much. I began it, but what could we do without you, you that have backed us up. We began, Mrs Stewart and me, without any backing, nothing behind us, no money, no real backing and here I come to Australia and get such a wonderful welcome and get such a – I am going to tell you the truth – surprise. I never thought I would see so many dancers so far from home. After all I am accustomed to seeing large numbers in Canada but then that is not surprising because after all Canada is only six hours away from us and I could always go there because I knew I could get home if I was needed in six hours. It is true, it is true, I am wondering what is going on in my accent and I am looking forward, I really am, I am now over the 'knowe' (??) and going down the hill a wee bit you see. I have been more than half my time, I have only got Africa now so I am preparing for finding out all that has been going on when I have been away. But really and truly I want really to tell you this has been the joy of my life. I gave up my profession to do country dancing, because after all if you are a professional woman you know that the time will come when at age you must resign and you must retire so it was a case that if I gave up my country dancing I would give it up forever because you can't pick up a thing like this and let it down and I have said to the Director well I am going and he said you are not. He said I won't accept your resignation but I said I am sorry I am going because I so love this, and I am so anxious to give my whole time to it that I must just resign, retire. I did it with great sorrow as I have spent the whole of my career in the same place. When I first went to College to take up the job at Jordan Hill Training College a lot of the students were older than I was. And now I think it was the most ridiculous appointment of course to have somebody so young but still I spent my whole life there and it was lovely and I have never, I don't think anyone in this world have had the reward I have had in the wonderful xxxx of my old students. The Scottish Country Dancing would never have been what it is now if it wasn't for my old students who have rallied round me in every country and have never forgotten some of the funny things that used to happen.

You see I was lucky because I didn't only have girls I had all the physical training boys and when we were a little short of young men I could always come to the rescue. I always tell the very funny story about the English Folk Dance Society asked us to go up to London. This was very early, about in the early 1930s, and they were having their first great international show and they asked if I would bring 48 dancers and a Highland band. Well 48 dancers, the ladies were all right, but the men were the question. So I said I would bring 20 of my boys and the Director said to me – the Director came from Aberdeen and he was a bit of a wag – he says to me well you have got courage, are you going to London with 20 young men? I said yes, I am going to London with 20 young men and they will just do us all credit. So I hastened up to London a day earlier and when in and saw the Manager of the YM and I said now will you take 20 young men for me. He said yes, I will be very good to them, I will give them a very nice time, and he did. But when I walked in with my 20 young men, well, he had a kind of queer look on his face and I believe that whenever my back was turned he said I have heard of a xxx coming with 21 xxxxx A lady coming with 21 (??) However, they were all angelic to me. I was having a joke with Mr Snedden about discipline. I said it was of course my friend on the left who declared that I cowered everybody with my eye, and I said to him well everybody likes discipline, it is a good thing, it is very good to have plenty of good discipline and now I have forgotten what I was going to say. Never mind, we can say something else. Certainly I have had a most extraordinary life let me tell you. What with one thing and another I think there isn't much I haven't sampled. I was going to tell you something different from what Mr Snedden said about what happened to him. I was going to tell you something that had happened once to me but I can't remember what it was. Mr Cumming there said he hadn't prepared anything and he was just going to let it come out well of course that is what I always do so I have no idea what xxxxxxxx One thing I will maintain I have stuck to all my life is that life isn't worth anything without a laugh.

I have pretty well laughed myself through New Zealand and also Australia but I doubt I will be a success when I go to South Africa but I am going to friends there, people that I know, so I am terrified of you all you know. (much laughter and unable to hear clearly) You have no idea really what delight it has given me - I call this the modern miracle – Mrs Stewart and I had no thought beyond Scotland, none. We only wanted to see Scotland dance again because at that time there was a shortage of men always at every kind of Ball. If you had to go to a Ball you got somebody whose steps suited yours because that was all that mattered and they went about their own sort of (inaudible) and we thought oh this isn't Scotland surely where people are all friendly, especially Glasgow of course. I could entertain you the whole night with stories about my friends the taxi men in Glasgow. Yes they were all nice, best men in the world, (inaudible) and we thought this isn't Scottish at all, let's get people again to do this, that they meet other people and dance with them and like them and be friendly with them and let us make up a Ball that really is a meeting of friends. But how were we to spread it, that was our first difficulty, how were we to spread it. Of course I had had a

class. At this meeting they asked a book, we must have a book, and we must have somebody to teach us and so I said I would take a class in Glasgow. And I had a 100 at my first class and they all paid their 5 shillings at once, as we know everybody does here. And they became members of the Society and said now we are in such good numbers let's have a Branch, we will be a Branch and we will run our own domestic affairs and we will send a representative up to the general meeting. We will run our own affairs, so that was the first Branch, then Edinburgh came in next, then Perth came in next, then Aberdeen and London began, and then Dundee, and so it went on, until now we have a hundred and – I made a new Branch I may say the other day in Australia, Newcastle is now a Branch. I was so delighted because they voted – I had a person from every little class – I said I will not speak to you unless I had a person from every little class in the whole district represented and then we will take it to a vote and then we got it (inaudible) So now have a new Branch and I am so proud there is another Australian Branch and of course Canberra is trembling on the brink, they are going to take the dive just in a few months I hope because you have got all the essentials here, you have good dancers, you have good teachers and you have got a good spirit. Now I know you don't want to hear me talking any more and I just want to say thank you all so much and thank you Mr Snedden so much for what you said and you know I loath people who won't open parcels. Who is as excited as I am? (opening of gift)

**Mr Les Cumming** - Don't tear the paper, we will need it again.

**Miss Milligan** – A real Scots voice has been raised. Give me a skean du (inaudible chat when opening gift) We always had a great time when we go abroad with our skean du's, they are dangerous weapons. What a lovely piece of paper too.

**Unknown** – It hasn't got Canberra on it, no it is Australia

**Miss Milligan** – Has it not got Canberra on it? Something absolutely, oh, oh really, yes, my discarded (inaudible) There is nothing else? Good heavens, my dears you are far too generous, I want to burst into tears, that's true. Just look at this, oh isn't that beautiful.

**Mr Les Cumming** – Open that, that is the (inaudible)

**Miss Milligan** – Is there a penny in it?

**Mr Les Cumming** – Aye, there is a penny in it.

**Miss Milligan** – And you are the laddie that gave me the penny. There isn't a penny in it, oh that is lovely. Isn't that lovely (applause) Now without meaning to dash your pleasure at all I am so frightfully pleased to have it because somebody at the Golden Ball bought me the Canadian one and so now I have got both. I

am terribly delighted with that, oh that is lovely that will go into my treasure chest. Thank you all so much, quite seriously you have been – I will never forget this visit because it was so nice and I am going to work strenuously to get you a regular visitor if I possibly can. (applause) Three cheers. I feel very humbled.

**Mr Bill Snedden** – I would like to propose (inaudible) to a gorgeous, generous, accomplished young lady who has come to visit us from Scotland, Miss Milligan.

Singing – for she's a jolly good fellow followed by three cheers. To Miss Milligan

**Miss Milligan** – If the Lord spares me I will sing to you. (inaudible)

**Mr Les Cumming** – I think someone said to me that we would need a fair bit of entertainment to fill in the evening tonight. I think that Miss Milligan's part in the in the proceedings has proved that we don't need really much more, although we have a little bit of a surprise, especially for Bill and Joy Snedden, we thought that they might like to see two of the dances which were devised especially for our Jubilee year and the team will be dancing Miss Milligan's Strathspey and Mrs Stewart's Fancy. Meantime, I have already said that Joy has gone out of her way to make sure she was with us tonight I am sure you all appreciate this very, very much. I would ask one of our successful candidates, and all five candidates were successful, (applause) and as well as expressing my pleasure in saying that they were successful, I am sure I express the pleasure of Rae Geddes sitting on the far side there, Sheila Barritt-Eyles who has gone to change or do something, and Catherine McKenna who assisted in the teacher's program and to them I am most grateful, but I am most delighted with the candidates. Here, if we could have, if she is available, Mary Thomson to acknowledge our appreciation of Joy's efforts to be with us tonight. Mrs Mary Thompson, she is of course not only a successful candidate, she is President of the Burns Group and a very warm welcome to Mary.

**Mrs Mary Thomson** – These tulips, beautiful, lovely pink ones, but I feel extremely honoured to be sitting beside Miss Milligan tonight and I have had quite a lot of very pleasant conversation and she is a rather strong, not bachelor woman, spinster woman, and she is quite superb. She has her own views about things and that very feminine but also she has her character which is strong and I think that this is most important. I think this is conveyed through to we Australian women and I hope we can continue to be very much a Miss Milligan in our role as Australian women. Thank you.

**Mr Les Cumming** – Thank you Mary.