

This four-part series about the early history of Scottish Country Dancing in Canberra appeared in Scotch Circle, 1987-8. It precedes and is complementary to the history of The Scottish Country Dance Club of Canberra, "50 Years and Still Dancing", by Bobby Clark (1994), which is also available on this web site. Thanks are due to the author, Dr Tom Middlemiss, for the great deal of research that went into its production, and for his permission to reproduce it.

ROOTS

Tom Middlemiss

In an unguarded moment recently the idea of an account of our origins entered my head. Some devil put it there - no angel could have been so cruel. I have had to condense a lot of the information and the whole piece will be serialized.

Part 1 (Scotch Circle 1 June 1987)

As Canberra grew from a tent township into a suburban one, the population developed recreational facilities within the suburbs - Eastlake, Westlake, Westridge and the others. Dancing, as now, was a very popular social pastime and local community groups held dances in local community halls. Well known and much used halls were the Friendly Society Hall at Kingston (formerly Eastlake), the Causeway Hall, and the Riverside Hut (on the river side of the Hotel Kurrajong). These halls were small wooden structures, funded and built by the Department of the Interior and run by the local Good Neighbour Councils. The Friendly Society Hall and the Riverside Hut are gone now, the Government Printing Office occupying the site of the Friendly Society Hall and the Riverside Hall is demolished. However there is one hut remaining on the riverside and this is a good example of these structures. Another good example is the hall in Corroboree Park. The Causeway Hall is still there but is closed up after a fire damaged part of the roof. It is a large hall and was used for bigger dances. Surprisingly, to the writer at any rate, it is only slightly smaller in floor space than the Albert Hall which was completed in 1928 and was used for special occasions and Balls.

The dances held in the local halls were, as might be expected, "olde tyme" in nature. However, the immigrant Scots brought their traditional village hall favourites with them and a Saturday night dance would usually see the Eightsome Reel, The Dashing White Sergeant and Strip the Willow on the programme. As might also be expected these dances were popular with other ethnic groups attending the dances. The music was usually played on a piano but the pipes were played for the Scottish dances. Well known pianists were Les

Pogson and Gordon Reid.

In 1924 the Burns Club and Highland Society was formed. As far as I can establish, this was the first social club with a constitution and aim in the A.C.T. and dances were promoted by the Burns Club on alternate Saturday nights in the Friendly Society Hall. Proceeds from the dances were added to a fund for the building of the Club's own premises.

With the opening of the Albert Hall came an opportunity for the Burns Club to hold Hogmanay Balls. The first one was held in 1928 and was the precursor of many. The programme of dances was still not entirely Scottish and resembled the programmes danced in the Friendly Society Hall. No alcohol was sold but, as the writer was told, "Noo listen, there were no rules about it" and "The day of the Ball, a truck would draw up and leave certain items in the bushes outside" and "some was available for traditional toasts".

The Albert Hall was the venue too for Scottish Balls held by another group with Scottish origins - the Presbyterian church of St. Andrew on Capital Hill. A Ball was held in 1950 and in 1951 to raise funds towards a Church Hall. (Readers will see the obvious parallel between the aims of the Burns Club and St. Andrew's Church and the coincidence of their geographical proximity. Branch members will note with interest that the Branch is shortly to hold classes in the self same St. Andrew's Church Hall, a happy twist of fate.) Again however, the dance programme was as before with music from the pipes for the traditional Scottish dances and from an orchestra - progress! - for the "olde tyme".

The Second World War had far reaching effects on society and prosperity and it was not until the 1950's that the social scene changed much within Canberra. The post war period saw a large influx of migrants. Many of this group were Scots who naturally gravitated to the Burns Club and the dances held in the Friendly Society Hall. Among these Scots were Bob and Jean Clark (arrived 1950) and Bob and Helen Morrow (arrived 1948) . 1952 saw the arrival of Peter and Barbara Treacy in Canberra too, to posts at the A.N.U. Far away, and since 1923, in Scotland the S.C.D.S. had revived and cultivated traditional Scottish Country Dancing. Here in the A.C.T. and district the bush was being cleared, so to speak, for similar endeavour.

Part 2 (Scotch Circle 1 Sept 1987)

In 1951 the Clarks and Morrows developed an interest in Scottish Country Dancing and, specifically, in the correct form of given dances. They had observed confusion and even roughness at the Saturday dances when people of Scottish origin applied Scottish regional variations to well known dances. There were no teachers or authorities on the subject in the district even within the membership of the Burns Club (although there was a teacher of

Highland Dancing, Betty Schmidt) and interest was generally at a low level. In late 1951, or early 1952, they determined that they would teach themselves the form of Scottish Country Dancing as set out by the then Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (The Royal Charter was granted in 1951).

Using Society books, some obtained in Sydney, some sent by relatives from Scotland, "Won't You Join the Dance" and 78 R.P.M. records they tackled the various formations and formed an understanding of them. It is hard for us nowadays to realise how difficult it must have been. The venues for their dancing were their own houses and the "foundation seed" forming the set were Bob and Jean Clark and their three girls (aged 7, 9 & 11), and Bob and Helen Morrow with their son, "wee George" (born 1947 and not yet at school!). Their interest soon spread to some friends and some Burns Club members and a group of dancers formed in the environment of the Friendly Society Hall. Bob Morrow had the onerous duty of teaching and music was from 78s.

In 1952, as mentioned in Part 1, Peter and Barbara Treacy came to posts at the A.N.U. Barbara has been keen on all kinds of dancing all her life and had learned Scottish Country Dancing at school in England. (Are we back to Miss Milligan's Jordanhill girls again?). While a student at Cambridge University she joined the Cambridge University Strathspey and Reel Club (C.U.S. & R.C.) - a big group which had been much influenced by Hugh Thurston (Editor "The Folk Dancer" 1954, and "Scotland's Dances" 1954) - where she met Peter. At Yass, in June 1952, they attended a "Scottish Ball" but found that, as we have already observed, the dancing was 50/50 and so in February 1953 they founded an informal group of Scottish Country dancers, meeting on Sundays, in the Council Room of the A.N.U. A preponderance of females (in number, not in soma!) was countered the following month, March 1953, by a strategic manoeuvre to the gymnasium at Duntroon. For resource material Barbara and Peter used R.S.C.D.S. books, the C.U.S. & R.C. Dance Book, films made by the R.S.C.D.S. obtained from the National Library, and also a "loop" film showing the dance "The River Cree". Music was from 78's.

On September 26th, 1953 (Barbara kept a diary for most of her life and this proved invaluable to the writer in preparation of this article) the Lady Cowrie Hall in the R.S.L. Club in Manuka was hired by the group and a Scottish Country Dance was held. The Eightsome was piped by Jimmy Ogilvie and music for the other dances was from records. This was the first purely Scottish Country Dance function to be held in a formal way in the A.C.T. as far as I can ascertain. Two months later, in November, "Town" met "Gown" when the group from the Friendly Society Hall visited the Duntroon group.

The Treacys moved from Canberra in 1956 but their group continued for a while afterwards. It is interesting to reflect on the influence which the A.N.U. still has on local

Scottish Country Dancing when one considers the people important to our Branch and Clubs who work at the A.N.U. (Barbara and Peter have been back in Canberra some time now working again at the A.N.U.).

Reference was made earlier to the Scottish influence in Yass. In the Spring of 1953, not far from Canberra - to the South this time - Mrs Kinmont, the wife of the Presbyterian minister in Cooma decided to hold an "International Evening". Gordon Henderson was co-opted by her to prepare a Scottish table and to demonstrate Scottish Country Dancing. Gordon drummed up a set and they demonstrated "The Reel of the 51st Division" and "The Duke of Perth". They enjoyed themselves so much that Gordon and his wife, Val, formed the Monaro Caledonian Society in October 1953 with a Chief and a Council and a constitution modelled on the Wellington Society.

The Scottish Country Dance section of the Monaro Caledonian Society was founded by Grace Roberts and Barbara Webster.

With the increasing interest in Scottish Country Dancing in the district, Bobby Clark saw the need to form a Branch of the R.S.C.D.S. However, as the formation of a Branch requires the membership of two qualified teachers, Bobby's attempt to do so in the early days was frustrated. The enthusiasm for the dancing would not be stayed though and from the seeding and germination which had already occurred, came the growth of the Clubs.

Part 3 (Scotch Circle 1 Dec 1987)

The Canberra Times of 28th April 1953 reported that the Good Neighbour Council had acquired new premises at Riverside and the first reception was to be held on Sunday May 3rd. Thereafter, the hall was available for public use and in April 1954 some of the Scottish Country Dancers left the Friendly Society Hall and moved there.

Bobby Clark's records list the following initial members - Mr and Mrs W. Bruce, Mr and Mrs C. Caulfield, Mr and Mrs R. Clark, Mr and Mrs A. Logie, Mr and Mrs W. Nowell, Mr and Mrs W. McHardy, Mr and Mrs J. Morrow, Mr and Mrs R. Morrow, Mr and Mrs G. Ramsay, Mr W. Robb and a single lady. Bobby Morrow continued teaching as he had done in the Friendly Society Hall for a while and more resource material was obtained in the form of the instructional films from the National Library (original site) which showed how to do a reel (Mrs McLeod of Raasay), a jig (Corn Rigs), and a strathspey (Rakes of Glasgow). (Little did the group realize it but one of the young men dancing in one of the demonstration films they saw - Scotland's Dances - was Les Cumming.) The group attracted more members, (among them Fred Frank who was "captured" from Duntroon!), and remained at Riverside for the next four

years. Thursday night was for members only and a beginners class was held on Tuesdays. At one stage it was necessary to continue the beginners class back in the Friendly Society Hall.

In 1956 a formal constitution was drawn up and on 8th December 1956 the Scottish Country Dance Club of Canberra Inc. was affiliated with the R.S.C.D.S. (This was the date on which the R.S.C.D.S. committee accepted the application. Miss Gibson's opinion is that this should be regarded as the official date and this ruling has been applied to the affiliation dates of the other clubs.) A feature of the early constitution was that all members of the S.C.D.C. of Canberra must be members of the R.S.C.D.S. and the members, unable to form a Branch here as mentioned in Part 2, joined Headquarters.

From 1953 till 1955 a class continued in the Friendly Society Hall on Monday nights. The dancers attending also were from the initial group in the Friendly Society Hall and others were attracted in due course. (It should be noted here that many dancers attended both Riverside and the Friendly Society Hall. Unfortunately the records of the Burns Club Dancers for this time are lost and it has been necessary to rely largely on peoples' memories. This has made the critical examination of history after a lapse of thirty years a difficult task but the major cross references tie in). Well known names in the Burns Club group in its early days were Sheila Taylor, (now Barritt-Eyles), Harry and Betty Schmidt, Anne Greig, Margaret Mitchell, and Bill Robb. A later well known dancer was Dick Alder.

On 16th December 1956 the Canberra Highland Society and Burns Club opened its own new premises on National Circuit in Forrest and on 10th August 1957 the C.H.S. and B.C. was affiliated with the R.S.C.D.S. Anne Greig and Bob Morrow were teachers.

Fortunate as they were in having a stable venue for their dancing, with their increasing knowledge and ability the Burns Club dancers found the lack of a trained teacher a hardship. Sheila Barritt - Eyles had been dancing in the U.K since the age of 7 at school where her teacher was a qualified R.S.C.D.S. teacher, Miss Ramsbottom, and so Sheila contacted her for help. From then until 1964 Miss Ramsbottom encouraged and advised the Burns Club dancers by air mail. The enthusiasm of the members however reached a low during 1961 - 1963 and the Burns Club S.C.D section was kept going by Sheila who held classes in her house. From 1963 to 1966 the Club danced at the Mal Strahan Studios in Civic (above the Seven Seas Restaurant) returning in happier times to its Alma Mater, the Burns Club, in 1966. A notable feature of the Burns Club has been a long running class for children held by Sheila.

In the matter of a teacher the S.C.D.C of Canberra was more fortunate. The 3rd June 1957 saw the arrival in the A.C.T. of Kathleen Henderson and the teaching reins were quickly handed over to her - a post she held till 1965. Kathy must have been a real "find" for the Club. She had danced S.C.D. since she was a child in Peterhead and had been made a Life Member of the Peterhead S.C.D. Society in 1956 as an emigration present to her. Her teacher

was Miss Collie and she had danced in the Peterhead Society's top demonstration team (various clubs competed in Aberdeen at that time for a club championship). She passed the preliminary part of her Teacher's Certificate in Peterhead. On the day of her Final Exam, on her way to the train for Aberdeen, she developed acute appendicitis and could not take the final part, of course. There was no time after that to take the examination before she left for Australia.

Kath would surely have been the first person to have authoritative and extensive teaching knowledge in the A.C.T. and under her guidance the S.C.D.C. of Canberra built up to a standard where she had a demonstration team of dancers all picked by her. Members of the team included Jean Clark, Moya Ewin, Rae Geddes, Cath Morrow, Kath herself, Bill Geddes, Rodney Johnston, Joe Morrow, David Ross and Laurie Souter. Before she stopped teaching Kath was already preparing some dancers for the preliminary examination for teachers and remembers particularly Rae Geddes and David Ross.

In the late 1950's, the Good Neighbour Council stopped using the Riverside Hall and from 15.6.58 to 19.5.59 the S.C.D.C. of Canberra rented the Friendly Society Hall. As before, the beginners' night was on Tuesday but the members danced alternate Sundays. In 1959 the Club moved to the Acton Hut (also known as the Trades Union Hall or the Lennox Crossing Hut). Subsequent moves saw the Club in Downer Community Centre, Garran Scout Hall, Hughes Community Centre, the Church of Christ Hall at Lyons, and, most recently, the Y.M.C.A. Hall at Woden.

Just as it seemed that the middle of the 1960's would see a decline in Scottish Country Dancing, an expert of outstanding ability appeared in our midst in February 1963 - Les Cumming. Les's dancing career needs a profile all of its own and I hope to bring this to readers after the final part of "Roots". Sufficient to say for now that he provided the ground for some of our dancers to further their skills and progress to the next stage of our development - the production of "home grown" teachers.

Part 4 (Scotch Circle 1 March 1988)

Soon after his arrival from Melbourne in 1963, Les Cumming gathered together a social group of church acquaintances and taught in his own house in Antill Street, Downer. The object was the preparation of a set to display Scottish Country Dancing at St Andrew's Night in St Ninian's Church Hall. This set was composed of Jean and Bob Clark, Margaret and Bill Robb, Ella and David Ross and Les and his wife Aileen -They also danced in Sydney for a charity for the disabled.

In 1964 he formed a group, called the Celtic Group, which met on Wednesday nights in Hughes Community Centre. The pianist was Geoff Waters, and the teaching here gradually developed a more serious purpose. The class was general, but an advanced group of keen people - Jessie and Bill Coyle, Aileen Gunning, Rae Hopgood (now Geddes), Audrey Henderson, Cath and George Laburn, Margaret McIntyre, Ella and David Ross, Jane Spate (now Lindsay), John Griggs and Bob Morrow - developed within it and when news of a projected visit in 1968 by Mrs Florence Lesslie (a former Chairman of the Society, formerly of Edinburgh and at that time of Wellington, New Zealand) arrived, Les prepared this group for the preliminary part of the Teacher's Certificate. Headquarters was very keen to train teachers overseas and special dispensations were made by the Society to permit outstanding people of exceptional status such as Mrs Lesslie to examine on their own.

On 13th May 1966 in Canberra, Aileen Gunning, Rae Hopgood, Cath Laburn, Bob Morrow and David Ross passed the preliminary examination. The following May, 1967, Mrs Lesslie revisited Australia and at examination by her in Canberra Audrey Henderson (travelling regularly; from Cooma to be taught by Les) and Sheila Barritt-Eyles passed the preliminary test and Rae Hopgood passed the full Teacher's Certificate examination.

Canberra and District was up and running - and on 27th August 1968 Audrey Henderson and Sheila Barritt-Eyles were once again examined by Mrs Lesslie on her third visit to Canberra, both passing the final part of the Teacher's Certificate.

Obviously the years 1964-1968 had been very demanding for Les and he stopped teaching actively after 1968 but continued to take an interest. Mrs Lesslie visited again in 1970, her last visit here, and Les prepared Cath McMaster (formerly McKenna) and Mr and Mrs Dennis Amy (who had all three obtained preliminary passes elsewhere before coming to Canberra) for the final part, and Mr W.A.E. and Mrs Marion McBride for the preliminary part of the Teacher's Certificate. On 11th June 1970 all five candidates passed their respective tests. The examinations were followed by a weekend school organised by Les at which Mrs Lesslie, Les, Kevin Connolly, Sue Beaton, Audrey Henderson, Sheila Barritt-Eyles, Rae Geddes (nee Hopgood), Jean Conway, Helen and Dennis Amy taught. The School was held from 12 June to 15 June 1970 at the Presbyterian Conference Centre at Cotter.

After the hectic years a lull in proceedings was almost mandatory - then came news of Miss Milligan's visit to Australia in 1974. Les, Shiela, Rae, and Cath McMaster made short work of the preparation and on 14th October 1974 in the Burns Club Miss Milligan passed Jan Livingstone, Helen McLaren, Mary Thomson, John Dean and Stewart McKenzie in the preliminary part of the Certificate. On 15th October 1974 a dance to celebrate Miss Milligan's visit was held at which the guest of honour was, of course, Miss Milligan and other

distinguished guests were Mr & Mrs Billy Mackie Snedden. Hamish Gidley-Baird was the piper.

After the 1974 examinations Canberra & District thus possessed eight full teachers. In 1975 Jean Conway arrived to increase this number. With such activity, nine teachers and the presence of two examiners (Les Cumming and Kevin Connolly) in the region it must have been very gratifying for those dancers from the early days to see how their interest and efforts had flourished. Growth did not stop however.

In 1978, stimulated by Les Cumming, Bobby Clark and Jean Conway, and after the necessary formalities, the R.S.C.D.S Canberra and District Branch was formed. The flower had appeared, hopefully in time to fruit and seed, in its turn propagating the pleasure that is Scottish Country Dancing.

Author's Note:

This is the penultimate part of this little story of our history up to the formation of our Branch. In the next edition of Scotch Circle I hope to publish an account of our musical history to finalise "Roots". No account of our dancing history would be complete without this.

I am indebted to many people for their courtesy and patience with my often importunate questioning, but my special thanks go to Bobby and Jean Clark, Helen Morrow, Mr & Mrs Andy Wood, Peter and Barbara Treacey, Sheila Barritt -Eyles, Les and Aileen Cumming, Stewart McKenzie and Miss Gibson. My thanks also go to Mrs Flora Phillips, Mrs "Cissy" Ogilvie, Bob and Margaret McAuslan, Ella Ross, Mack and Helen McLaren, Bill and Margaret Robb, Gordon Henderson, May McKenzie, Mary Caulfield, Gordon Moncrieff, Tom Trebilco, Mr R.A. Kelly, Rose Mason, Rae Geddes, Jane Lindsay, Kathleen Henderson, Jan Livingstone, Henry Reid, Anne Greig, Margaret Mitchell, Fred Frank, David Currie, Jan Ferris, Cath McMaster, Jan Griggs, Harry Schmidt, George and Cath Laburn, Moya Ewin, Bev Sproule and to all those people who in passing may have just said a word, or mentioned an event that helped to "gel" apparently unrelated facts or confirm already established information.