

Sir Walter Scott, A celebration through Scottish Music and Dance – the Heart of Midlothian

The publication celebrates the life of Sir Walter Scott, 250 years after his birth, and the book is inspired by a leaflet, originally published in 1820, entitled “The heart of Midlothian, a reel, the Laird of Dumbidike’s Favorite and Madge Wildfire’s Strathspey and Reel to which are added two favourite dances for 1820”, the latter also with connections to Sir Walter Scott, and originally published in 1855 by Nathaniel Gow.

All of the dances have had to be interpreted. The publication contains original 1820 explanations and what Jimmie Hill and the team thought it meant in our terms today. With some of the dances there is the same formation listed, but they have to be interpreted differently in each dance as there is not a description of how it should have been danced – for example the formation set, cross and corners. Lead outside is another movement that the team had to figure out.

Jimmie explained that the pousette formation was never a progressive movement and would have been danced by doing a waltz all the way round. The progressing during this time for a dance tended to happen when the 1st couple danced down the middle (they would call it lead down, but it was always with nearer hands) and danced back to 2nd place, so not the progressions we see nowadays in Scottish country dancing. He also noted that dancing at that time was mainly for 2 couples and in 24 bars, so the committee had added footnotes into the book to suggest additional 8 bars if teachers need to make it into a 32 bar dance for dancing in the 21st century. For instance adding 6 hands round and back at the end of the jig *Kenilworth* found on page 52.

Jimmie introduced each dance in the book giving the participants fascinating background information and the breakdown of how each was written at the time and the interpretation of them by him and the RSCDS Management Committee. The following dances were covered: *Kenilworth*, *Reuben Butler*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Laird o’ Dumbiedike’s Favorite*, *Madge Wildfire’s Strathspey and Reel* and *The Pirate*. *The Pirate* was the second dance with Petronella turn in it which is something which did not exist before 1820 in Scotland.

After a marvellous morning of dancing these historical dances Jimmie took participants through a more detailed background of the publication process and Country Dance and its music at the time of the 1820 Heart of Midlothian leaflet from the perspective of teachers. Each segment of dancing was dissected and given the background evidence that they had used for the decisions they made in the book. It was fascinating, seeing circles going round to the right, found in a manuscript: “*Contre – Danses à Paris 1818.*”

Can you believe that more than 20 dances are inspired by Sir Walter Scott?

During the presentation participants heard musical excerpts from Mo Rutherford and Tim McDonald who had worked on the tunes on the CD to accompany the publication. Some of them we recognised from popular dance tunes we use today. And who knew back in the day it was common for the tune to go into a minor key for the Ladies Chain and only for that 8 bar phrase of music?

Jimmie discussed the theories of who has composed the tunes, no jigs, but always with a waltz. Could it have been John Coutts, who published music around the time, or Finlay Quinn, who was the son of Barclay Dunn, an Aberdeen dance teacher who moved to Edinburgh? Finlay was famous for bringing quadrilles from Paris and bringing Mendelssohn to a bagpipe competition! Or was it Nathaniel Gow, son of Niel Gow and brother of John Gow? Nathaniel was the most active dance composer musician from 1791 to circa 1830 and was even appointed as one of His Majesty’s Herald Trumpeters for Scotland! With no evidence we don’t know who devised the tunes. Country dance

music then and now? The instructions were very much secondary to the tune, with it being suggested that in 1820, formations were made up on the night by the top lady and the same tune would be played again and again and again for the whole dance, unlike it is now. Medleys were also used a lot more than they are now, but more often with a reel followed by a jig.

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