

# LAKELAND STEP-DANCING AND THE CUMBERLAND BARD

By Keith Gregson

The girt swort are monstrous clivvor at masquerading an' caper away at ballroom waltzes—the lower mak' gi' whornpeypes, jigs an' reels at murry neets

(From the ballad 'All The World's A Stage' by Robert Anderson, the Cumberland Bard [1770-1833])<sup>1</sup>

When John Keats visited a dancing class in the Cumberland village of Ireby during 1818, he was much amused by the activities of the participants. The poet wrote:

They kickit and jumpit with mettle extraordinary, and whiskit and friskit, and toed it and goe'd it, and twirl'd it and whirl'd it and stamped it, and sweated it, tattooing the floor like mad.

Being one of the relatively few surviving references to Cumbrian step-dancing in the early years of last century, Keats' observation is of great value. It is quoted, along with others, in a recently published and invaluable work entitled *Traditional Step-Dancing In Lakeland*.<sup>2</sup> This book is a veritable gold mine of information on the development of the art, tracing dances and dancing masters and describing the methods of performing the actual dances. Furthermore, its contents have added an interesting new dimension to my own researches into the work of Robert Anderson, 'The Cumberland Bard,' a dialect poet and songwriter who was at his most prolific during the first decade of the last century.<sup>3</sup> I hope, in turn, that the fruits of this 'new dimension' may add a little to knowledge of the history of step-dancing.

Anderson was best known in the old county of Cumberland for his songs and many have survived to be collected from the singing of elderly citizens of Carlisle over a hundred years after they were written.<sup>4</sup> Some have even left their mark during the more recent revival of interest in song. 'Barbary Bell', 'Sweet Sally Gray' and 'Jenny's Complaint' (almost certainly the source of the popular 'Recruited Collier') are among the best known.<sup>5</sup>

As his posthumous title suggests, 'The Cumberland Bard' was as much a man of his people as his hero across the border, Robbie Burns. Indeed there are Cumbrians who dain to make a favourable comparison between the two men—and that in print!<sup>6</sup> Anderson possessed the keen and observant eye required by a successful songwriter and many of his works are little more than first hand accounts of events which actually took place. The wedding of John Dalton's daughter at Caldbeck and a Cumbrian merry night at Blackwell near Carlisle (December 1802) come to life under Anderson's pen. Selected verses from 'The Codbeck Wedding' (to the tune of 'Andrew Carr') give some idea of the scenes Anderson loved to describe:<sup>7</sup>

1. They sing of a weddin at Worton, where aw was feicht, fratchin' and fun; Feep!  
sec a yen we've hed at Codbeck, As niver was under the sun; the  
breydegroom was weaver Joe Bewley, He com frae about Louthket Green; The  
breyde, Jwohny Dalton's lish dowter and Betty was weel to be seen

First auld Jwohny Dawton we'll nwotish  
And Mary, his canny douse deame;  
Son Wully, and Mally his sister;  
Goffet's weyfe, muckle Nanny by neame;  
Wully Sinclair, Smith Leytle, Jwohn Aitchin,  
Tom Ridley, Joe Sim, Peter Weir,  
Gworge Goffit, Jwohn Bell, Miller Dyer,  
Joe Head and Ned Bulman were there.

The breyde hung her head, and luik'd sheepish,  
The breydegruim's as wheyte as a clout;  
The bairns aw gley'm'd thro' the kurk windows.  
The parson was varra devout;  
The ring was lost out of her pocket,  
The breyde made a bonny te-dee;  
Cries Goffet's weyfe, "Meyne's meade o' pinchbeck,  
And la ye! It fits te a T"

The breyde wad dance Coddle me Cuddie  
A threesome then capered Scotch reels;  
Peter Weir cleek'd up auld Mary Dalton,  
Leyke a cock round a hen neist he steals;  
Jwohn Bell yelp'd out 'Sowerby Lasses';  
Young Josep, a lang country dance,  
He got his new pumps Smithson meade him,  
And fain wad show how he cud prance.

And so, in passing, Anderson takes the reader into the world of Cumbrian social dancing in the first decade of the nineteenth century. It is a world very similar to the slightly later one described in detail in *Traditional Step-Dancing in Lakeland*.

In the first instance, it would be difficult to read even a selection of Anderson's work without realising the importance of the hornpipe to Cumbrian dance. In a song entitled 'A Weyfe For Wullie Miller', he describes how Lanty Langcake's daughter "danced a whornpeype . . . in her clogs". So too did Jack Spang and Young Sawney in other songs. In 'The Quilters', a tale of the conversation between young girls making quilts, one lass maintains that her boyfriend's dancing ability is his finest quality—

. . . well leykt by lads, lasses

In hornpeypes he's fit for a show<sup>8</sup>

'Ubiquitous' hornpipes were still the main feature of step-dancing in the Victorian era and are beautifully described in *Traditional Step-Dancing in Lakeland*:

They were simply exhibitions of the step-dancing which the children had learnt throughout the weeks at the classes. At the finishing ball each child performed the steps which he or she had perfected; some only managed three or four simple steps. some twelve of the more complicated ones. If the dance was billed as a clog hornpipe, it was composed of the same steps but performed with the child wearing clogs<sup>9</sup>

Anderson's descriptions seem to be of a slightly less sophisticated dance (possibly because they were danced by adults and frequently under the influence of drink!). Certainly they have more in common with Keats' 1818 description. In Anderson's 'Jeff and Job', for example, an old man tells his friend how he used to 'kick the ceiling' when dancing. Elsewhere Leyle Steebem, a village beau, is described as 'a capper' who could 'shuffle the lowp till he swet'. At the Blackwell merry night, a local clogmaker (probably the same John Bell listed at the Caldbeck wedding):

stampt wid his feet and he shouted and roystered  
Till the swet it ran off at his varra chin end!<sup>10</sup>

If step-dancing in Anderson's day was as much perspiration as inspiration, there were still signs of the competitive spirit which was to be a later characteristic. At another wedding, this time at Worton, a match was made between the village cocktamer and one of the girls. The cocktamer, dancing first, 'in his clogs top time did beat' and leapt 'bauk-heet' (as high as the hay stored in the loft). His performance was good but not good enough for the girl 'in her stockin feet suin bang'd him out and out'.<sup>11</sup>



The competitive nature of step-dancing obviously led to an increase in its entertainment value. How far outside the county this entertainment was taken at this stage must be difficult to estimate. Anderson does, however, present us with one provoking suggestion in 'The Quilters' where another of the quilting girls sings of her beau:

Oh! Was he seated among us,  
His steps wad soon 'stonish us all!  
In Lunnon he'd mek a girt fortune  
What! King o' the dancers is he;

Did Cumbrians perform their step-dancing in the capital during this period? Certainly at least one team of Cumbrian sword dancers entertained a distinguished London audience during the late Eighteenth Century and Anderson's personal experience of the London entertainment world as a youth makes the 'Quilters' extract the more intriguing.<sup>12</sup>

Although Anderson was more interested in portraying a general atmosphere in his songs than going into enormous detail, he has provided us with one or two glimpses of the art of dancing. At the Worton wedding again;

Young Sour-milk Sawney on the stool  
A whornpeype danced and keav'd and pranc'd

Was this the forerunner of the pedestal dancing so beautifully described in *Traditional Step-Dancing In Lakeland?* If so, poor Sawney would have needed a great deal of practice before he competed with the later experts because;

He slipp'd and brak his left-leg shin,  
And hirpl'd sair about.<sup>13</sup>

And skilled heelwork which was to be such a feature of later step-dancing also receives a mention. At the party which followed the house-warming at a new 'Clay Daubin', old Philip:

natted his heels like a youngen  
And capered around the clay floor

But the most outstanding reference in the whole of Anderson's work must be that made to 'Clogger' John Bell's performance at the Blackwell merry night. Though noisy and sweaty, as described above, this performance was not without technical merit. According to Anderson, Bell:

... danced 'Cross The Buckle' and 'Ledder Tespatch'  
When they called 'Bonny Bell' he lap up to the ceiling  
And aye snapt his thumbs for a bit of a fratch<sup>14</sup>

Like Max Boyce, Robert Anderson, 'The Cumberland Bard' can justifiably claim, "I was there" and his passing references to step-dancing not only provide a genuine insight into an important tradition but also give a rare opportunity to give Dance and Song equal weight in one article!

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> 'All The World's A Stage' can be found in Rev. T. Ellwood (ed.) *Anderson's Cumberland Songs And Ballads* (Ulverston 1904). A glossary of the most obscure terms is provided at the end of these notes.
- <sup>2</sup> J. F. & T. M. Flett *Traditional Step-Dancing In Lakeland* (EFDSS London 1979). A valuable review of the book can be found in *English Dance & Song* Vol. 42 no. 1 p. 22.
- <sup>3</sup> A number of Anderson's songs (complete with music) appear in my *Cumbrian Songs And Ballads* (Dalesman, Lancaster 1980)—hereinafter *CSAB*.
- <sup>4</sup> *Lucy Broadwood Collection* V.W. Memorial Library.
- <sup>5</sup> For one of the tunes for 'Barbary Bell' see *CSAB* p.8.
- <sup>6</sup> *Robert Anderson, The Cumberland Bard* (Centenary Brochure, Carlisle 1933)
- <sup>7</sup> *Ballads In The Cumberland Dialect By Robert Anderson With Notes, A Glossary And A biographical Sketch of The Author* (Wigton, Cumbria 1834) contains 'The Worton Wedding' (p.8) 'The Bleckell Murray Neet' (p.55) and 'The Codbeck Wedding' (p.139). 'The Worton Wedding' is to the tune of 'Dainty Davie'. The tune for 'The Bleckell Murray Neet', can be seen in the *Broadwood Collection* (above) and in *CSAB* p.10.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ballads In The Cumberland Dialect etc.* p. 73 for 'A Wyfe For Wullie Miller'. The other two can be found in Ellwood *op.cit.*
- <sup>9</sup> J. F. & T. M. Flett *op.cit.* p.8.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ballads In The Cumberland Dialect etc.* pp. 39 & 92.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p.8.

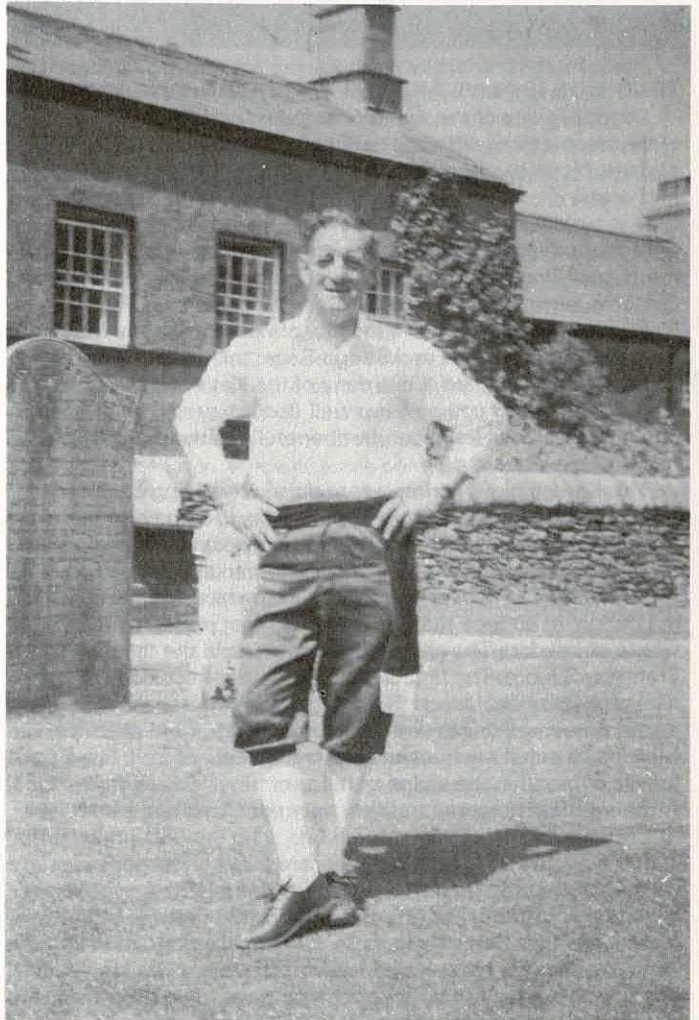
<sup>12</sup> A copy of an extract concerning this can be found in *English Dance & Song* vol.42 no.2. Anderson spent some time in London as a youth and had some non-dialect songs performed at the Vauxhall Gardens.

<sup>13</sup> *Ballads In The Cumberland Dialect etc.* p.8.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p.55, 'The Clay Daubin' can be found there also (p.97). It also appears in my 'Songs For Singing' series-no.14 *Lakescene Magazine* November 1979.

#### Glossary (from 'Ballads In The Cumberland Dialect etc.')

Girt	—great
Swort	—kind; people
Murry	—merry (as in the Cumbrian version of the Ceilidh—the merry night)
Fratch	—quarrel
nwotish	—notice
douse	—(disputed)—either jolly or grave
deame	—dame
cleek	—catch; grab
pumps	—soft shoes
a capper	—one who excels
bang	—defeat
keave	—waver about
hirple	—limp
hattle	—strike slightly
ledder tespatch	—so called because it wore away leather (mentioned in Ellwood <i>op.cit.</i> )



Norman Robertson Cumbrian Step-dancer

