

Interview with Alice Oliphant and Ross Colwell, St Andrews Branch

Last November editor Jimmie Hill had tea with two well-known TAS members: Alice Oliphant and Ross Colwell of St Andrews Branch. They are experienced teachers and, in their own words, “d’un certain age”.

Jimmie began by asking them when and where they had qualified.

Alice: I went to Dunfermline College in 1952. Miss Milligan was my examiner, but it was the dance lecturers who taught us – Miss Tuck and Margaret Anderson. We all had to do our Preliminary Certificate in our second year at college. It was only when I started teaching that I met Charlie Todd in Markinch Junior Secondary School and he encouraged me to take my Full Certificate. I did that at Summer School in 1957. As a PE teacher I was peripatetic at first, teaching in both primary and secondary schools around the county. I remember one of the first adult classes I taught. I had this little boy playing the piano – it was Bill Ewan, who is still playing for country dancing. I was used to ladies with L.R.A.M.s after their name and here was this little boy. He was wonderful. I didn’t know I had a gem sitting there at the piano. I recently attended a Dunfermline College reunion at which two new PE graduates were present. I asked them how much dance they had done in the course and was appalled to hear they had only done 4 hours in total.

Jimmie: Were the PE-trained country dance teachers different from other teachers?

Alice: I don’t know, but sometimes when I see teachers doing warm-ups nowadays, I wonder if they know what they are doing – or are they just doing things they have seen other teachers doing.

Ross: I don’t see why you have to do a whole half hour of warm-ups before you start dancing. I remember a woman called Elsie who was fairly outspoken in class and said what she thought. Charlie would get some of us out to demonstrate something and she would say, “I’m here tae dance, no tae watch a demonstration team!” Once, when the trend for warm-ups first came in, she shouted out, “If I want keep-fit, I’ll go tae a keep-fit class!” We need more people like that with their feet firmly on the ground.

Alice: I like a bit of banter in a class. I can understand that some people want to do things properly, but it isn’t actually that serious! I’m glad I wasn’t at Summer School the year there was a furore about who puts hands where during hands across. It reminds me of the story of the girl at the pictures, “Take your hand away! Not you! You!”

Jimmie: So where did you train, Ross?

Ross: I trained at an evening class in Perth. I had danced and taught a bit at the White Heather Club in Cyprus. My husband’s job had taken us there. I was trained by Jean Muir, who had been taught by Florence Adams, who was my examiner. The night of my exam was so snowy that the snow gates were closed, but we struggled and managed to get through, and of course in those days you were told whether you had passed or failed on the spot. I remember I had a young boy to play for my classes – he wasn’t old enough to drive so his father brought him – it turned out to be Colin Dewar! Another of my musicians was a young lad called Kenny Anderson – now the famous King Creosote. He didn’t want to play, but his dad told him it would be good training for him. Billy, his father, played for Charlie Todd for years. When Billy started playing you were on your toes and away. The Andersons were a very musical family. I think a lot of the fun has gone out of country dancing these days. Alice was a great teacher. She was great at motivating people and making it fun. Maybe today

people are too worried about where they're going in the more complicated dances. I always remember something Charlie Todd used to say if he was teaching a familiar dance: "Some of you may know this dance and if you do, dance it better."

Alice: Charlie didn't go in for all these exercises at the beginning of a class. But as he went along, he dripped things in. A lot of dancers just want to do dances in classes. I like to take a really simple dance and do every bit of it really well. Last night at the Branch dance, the last dance was *The Laird of Milton's Daughter*. I had forgotten what good fun it was! It all comes down to the giving of hands and having counter balance. A really super super dance. Jim Lindsay was playing and the fiddler gave us such lift. It's a pity that we don't do the older dances as much as we used to. One teacher recently had five minutes left at the end of lesson, so he said, "We'll just do *Jessie's Hornpipe*." Hardly anyone knew it!

Jimmie: So why was there so much dancing in Fife?

Alice: I think the reason there was a lot was because the Co-operative ran classes for juniors. The miners did so much for education – evening classes and so on. I think some miners didn't want their sons to go back down the mines like they had done. I remember there was a man called Charlie Kennedy who trained boys in country dancing. He had been a miner, but became an English teacher. At one point Fife Council primary schools had 14,500 children one year doing country dancing at the Fife Festival Week, but it sadly changed when only a few years ago the peripatetic PE Teachers were removed.

Jimmie: What changes have you seen over the years?

Ross: I think there is now the idea that if a dance is difficult, it must be good. People sometimes say to me that it must have been easier years ago because there weren't as many dances around. That is true to an extent, but there were lots of dances not published by the Society and we did them too. There were also bigger regional differences. If we went to a dance in Dundee or Perth, the programmes would be totally different from ours in St Andrews. Living in the area, we used to enjoy attending Summer School classes, but for us in St Andrews I think the cost of just attending the classes has become very expensive. There should be a basic cost for people who just want to attend the classes. We end up paying £250 for 12 lessons – over £20 per class! That is expensive. Three years ago was the last time I went and it was one of the best classes I have attended. The class really gelled. Robert Mackay and Muriel Johnston were the musicians and Helen Russell and Angela Young were the teachers. It was superb. And there were no stupid questions!

Jimmie: What was it like when you started dancing, Alice?

Alice: I think country dancing got a great boost after the War – everyone wanted to dance. All the dance halls had a specific SCD night, so it was possible to dance Scottish every night of the week. In Dundee you could even go to the Empress Ballroom down at the docks – you thought you were being very risqué going there. When I was in sixth year at school, I went with parents and aunts on Saturday nights to the Rockwell School where Jimmy Shand played. They did the *Quadrilles* there and that was great fun. I remember seeing *Macdonald of Sleat* there. I went back to school and told the PE teacher. She had all the girls from 4th, 5th and 6th years doing it as an item in the Bell Baxter (Cupar) annual gym display. I think the primary schools are still teaching dances like the *Gay Gordons*, but I don't think they do anything very different in the secondary schools. Charlie used to get them doing the five figures of *The Lancers*. And the boys just loved the basket figure where the girls' feet come

off the floor. But we also taught things like the tango and the cha cha cha because that is what people did at social dances in those days.

Jimmie: Why don't we get more beginners?

Ross: We have a 'Come and Try' dance every year and we usually get two or three new people and we integrate them. But it isn't fashionable. We need to stress the health aspect. Unlike something like aerobics, all you need is soft shoes.

Jimmie: So you both must have been taught at some time by Miss Milligan?

Ross: I thought she was very good. She used to shout out, "Come on, sort these lines out. Breadth always better than length – or it might have been the other way round!" And the other comment I remember her shouting was "Nobody is laughing!" We were all too frightened.

Alice: You remember, Ross, what she used to say about two women dancing together! I still say, when there are two men left at the side – like lambs to the slaughter, "Men, you'll have to split these ladies' combinations." People don't know what combinations are nowadays so it falls flat. I know I have been doing it for all those years, but I just think Scottish Country Dancing is such fun!

Jimmie: And, finally, what are your favourite dances?

Alice: Years ago it would have been *The Reel of the 51st* and *Montgomerie's Rant*, but nowadays there are so many. I also love *Miss Allie Anderson*.

Ross: *The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh*. I remember seeing it in a demonstration at Pitlochry and I thought it was just wonderful. And my other favourite is *The Robertson Rant*.

(In the RSCDS we hear a lot about Jordanhill, but Alice trained as a teacher at Dunfermline College. It was founded as a training college for women students of PE in Dunfermline in 1905. In 1908 it was opened to men and a year later it was recognised by the Scottish Education Department as a central institution. In 1931 the male students transferred to Jordanhill and 'Dunf' became a women-only college again. During the war the staff and students transferred to Aberdeen when its buildings in Dunfermline were commandeered by the navy. In 1966 the college transferred to newly-built accommodation at Cramond, just outside Edinburgh.

In 1986 it merged with Moray House College of Education and the following year the male students from Jordanhill transferred to the enlarged Moray House. In August 1998 Moray House became the Faculty of Education of the University of Edinburgh. The Cramond campus closed in 2001 and the department relocated to the Holyrood campus. The Edinburgh Branch used to hold its annual Weekend at the Cramond campus.)