

It all began with Flora (No, not Marge! she was another dancer). Flora was a member of our West Cumberland Dancing Class who had elastic legs which stretched remarkably when pulled ever so gently. Flora was not really her name - that was just another leg-pull - and its use occasioned loud shouts of "You know that is not my name!". Ian, who had christened her "Flora", suspected that she secretly enjoyed the attention and quoted Queen Gertrude - "The lady doth protest too much, methinks".

It was decided that we should make up a dance for Flora - just to pull her leg yet again. After several attempts by various people, my reel was chosen; it was taught, without a name, to the class by Liz our teacher, who then, at the end, announced that we had just danced "Flora's Rant". The results can be imagined!

That dance has faded into history. I no longer even remember how it went, but the seed had been sown and started to grow. Dances began to appear. For some reason, which I cannot myself explain, I seem to have the ability to imagine new movements in dances. This may be related to a facility for geometry which I had at school, often getting 100% marks in exams.

The first dance of any lasting value which I devised was "A Trip to Tobermory", a 24 bar strathspey. I had it printed on a leaflet and Liz took copies to St. Andrews (I had not advanced that far in those days) and gave one to Miss Milligan. A year or so later, this dance appeared on Younger Hall programmes at the Summer School and I felt that I had arrived!

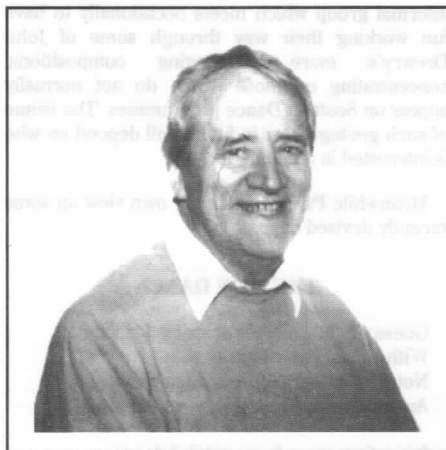
In the meantime I had become a member of the Carlisle and Border Branch and, when I had produced a set of reasonably interesting dances, friends in the Branch organised a session to try them out. They were so enthusiastic that they encouraged me to produce a booklet of the best of the dances and the "Bon Accord Book" was the result. The first copies were duplicated by stencil (not printed) and I painted a design of a white rose and heather on pale blue card for the first hundred covers.

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Sometimes ideas came to me with remarkable speed, for example "The Bonnie Lass of Bon Accord" was devised in about ten minutes while listening to a Jimmy Blair recording of the music. (The recording had no initial chord; hence the idea of the 8 bar introduction to the dance). The dance "Bratach Bana" was inspired by listening to the tune on the radio while I was camping on the shores of Loch Sunart near Strontian. I walked it through alone on the smooth sand. Occasionally I have woken up in the middle of the night with a complete dance in my head. This has happened spontaneously without my intending to make up a dance before going to sleep.

Very soon after I started devising dances, I met Hugh Foss, the founder of "The Reel", who gave me tremendous encouragement. He supplied me with blank sheets and Letraset stencils for setting out the music for the Bon Accord Book. This was a slow procedure. I think it took about twelve hours to prepare each tune.

The dance "Bon Accord" was devised in imitation of a Foss "fugue". It needed special music because it began with two twelve bar phrases. Miss Winnie Carnie of Glasgow was kind enough to compose two tunes for the dance and the second had a quotation from "The Bonnie Lass of Bon Accord" in it. Miss Allie Anderson took a liking to the dance and it was included in the programme for "An Edinburgh Fancy" in 1966 ("A Trip to



THE DANCE MAKARS

(Part II)

John Drewry, the doyen of modern dance devisers, gives us an insight into the secrets of his success

Tobermory" was also in the same programme). Since then, the programmes for "An Edinburgh Fancy" have almost all contained at least one of my dances, which I take as a great compliment. In 1990 the dance "The Rose of Glamis" was commissioned for the Edinburgh Fancy to mark the 90th birthday of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

I moved to Aberdeen in 1965 and, since then, the "Drewry" collection has grown and grown until it now numbers over four hundred and fifty dances. Many of them have been devised to satisfy requests and others for me to take with me when I have been invited to teach in far away places. (I do not always feel able to respond to some requests, like the one from a lassie who wanted a dance to show her boyfriend how much she loved him.) From the humble beginnings of "Flora's Rant" in Cumberland, the dances have spread over the whole of the Scottish Country Dancing world and have resulted in my visiting many interesting places and forming many good and lasting friendships.

A variety of things have provided the stimulus for me to devise a dance; the discovery of an extra good tune which was crying out for a dance to go with it; the dancing of a good figure in an existing dance with could possibly be developed in new and interesting ways; finding a dance with difficulties which were not resolved satisfactorily and attempting to find a better solution. The most common factor now-a-days is a request from someone for a dance for a special purpose.

It is important that ideas for movements in dances are thoroughly tested before they are put in print. I am lucky in that I have a group of guinea-pigs who are very willing to try out ideas. They come for an evening of dancing in a local school and are rewarded with a supper at my place. I am not sure whether it is the dancing or the eating which is more popular but the dancers never need pressing to accept an invitation. Usually things work out much as I imagined but occasionally a figure, which appears attractive as an abstract idea, does not work out in practice. Hugh Foss once said that he had many of his dances printed without trying them out, but I feel this is not to be recommended.

What should be the objectives of the dance deviser? Primarily to produce something which is pleasant and stimulating to perform, which is well married to the chosen music and which does not over-tax a competent dancer. A movement should fit comfortably into the allotted bars of music, but, I feel, it is preferable to be forced to stretch a little to reach a certain position than to have to hold back. As an illustration of this principle, compare "The Braes of Breadalbane", where stretch is needed, with "The Starry-Eyed Lassie", where first couple need to hold back considerably at the end of the reels. It is not necessary to have everyone dancing all the time. A dance can be far too busy. The deviser should aim for originality and simplicity but these are difficult to attain. It is relatively easy to make up a very complicated dance, but a simple dance with something new in it is an elusive goal but very gratifying when it is achieved.

The choice of music is of primary importance. The music supplies the impulse to dance and ideally the music should be chosen first and the dance movements should grow out of the music. Regrettably, I have found that the ideal is not always attainable and sometimes I have to look for music to match movements which I have dreamed up. Other devisers have this problem too; often dances are submitted to the Publications Committee of the RSCDS with no suggestions of suitable music, or music is suggested which is completely unsatisfactory. On rare but happy occasions, discovery of a tune will supply both the music and the title for a dance. One such happening was finding the tune "The Dancing Master" when I was asked to devise a dance for Bill Ireland. I have a large collection of printed music and am able to play the piano well enough to help me search for suitable tunes. Sometimes musicians have composed tunes specially for my dances and usually this works out very well, but it is embarrassing on the odd occasions when I do not like their efforts.

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The quality in my dances which attracts the most comment is "flow" but sometimes I am very disappointed when I see flowing dances performed. The dancers follow the correct "floor pattern" and doubtless imagine that they are giving an impeccable performance, but they phrase badly and are not in the right place at the right time with the result that the dance becomes a shapeless jumble. Non-flowing dances, in which the performers need to stop or to reverse direction at certain points, make errors of phrasing more obvious. On an auspicious occasion, when I dance a good flowing dance (not necessarily one of my own) in a competent set, it becomes a specially satisfying experience.

If a new formation or progression is successfully devised, it is a good idea to give it a name. This simplifies the description considerably when the formation is used in other dances. "Inveran Reels", "Rondel", "Set and Rotate" may be cited as useful names from my own dances. It was Miss Milligan herself who supplied the name "Rondel". She was very fond of "The Silver Tassie" and it is the only 8x32 bar strathspey which I have known to be encoded. This happened on several occasions just after it was first taught at St. Andrews.

If you do devise a dance and wish to have it published by the RSCDS be prepared to be patient. Dances which are sent in to the Publications Committee are all danced at least once. The better ones are put in a "possible" file, and these are all reconsidered when publication of a book of new dances is pending. It will take several years from submission to final appearance in a book for the few dances (less than 10%) which are successful.