

# Some Notes on Dancing in Orkney

## PART TWO

ABOUT 75 years ago, dances from the South began to come into Orkney, spreading first into Kirkwall and Stromness. One old lady of 94, who was brought up in a country district of the mainland told me that, when she first went to dances at the age of 17 or 18, there was nothing but Reels. She remembered very distinctly how, at the age of 20, she was very irritated by a young man from Kirkwall who bragged that he knew the Lancers, Quadrilles, Petronella, and other dances then unknown in her district.

Readers may remember the programme of a dance given by the Kirkwall St Magnus Football and Athletic Club in 1884, which was reproduced in the "Orkney Herald" for October 4th, 1885. This showed how completely the dances from the South replaced the old native Reels. In twenty-one dances, there were only two Reels, one being the Reel of Tulloch (itself an incomer). There were three sets of

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Lancers during the evening, and no fewer than four sets of Quadrilles. There were three Country Dances, Rory O'More, Triumph, and the Milanese Country Dance (I do not know the last, but the other two are still known in Orkney), and the rest of the programme was made up of waltzes, polkas, etc.

The first dancing teacher on the mainland of whom I heard any mention was a Mr Chalmers, who taught in Kirkwall, Stromness, Holm, Burray and St Margaret's Hope. Mr Chalmers was already an old man by about 1890, so was presumably the teacher who taught the young braggart from Kirkwall.

One of my informants told me that when he had lessons from Mr Chalmers, the boys and girls were taken on separate nights for the first half-dozen lessons or so, and only after this were they taken together. Whether this was his usual custom, I do not know. The dances which Mr Chalmers taught included the Four-some Reel, Lancers, Quadrilles, Petronella, Flowers of Edinburgh, Cumberland Reel, Triumph, Rory O'More, Haymakers, Glasgow Highlanders, Circassian, Circle, Highland Schottische, Jacky Tar, Scottische, and the Spanish Galop. He also taught the modern Eight-some Reel, but did not teach either the old Orkney Eight-some or the Six-some Reel. In addition, he taught the Highland Fling, Sword Dance and the Sailor's Hornpipe (Jacky Tar).

So much, at present, for mainland dances. The repertory of dances on most of the other islands which I visited were similar. Rousay does not seem to have been visited by a dancing teacher, but the dances from the South arrived there at much the same time as on the mainland. The country dances, such as Petronella and Flowers of Edinburgh, and the couple dances such as the waltzes and polkas, were the first to arrive, being already established by 1890. The Lancers and

Quadrilles were introduced soon after 1890, and the modern Eight-some Reel later still.

The southern dances arrived a little earlier on Burray, this being one of the places where Mr Chalmers held his classes. It was possibly owing to Mr Chalmers' tuition that the Burray people acquired their reputation for being fine dancers. Another reason is that they built themselves a hall some 60 years ago (one of the first in Orkney), in which they held dances throughout the winter. Such regular dances were most unusual in Orkney at that time. In most parts, dancing took place only at weddings, at harvest homes, and at New Year time. The Volunteer balls were another great occasion. Sometimes, too, people held "fireside" dances in their own homes, but in general it was unusual for Orkney people to dance more than three or four times a year.

Yet another reason for the Burray people's reputation was that most of the men were employed in the herring fishing, and had opportunities for practice in the "tarry temples" of the Shetland fishing ports. This was the name given to the wooden huts, tarred on the outside, in which the girls employed to gut the herring lived.

Most of the boats carried at least one member of the crew who could play the fiddle or the concertina, and when the boats were becalmed or held up by rough weather, it was the recognised custom for the crew to go into one of these "tarry temples," and start a dance, even if they had never seen the girls before. If they fished from a particular port for a few weeks, they "would get acquaint in a certain hut." They kept the Sabbath strictly, and on a Saturday evening these impromptu dances ended at midnight. On other nights they often went on until early morning. This mostly ended with the 1914-18 war.

South Ronaldshay was another of the places in which Mr Chalmers taught. It also had one or more visits from one of the old itinerant teachers, Mr MacDougall. These itinerant teachers would stay in one place for about eight or ten weeks, teaching there on two nights a week. If possible, they would also teach in some neighbouring places on the other nights of the week. Their charges were reasonable, some six shillings for the session, and all the young people within reach would attend. They were almost invariably fine fiddlers, and it was part of their stock in trade that they could dance and fiddle at the same time. Mr MacDougall, an Argyleshire man, was one of the most widely-travelled of these teachers. I have met people who were taught to dance by him in Lochcarron, in Skye, Morar, Arisaig and Meldart. His repertory of dances included all those taught by Mr Chalmers, and also the Queen Victoria Country Dance and some others.

In all these places the old Orkney Six-some Reel fell out of use about fifty years ago, while the Orkney Eight-some Reel disappeared even earlier. The kissing dance lasted longer (naturally!), but even it eventually disappeared from the programmes.

(To be Continued)