



Dance the Highland Fling

Liina Flynn | 21st July 2011

When I was growing up, my Scottish grandmother taught me how to dance the Highland Fling. With arms flung above my head, I hopped on my feet moving one leg behind the other as I chanted "shed, behind, before, behind". The footsteps of the dance were taught to me in an old chant that explained a pattern of fabric weaving and helped me to remember which steps came next. One theory about the Highland Fling is that it originated as a dance of triumph at the end of a battle; another says it was danced on top of a shield before battle, to ward away evil spirits. So, with highland dancing and its militaristic origins on my mind, I took my tartan heart and my (sort of) nimble feet and went to learn more about Scottish dancing.



Scottish country dancing enthusiasts Judy Cook and Andrew Ross.

When I arrived at a Scottish country dancing class in Lismore, rather than launching into a solo Highland Fling, I was prepared to take part in a group dancing lesson with guided instructions. I had heard about the formal Scottish dance 'The Gay Gordons', but dancing instructor Judy Cook tells me it's a pretty ordinary dance and closer to ballroom dancing than Scottish country dance. Instead, tonight we'll be doing dances like Galloping Carousel, Campbell's Frolic, Dancing Bees, and Good Hearted Glasgow. Scottish country dancing usually requires at least six or eight people to be able to form a set, but while we're waiting for other people to arrive, Judy wants to teach us Domino Five, a dance that only requires five people.

Domino Five

"Somebody must have already had this problem of not having enough dancers and so made up this dance," Judy laughs.

Judy takes us through the basic steps, then, when we're ready, she hits the play button on the stereo and the strains of accordion and fiddle fill the room.

We form a diamond with one person in the middle and Judy calls out the next step just as we are finishing the last one. "Left hand across... right hand across... right shoulder reel... figure of eight," Judy calls.

She tells us this sort of dance can be found at an Australian bush dance and should be skipped. I can feel my breathing quicken and we're all laughing as we skip and bounce around.

"If you get tired of skipping, you just walk," laughs one of my dancing partners, Effie Ablett.

"Use the other left!" Judy calls out to me. "If you stuff it up, you just keep going. The real trick is to keep smiling."

I am definitely smiling and can see that this is a fun way to get exercise without realising that's what you're doing.

Judy and her partner Andrew Ross formed the Scottish country dancing group in Lismore a year ago. They are both dance enthusiasts and Andrew is also a keen traditional Scottish musician who plays harp, whistles, banjo and guitar, and often plays music at balls and social dancing get-togethers (or 'céilidhs' in Gaelic).

Judy and Andrew's aim is to make dancing fun, welcoming and friendly, and for people to have a good time.

"It gets you moving and age is not a barrier; it's for young and old," Andrew says. "We have an 83 year old who turns up in his kilt and dancing shoes. It's a pleasurable way of being active and not at all boring like being at a gym."

"A full medical study was done that recommended Scottish country dancing to people as a good form of physical, mental and social activity to help keep Alzheimer's at bay," Judy says. "An important part of this dance is movement, memory and sound. I sometimes don't know what the song is called, but I know how to dance to it."

More people have arrived at the class now and Judy starts to teach us the moves to Good Hearted Glasgow.

Good Hearted Glasgow

As men and women wearing kilts and Scottish dancing shoes line up facing each other in two rows (called a longways set), there's something about seeing people in kilts that stirs up the romantic in me. I can imagine the olden days when céilidhs were the highlights in the social calendar of every Scottish lad and lass. While these days most young people prefer dancing in discos and nightclubs, céilidhs have long facilitated courting and prospects of marriage for young people, and they are still a popular social outlet in Gaelic-speaking regions of Ireland and Scotland.

Andrew is wearing his Ross clan tartan kilt but explains that specific tartans have only been associated with individual clans since the highland clearances in the 1700s. Prior to that, tartans were much more drab in colour. Prior to the modern kilt being invented,

traditional kilts (or plaids) were worn by men and were made of eight metres of fabric folded around the waist and then thrown over the shoulder; the Scotsman could then roll up in the fabric at night to keep warm.

As the dance music plays, the principal dancer leads the way, and we turn in a circle, parade up and down and do a few of the moves from the last dance. I'm almost starting to feel like an old hat at it now. People weave in and out of each other, forming patterns. We're all smiling as we try not to collide with each other and I feel the need to take my jumper off as I'm starting to get hot.

Judy calls out dance moves that sound like knitting instructions as we are told to 'cast off' at the end of the row. It reminds me of the weaving chants I learned from my grandmother when she taught me the Highland Fling. Andrew, who's also a history buff, tells me that aboriginal peoples all over the world have been passing on old knowledge through music and movement for a very long time.

"In Scotland, the women would often chant while making cloth and we know ancient civilisations used to do the same when building," Andrew says. "Chanting was necessary to get the man power moving the load or pulling the oars in boats at the same time. There was no written language and it was through songs and dances that knowledge, thoughts and emotions were passed on."

Today, lots of bands keep Celtic music alive and the tradition of Scottish country dancing has been taken up in countries all over the world. The exact origins of Scottish country dancing are debatable, but it is known that these formalised dances with instructions have been around since the 1500s, when French court dancing was introduced into Britain during the reign of King James V. Another school of thought believes these dances had already existed in Scotland and were merely refined

around this time. It is known that over time, Scottish country dancing went through a decline in popularity, except in the Gaelic-speaking Hebridean Islands, until 1923, when the Scottish Country Dance Society was formed and the modern form of dancing was revamped.

There are more than 13,000 different Scottish country dances and new ones are being written all the time. Dances can be fast or slow and each dance has a signature tune to go with it. There are fast jigs danced to music in 6/8 time, reels in 4/4 time and slips in 9/8 time. Strathspey dances are much slower in 4/4 time. A good dance, according to Judy, should flow and be easy to remember.

"You can write a dance on paper, but put eight people to doing it and it looks different," Judy says. "Once you have had an initial run through of the steps and you start the dance, a good dance is one where you are not wondering what to do next. The 'stand out' dances will often turn up at the balls."

The dance caller holds the most important role. At dances, crib sheets are given out – these are like Morse code for dancing and the caller needs to decipher them. Sometimes the dance instructions are **cryptic in the extreme and the dance doesn't work out.** Judy said a good caller should be calling the next move as one is finishing the last movement. A bad caller doesn't count the bars of music right and the timing is thrown out.

As we learn the movements to Dancing Bees and Campbell's Frolic, Andrew tells me these are the simple dances and by learning the basic steps and movement, we can build up to being able to do hundreds of dances.

Strathspey

As the music to one of our final dances for the night begins to play, Andrew says to me, "Don't panic, it's a strathspey; it's slow and you have more time to think."

I was ready to start skipping but can instead walk at an elegant, leisurely pace in a clockwise circle.

"You put your right hand in... but it's not the hokey pokey," Judy says and I try not to giggle.

Despite its slow speed, I still stuff it up and now I'm grinning so hard my cheeks are hurting.

There are regular dancing weekends held where Scottish country dancing enthusiasts across Australia come together to dance and play music. Traditionally women wear to balls long white dresses with a tartan (plaid) sash over one shoulder, pinned on with a large broach. Effie Ablett, who has been Scottish country dancing for 10 years, loves taking part in these social dances while **wearing fancy dress costumes and wigs. She says there's not too much drinking done at these balls,** because the dancing is the main highlight and can be quite complex.

Judy hopes to hold a social dance in Lismore in the near future and encourages people to come **along and learn the dances so they can get involved. You don't have to dress up, wear a tartan kilt,** pull your socks up or even be Scottish to join in the fun, but you will need to be tolerant of the occasional sound of bagpipes.

The Scottish country dancing group meets every Wednesday night at the Scout Hall in Magellan Street, Lismore, from 6-8pm. **Don't be afraid** to come along and give dancing a go. You can work on doing it well or just come along for fun. Just wear comfortable shoes and clothing and you may get the pleasure of hearing a few Scottish brogues.