

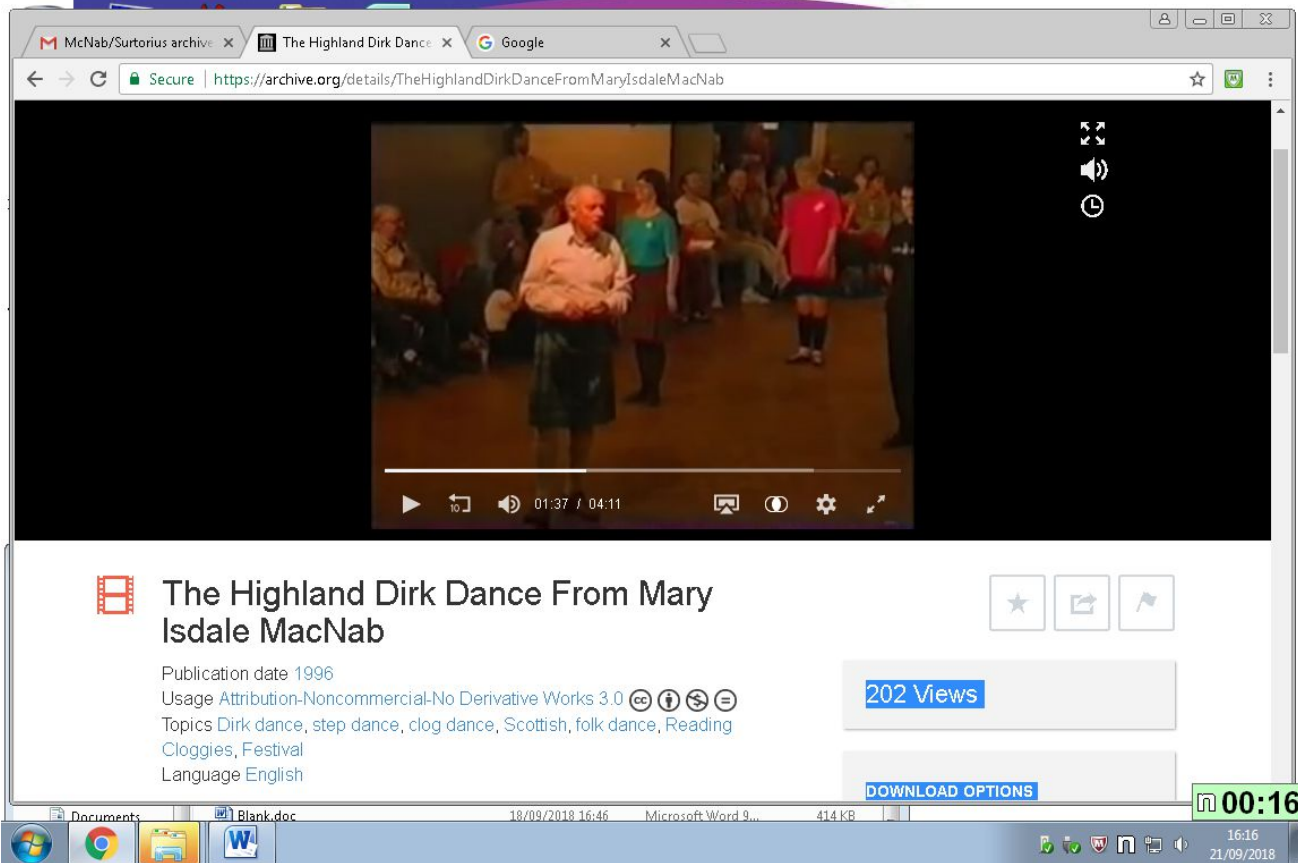
The Missing MacNaberries

T04 The Dirk Dance
(Man's solo)
Strathspey + Reel (6 steps)

Description found in
Traditional Step-Dancing in Scotland
by Joan & Tom Flett 1996
(pp178-184)

The Mary Isdale MacNab Collection *T04 The Dirk Dance*

Colin Robertson commented in September 2018 *The Dirk Dance* was bought by Tom Flett who passed on to John Wesencraft who in turn passed the dance on to Jane Harrison, daughter of Tom and Joan Flett. The reason for all the *passing on* was that Mrs MacNab insisted that the dance should only ever be known by two living persons at any one time (Great way to preserve a Heritage). This was the agreement that Tom took with the dance, but when Tom died Joan did not feel obliged to maintain that agreement and published the dance in *Traditional Step-Dancing In Scotland* in 1996.



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a video player. The video player is titled "The Highland Dirk Dance From Mary Isdale MacNab" and has 202 views. The video is currently at 01:37 / 04:11. The browser address bar shows the URL <https://archive.org/details/TheHighlandDirkDanceFromMaryIsdaleMacNab>. The system tray at the bottom shows the date 18/09/2018 16:46 and the time 16:16 on 21/09/2018.

Uploaded by Chris J Brady on 21 May 2014

Highland Dirk Dance from Mary Isdale MacNab

This is The Highland Dirk Dance as 'collected' by Mary Isdale MacNab in Vancouver Canada. In the 1950s/60s she taught this to Professor Tom Flett of Liverpool University - with the strict instruction that it only ever be taught to one other person. So, Professor Flett taught it to one John Wesencraft (here in the kilt). After Professor Flett passed away, John taught it to Professor Flett's daughter, Jane (on the left more-or-less behind John).

This is the only known recording of the dance and it was filmed at a teaching workshop in 1996 at the Reading Cloggies Festival of Step and Clog Dance. Thanks are due to Prof. Tony Barrand of Boston University for processing the recording from a poor-quality VHS tape donated by one Mike Cherry of the Reading Cloggies. The clip was originally uploaded with permission to Professor Barrand's DVRA - The Digital Video Research Archive of Morris, Sword, and Clog Dancing at Boston University at <http://www.bu.edu/dbin/dance/>

The same clip is uploaded here as a mirror of the DVRA and to reach a wider public.

Notation for the dance can be found in *Traditional Step Dances of Scotland* by Tom and Joan Flett. Further info. re: *The Dirk Dance* and other fighting dances of the British Isles can be found at: <http://www.dirkdance.tripod.com>

The Dirk Dance taught at the Reading Traditional Step-Dance Weekend in 1996

Introduction by Joan Flett

The Dirk Dance was taught to my husband, Tom, by Mrs Mary Isdale MacNab of Vancouver. Tom was an accomplished dancer and was the only person to collect dances and their history both in the field and from literary sources. He continued this work, both in Scotland and the Lake District, until his death in 1976 at the early age of fifty-two.

Mrs MacNab was a well-known teacher in Canada and, at one time, had a dance school of one hundred pupils and two teams of exhibition dancers. She did not collect dances in the technical sense but obtained them from other dance teachers in Canada. She was born in Glasgow and her family emigrated to Canada in 1907 when she was nine or ten years old. She had already had dancing lessons in Glasgow and, shortly after going to Canada, she and her sister had lessons from Mr D C Mather. The dances she learnt included the Dirk Dance and either her mother or Mr Mather insisted that all instructions were written down.

Mr Mather was an orphan and had been brought up at The Royal Caledonian School at Bushy in Hertfordshire where he was taught to dance and pipe. He left school in 1877 and became piper to various landowners in Scotland where he took part in piping and dancing competitions. He emigrated to Canada in 1899 and, sometime after 1914, went to America where he died in a road accident in 1941.

In 1948 Mrs MacNab came over to The Royal Scottish Dance Society Summer School at St Andrew's. At that time she also taught in London where we attended the sessions. We became friends and, on subsequent visits to St Andrew's in 1952 and 1954 she stayed with us at our home on Merseyside. On her visit in 1952 she taught Tom the Dirk Dance. She had the custom of 'selling' dances to favoured pupils with the stipulation they were to be their personal property and not to be taught to anyone else. Tom observed this edict for a number of years but, eventually, in order to ensure the survival of the dance, he taught it to John Wesencraft who, in turn, taught it to our younger daughter, Jane. Tom and Mrs MacNab kept up a voluminous correspondence and we were with her in Vancouver in 1966 shortly before her death.

There are numerous literary references to dancing with a dirk in Scotland dating back to at least 1806. They refer both to solo dances and also to two people taking part. In 1957 it was also recalled by older ex-patriots in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. It sometimes bore a resemblance to an even older mumming dance called Cailleach an Dudaln (The Old Woman of the Mill-dust) which had a ritual element with a death and resurrection theme. The 'mill-dust' refers to the dust from a variety of oats which, when threshed, made the thresher's face black with the dust.

Full details of the background and the instructions for the dance are given in our book *Traditional Step-Dancing In Scotland*, J F and T M Flett, Scottish Cultural Press, Unit 6, Newbattle Abbey Business Park, Newbattle Road, Dalkeith, EH22 3LJ, £12.99. Tel. 0131 660 6366 Fax: 0131 660 4666 Email info@scottishbooks.com