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THE BUMPKIN

J. F. and T. M. Flett

To-day in Scotland the distinctions between various types of dance have become blurred, but to previous generations there were four main types of dance, Reels, Country Dances, Square Dances and Circle Dances. These four types were clearly differentiated, and each had its own special characteristics (Flett 1964). In addition, however, there were a few miscellaneous dances which did not fit into this classification, and one of the most interesting of these was the Bumpkin.

The dance is a fairly elaborate set dance, i.e. it consists of a sequence of figures performed by a group of dancers all dancing together at the same time (unlike a longways Country Dance, where the bottom couples remain idle until the top couple have progressed down the set to join in the figures with them). However, in spite of its elaborate nature, the Bumpkin was in no sense an exhibition dance, but was purely a social dance.

It was performed by three men each with a lady on either hand, one of the men wearing a hat, and as the dance progressed, each man acquired the hat in turn. In some descriptions of the dance the man wearing the hat is referred to as the "King". Although we have no reference to the dance prior to 1782, the "game" element introduced by the exchange of the hat is reminiscent of some of the dances of the early eighteenth century.

The early history of the Bumpkin is confused by the fact that the name Bumpkin was also sometimes used for the ubiquitous kissing dance, more usually known as Babbity Bowster or The White Cockade (Flett 1964). We are unable to connect the Bumpkin proper with the kissing dance, or to find a common source for the two dances, which, since at least 1782, have had a separate existence. At the best we can point out that the Bumpkin proper, like the kissing dance, seems usually to have been the last dance at a ball, and that in some versions of the kissing dance a hat is used in the process of choosing a partner.

Since the dance is unquestionably one of our older national dances, it seems worth while to gather together what is known of its history.

As far as we know, the earliest reference to the Bumpkin is in a letter to an Edinburgh newspaper, written between 1782 and 1791, which is reproduced in *Edinburgh Fugitive Pieces* (Creech 1791:294-5). Signing himself "Peter Paspy", the writer said:

"Sir,

"The rapid decline of dancing in this country, and particularly in the capitol, seems a matter of such serious moment to all admirers of the fair sex, that I hope a few observations on the subject . . . will prove neither wholly useless nor impertinent. The fact will hardly be disputed: It is too well known, that not above three or four assemblies have been attended this winter; . . . So negligent were the men, that one evening the ladies were driven to the sad resource of footing it with one another. . . . It is evident, unless some *steps* are speedily taken, the art itself must be lost among us. The Minuet with its beautiful movement, the cheerful Country-dance, the joyous Jigg, the riotous Reel, the boisterous Bumpkin, the sprightly Strathspey, and the courtly Cotillion, will soon fall into everlasting oblivion."

One of the earliest descriptions of the Bumpkin appears in William Campbell's *14th book of Strathspey Reels, Waltz's and Irish Jiggs . . . with their proper figures* . . . (Campbell 1799). Under the heading "The Country Bumpkin" the description is as follows:

"Six Ladies and 3 Gentlemen in 3 lines—the middle Gentleman dances with his Hat on—all nine foot up the Room to the top in 3 lines and turn and foot back again to their places—then the Gentleman in the middle sets to the Lady at the right hand corner turn her and then set to the Lady on the left hand corner and turn her and Hey [1]:—the other two Gentlemen do the same with their corners and Hey at the same time then fall back to their places and foot up the Room as before and then down again then the Gentleman in the middle foots to the other right hand corner turn round and Hey the other two Gentlemen do the same with their other corner and turn round and Hey all at the same time then fall back to their places foot up as before and back again then the three Gentlemen foot to the three Ladies on their right hand turn then to the three Ladies on their left turn and all Hey then foot up

as before and back again then the middle line set to the bottom line turn round and set to the top line then turn round and all Hey up and down the room the Gentleman in the bottom line takes the Hat off the Gentleman of the middle line then falls into the middle line with his two Ladies repeat all the Figure over again the Gentleman of the top line then takes the Hat off the head of the Gentleman of the middle line and with his two Ladies falls in the middle line and repeats all the figure over again—then finish with a threesom Reel across the Room."

An almost identical description of the dance is to be found in a MS. collection of music, songs, and dances now in the British Museum (B.M., Add. MS. 25073). The description of the dance occurs on a page on the back of which is written "Country Dances of the year 1790".

Another interesting early description of the Bumpkin under the name The Bounky is given in a MS. collection of dances taught at Blantyre Farm in 1805 by a dancing-master, Mr. William Seymour, from Kilbride (S.P.L. Blantyre MS.). In this the gentleman wearing the hat is termed the "King".

"3 Gen^{r} and 6 Ladies begin the dance—A Lady placed on right and left hand of each ge*n*. Sett up, fire once,[2] wheel, sett back again, fire once and turn. M^{d} ge^{n} covered or King, sett right corners, and reel, sett up and down, same way again, then wheel, King sett left corners and reel, sett up and back. All Ge*n* and all Ladies reel, sett up again, and back as usual—sett every ge^{n} to his own partners, do same as beginning, then 3rd in middle covered same as first. Play uncommon time, all hands round, King in middle, fire once, 3 Ge*n* sett to ladies, then King make his bow."

Several descriptions of the dance, in particular those in Gow's *Complete Respository* (Gow 1817:iv) and *The Companion to the Reticule* (*c.* 1820) give an alternative ending to the dance. Here three extra men join in the last "set and reel", and the dance concludes with three Foursome Reels. The writers of *The Companion to the Reticule* remarks that "The Figure of the universally admired Bumpkin . . . is given . . . in the hope that, having been longest in disuse, it may be among the first of the NATIONAL DANCES to be revived", and the description of the dance itself ends with the words "and thus concludes the Bumpkin, as danced all over Scotland prior to the year 1815".

A fascinating picture is given both of the Bumpkin and of dancing generally at the beginning of the nineteenth century

in *The Memoirs of Susan Sibbald* (Sibbald 1926:153:246-9).[3] The memoirs were written in Canada when Mrs. Sibbald was aged about seventy, and they cover the years 1783-1812.

Mrs. Sibbald recalls learning her "Scotch steps" at school in Bath and doing "credit to Bath" when she later attended a London "Caledonian Ball". Before her marriage to Colonel Sibbald, she lived near Melrose and her memoirs give several glimpses of the local dancing. She writes of Old David the shepherd, "with his feet turned out in a horizontal position, the heels touching, . . . No doubt David had learnt to dance as all Scotch did, in whatever grade of Society, and therefore his feet being far beyond what Dancing Masters call the first position, I fear he must have found the three most favourite steps 'dooble shuffle', 'cut the buckle', and 'Pigeon's Wing' rather difficult".

Mrs. Sibbald herself was an extremely enthusiastic dancer and her descriptions of her prowess in dancing the Bumpkin at Melrose are so vivid that we quote her at some length.

"In those days, dancing was a favourite amusement, and regularly at Balls the last reel was a matter of contention, as to who should "keep the floor" longest. I was never beat although there were many girls who tried to conquer me. It was in the following manner. The last dance before breaking up was the 'Country Bumpkin'. Three gentlemen stood up with a lady in each hand, one trio before the other. . . . The gentleman in the middle set wore an Opera hat; there was a regular figure after the gentlemen had changed places and each worn the hat. The sets widened. Three other gentlemen sprang up to form the three 'foursome reels', taking plenty of room; then came the tug of war, and you would have been amused to see Neil Gow, the leader of the band, and then so celebrated, come to the front of the orchestra, fiddle in hand, as if he would crush through it so excited he always was, and stamping with his feet, and calling 'high' as the music changed from strathspey to reel alternately.

"You would see after a while ladies beckoning to young friends to take their places and gentlemen do the same but I would never. Once at Lamberton Races, perfectly without my knowledge until afterwards, a bet was made between a Mr. Scott and the Bishop of Durham's son (I forget his name), as to which should keep the floor longest, Miss Johnstone of Hutton Hall (to whom Mr. Scott was engaged) or myself. I was the last to sit down.

"But the most trying time I ever had was at my last appearance at a public ball, . . . the last night of the Caledonian Races in the autumn of 1807. The Honble. Anna Maria Elliott, her sister Harriet, and many others continually changing with each other, all trying to tire me out, fanning themselves and looking so warm while I never fanned myself at all, and thanks to my Bath dancing mistresses, Miss Fleming and Mam'selle Le Mercier, I had been taught such a variety of steps that dancing was not quite as fatiguing to me as to many.

"At last the Earl of Dalkeith as my partner, when all had left the floor but ourselves, led me to a seat, . . . and shaking me by the hand said, 'Indeed, you are a young lady of spirit'."

Mrs. Sibbald suffered for her victory later that night when she found that her feet were bleeding, her efforts having worn a hole in the sole of each shoe and stocking. The next morning she begged her father to return home early so that the other girls would not see how lame she was!

Instructions for the Bumpkin appeared in a few of the small pocket ballroom guides which were produced by Scottish dancing-masters in the nineteenth century, e.g. in *Lowe's Ball-Conductor and Assembly Guide* (Lowe *c.* 1830), and in David Anderson's *The Universal Ball-Room and Solo-Dance Guide* (Anderson *c.* 1899-1902). A version of the dance has been published by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society under the title The Bumpkin or The Ninesome Reel (S.C.D.B. No. 2, 1925), but we do not know whether this was collected from oral tradition or was taken from some printed source.

Dr. H. A. Thurston (Thurston 1954:39) remarks that the dance survived traditionally in Lanark under the name "The Lanark Reel," and we ourselves have collected from Mr. William Lawson of Lanark a dance for nine very similar to the Bumpkin, called The Rob Roy Reel. This Rob Roy Reel, which Mr. Lawson learnt in Lanark about 1890, was an exhibition dance for children. It differed from the Bumpkin as described above in having no progression of the trios, and when the centre person reeled diagonally, the other two trios danced "three-hands-round" instead of reeling; there was also no "King" with a hat. Dances similar to the Rob Roy Reel are given in some of the nineteenth century ballroom guides, with the title Reel of Nine or Ninesome Reel (e.g. Willock 1865, Anderson 1886-1902), and are almost certainly simplified versions of the Bumpkin proper.

To-day the Bumpkin is regarded as a Country Dance, but

unfortunately is rarely danced. On the few occasions when it is performed it is usually as an exhibition dance and not as a "boisterous Bumpkin" to end an evening's dancing.

NOTES

[1] *Hey* is the English term for *reel*.

[2] The meaning of the term "fire" is unknown to us, but it may possibly mean "clap".

[3] We are indebted to Mrs. I. C. B. Jamieson for this reference.

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