

## The Reel Profile - Today's Dance Devisers: Mervyn Short in his own words



From time to time it is the intention of *The Reel* to invite a popular dance deviser, to reveal a little of themselves - their beginnings and stimuli. *The Reel* is very grateful to BHS Borders Branch member Mervyn Short from

Rustington, West Sussex for sending us his story. Mervyn in collaboration with *Green Ginger* has published 12 Scottish Country Dances with accompanying music, Mervyn has also had several dances published in RSCDS Books and the Strathspey Server shows in excess of 40.

As a child I learnt ballroom, old time and Latin American dancing but gave this up when I became a teenager. I started Scottish country dancing in 1977 at 17 and Highland at 18. My first teacher of Scottish dance, Margaret Ogilvie, was an all-round dance teacher so I also learnt some ballet, modern and tap dancing which helped with the Highland dancing. I was totally hooked on Scottish dancing and was dancing at every opportunity, sometimes seven nights a week. In 1980 I qualified to teach SCD with The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) and a year later I qualified under Janet Cook to teach Highland dancing. In the nineties I decided to qualify with RSCDS and gained my Preliminary Certificate in 1993 and Full Certificate in 1995. My tutor for both courses was Bruce Frazer. Soon after I was invited to teach at Day/Weekend Schools and in 2006 I taught at St Andrews and the following year at Winter School. Since then I have been very lucky to be asked to teach all over the world. In 2016 and 2017 I was Depute Director of Summer School and in 2018 Coordinator of Winter School. I have served on Education and Training Committee twice and am an examiner for the Society's Teaching Examinations.

I started devising dances many years ago and published a book in 1985. At that time John Drewry's dances were very popular in West Sussex where I danced. Around the same time dances devised by Roy Goldring and Derek Haynes were also catching on. Like a number of other devisers I used John's idea of the 3rd and 4th couples starting on the opposite side and choreographed quite complex dances. After learning many dances by Goldring and Haynes with a 'twist' on a common formation I realised that dances could be effective and enjoyable without being too difficult. Over the years I have enjoyed dancing/teaching dances by other devisers particularly those of Jean Attwood, Ann Dix and Barry Priddey. I am sure some of their ideas have found their way into my dances.

My friends will know that I am very keen on dance programmes including a good variety of formations without duplications, mainly popular dances (to avoid lots of 'homework' or lengthy recaps) and old as well as a few new dances. I also like a good variety of types of tunes eg single and double jigs/reels, pipe tunes, two-steps, strong strathspeys, pastorals and slow airs. When devising dances I like to use a good variety of formations. Some of my favourite formations to dance are corners pass and turn, parallel reels of three, set to and turn corners (especially in strathspey time), strathspey poussette and tourbillon. In my

dances I try to include something new or a 'twist' on an old formation. Today, people seem to only like dances that 'flow', so to this end I try to include this feature. However, I think it is sad that dances that require anticipation, a change of direction or difficult phrasing do not become popular. If one looks at dances from the early RSCDS books some fall into this category but have stood the test of time.

Nowadays most of my dances are 32 bars long and use the longwise set. I used to write 40 bar dances but stopped when I learnt that it is more difficult to arrange music for this number of bars. As well as the conventional longwise set I have devised a couple of dances more suitable for demonstration than the ballroom and use different shapes, eg diamond and triangle. My dance, *Sixsome Medley* a 32 bar strathspey and 32 bar reel, starts in a diamond shape and uses four women and two men. It was devised for a demonstration when there was a shortage of men. I was very pleased to have this dance placed first in the annual Jack McConachie Memorial Sword 1993 competition organised by ISTD. Three more of my dances were placed first in subsequent years, *A Jig for Heather*, *King Edward's Jig* and *Boundary Cottage*. These dances and other 'placed' dances will be published by RSCDS in *The Imperial Book of Scottish Country Dances, Volumes 4-5*. This book became available from RSCDS bookshop at Summer School this summer.

Some people assume that a deviser needs a reason to devise a dance but this is not necessarily true. I have devised dances for a specific occasion, person, place or animals as in *Sunshine and Sweetie's Jig* Book 48. Usually ideas come to me and I then devise a dance using those movements. My dance, *Mist o'er the Loch*, RSCDS Diamond Jubilee Book, was devised during a quiet five minutes at work! If I sit down with the intention to devise a dance I very rarely have inspiration and the paper remains blank! Some teachers devise dances specifically to teach a particular formation. I try to avoid this as I like to teach dances that dancers might encounter at a dance. However, my dance *Holyrood Strathspey* Book 51 was devised because I wanted an easy strathspey that included the formation corners pass and turn.

Over the years I have used different methods of devising a dance. I might start with the first eight bars or conversely I might decide on the last formation but usually I devise the middle section first. This was certainly the case with, *Mist o'er the Loch*. In my latest dance, *Ysobel Stewart of Fish Hoek* Book 52, I started with the first eight bars. I wanted to include the formation, tourbillon as I felt it is not used enough. There is only one other RSCDS dance which includes the formation, *The Sands of Morar* Book 45. The next sixteen bars I derived inspiration from *Midsummer Common* bars 9-16 Book 49 and *Portnacraig* bars 17-24 Book 36. Bars 25-32 of *Ysobel Stewart of Fish Hoek* are a variation on Bars 25-32 of *Mrs Stewart of Fasnacloich*. I was delighted that this dance was included in Book 52 because of its association with Ysobel Stewart (co-founder RSCDS) and that it includes the tourbillon.

It would be very satisfying to invent a new formation but so far I have not been very successful! Scottish country dance is a traditional form of dance and I think it is very important to devise dances using

traditional formations and in the traditional style. However, it is an evolving dance form and new formations keep it alive and fresh. I am very concerned that 8x32 strathspeys are disappearing from our programmes. I have devised strathspeys for three and four couples but my strathspeys published by RSCDS are all 8x32. When Stephen Webb asked me to write this article he also asked me to devise a new dance, please see *The Dance Corner* on p14. I decided that I wanted to use the corners in the middle section of the dance. I would not say that I have devised a new formation but the movements are a little different, perhaps it could be called 'Turn and Loop'. To start this formation I needed the 1st couple facing their first corners and there are many ways of doing this, eg set cast and turn, cross cast and turn, turn cast and turn, 'long' cast and turn or lead down the middle and up to face first corners. However, I enjoy dancing the last eight bars of *Lady Mary Cochrane's Reel* Book 26 and have used it for bars 1-8 of this new dance changing the right hand to left hand at the end. Having devised bars 1-24 I needed to position the dancers in their progressed positions to repeat the dance. After the setting on bars 25-28 I could have had the dancers 'chasing' to their new positions but I felt this was being overused so I opted for six hands round to the left half way. I hope this will become a popular dance on programmes as well as a 'teaching dance'. Emphasis can be given to the dancing of the 'polite turn' correctly, good use of hands and arms in the turns, phrasing in the 'loop' formation and control in the hands round to the left half way.

Finally, I would like to set out my views on music for new dances. In my early days of devising dances I did not have the luxury of a musician so I wrongly used music that I liked for other dances. If it is a dance that is rarely danced I still feel that this is acceptable but I think it is very wrong to use the tune for a well-known dance for a new dance. I remember seeing footage of Miss Milligan talking about dances and their tunes and she said that the tune always came first. I agree with her and when I hear a tune that I particularly like I start thinking about writing a dance for it. This is what happened with my new dance. The tune that I have used for *Lochinver* is one that Judith Muir played in a class and I instantly liked it. I have a penchant for minor keys anyway! As far as I know the tune has not been assigned as the 'original' for another dance. When I submit dances to RSCDS I usually do so without suggested tunes and I have always been happy with the tunes that are assigned to the dance.

I try not to devise many dances now as I feel that there are so many. However, I am sure the urge to write a new dance has not entirely disappeared. I think it is a pity that a lot of RSCDS dances are never danced. Years ago a very experienced teacher said to me that if you want a new dance just look at the early RSCDS books! A very true statement.

Ed. For *Reel* 313 it is planned that New Zealand deviser, Iain Boyd will give us his profile.