

Jimmie Hill – Miss Milligan meets Madge Wildfire

I remember joining the RSCDS and being proud of the fact that we had published the music and country dances of Scotland. Over the years I have become aware of questions about the accuracy and breadth of the early research on those dances, most notably the very public questioning of Miss Milligan's research methods by Tom and Joan Flett, authors of *Traditional Dancing in Scotland*, in the *Saturday Scotsman* in 1957. Miss Milligan's public reply at the time did not answer their very real concerns.

There are definitely question marks over some of our dances. One of the earliest dances we teach to beginners is *The Frisky* from Book 26. It is attributed to 'Bremner' and the 'original' tune is 'Humber Jumber' - a traditional singing game. Dance programmes the world over list *The Frisky* as "devised by Bremner". Even Robbie Shepherd announces the fact on the BBC. Bremner was a music publisher, not a dance deviser. There is no mention of *The Frisky* in *A Collection of Scots Reels or Country Dances*, published by him in London in 1757 and no dance instructions. The new RSCDS 1994 edition dropped the attribution to Bremner. Pat Clark played the tune published with the dance in *Twenty Four Country Dances for 1774* – a perfectly danceable jig, printed by Samuel Thompson in London 1774. Only 20 of the 32 bars are the same as *The Frisky* we dance. There is an earlier *Frisky*, which bears no relation to the 1774 version, except for the tune. All this means that the dance we dance today is a strange hybrid, with an unoriginal 'original' tune.

Historical instructions are very interesting, but very cryptic. They only begin to mean anything when you have read lots of them and when you put aside modern preconceptions. What is essential, however, is to look at these original instructions side by side with the dance manuals of the day. Dance reconstruction will never be an exact science, but some reconstructions have more validity than others.

My main aim in the workshop was a practical one – to attempt to reconstruct the dances published in 1820 in the pamphlet, *The Heart of Midlothian*, a reel, the *Laird of Dumbiedike's Favorite* and *Madge Wildfire's Strathspey and Reel*, to which are added two favourite dances for 1820, published in Edinburgh in 1820 and attributed to Finlay Dun. The Society has published two of the six dances: *Madge Wildfire's Strathspey* in Book 9 and *The Laird of Dumbiedyke's Favourite* in Book 12. The pamphlet was clearly an opportunity to cash in on the huge publishing success of Sir Walter Scott's Edinburgh-based novel *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* as all six dances are linked to the novel and its characters: Madge Wildfire, Reuben Butler, Jeannie Deans and the Laird of Dumbiedike.

Madge Wildfire's Strathspey

We began by dancing *Madge Wildfire* as Miss Milligan described in *Won't You Join the Dance* with the difficult to-time 4-bar cross. We gave right hands as we crossed and timed the crossing exactly as she stipulated. Intriguingly, the hands have been dropped in the new combined edition of Books 7 - 12. We used a set width which we all agreed was normal today. If you have danced this dance, you will know that very small steps are required. We then used Thomas Wilson's contemporary 1820 instruction to have a set width of four and a half feet. The crossing with 4 strathspey steps then becomes ludicrous. Something has gone wrong in the reconstruction. Back to the 1820 instructions.

Bars 1 - 8 are clear: six hands round, back again.

Bars 9 - 16 are also clear: 3 couples crossing over opposite sides, back again and turn partners. The use of 'and' suggests that turning should be part of the 8-bar phrase. We danced this as 'cross over for two steps giving right hand, cross back giving right hand, then all three couples turn with both

hands, 1st couple casting off into second place and 2nd couple dancing up to top place. Everyone agreed this made more sense. 1st couple finished in 2nd place on their own side. Formations at this time tended to begin and finish in sidelines.

Bars 17 - 24 are less clear: set cross corners. 'Cross corners' is a formation as well as a description of corners. The formation involves the woman dancing a large loop round 1st corners while the man dances a large loop round 2nd corners. We danced this as: 1st couple set to each other, then, giving left hands, 1st couple cross up between 2nd couple, cast off, then cross down below 3rd couple and cast up to meet in the middle of the dance, man with his partner on his left, facing the man's side.

Bars 25 - 32 are also debatable: lead outsides. This can be interpreted as lead out between the 2nd and 3rd men, lead back into the middle and turn - impractical if there is more than one line of sets. We danced it as: 1st couple cross out between 2nd and 3rd men, cast into the middle, cross out between 2nd and 3rd women, and cast back to place. The original instructions do not mention finishing with a reel as in the RSCDS version although there are dances of the period with the instruction "lead outsides or reel". It is a pity that we tend to avoid this dance because of a poor reconstruction.

Madge Wildfire's Reel

We then tried out *Madge Wildfire's Reel*, up to now ignored by the Society. Bars 1 - 16 are clear, but 17 - 32 are "set cross corners and turn, Reel." We danced this as "set and turn 1st corners, set and turn second corners, followed by a left shoulder reel on the opposite side, finishing with the 1st couple crossing back." I believe these reels were full 8-bar reels – I have found no evidence for 6-bar reels with the dancing couple crossing over on 7 and 8 in dances of this period, but I am keen to hear if anyone else has.

The Laird of Dumbiedike's Favorite

We then tried *The Laird of Dumbiedike's Favorite* – note the early Scottish/US spelling! We first listened to the RSCDS 'original' tune, then Pat played the actual 1820 original – we speculated that perhaps Miss Milligan's pianist "didnae like" the original. The Society dance is a 40-bar reel. I believe this is a mistake. The dance should be 32 bars. The 1820 bars 9 - 16 have become 16 bars in the Society version. This is how we danced it:

Bars 1 - 8: 1st and 2s Cu: 4 hands round, set and back again: 1st and 2nd couples circle to the left for 2 bars and set, then circle back to the right and set. We used skip change for the circle – using slip step in circles is probably unhistorical, and we remained in the circle to set on 3 and 4.

Bars 9 - 16: 1st Cu: lead 3 outsides opposite, back again to places: 1st man, leading the 2nd and 3rd men cross over, down the ladies side, cross back and up the men's side. At the same time 1st woman leads 2nd and 3rd women in a similar movement across and down the men's side and back to place. The men passed above the women at the top of the set and the women went below the men at the bottom.

Bars 17-24: poussette: We danced this in the style of Wilson, starting from sidelines, using skip change and a two-handed hold, turning clockwise, the couples moving anti-clockwise round each other. This was fun and many preferred it! It was pointed out that Charlie Todd remembered dancing a poussette in 'gripit' hold. Two hands would have been used in the early 19th century, but this would have developed into a ballroom-type hold by the late Victorian period. The use of pas de basque for a poussette is very questionable historically.

Bars 25 - 32: right and left. Wilson in 1820 describes the use of the jeté assemblée step on bars 4 and 8. We tried this fun step, but more practice would have been needed to perfect it! The class made a good attempt.

With time running short, we looked at the jig *Reuben Butler* with its excellent tune and the lovely *Jeanie Dean's Strathspey*. We left *The Heart of Midlothian* for another day. I think this was a useful exercise. We did familiar things in a different way. We had some fun. On a more serious note we looked at two seldom-danced Society dances. Of those present, only one could remember teaching The Laird – and that was at a day school when teachers famously resurrect undanced dances! It is my view that we avoid both *Madge Wildfire* and *The Laird of Dumbiedike* because their reconstructions were not informed by the dance manuals of the day. Perhaps the Society might consider publishing the 6 dances one day, informed by research, and with their original tunes. There is nothing wrong in admitting mistakes have been made.

I really appreciated the hard work of Pat Clark in preparing all the music for this workshop.

Jimmie Hill

Reaction from Janet Johnston

Jimmie Hill's workshop had 'Miss Milligan meets Madge Wildfire' as its rather intriguing title. He took us through his research into early dances from the 18th and 19th centuries. He found original dances and noted how they'd been changed. Jimmie stated that research in the early days of the SCDS had not been as thorough as it could have been. Jimmie referred us to the 'manuals' of the day with Nicolas Duke's book of basic figures from 1752 – a rather costly book giving clear diagrams, and Thomas Wilson's ballroom guide of 1820. Many of our dances today are influenced by them. He went on to say that in dance reconstruction there is no right or wrong way, but reference should be made to the dance manuals of the day. He gave 'cross corners' as an example saying it was a formation as varied as the dances. Bill Clement had supplied Jimmie with a copy of some dances with music in 1983. It is a copy of a manuscript published in 1820 by John Sutherland in celebration of Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian*. From it comes *Madge Wildfire's Strathspey* and *The Laird of Dumbiedyke's Favourite*. The manuscript dances can be viewed in the RSCDS archive and in Glasgow University Library. We then had the opportunity to dance some of the dances from the 1820 leaflet once we'd considered set width and the dress and shoe type of the day. Pat Clark, very ably supplied the music demonstrating how it would have been played with cello accompaniment then with a more active left hand for a more modern arrangement of the tunes. We danced *Madge Wildfire* in three ways: as per our present RSCDS publication with our current set width; then using Wilson's 1820 set width; then from the original. We followed it with *Madge Wildfire's Reel* and the *Laird of Dumbiedyke's Favourite*. For this one a poussette using skip change was required and after a bit of practice we managed fairly well. *Jeannie Deans Strathspey* was next and it was followed by the jig *Reuben Butler*. Our jeté assemblés at the end of bars 4 and 8 of our rights and lefts require more practice but that's for another day! The group enjoyed a very interesting and interactive session with Jimmie and Pat, and we will no doubt look at our early dances with more thought in the future.

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