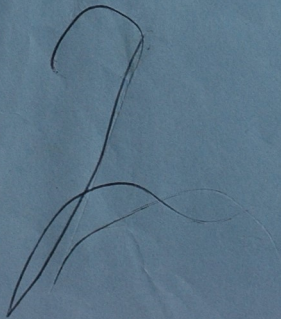




THE THISTLE



MARY ISDALE MACNAB

The death of Mrs. MacNab last November brought to an end a long, valuable and colourful career in the world of Scottish dancing. Her pupils lost not only a teacher but a friend.

Mary Isdale (for this was her maiden name) was born in Govan and was taught highland dancing as a child by E.E. Henderson. She and her family emigrated to Canada in 1907. In 1920 she married Allan MacNab, from Lochgoilhead. She is survived by one son, Gordon.

She started to teach highland dancing in Vancouver about 1910, and at the present time nearly all the leading teachers here are former pupils of hers. What distinguishes her from other teachers of highland dancing is that instead of confining herself to the standard repertoire for highland dancing competitions she also collected, and eventually taught, other, less common, dances. Her collecting started, so she once told me, when she was encouraged by some old highland ladies in Vancouver to learn some of the dances they knew as children. She found that other people were willing to teach dances to her, and her mother encouraged her to write down what she learned. Most of her collecting was done about forty years ago, but she would learn dances whenever the chance presented itself, and she acquired the Weaving Lilt as late as 1946. Her collecting was not like the field-work of a folklorist: it was mostly from other teachers. Vancouver, a busy port, with many highland Scots in its population, was an ideal centre for this.

The dances which Mrs. MacNab collected were very varied. Many were step-dances; she had a magnificent collection of sword-dances and a fine version of the dirk-dance; she had figure-dances for various numbers of dancers, some with plenty of stepping; and she had several quadrilles and two country-dances. Many of her dances were clearly of the sort that a highland teacher would display at his end-of-season concert. These concerts seem to have

been fairly common in Scotland during the late nineteenth century, but fell out of fashion. However, after Mrs. MacNab's dancing school had become established she began to use the dances in her collection in this very way: in an annual concert which developed into the famous "Gathering of the Clans". Besides being a first-class teacher of dancing, Mrs. MacNab had a flair for costuming and for compiling a satisfying and balanced programme. We print later the contents of the last of these concerts, her Centennial Revue of 1966.

For these concerts 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. (I do not believe that anyone could reconstruct the dances completely from the notes alone). In a letter which she wrote to me in 1955 she said

" My latest is 'Lamont of Inveryne', a very complicated dance. As I had my notes for a very long time it was hard to follow, but I have worked on it with my senior class, and have it finished. "

The most striking things about Mrs. MacNab's dances are their variety and flexibility. Nearly all figure-dances are performed in a definite formation: square, column, line, circle, and so on. Not only did Mrs. MacNab's dances have a greater variety of starting-formations than usual (including three-sides-of-a-square in 'MacKenzie of Seaforth' and 'McLeod of Lewis', half a square in 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', and a most interesting formation in 'McNeil of Barra', to be described later) but they tended to melt from one formation to another, not always regaining the original formation at the end of the dance.

Here is a list of some of these dances.

Solo step-dances for men.

Dirk Dance	MacNab's salute	(sword-dance)
The first of August	Earl of Ross	(sword-dance)

Solo step-dances for women

Highland laddie	Over the water	An cailin cuairt
Island herd-maid	Yellow-haired laddie	Lady Louisa MacDonald
Bonnie breast-knot	(or My lady's breast-knot, or The lovers' knot).	

Duets

Jacobite sword-dance	Reel of the black-cocks
The braes of Tulliemet	Mairi Ban's bridal

Trios

The shepherd's crook	Bronach	The fiery cross
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Sword-dances (other than solo and duet)

Culloden	The Clansmen
Argyle sword-dance	Broadswords of Lochiel

Set-dances for men (other than sword-dances)

MacKenzie of Seaforth	The whirlygig	Friockheim
The house of Fraser	The sailors' knot	

Miming or acting dances
 Flower of Benbecula (one woman)
 Reel of the black-cocks
 (two dancers in costume)

F. shot
by Maudie's lines
 Village maid (one woman)
 The fiery cross (two men and
 a boy)

Special dances
 Hebridean weaving-lilt
 Sheena's dance
 A courting-dance

The men of Moussa McNeil of Barra
 Eight men of Moidart Muilean dubh
 The brooch of Lorne

Country-dances
 Jeannie o' the witchin' e'e (longways)

St. Andrew's night
 (circle)

Set-dances

The Duke of Gordon's welcome to Aberdeen
 Braes of Balquhider
 Glangarry waltz
 Orcadian wedding-dance
 Bonnie Anne
 MacLaine of Lochbuie
 MacLeod of Lewis
 Laird of Dochart's reel
 Lerwick reel
 Portree lassies

St. Andrew's night
 The Cameronians
 Waltz cotillion
 Rouken Glen
 Over the Dee and over the Don
 Brig o' Doon
 Because he was a
 bonnie lad
 Huntly reel
 Bonnie Prince Charlie

MacLeod of Dunvegan

Brook of Jona

One highlight of this collection is the fine series of sword-dances. Outside this collection only two Scottish sword-dances seem to be known: the solo sword-dance performed at highland games, and the Argyll broadswords danced in several highland regiments (not the same dance as Mrs. MacNab's Argyle Broadwords). Most of Mrs. MacNab's sword-dances are of the same general type as these two, but 'The Clansmen' is an unusually spectacular one that requires eleven dancers and ten swords.

The backbone of the collection are the set-dances. These are figure-dances for various numbers of couples, mostly in square or longways formation. They vary from 'The Cameronians', which has plenty of highland stepping, through 'The braes of Balquhider', which has a sporadic highland schottische, and 'The Earl of Errol's reel', which has only polka, balance, and pas-de-basque steps, to the stately Kelvingrove, which is a waltz quadrille. Perhaps the most attractive of these dances is 'MacLaine of Lochbuie' or 'MacLaine's hogmanay', for three couples in longways formation. The first part consists of such usual figures as setting, reeling, crossing and turning. The second part is the "hogmanay": the music quickens and each man in succession gathers up his partner, finishing in file, each man with his left arm round his partner's waist; they balance forward and back twice and spin round, each man passing his partner on to the next man. After three such passes everyone has his own partner back and the couples turn to their original places. An interesting little detail is that the dancers do not fall back into their original lines and bow and courtesy to each other from a distance, but retain right hands for this final salutation. Another interesting set-dance is 'MacLeod of Dunvegan'

or 'Dunvegan castle', danced by six couples who start in a solid rectangle. Some of the figures depict the castle itself: for example in the figure called "battlements" four dancers stand shoulder-to-shoulder to form a wall, which slowly rotates. (The other eight dancers form two more walls).

The dances I have called 'acting or miming dances' were prominent in Mrs. MacNab's concerts: she always seemed to have pupils who could act well enough to carry them off. The Reel of the black-cocks is perhaps a stage version of the traditional west highland dance 'Ruidhleath nan coileachan dubh'; if so, it 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 Flower of Benbecula" tells a story: a young girl is taking a dancing-lesson on her mother's orders but she does not really like the slow elegant ballet-like movements and would rather be dancing in highland style. After a while the quick angular movements of the highland dance begin to show through, and as soon as she is sure that her mother is not looking she persuades the musician to change his tune and breaks into a highland fling. Unfortunately a corrupt version of this dance (consisting only of the elegant first part) was put about in Scotland a few years ago under the name "Rose of Benbecula".

A few of the "special dances" deserve comment. 'The Brooch of Lorne' is a spectacular dance that was often the main theme in Mrs. MacNab's annual concerts. The formation consists of concentric rings of dancers; in the very centre a male dancer in a yellow shirt represents the cairngorm in the brooch.

'The eight men of Moidart' is based on the well-known legend of the '45 Rising. There are several dances of this name, all quite different: this one starts as a minuet, then changes to a strathspey and finally to a reel.

Concerning three more of these dances Mrs. MacNab wrote (in a letter):-

A Scottish fantasy, 'The bride of Iona' was based on a story given to me by a Canadian-born Norwegian, Lief Hansen, whose great-grandmother came from Iona. The scene was taken from the arrival of a bridal party at the house of the bridegroom. The dances he gave me were very Scandinavian with a highland flavour, and the bridal song I found later was part of an old Norwegian dance. The Hebridean Weaving Lilt was collected from Bellshare [presumably Baleshare], North Uist. Another Hebridean dance used in 'The bride of Iona' was 'The court-ing dance'. It is almost like Daldans. Another, 'Sheena's dance', has a Swedish tune.

A particularly interesting dance is 'McNeil of Barra'. Mrs. MacNab got it from L. McNeil of Castlebay, which is on Barra. Six girls stand in two lines; a man in the centre of the rectangle so formed dances a Fling while the girls dance various figures round him. Then the music speeds up to reel tempo and he dances with

the girls, two at a time, rather as in 'The Bumpkin'. Now it is well known that many dances once common in the Hebrides have faded away: of some, brief descriptions are known; of others, only the name. Only the name survived of 'An long' ('The ship' in Gaelic): it was mentioned, in a list of such forgotten dances, by D.G. MacLennan in his book 'Highland and traditional Scottish dances' (1950) with the remarks that it was Hebridean. Joan and Tom Flett have described in their book 'Traditional dancing in Scotland' how they went in search of these dances in 1953 and managed to find on Barra an 88-year-old piper, Neil McNeil, who remembered some details of the 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 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.

Much more could be written about these dances if space permitted. Since it does not, let us turn to a description of how Mrs. MacNab collected them.

The first dances she collected were from D.C. Mather, who had emigrated to Canada in 1899, and from whom Mrs. MacNab and her sister took dancing lessons soon after they settled in Vancouver (they were his only pupils at the time). He taught them the standard highland dances and, in addition the Dirk Dance, 'Culloden', and 'The fiery cross'. Although Mrs. MacNab took these dances down, she had no idea then of collecting dances in earnest: this only started when she met some old highland ladies who were eager to teach their dances to her. One of these ladies was Mrs. Fassiefern Bain (daughter of the Rev. Alexander Stewart, better known as 'Nether Lochaber'), who taught her 'MacDonald of Sleat', 'Jeannie o' the witchin' e'e', 'Highland laddie' and 'Over the water'. We have already mentioned Lief Hansen. Other sources were:-

Lochlann Campbell (Nova Scotia) : Lamont of Inverynie, Portree lassies

Mrs. Gilbert Fontaine (Quebec) : The Earl of Errol's reel
Graham Forbes (Ontario), who got the dance from his grandfather :
The Duke of Gordon's welcome to Aberdeen

J. McAskill (Stornoway) : McLeod of Lewis
Angus MacAulay, an engineer on a tramp ship (Lewis) : The house
of Fraser

Allan MacDonald (Truro, Nova Scotia) : MacKenzie of Seaforth,
Dunvegan Castle

Murdo MacLaine (Nova Scotia) : McLaine of Lochbuie

Finlay McLennan (Nova Scotia) : Jacobite sword-dance

Archie MacNab (Toronto) : The laird of Dochart's reel

L. McNeil (Castlebay, Barra) : McNeil of Barra

Neil McNeil, aged 89 (Craigston, Barra) : The reel of the black-
cocks

Hector MacPherson (Lochboisdale) : The first of August, The
Harris sailors, Whirlygig

Torquil MacPherson (Lochboisdale) : The flower of Benbecula
Mrs. Nimmo (Glasgow) : Rouken glen
An elderly lady from Argyllshire : Bonnie Anne
An engineer on a Pacific liner : The sailors' knot
A pipe-major in the Seaforths (London, 1935) : The broadswords
of Lochiel

In addition, Mrs. MacNab taught two dances collected by her brother in North Carolina: Because he was a bonnie lad, and Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Besides using her more spectacular dances for her concerts and at such gatherings as the monthly concerts of the local Gaelic societies, or the annual Vancouver Folk Festival, Mrs. MacNab produced a team of dancers to perform at tattoos, at first local, but eventually in 1964 at the most famous of all Scottish tattoos: the tattoo on Edinburgh castle esplanade on the occasion of Edinburgh Festival. (They are so far the only team of Scottish dancers from abroad that have been invited to perform there). The next year these dancers toured the U.S.A. as part of the Royal Marine tattoo.

Although Mrs. MacNab concentrated on the highland style of dancing, she by no means neglected the social dance. She organized the Prince Charles club, where country-dances, quadrilles and the eightsome reel were danced weekly during the winter season; and she obtained a teacher's certificate from the R.S.C.D.S. In 1948 she visited the summer school at St. Andrews, and taught four of the dances from her collection: MacDonald of Sleat, The Hebridean weaving lilt, Rouken glen, and The shepherd's crook. These dances were a resounding success, adding some much-appreciated variety to the repertoire of country-dance enthusiasts. They were printed for her by the R.S.C.D.S. in pamphlet form under the title "Scottish country dance book of four set dances as collected by Mrs. Mary Isdal [e] MacNab of Vancouver and given to the Society at their 17th Summer School at St. Andrews". This was the first of a series of such pamphlets and Mrs. MacNab's pleasure at its success was only slightly marred by the fact that the Society printed for the Weaving lilt a tune which she considered most unsuitable: instead of the tune she used, a variant of "Charistiona Chaimbeul", they printed "Orange and blue" (under the title "Broachan laoi[m]h" [sic]). There are some blemishes in the descriptions of other dances, but the only other one that I have heard her speak strongly about is the changing of "Kelvingrove" from a waltz to a strathspey.

Somewhere between the Prince Charles club and her young professional pupils comes the 'Braemar' group, consisting of eight adult couples, all personal friends of hers, and many of them parents of her pupils. To this group she taught over the years many of the less strenuous dances from her collection. These dances were only relatively less strenuous - the Braemar group's repertoire did not include dances like The clansmen or The sailors of Harris, but the men of the group could and did dance eight bars of high-cuts when required. It was probably teaching this group that gave

Mrs. MacNab the experience and confidence necessary for her teaching at St. Andrews, for she always regarded herself as a teacher of children and was rarely at ease when teaching adults except for this one group of personal friends.

Mrs. MacNab showed a keen interest in the dances of other nations besides Scotland. She arranged for Swedish, Ukrainian, Irish and other teachers to give instruction in their own dances to her pupils, and she even collected a few exotic dances herself. One of these was a stick-dance from Ceylon in which two dancers, kneeling, clash two wooden beams together in time to the music, while half a dozen others dance round, over and between the beams with athletic leaps and crouches, being careful, of course, to land between the beams only when they are apart and to leap away before the next beat, when they clash together.

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: she was one of those rare people who can tell a joke against themselves. There is no doubt that her girl pupils, from the youngest to those who are now adult, were extraordinarily fond of her. She was a mainstay in the Scottish life of Vancouver. She was active in the St. Andrews and Caledonian Society, the Glasgow and district association, the Gaelic Society, the B.C. Highland dancing association, and the Vancouver branch of the Canadian Folk Society. She also took a great interest in the highland dancing in San Diego (where her sister and niece live). She was a founder of the Vancouver ladies' pipe band (who wear MacNab tartan in her honour) and was its president for 25 years. She also took a great interest in the Vancouver police pipe band and the pipe band of the local Seaforth Highlanders battalion. She was, finally, one of the founders (in 1960) of the annual Scottish dance week-end, which attracts dancers each May from as far as Southern California and Northern B.C., and once even from Alaska. She was, moreover, no mere figure-head: before the first week-end she made several awkward trips by car and ferry in search of a suitable site.

Mrs. MacNab's passing leaves many gaps which will not be filled; but her dances at least will remain a fitting memorial to her.

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