

Petronella

Dance 1, RSCDS Book 1

For us today *Petronella* is both the first dance in Book 1 and a dance movement. While working on the dances for the new Sir Walter Scott book we came across the reel, *The Pirate*, published in Edinburgh in 1822 by Nathaniel Gow. The novel, *The Pirate*, was one of the Waverley Novels, published in late December 1821. I am sure most of us have never read it! It is set in Shetland, which Scott had visited seven years earlier with the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners, and the novel was probably inspired by his visit. I have to admit that my collection of the Waverley novels languishes on a top shelf gathering dust!

The Pirate contains one of the earliest instances of the petronella movement. The dance begins with the 1st woman and 2nd man using 8 bars of petronella to change places. Their partners repeat this. This is the progression, but with the difference that both couples finish on opposite sides. They get back to their own sides using an all-round poussette in reel time.

We are told that the dance *Petronella* was introduced into Scotland at a ball in the George Street Assembly Rooms by Nathaniel Gow in 1820, just two years before his *Pirate*. Gow published *Petronella* in a leaflet of 1820, *The Cries of Edinburgh*, after his Ball on Tuesday 14 March along with *Hot Pyes, Kail and Leeks*, and a strathspey/reel medley – *the Gosforth Masquerade* – the strathspey by his brother John and the reel by himself. Unfortunately, Gow did not include the instructions for *Petronella*. We have to wait until 1827 to find them in *The Ballroom* published in Glasgow:

‘First couple chassé round to the right, and set in the middle; round to the right again, and set on the sides.’

It is clear that the first movement to the right used skip change and not pas de basque and that is what we recommend when dancing *The Pirate*. The first edition of our Book 1 states clearly that pas de basque should be used in *Petronella* in bars 1 and 2. No sources are given in the first edition, so Miss Milligan and Mrs Stewart may have been writing down the dance as it was danced in 1923 rather than its earliest known source. From the diaries of Christina McKellar, we do know that *Petronella* was a repertoire dance in Argyllshire from 1919 to 1927. Although it seldom makes an appearance today on dance programmes, it is still a staple dance for Reelers and is danced at the end of every Asilomar Ball in California with great gusto by all the young people present!

Following the 16 bars of petronella, the dance continues with down the middle and back, then a poussette. We know in 1820 that the progression took place at the end of down the middle and back. One contemporary source tells us that, ‘Formerly, after coming up the middle you went round to the outside and cast off. This is now in disuse. They (the 2nd couple) merely move up, and you leave them off.’ With the progression having taken place, it means the poussette is all-round. The greatest writer on country dancing was Thomas Wilson, who was publishing his dance manuals from 1811 until 1820. He describes an all-round poussette and a half-poussette. The all-round poussette in fast time could be done by joining both hands and moving round each other in a ‘draw’ movement (forward and

backward) with no turning. However, it is more likely that Wilson's waltzing movement was more current in Edinburgh in 1820.

In 'Traditional Dancing in Scotland' Tom and Joan Flett write, 'Following the introduction of the Waltz to Britain in the early years of the nineteenth century, the 'sauteuse' Waltz step was introduced into the poussette, and the forward and backward motion of the original figure was replaced by the circling motion of the Waltz. This change, which took place in Scotland at some time before 1818, was no doubt facilitated by the fact the original hold used for the Waltz in Britain was a two-hand hold, the same as that used in the original poussette. After about 1820 other 'ballroom holds' came into fashion for the Waltz, and some of these were naturally transferred to the poussette.

The Fletts note that the current RSCDS poussette was developed in the early years of the Society and is 'a modification of a poussette invented about 1925 by Mr John Duthie from Galashiels'. By deciding that the step used in a poussette would be the pas de basque, this limited the distance capable of being travelled, and it thus became our modern half-poussette in reel and jig time.

The *Petronella* tune is very distinctive and we like to think it is Scottish, but I am afraid it was composed in London by a Welshman, who dedicated it to a Persian nobleman. It first appeared as *The Persian Dance* around 1810. Even Nathaniel Gow published it as *The Persian Dance* in Edinburgh in 1812. It first appeared with the name *Petronella* in London in 1815, but with instructions that bear no relation to our dance – no petronella movement! The tune seems to have been very popular in London for a short time, then fell out of favour, but the Scottish tradition has kept it very much alive. So, there's more to that simple dance than we think!

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