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### Mary Isdale MacNab: Teacher and Choreographer

Vancouver dancers can enjoy the good fortune, rare in North America, to look back over a 65-year span of Scottish Country Dancing. We owe this good fortune mainly to the organizing genius of Mrs. Thomas Bingham. Yet another great lady was present almost from the start, one whose gifts almost miraculously complemented those of Mrs. Bingham. Mary Isdale was known professionally by her maiden name, but her married name, MacNab, has been associated with her dances and is now perhaps more recognizable. Her work served to cement the link between country and highland dancing, and between the Vancouver dance community and the S.C.D.S., later the R.S.C.D.S., in Scotland.

In 1929, interest in Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver was awakened when Mrs. Bingham gave a lecture-demonstration first to the Scottish Society and then to the Overseas League. Mrs. MacNab (who had emigrated from Scotland as a young girl in 1907, and was recognized as the leading teacher of Highland dancing in Vancouver) was invited to the second lecture. From then on she played a steady supporting role in the country dance movement in Vancouver. She served on the Vancouver group's committee and as its representative on the Provincial Society executive, and led step practices in her dance studio. Later she hosted Miss Milligan on one of her Vancouver visits. She was the prime force behind the first weekend Camp at Crescent Beach, where she also taught. She formed the Prince Charles Scottish Country Dance group, and led the Braemar group, a demonstration group consisting mainly of the parents of her Highland pupils.

Mrs. MacNab's professional life, however, centred on her work as a teacher of Highland dancing, which spanned more than 40 years. This long career had a spectacular public side: she put on annual dance displays ("The Gathering of the Clans"); toured with her group of young dancers, the B.C. Highland Lassies; was invited to be director of dancing at the Edinburgh Tattoo in 1964; and founded the Vancouver Ladies' Pipe Band, who still wear the MacNab tartan.

But her main contribution is in her dances. They bring together the Highland and country dance traditions, and cover a great range--from pure country dance to dances consisting almost entirely of highland stepping, such as sword dances. Most characteristic of all are her set dances: "Bonnie Anne," "MacLaine of Lochbuie," "MacDonald of Sleat," and others. These are danced in formations, with many country dance figures as well as passages of highland stepping; they are remarkable for their fluid choreography, with one formation melting into another, which makes them superb demonstration dances.

The origin and development of these dances provoke interesting questions. Most are based on dances originally collected by Mrs. MacNab from a variety of sources--some from Scottish emigrants in Vancouver and Nova Scotia, some from sources in Scotland. Mrs. MacNab seems to have lent an open ear to anyone willing to teach her a dance, especially old people describing dances they knew as children.

Her collecting was not that of a scholar, however. Since she began recording dances while still a student, as many as thirty years might elapse between the collecting and the reconstruction of a dance. Hugh Thurston writes from first-hand knowledge of her method:

. . . Mrs. MacNab reconstructed dances from her notes--or, rather, not entirely from her notes (which were very brief) but from a combination of the notes, her memory, and her experience of, and feel for, the kind of movement that is a valid part of Scottish dance tradition. (*Thistle* No. 33, October 1967--a memorial issue for Mrs. MacNab)

The finished dances appear to have evolved also from the collaboration between Mrs. MacNab and her class, rather as plays can evolve in a collaborative workshop process. They also owe much to Mrs. MacNab's artistic feeling for dance as spectacle, her flair for organizing an effective and varied performance. Her theatrical instincts may be seen in her published instructions, for example in the last eight bars of "Because He Was a Bonnie Lad":

The four men dance forward with three pas de basque, tap their partners on the shoulder and dance one step backwards. The women turn quickly, give partner right hand and all turn once round, finishing hand in hand facing each other in the middle ready for the bow and curtsy.

Mrs. MacNab's theatrical instincts are visible also in the linking of the dances, in her programs and published notes, to romantic Scottish legend. For example, "McLaine of Lochbuie" (a magnificent dance collected from Murdo McLaine of Nova Scotia) is said to have been "danced in honour of Red Hector who was one of the heroes of the Battle of Flodden." "Lamont of Inveryne" is said to be "from the 15th century and to have been danced on the occasion of the visit of Mary, Queen of Scots, to Toward Castle." "The Eight Men of Moidart" (which must be distinguished from the R.S.C.D.S. dance of the same name) is connected with a legend of the '45 in Mrs. MacNab's program notes:

These were the men who came from France to Scotland in 1745 with Prince Charles Stewart. In order to gain the favour of the Scottish people, they dressed in their best doublets and danced a reel on the wharf. It was named "The Eight Men of Moidart" as this was the sign that the Prince and his followers were accepted.

Given such a story, it's no surprise that we have more than one dance of this name in the repertoire!

All this may arouse our scepticism. Yet this scepticism may be premature. The "Hebridean Weaving Lilt" was collected by Mrs. MacNab from a Canadian whose Norwegian ancestors had settled in Iona. This "occupational" dance belongs to the genre of Norse weaving dance which the Vikings took with them wherever they settled. Even Emerson (who in *A Social History of Scottish Dance* throws doubt on Mrs. MacNab's scholarly credentials) points out that "The Hebridean Weaving Lilt" is closer to its Scandinavian original than the "Foula Reel," the R.S.C.D.S. reconstruction of a similar weaving dance, which was derived primarily from a version popular in the 19th century ballroom.

"McNeil of Barra" is another example of a dance combining Mrs. MacNab's instinct for effective display with her role as a transmitter of traditional dances. Here six women stand in two lines facing each other. A single man in the centre of the rectangle dances Fling steps while the women dance figures around him. The dance concludes with 16 high cuts performed by the man, presumably to the awed wonder of the women--a superb opportunity to exhibit the talents of a star male pupil! (Probably this role was danced by Billy Kerr, who according to Mary Wattum was Mrs. MacNab's outstanding male dancer.) However, we also find that the dance (collected by Mrs. MacNab from L. McNeil of Castlebay on Barra) closely resembles a dance found by the scholarly researchers Tom and Joan Flett when they went in search of traditional Hebridean dances in 1953:

[The letters] managed to find on Barra an 88-year-old piper, Neil McNeil, who remembered some details of the [ship] dance. Its full name was "An long Bharrach" ("The Barra ship"); six dancers formed the outline of the ship and the seventh, who represented the mast, danced with each of them in turn. It was taught about 1881 by Ronald Morrison at Castlebay. There can be no doubt that "An long Bharrach" and "McNeil of Barra" are one and the same dance. (*The Thistle* No. 33)

In fact, Mrs. MacNab seems to have picked up and accentuated the dramatic element in the traditional dances. A traditional dramatic or pantomimic dance of the West Highlands is "Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha" ("Reeling of the Black Cocks"). Mrs. MacNab's "Reel of the Blackcocks" is a stage version of this dance, which, according to Hugh Thurston, "has developed a long way from a simple social dance to a representation of the strutting and fighting of two black-cocks, ending with the victory of one; it is danced with tremendous verve and energy" (*The Thistle* 33). Once again, the basis is traditional, but the dance in performance bears the stamp of Mrs. MacNab's choreography.

Mrs. MacNab's work was widely recognized both here and in Scotland. When Miss Milligan visited Vancouver in 1961, "she saw a performance of Vancouver's own dances, arranged by Mrs. MacNab. The highlight was the scintillating performance of 'The Eight Men of Moidart' and 'Lovat Star' by 16 dancers" (*The Thistle* No. 1, November 1961). Mrs. MacNab subsequently taught her dances at St. Andrews, and a number were published by the R.S.C.D.S. (two volumes--27 dances in all--are currently available). Mrs. MacNab's relationship with Miss Milligan was one of mutual esteem. Miss Milligan taught two new MacNab dances at Summer School 1964, and she herself wrote the obituary for Mrs. MacNab which appeared in the *R.S.C.D.S. Bulletin* for 1968. She mentions Mrs. MacNab's loyalty to the R.S.D.C.S., her enjoyment of Summer School, and her dry sense of humour.

Despite their comparative difficulty, several favourite MacNab dances became established in the Vancouver party and ball program repertoire. The frequent recording of the dances (for example, "Bonnie Anne" was recorded by the Gordon, Johnstone, and MacLeod bands in Scotland as well as the Teuchters and Schiehallion in Vancouver) shows their popularity throughout the Scottish Country Dance world.

When the Vancouver Branch was formed in 1964, Mrs. MacNab and Mrs. Bingham were made Honorary Vice-Presidents, "in recognition of the fact that Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver owed its beginnings and success during the past forty years to their efforts." Both attended the Branch's first Annual Ball.

On September 18, 1964, the Vancouver Ballet Society presented an extravaganza of Scottish dance, song, and music to honour Mrs. MacNab after her successful tour of Scotland. The Ladies' Pipe Band paraded down the aisles of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, the Highland Lassies and the R.S.C.D.S. danced, and Mrs. MacNab received a commemorative scroll from the City of Vancouver.

Mrs. MacNab's most lasting memorial, however, is in her dances.

R. Coupe, Archivist

Thanks to Hugh Thurston and Mary Wattum for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

## Mary Isdale MacNab

No better material for a Scottish dance performance can be found than the dances of Mary Isdale MacNab. Their variety of formations and footwork is stunning: circles melt into lines, squares into diagonals, and the dancers break from highland stepping into travelling steps. These complex, exciting dances are the legacy of a woman whose vision of Scottish dance was broad and inclusive, and who was a gifted teacher as well as a collector and creator of dances. In her work and through her dances, she helped to cement links between country and highland dancing, and between the Vancouver dance community and the SCDS, later the RSCDS, in Scotland.

Born in Govan, Scotland, Mary Isdale emigrated to Vancouver as an eight-year-old child in 1907, and soon embarked on her lifelong career as a Highland dance teacher. Her students won trophy after trophy and she quickly became recognized as the leading teacher in Vancouver. Those students who did not wish to compete were encouraged to perform at garden parties, teas, concerts, and the school's grand end-of-year recital, "The Gathering of the Clans." Mrs. MacNab had an eye for dramatic spectacle, and she often linked her dances to Highland history and legend. Former student Mavis Pickett describes the elaborate performance of a dance called "The Brooch of Lorne" honouring the brooch wrested from Robert the Bruce in 1306. It was designed to be seen from the balconies of a military armoury, with the dancers making up a colossal Cairngorm brooch. The central "jewel," dancer Bill Elliot, enacted the spirit of Bruce in a "Dirk Dance." Four more men were the "claws" of the jewel, and surrounding them were concentric circles of "rubies," "emeralds," and "sapphires" wearing red, blue, and green caps respectively. First one circle and then another would dance around the central jewel. Lines of other dancers radiated out from them, dressed in white and silver. Dances of this kind were certainly coloured by a romantic vision of Highland history, but they were splendidly conceived.

Piping and dancing were closely integrated in those days in Vancouver, but piping was still a male preserve until Mrs. MacNab founded the Vancouver Ladies' Pipe Band. She toured extensively with the Pipe Band and her team of young dancers, the BC Highland Lassies. Hers was the first Scottish dance team from abroad invited to perform at the Edinburgh Tattoo, where Mrs. MacNab was director of dancing in 1964. Some students, like Irene Donegan, belonged to both Pipe Band and Highland Lassies. Irene also made the kilts and jackets for the Pipe Band, and remembers the huge bolts of MacNab tartan arriving from Scotland. The Vancouver Ladies' Pipe Band continued to wear the MacNab tartan into the 1990s.

Mrs. MacNab's vision of Scottish dance went beyond Highland dancing. Organized Scottish country dancing began in Vancouver as early as 1929, when Mrs. Thomas Bingham (another Scottish immigrant) gave lecture-demonstrations to the Scottish Society and the Overseas League. As the leading Highland dance teacher in Vancouver, Mrs. MacNab was invited to the second lecture. From then on she played a steady supporting role in the country dance movement in Vancouver. She served on the Vancouver group's committee, represented Vancouver on the Provincial Society executive, and led step practices in her dance studio. Later she hosted Miss Milligan on one of her Vancouver visits. In 1960, she was the prime force behind the first weekend Camp at Crescent Beach, where she also taught. She formed the Prince Charles Scottish Country Dance group and led the Braemar group, a demonstration team consisting mainly of the parents of her Highland pupils.

When the Vancouver Branch of the RSCDS was formed in 1964, Mrs. MacNab and Mrs. Bingham were made Honorary Vice-Presidents, "in recognition of the fact that Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver owed its beginnings and success during the past forty years to your efforts." Both attended the Branch's first Annual Ball. Two years before her death, on September 18, 1964, the Vancouver Ballet Society presented an extravaganza of Scottish dance, song, and music to honour Mrs. MacNab after her successful tour of Scotland. The Ladies' Pipe Band paraded down the aisles of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, the Highland Lassies and the RSCDS danced, and Mrs. MacNab received a commemorative scroll from the City of Vancouver.

Mrs. MacNab's work was widely recognized in her lifetime, both in Canada and in Scotland. When Miss Milligan visited Vancouver in 1961, Hugh Thurston wrote, "she saw a performance of Vancouver's own

dances, arranged by Mrs. MacNab. The highlight was the scintillating performance of 'The Eight Men of Moidart' and 'Lovat Star' by sixteen dancers." Mrs. MacNab subsequently taught her dances at St. Andrews; her relationship with Miss Milligan was one of mutual esteem. Miss Milligan taught two new MacNab dances at Summer School in 1964, and she herself wrote the obituary for Mrs. MacNab in the *RSCDS Bulletin* for 1968. She mentions Mrs. MacNab's loyalty to the RSCDS, her enjoyment of Summer School, and her dry sense of humour.

Above all, it was in her dances that Mrs. MacNab brought together the Highland and country dance traditions. The MacNab group dances—MacNabberies, as they were affectionately known in Canada—belong to diverse genres of Scottish dance. These include the threesome reel ("Shepherd's Crook"), the country dance ("Jeannie o' the Witchin' E'e"), the quadrille ("Kelvingrove"), the ecossaise ("St. Andrew's Nicht"), the Hebridean pantomimic dance ("Reel of the Blackcocks"), and the occupational dance ("Hebridean Weaving Lilt"). The structure of many of her elaborate set dances is also based on alternating phrases of setting steps and travelling figures, as in the broad Scottish reel tradition. In this eclectic approach, Mary Isdale MacNab resembles other great teachers of Scottish dance (Peacock, Anderson, MacLennan) who also recorded and taught many forms of Scottish dance.

Mary Isdale MacNab was in part collector and in part creator of her dances, and she would probably have seen no contradiction between the two roles. The traditional dances seem to have been seeds from which her choreographed versions grew. Most are based on dances she originally collected from a variety of sources—some from Scottish emigrants in Vancouver and Nova Scotia, some from sources in Scotland, some from Scottish seamen (Vancouver was a busy port city). She seems to have lent an open ear to anyone willing to teach her a dance, especially old people describing dances they knew as children. Several of her dances were learned from her Canadian teacher D.C. Mather, a piper and dancer, and from Mrs. Bain, a Vancouver high school teacher whom Mary Isdale met during World War I.

Since Mary Isdale MacNab began recording dances while still a student, as many as thirty years might elapse between the collecting and the reconstruction of a dance. Hugh Thurston writes in *The Thistle* from first-hand knowledge of her method: "Mrs. MacNab reconstructed dances from her notes—or, rather, not entirely from her notes (which were very brief) but from a combination of the notes, her memory, and her experience of, and feel for, the kind of movement that is a valid part of Scottish dance tradition." The finished dances evolved also from the collaboration between Mrs. MacNab and her class. Mavis Pickett describes her trying out first one figure and then another until she was satisfied with the result. The dances also owe much to her artistic feeling for dance as spectacle and her flair for organizing an effective and varied performance. She seems to have picked up and accentuated the theatrical or dramatic elements in the traditional dances. In "McNeil of Barra," for example, the traditional Barra ship dance in which a single dancer (the mast) is surrounded by a ring of six dancers becomes a display of dancing prowess by a sole male dancer framed by the six women. The fact that Mrs. MacNab wished to showcase the talents of her outstanding young male dancers, Bill Kerr and Bill Elliot, helped to shape her choreography.

Former pupils remember Mrs. MacNab as a kindly teacher who insisted on high standards of performance. According to Mavis Pickett, she had authority and presence, and like an old-fashioned dancie she taught good manners as well as dancing. She took care of her dancers, providing costumes for them (Mavis still has a cairngorm the size of a saucer) but woe betide the student who went out alone at night while on tour. Irene Donegan remembers her protectiveness towards her students, and the sense of security it gave them. Hugh Thurston saw a different side of her:

Mrs. MacNab was, in herself, a very friendly, motherly person. This statement may surprise anyone who met her only briefly, because she had a certain reserve that had to be broken through before her true character became apparent. But many is the pot of home-made jam or soup that bachelor members of her dance-groups have taken home with them after an evening's dancing in her basement, and many is the party that she has enlivened with her rather dry sense of humour . . .  
 .(*The Thistle* No. 33)

Cheryle Macdonald, leader of the Stave Falls Dancers, remembers that Mrs. MacNab wanted her pupils to

enjoy dancing as much as to succeed in competition. Her horizons were broad, and she introduced her students to many forms of dance, including dances from Sweden, Ukraine, and Ceylon. She encouraged her students to become teachers themselves, and remarkably at least six of them eventually formed their own Scottish dance schools in the Vancouver area. Two current groups in particular, the Stave Falls Dancers and the Inverglenn Dancers, continue her philosophy, stressing the love of dance and exploring the traditions of Scottish dance in all their richness. Both groups have travelled and performed in many parts of the world, taking the spirit of Mary Isdale MacNab with them.



Mary Isdale's Highland's Performance Group "BC Highland Lassies" 1926-27



Mary Isdale MacNab with her performance group "The Braemar Dancers"