

The Missing MacNabberies



Mary Isdale MacNab in July 1957 teaching *MacLeod of Dunvegan* at the at Pinewoods Camp SCD Weekend, Plymouth, Massachusetts.

In 1948 Mrs MacNab visited the 17th Summer School at St Andrews, and taught the first four dances from her collected dances. So writes Hugh Thurston, in *The Thistle* No. 33. Then, between the late 1940's and the early 1960's the RSCDS published what were affectionately known in Canada as The MacNabberies, i.e.

dances supposedly collected by Mary Isdale MacNab of Vancouver. The dance descriptions (sometimes with diagrams) were printed, with music, in nine leaflets. Each Set, as they were known, consisted of about three or four dances, resulting in a total of 31 dances. In fact, four of these dances are stated as not being collected by Mrs MacNab. Two were collected by others, viz: *Tir nan Og (Land of The Eternal Young)*, by Iain MacFarlane of Toronto, and *The Duke of Gordon's Welcome to Aberdeen*, by Graham Forbes of Ontario and two others: *From Scotia's Shores We're Noo Awa'* and *The Silver Tassie* were newly devised by Robert Campbell of Ontario and John Drewry of Aberdeen respectively.

These dance sets had gone out of print by the early 1970's, so, when the RSCDS collected them all together and published the MacNab dances into two convenient volumes in 1987, it seemed that these challenging dances would be accessible to all. Interestingly, the two volumes only published 27 MacNab dances, though in the same year they published leaflets of *From Scotia's Shores...*, with the new tournée progression, and *The Silver Tassie*,

demonstration for 12 couples (4x3) in 1990 at Porchester Hall, which can be viewed on Youtube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6lwGHAVx-w. Edna Russell stated that this 128 bar strathspey was originally published in Mrs MacNab's *Collection of Dances of the Scottish Clans* and called it *Mackenzie of Seaforth*. However, in 1968 it was published as *McKenzie of Seaforth* by Elizabeth Sutorius, Mrs MacNab's niece, and later, in 1991, by Ron Wallace in *Scottish Step Dances 1*. Although I have the description of this particular dance, it is certainly implied from the use of the word 'Collection' by Edna Russell that there may be other MacNab dances in existence! Does any reader possess this collection? Given the Edna Russell connection, could it be that this was an ISTD publication?



Steve Leonard in the middle of *McNeil of Barra* at the Pinewoods Camp SCD Weekend, Plymouth, Massachusetts, July 1957.

In addition, there are a number of dances that may also have been collected by Mrs MacNab, though not included in any of the publications mentioned. Speaking to Paul during my research in connection with *McKenzie of Seaforth*, he recalled in his youth dancing the 4x64bar reel *St Andrew's Day* (not to be confused with the Book 24 version), and felt that its form was likely to be a collected dance by Mrs MacNab, but could find nothing to substantiate this or an official description of the dance; I too had made separate enquiries to no avail.

A further display dance, believed by Dr Thurston to be unpublished, is referred to in a Vancouver dance history, where Rosemary Coupe writes: "Mavis Pickett, a former student of Mrs MacNab, 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 the Seaforth 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 jewel. Lines of other dancers, dressed in white and silver, radiated out from them. Such dances were more decorative than historical, but they were splendidly conceived."

Finally, Wilson Nicol (previous editor of *The Reel*) recalled being there when Mrs MacNab presented a dance called *Friockheim* to Dr McLennan of RSCDS Friockheim Branch, ostensibly collected in Amerstburgh in Ontario by emigrants from Lübeck. "The trail is so tenuous as to be incredible," said the sceptical Dr Nicol, who would only believe it today if substantiated personally by Mrs MacNab! So I can go no further with obtaining a description of this dance since Mrs MacNab passed away (age 77) in November 1966!

The possibility that Mrs MacNab devised some of these dances herself, rather than collecting them is summed up by Rosemary Coupe in her article on Mary Isdale MacNab in RSCDS *Bulletin* Issue 82 November 2004 p13 as "she was in part collector and in part creator of her dances, and she would probably have seen no contradiction between these two roles." Either way, there does seem to be scope for the Membership Services Committee to publish a more inclusive collection of MacNab dances, with suitable accompanying music.

Stephen Webb



St Andrews 21st Summer School: *Brig o'Doon*, line led by Mrs West then, Elspeth Goodall, Mr Lamont, Tommy McMahan and Irene Grant (Mrs Caithness) at the end with lone dancer past RSCDS chairman Alistair Aitkenhead on the left of the line, 31 July 1952.

with the new rondel progression. That left *Tir nan Og* and *The Duke of Gordon's Welcome...* unpublished until in 2007. In that year, both these dances appeared as Pilling style diagrams by Angus Henry, and *The Duke of Gordon's Welcome...* alone, was added as no. 28 in the single volume MacNab dance reprint in the same year. When *Tir nan Og* was finally published, just 18 months ago, in a compilation of Leaflet Dances 1964-1998 and Other Dances, the Society had eventually caught up with these original nine sets!

There is at least one other MacNab dance that has not been published by RSCDS, called *McKenzie of Seaforth*. This set dance for three couples, with figures of special significance, was brought to my attention by Paul Plummer, who incorporated it into a beautifully danced, cleverly choreographed