

In Memoriam: Hugh Ansfrid Thurston, 1922-2006

Today the University of British Columbia is a city within a city, with massive high-rise buildings. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, permanent buildings were sparse, and the gaps between them were filled with uniform rows of World War II army huts. One (Hut L5) was the home of the West Point Grey Scottish Country Dance Club and its teacher, mathematics professor Hugh Thurston. Even a casual visitor could see that Hugh cared passionately about dancing. He insisted on precise phrasing, and he taught and demonstrated with perfect clarity. His style was simple and unpretentious, like the army hut itself, but there was an intensity about the classes. The group was close-knit and friendly—after the Friday class, everyone would go to the home of one of the members for tea, and listen to Hugh talk about the dances and their history.

West Point Grey was not the first class Hugh taught. As a very young Englishman during World War II—obviously a mathematical whiz kid—he worked as a cryptographer deciphering the messages of the Italian navy and later the Japanese armed forces. His friendship with Hugh Foss (a leading codebreaker at Bletchley Park) must have dated from that time, and likely Foss sparked his interest in Scottish dancing with its intricate patterns. Later, Hugh Thurston dated his interest in Scottish dancing as starting in 1943.

Hugh Thurston took his PhD at Trinity College, Cambridge. While there, he likely joined the Cambridge Reel Club, and he would have met fellow Cambridge mathematician and dance historian Tom Flett, whose *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* was eventually published in 1964. Then for some years in the 1950s Hugh lived in Bristol. Jean Hood, a member of the Bristol Branch, remembers him:

It was in the 1950s when I joined Hugh Thurston's class on a Thursday at Westmorland Hall. It was a lively group, full of enthusiasm . . . There was always an excuse for fancy dress, and any date was seized upon: Midsummer Day, Hallowe'en, Hogmanay, St Andrew's Day, Guy Fawkes, someone's birthday. It was not always easy to dance in heavy costume! We gave demonstrations all over the region. . . . We had two visits from Miss Milligan, the second to test us on the first part of the teaching exam.

Later in *The Thistle*, Hugh himself remembered the group's trip to Italy at the invitation of Italian dancers. They travelled in kilts with their own piper, giving impromptu performances in piazzas. One day they danced a foursome and broadswords while waiting for a train in Milan, and had to scramble aboard when the train left early. Hugh's interest in the dances of other cultures may date from this period in his life, as well as the Cambridge Reel Club's trip to Sweden in 1951.

While still in his early 30s, Hugh amassed a huge amount of information on the historical background of the dances, and in 1954 he published *Scotland's Dances*. The foreword was written by Hugh Foss, OBE, who by this time was Chairman of the London Branch of the RSCDS. This book, still in print, is typical of Hugh Thurston in several ways. It takes a careful analytical approach to the history of dancing in Scotland, probably the first book to do so. It presents information in meticulous detail, listing the sources, for example, of dances currently popular. Finally, the book covers the whole gamut of Scottish dancing, from reels, Highland dances, and Hebridean dances to country dances.

By 1956, Hugh had moved to Boston, becoming the first editor of the Boston Branch newsletter *The Tartan Times*. He came to Vancouver in 1958 to take up a position in the Department of Mathematics at UBC, and lost no time in founding the West Point Grey Scottish Country Dance Club. He befriended Mary Isdale MacNab and taught her dances with great enthusiasm. In 1961 he first issued his own remarkable dance magazine, *The Thistle*. The first number of *The Thistle* began with a statement typical of Hugh's understated style: "We have decided to issue a magazine. This is it."

The Thistle published new dances and historical studies of traditional dances. It explored similarities and differences between Scottish dancing and other dance traditions. It answered readers' questions on all matters connected with dancing. It gave advice on dance technique. It contained puzzles and quizzes to intrigue its readers (Hugh was ever the playful cryptographer). While the original articles were not signed, almost all (perhaps even some of the readers' questions!) were pretty obviously written by Hugh himself.

Above all, the 55 issues of *The Thistle* show Hugh's erudition and the breadth of his interests. He writes with authority not only on Scottish country dancing, but on Serbian, Bulgarian, Scandinavian, Portuguese, and Irish dancing, and on New England contra dancing. Other articles show his detailed knowledge of music. During these years, Hugh and his wife Nina (they married in 1962) taught at SCD workshops in Vancouver, Calgary, and Kamloops. They were also active in the international dance community. In 1964 Hugh served as President of the Northwest Folk Dancers Incorporated, an organization coordinating the folk dancers of Alaska, BC, Washington, and Oregon. Nina edited the group's newsletter and followed Hugh as President in 1967. Dub Fortenberry of Seattle, whose background is Swedish, remembers being amazed at what Hugh knew about Swedish dancing, and at his understanding of the rhythms of all the countries of Europe: "When he was teaching rhythms, for example in Bellingham, he called them off like you'd say 2 plus 2."

Hugh's attitude towards the RSCDS was complex. He combined great personal respect for Miss Milligan with a critical attitude towards the work of the RSCDS in reconstructing old dances. Various *Thistle* articles pointed out misinterpretations by the RSCDS editors, often showing the reader the difference between the dance as originally written and the dance as arbitrarily re-written by the RSCDS. Yet when Miss Milligan visited Vancouver in 1963, Hugh and Nina were eager to host her. Marianne Taylor of Boston remembers a story originally told by Stewart Smith:

Miss Milligan and Stewart Smith are flying to Vancouver, where she intends to give Dr. Thurston a piece of her mind about his recently published comments on the RSCDS research techniques and their way of figuring out Scottish dances. They get to Vancouver; Hugh meets them; his wife Nina gives them a lovely meal and then Hugh and Miss M. go into his study, while Stewart sits outside, chewing his nails and listening for sounds of conflict. After about an hour, Hugh and Miss M. emerge, all smiles, and Miss M. trumpets, "Dr. Thurston and I have agreed to disagree!" Hugh was such a marvellous, intelligent charmer that he charmed even her! And he was most likely right, as usual.

After her stay, Miss Milligan showed nothing but appreciation for the kindness of the Thurstons.

From Vancouver, Hugh Thurston kept in touch with Hugh Foss. Foss took a broad-minded, often humorous approach to contentious issues, yet remained a committed member of the RSCDS. Every year *The Thistle* published Foss' account of Summer School and the topics stressed by Miss Milligan, who always seemed to be "at the top of her form." Many clever and wonderful poems by Foss appeared in *The Thistle* too. Hugh Thurston also admired the work of Tom and Joan Flett, whose field work was done from a different perspective from that of the RSCDS. He invited the Fletts to give workshops in Vancouver, and they taught reels from Shetland, Orkney, and Barra.

Hugh's own interest in traditional reels may have led him to compose his best-known dance, "Schiehallion." Here is his account of its composition:

The idea was to create a new reel. The Scottish reel has a very definite structure—a verse-and-chorus pattern. Think of the Foursome Reel for example (the plain Foursome, not the Strathspey and Tulloch); here the reel of four is the chorus and the various steps are the verses. In the Threesome Reel, the chorus is the arching figure, and again the verses are steps. In the Reel of Tulloch, the birling is the chorus; and the same structure can be followed in the Fivesome Reel, the Sixsome Reel (as in *The Border Book*), the Shetland (Sixsome) Reel, the Sixer Reel from Oxtou (published under the name Oxtou Reel) and so on.



Photo: Westbury Scottish Club performing "Schiehallion" at the Bath and West Show in the early 1950s. Hugh Thurston is on the right with sleeves typically rolled up.

There seemed little point in creating a new reel with one new figure to act as chorus, letting the dancers choose steps for the verses, as so many reels on this pattern existed. But there did seem to be a place for a reel with a definite chorus and a choice of figures [rather than setting steps] for the verses. And this is the way Schiehallion was first presented: the chorus as we know it (half a grand chain and Highland schottische, and repeat) and a repertoire of a dozen or so figures for the dancers to choose from.

It turned out, however, that dancers did not want to choose their own figures, but preferred to be told what to do. So, Hugh writes,

I therefore noted the four figures that seemed most popular (two strathspey and two reel seemed to give the dance about the right length), put them in what seemed a good order, and began to teach (and eventually to publish) the dance in this form.

The name "Schiehallion" must have been inspired by the beautiful symmetry of the mountain and perhaps also its association with the history of science. Dr. Nevil Maskelyne, eighteenth-century Astronomer Royal, attempted to calculate the mass of the earth by determining the mass of Schiehallion itself and observing the degree to which it caused a pendulum to deflect. Such experiments would have appealed to Hugh Thurston's mathematical mind.

The term "Schiehallion" is now best known to dancers as applied to the "Schiehallion reels" which end the dance. Hugh preferred to call this figure a "reel of eight," and stressed that it was not really his original figure, but essentially the same as the reels in the traditional Axum Reel.



Photo: Hugh dancing on Queen Elizabeth Plaza, Vancouver. Nina is on right of photo, Dorothy Ross on left, and Alistair Ross behind

Among country dances, Hugh preferred the simpler, traditional ones. His favourite dance was "The Duke of Perth" (which he danced not in the RSCDS style, but with what he described as "elbow-cup" turns). He would be glad to know that his dance "The Flying Scotsman" is now a ceilidh favourite. He did not care for "artificially contrived exhibitions" of country dancing, preferring to see country dancing "as it is normally and naturally done." This may explain another story told by Marianne Taylor:

My other wonderful memory of him was when our folkdance performing group went to a festival in Saint John, NB, where the Don Messer show was the headliner. We performed dances of many countries, including one Scottish set. Hugh's comment on our performance was "Well, it may not be ROYAL Scottish country dancing, but it certainly is Scottish country dance."

The main figure in the only Hugh Thurston dance published by the RSCDS, "The Last of the Lairds," is also traditional in origin, based on the cross-over reels found in dances like "Maxwell's Rant." (Hugh Foss described the dance as "Maxwell's Rant cubed.") Given Hugh's ambivalence towards RSCDS editors, it is ironic that the RSCDS Publications Committee chose to alter "The Last of the Lairds" so that all three couples are moving on bar 32 and again on bar 1 at the beginning of the next repetition. This to Hugh was the mark of a poorly conceived or poorly reconstructed dance. He certainly would not have agreed with the Committee that "the ending shown above is more satisfactory," as the note in *Book 22* says he did.

In the early 1970s, Hugh and Nina moved away from Scottish country dancing towards folk dancing in a broader context. A sabbatical year spent in Turkey further spurred their interest in international dancing.

Throughout his career, Hugh was also active in his professional field, writing five books on the pedagogy of mathematics. After retiring as an Emeritus Professor, his interests turned to the history of astronomy. In *Early Astronomy* (1994) Hugh showed the same breadth of erudition as he had done in his writing about the dance, describing the astronomy of many pre-modern cultures including Greek, Babylonian, Chinese, and Mayan. A former student wrote, "His book is as entertaining as his lectures were."

In retirement, Hugh entered the debate about the observations of Ptolemy and their dubious validity. He also wrote a fascinating account of his war-time work in cryptography for an on-line magazine. In the same magazine he described his interests as "early astronomy, pure mathematics, cryptography, and scepticism" – a telling list. When Hugh Foss died in 1971, Hugh Thurston wrote, "In the days when leaders in the Scottish country dance movement tended to be narrowly dogmatic, Hugh [Foss] pleaded for liberality based on knowledge." This statement could just as easily apply to Thurston himself.

In later life, Hugh returned to Scottish country dancing, joining the White Rock Club for several years up to the early 1990s. Nina Thurston died on 14 September, 2006, and Hugh on 29 October, 2006. They left no family.

*Thanks to **Fiona Grant** of Bristol, **Marianne Taylor** of Boston, and **Dub Fortenberry** of Seattle for supplying material.*

*Rosemary Coupe, Vancouver
November 2006*