

“Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance” Part 2 - The Scotch Connection and Almack’s

Peter Ellis



Despite the waning of the Country Dance it is thanks to Thomas Wilson for his extensive compilation over the early 1800s that many figures are referenced. Bear in mind however the commoners were generally illiterate so the dancing master publications were of no use to them. It is likely the simpler folk dances survived with the rural folk and that some of the modern figures may have worked their way into the repertoire via servant staff being called upon to make up numbers in the country mansions of the landed gentry. It is also likely solo dancing as well as loosely connected couple participation was popular, certainly the Irish had their step-dance and jig, the Scots their native reel and the English various hornpipes and their own step-dances. Keep in mind also the situation could be quite different between the upper class becoming bored with the mundane formalities and the lower class enjoying simpler but livelier forms of country dancing. Certainly country

dances continued to thrive more so in Scotland and Ireland alongside the newer quadrilles, waltzes and polkas as they came on the scene. England in contrast seemed to quickly abandon its Country Dance except for Sir Roger de Coverley and an occasional new country dance such as Circassian Circle or Spanish Waltz over preference for the latest fashions with quadrilles and couple dances. But then the Country Dance was old and tired in England, it was a relatively new introduction to Scotland and Ireland and was able to develop incorporating native style and stepping.

The *Scotch Reel* was introduced to English society by 1800 most likely to provide zip and lift as a counter to increasing boredom. English teachers travelled to Scotland to learn the nuances of the Scottish or Highland Reel. It was the Foursome that was the popular dance from at least Macquarie's time in Australia. Note also that several new reels were published in Wilson's work, the degree of authentic incorporation of Scottish style I could only hazard a guess, but imagine the dancing masters incorporated as much license as they felt, and claimed it as their own genuine form.

Thomas Wilson in his 1815 edition of The Complete System of English Country Dancing lists the following dances for 'Private Tuition':- "*Quadrilles, Écossoises, Spanish Dances, Cotillions, Hornpipes, Gavottes, Irish Lilts, Highland Flings, Quadrille Country Dances, Waltzing, Minuets, Fandangos, Polonoise, Allemandes, English Country Dancing, Reels, Strathspeys, Country Dance Waltzing, &c. &c.*" Furthermore in *Danciad* (1824) he gives two separate general statements on the varieties of dances of the time in England:-

“Will teach completely, any dance you will; Minuet, gavotte, waltzing or quadrille.”

And *“Of all the various dances now in use, Quadrilles, the Spanish Dances and Batteuse, with English Country Dances, Ecosoise, The figured Reels and stately Polonoise ...”*



Town and Country Journal Jan 11 1873 page 49 Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria 'LaTrobe Picture Collection'

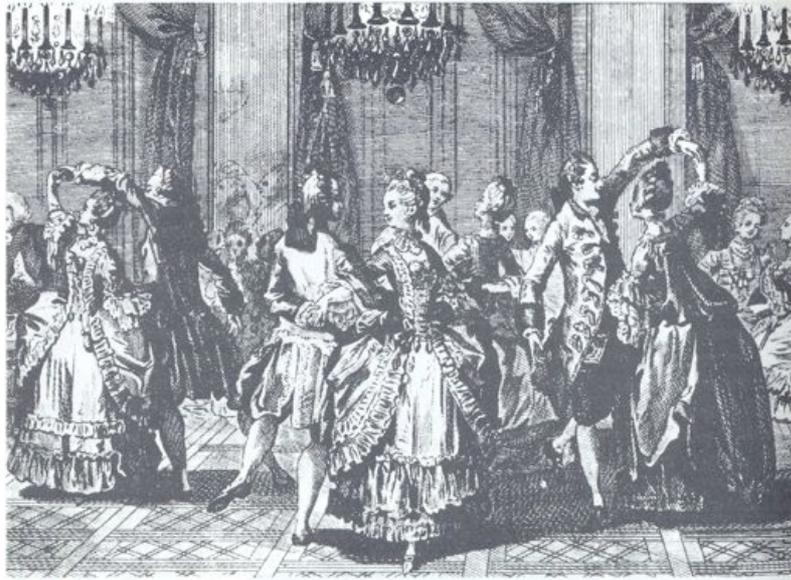
The Scottish dances remained extremely popular over the next two or three decades and Caledonian balls were introduced to society's most prestigious assembly, Almack's, in London.

Occasional *French Contredanses and Cotillons* had also been introduced as well as the *Écossoise*, although obviously Rose de Freycinet did not encounter the familiar dances of her homeland to any extent in Sydney (reference in part 1).



A SKETCH AT THE CALEDONIAN BALL.

Vic. May 5, 1886. 'Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria Latrobe Picture Collection.'



Contradanse Allemande



The earlier Cotillon consisted of two couples in facing lines similar to this illustration although this is the later party game Cotillon of the 1830s.

Batteuse would appear to be a new French Contredanse of the period as advertised on behalf of Wilson in *The Gentleman's Magazine* April, 1817 p.345

“The celebrated and fashionable dance La Batteuse, with the various Figures correctly explained, as danced at Paris and all the fashionable Balls and Assemblies of the Nobility and Gentry and also at

the author's Balls and Assemblies: clearly illustrated by Diagrams, shewing the various Movements of which it is composed. Arranged for the Pianoforte or Violin, by Thomas Wilson Dancing Master. folio pp 11”

The Écossoise

With respect to the Écossoise, in Philip Richardson’s ‘The Social Dances of the 19th Century’ (London) page 53 he states that in the first decade of the century the Écossoise was much in evidence, it was a popular dance during this period.

“It seems to have been a lively and spirited measure in 2-4 time, partaking partly of the nature of a Reel and partly of a Country Dance, in which each gentleman at some movement took two partners at the same time. In spite of its name, this Écossoise was definitely of French origin, though Scottish music was used. Indeed that well known modern authority on Scottish dances, Mr. D. G. MacLennan, states it was not generally known in Scotland. On the other hand, in Grove’s Dictionary of Music, it is claimed that it was, in earlier days, danced in Scotland, accompanied by bagpipes. It is of course, possible that this original Écossoise was imported into France by Jacobite refugees after 1745. Although little is known about this dance, it undoubtedly had considerable influence on our dances, and Schubert and Beethoven both composed a number of Écossoises for the piano.”

Ecossoise Constantia

Musical notation for Ecossoise Constantia, 2/4 time, D major. The piece consists of two staves of music. The first staff contains measures 1 through 8, and the second staff contains measures 9 through 16. Chord symbols are placed above the notes: D, A7, D, G, D, G, A7, D in the first staff; and A7, D, G, D, G, D, A7, D in the second staff.

Ecossoise Saint Michael

Musical notation for Ecossoise Saint Michael, 2/4 time, D major. The piece consists of two staves of music. The first staff contains measures 1 through 8, and the second staff contains measures 9 through 16. Chord symbols are placed above the notes: G, D7, G, C, G, C, G, D7, G in the first staff; and G, D7, C, G, C, D7, G in the second staff. The word 'trad' is written at the end of the first staff.

The above Ecossoises are from one of Thomas Wilson’s English Country Dance Manuals, courtesy Heather Clarke

The travelling step of the Écossoise or 'pas de Écossoise' may well have been that of the later Schottische. Curt Sachs in his *World History of the Dance* & quoted by Richardson says:-

“The polka step itself was nothing new. Its simple pattern was a combination of the old fleuret and pas de bourrée together with the so-called Schottische step, with which the people of the time were familiar from the Écossoise. This is why the polka, when it made its appearance in the German cities

after 1830, was called the Schottische.”

Schottisch is the German word for Scottish as is Écossaise (Écossoise) the French and the spelling Schottische an original English typo that has endured with the erroneous 'e' carrying through.

Ellis Rogers provides this information on the Écossaise:-

“Wilson defines an Écossaise as a duple minor longways where the first couple is improper. He gives no directions as to steps. On the mainland of Europe, Écossaise just means a Scottish dance and dancing masters interpreted this as they felt fit, knowing nothing of Scottish practice. The only thing they seem to have in common was a few hopped steps here and there. Composers were just as ignorant of the Scottish tradition and music, Beethoven in particular.”

According to the ‘World History of the Dance’ by Curt Sachs p. 438-9 it was longways for as many as will, gentleman and ladies facing one another:-

“Every couple dances with every other couple a number of simple figures, such as the moulinet, chaîne and balancé. The first couple dances the same two or three figures with the second couple, chassés down and back between the rows, and returns to second place, while the second couple moves to the head of the line. The first couple now dances the same figures with the third couple, after the chassé returns to third place, then dances with the fourth couple and so on, until it has been danced with all of the couples and has reached the foot of the line. This combination of couples is progressive: while the first couple dances with the fourth, the second and third couples dance together, and while the first couple dances with the sixth, the second and the fifth, and the third and the fourth unite. Thus the Écossaise is fundamentally the same as the old contre, which went under the name Anglais or English. But whereas the pas of the anglais used was executed like the medieval double step in which the one foot glides past the other, which is then drawn up to it, the pas of the écossaise was a changing step similar to the pas de fleuret, the pas de bourée, and the polka.... The Écossaise had a quick, energetic tempo-usually in two-four rhythm. Only in this dance did the lady stand on the left of the gentleman, and even here this was not always the practice. As a rule there were only four figures. Even into these waltz-like turns were finally introduced.”

Heather Clarke provides further information on the Écossoise from Nonsuch early dance. Vol. VIII. Glossary of 18th & 19th Century Dance Terms. Note there are two spellings.

“The origin of the Écossoise was probably derived from France and imported from thence into Russia, and seems formerly to have been the Contra Dance of that Country; and tho’ the term by which this species of Dancing is named is French with a Scotch definition yet the Dance and the Music properly adapted to it are purely Russian.

Though the Écossoise are constructed somewhat similar to English Country Dances yet in their formation they also partake in a great measure of what is termed the Spanish Contra Dance tho’ differing entirely from that dance in both figure and steps.

The figures are less complex from their being shorter than those of English Country Dance, the respective Minor sets being formed of but two couples instead of three, the number required in English Country Dance. The steps are few and easy to perform, and this species of dancing is easily attainable and capable of affording from its facility much more pleasure to the performer.”

Also from Let’s Dance - Social, Ballroom and Folk Dancing by Peter Buckman, Paddington Press Ltd, London 1978, Heather provides more information.

“That sentiment in favour of native folklore which the core of the romantic movement made a strong showing in the dance. Scotland was a popular source of inspiration, partly because it delighted many to think of her as a subject nation under English tyranny, and partly because of the immensely influential writings of Sir Walter Scott. The French fascination with Scotland had long historical roots, and the Écossaise, which was a French invention of the late eighteenth century (the name

simply means “Scottish Dance”), can be seen as another of those contredanses that the French had done so much to refine. It was often danced to the music of bagpipes, but since its rhythms bore little resemblance to the traditional Scotch reels and Strathspeys, it must be assumed that the name was bestowed on it out of perversity. The dancers were in two lines, and the first couple performed a few simple figures with the second couple, skipped down and up the line, and then danced with the third couple. By the time they got to the fourth couple, the second was dancing with the third, and so it proceeded until every couple had danced with every other couple. In this form the Écossaise proved popular even in Russia: Tolstoy in War and Peace has a ball in which little else is danced. When it came to England in the mid-eighteenth century, it was performed somewhat faster than across the Channel, and was sometimes given Scotch tunes, doubtless in the hope of making the dance live up to its name. It disappeared around 1833.”

(Ellis Rogers points out Tolstoy knew little about the Écossaise and totally misrepresented a description of the English Country Dance as well)

Note also that the Scottish Regiments with their success in the Napoleonic Wars had further attracted interest in all things Scottish or thought to be Scottish.

London's most prestigious Assembly 'Almack's' to which the Quadrille and the Waltz later made their appearance in England was first established by a Scot at a time in 1765 before the tide turned in favour of things Scottish. His name was really William MacCall, but he arranged a pseudonym by reversing his surname to Almack. By the time of the Regency the famous Neil Gow's Scottish band carried on by one of his four sons, probably Nathaniel, played there so a least one could be assured the music for any reels should have been spot on. Anything of fashion introduced to Almack's was copied everywhere.



Almack's Assembly Rooms London early 19thC (**More on Almack's at the end of this chapter.*)

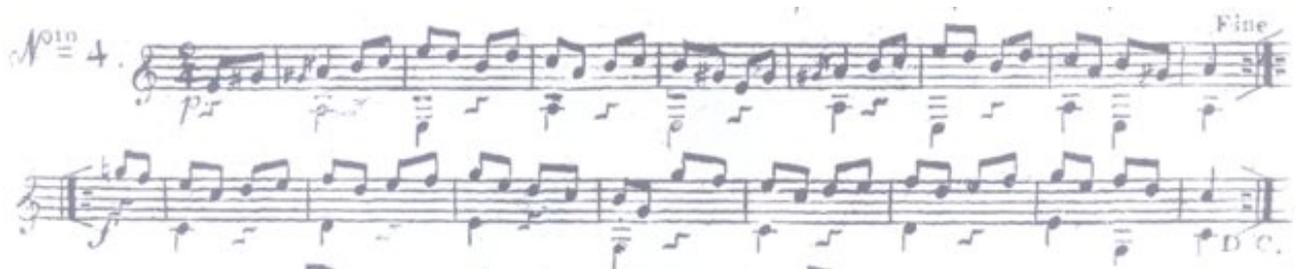
As for the Écossaise its popularity in the old country at the time of settlement of Australia would almost certainly indicate it would be in the repertoire here by the time balls had become established by Governor King in the early 1800s and certainly by 1810.

Although little is known about it, there is possibly sufficient information provided in the quotes about the formation, stepping and simple choice of figures to allow a reconstruction of the dance. I.e. longways for as many as will in duple minor, try figures with moulinet, chaine and balance at which at some stage the man is dancing with two ladies, then chassé or skip down the set and back to continue with the next couple, the progression will gradually snowball. Use the travelling step of the Schottische or Polka. As it is stated the tempo is brisk, but no reference given, I'd try the ballroom tempo of the polka at between 48 to 52 bars a minute to commence and trial it from there.

Heather Clarke has provided two tunes from Wilson, Écossoise Constantia and Écossoise Saint

Michael. I found 12 more on the web by Italian Composer and Guitarist Mauro Guillani and have included No 4 for interest. Guillani worked in Vienna between 1806 and 1819 during the period of interest and the full twelve scores can be found by typing 'ecossoises pour la guitare' into Google.

Ecossoise for Guitar No. 4 by Mauro Guillani, Since preparing this article, Heather Clarke has found more Ecossoises in a manual or two held in the National Library of Australia.



Lady Bruce Écossoise

(Mitchell Collection National Library of Australia)



Change sides, back again, down the middle, up again, and turn your Partner.

This lovely tune located and provided by courtesy of Heather Clarke

*Almack's Famous Assembly Rooms

The following historical information on Almack's has been assembled from notes provided in Philip Richardson's 'The Social Dances of the 19th Century'

Almack's was built in King Street St. James London in 1765 by William Almack, said to be a Scotsman from Galloway whose real name was MacCall. Because of the unpopularity of the Scots following Culloden it is said that MacCall swapped his surname to avoid the onus of a Scottish name, then considered foreign and uncouth. He did this by reversing the syllables and came up with the pseudonym 'Almack'.

The ballroom was considerably large and there was always a certain exclusiveness about Almack's, particularly by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

When it opened the First of the two Nights Subscription for Minuets and Cotillons, or French Country Dancers were available but nobody would be admitted without a Ticket (Two and a Half Guineas), nor could a ticket be delivered on the day of the ball. Remember the organiser or MC would arrange the order of the sets and in which set and in which position one would be placed, ahead of the ball. The leading lady of the top set chose the figure or figures and the tune, then after that dance the MC swapped the sets around and into new places and another leading lady took her turn. In the first year there were twelve Balls of which four were Masked and for each of those nights an extra 200 tickets were issued out.

“Tis most humbly requested of the Gentlemen in particular to send for their Tickets in Time, as positively no Person whatever can be admitted without a Ticket, nor any Tickets delivered out upon the Ball-Day.”

On two occasions the great Duke of Wellington was refused admission, once because he arrived after midnight, and once because he was wearing trousers (pantaloons) instead of knee-breeches.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the dances in vogue were the Minuet, the Country Dance, the Contredanse and the Cotillon. Of these the Country Dance was by far the most popular and only a ceremonial Minuet still danced at Court and at Almack's.

Scottish dances were enthusiastically sort after the Act of Proscription was repealed in 1781 and due in no short measure to the influence of the poems and novels of Sir Walter Scott and the success of the Scottish Regiments in the Napoleonic Wars and thus the Scotch Reels and the Écossaise were then much in evidence. In 1814 the dances at Almack's were predominantly these Scotch Reels and the old English Country Dance; and the orchestra being from Edinburgh had been conducted by the then celebrated Neil Gow (famous player of Scotch reels), although he had passed away in 1807, it being carried on by one of his four sons, most likely Nathaniel.

During the first half of the nineteenth century the dances in fashion at Almack's were copied everywhere; it was in these rooms that the Quadrille and the modern Waltz were introduced into England. By the middle of the century the invasion of the Quadrille, Waltz and the new Polka had swept the Country Dance off the floor. The Waltz first appeared in its modern close hold at Almack's in 1812. Almack's was ruled with a rod of iron by a group of Lady Patrons and Lady Jersey the most formidable of them all. She had no difficulty in introducing the Quadrille from France in 1815 and first danced by eight specially picked couples. Paine of Almack's published a set of cards for the use of Masters of Ceremony, small enough to be held in the palm of the hand, describing sixteen different sets (variations of quadrilles) of which the 'First Set' was the most important.

The Polka was ridiculed in April 1844 by the Illustrated London News, but changed its tune when danced at Almack's and a month later on May 11th presented its readers with a full description of the dance. You will see in the newspaper reference below it is stated that Almack's declined once the polka was introduced.

The rooms passed to a Mr. Willis when Almack died in 1781, later becoming known as Willis's Rooms and much later as Willis's Restaurant. The premises were severely damaged during bombing in World War 2 in 1941 and completely destroyed in 1944.

The following information is mainly sourced from Wikipedia and although not renowned for accurate historical research, the information tallies with other accounts such as by Richardson.

“The Patronesses allowed entrance to the rooms only to those they considered good ton. Those lucky enough to pass muster would be able to purchase non-transferable vouchers, which would allow them entrance into Almack's. Provided they were properly attired and arrived before 11pm that is. The voucher cost 10 guineas and it was valid for a Season (April to August) unless once behaviour caused the Patronesses to recall their voucher. Money would not automatically entitle one to be granted the coveted voucher. On the contrary rich 'cits' would not be admitted to Almack's, where what mattered was breeding, manners and 'ton'. A title would be a recommendation of course, but not enough on its own. Only about three-quarters of the hereditary nobility passed muster with the Lady Patronesses.

To avoid any suggestion of impropriety, dances were initially limited to the English country dances ,French contredanses and later Scotch reels, all danced with a good deal of energy. This changed around 1813-15, when first the quadrille and then the waltz were introduced. The introduction of the quadrille is strongly associated with Lady Jersey, and the waltz with Lady de Lieven.

No sumptuous repasts were served at Almack's since it did not aim to compete with the luxury of private balls. The refreshments served in the supper rooms were plain and consisted of thinly-sliced bread (which has to be a day old to be sliced that thin) with fresh butter, and dry cake (dry meaning unfrosted, without icing, not stale). To avoid the drunkenness rampant in society, where many noblemen prided themselves on drinking four or five bottles of port a day, they served only tea and lemonade in the supper rooms.

People came to Almack's to see and be seen, to assert their claim to being of the highest social rank, and to network with others of the caste. It also served as one of the marriage marts of Society where gentlemen could find brides of suitable ton. And mothers would give much to obtain the coveted vouchers when they had marriageable daughters to present to society.

The Patronesses reign lasted until around 1824, when exclusivity and strictness of rules started to be relaxed and at around 1835 Almack's started to decline as a centre of fashion. The assemblies are said to have come to an end in 1863, and for the next thirty years the rooms were used for dinners, concerts, balls and public meetings. In 1886-7 the site was purchased by a company and renamed Willis's Rooms. The building was destroyed by enemy action in the war of 1939-45. The site is now occupied by a block of offices called Almack House, erected in 1950. It bears a brass plaque commemorating the existence of Almack's on that spot."

Here is an interesting first hand reference to Almack's in a Sydney newspaper:-

The Empire, Sydney, Saturday October 24, 1863 p 3

"In one of the light papers in London's society, namely "Recollections of Almack's" occur the following remarks about modern dances on their first appearance."

"Quadrilles struggled into existence ere Almack's became Almack's; they were first regarded as a heresy. A great deal of romping and happiness went on as a deal of flirtation in the country dances. What a list of pleasures used to be held out for each evening! Hands across and four-round poussette and allemande down the middle and back again: then came the complicated figure of Moneymusk and the college hornpipe- wherefore one cannot call so divine, few so people surely are so little likely to dance a hornpipe as the fellows of a college. Then there was the Boulanger a dance including numbers with a great deal of turning and twisting and holding up arms and a sort of threading the needle that produced much laughter, whence derived I know not, except it may chance to be La Boulangere, a rondo dance in the north of France and also sung to words more piqued than proper. Lastly came Sir Roger de Coverley, the only good thing amongst delights which we attempt to retain. Quadrilles came – Paine's first set I remember they were called. It was ages before country gentlemen could learn them: and when they did, who was the fool hardy man who dared show his steps in that fearful pas soul "La Pastorale"? Shades of Oscar Byrne I have known some of my pupils immolate their reputation in that fatal stake. But the lists (steps?) are now closed to good dancers. The necessity for male prowess exists no longer. To walk the figure in time, to carry oneself well, and to look as if it felt one was somebody, are all the requisites of a cavalier in those enlightened days. Steps and pirouettes, balances and assembles, rigadoons and chasses, these have gone out with many abuses - for duals and damages for crimson; with silk stockings and pumps and embroidered waistcoats and shorts, and I know not what other absurdities. By degrees the quadrille became a stereotyped process. Paine's quadrilles at first comprised of five distinct figures: - there was La Poule and La Trenise, La Pastorale and L'Ete and a grand conclusion all vanished now into thin air. It was necessary, when the balls at Almack's began to go through the whole set, and learn a code of steps

consistent with each. And there was a long preparatory training with great lots of temper, and a loss of fiddle-strings on the part of the teachers – when lo! a revolution in men and manners! the waltz was introduced. Modestly at first, did young men and maidens, who had as scarcely as much as shaken hands, come into contact tender enough for affianced lovers. Deeply did virtuous matrons blush, whilst worthy fathers looked on from the card-room with horror on their roseate faces; but being assured that all was right and that my Lady Sophy Lindamell had waltzed away, first of all with Captain Cut-bush went back again with an air of resignation to their long whist. It is long since matrons have ceased to blush when they see their young daughters carried off in the whirl of some teetotum. They blush only, and with resentment too when their blooming daughters are suffered to sit still. The waltz, fixed by fate, as it seemed to be, has had its variations. When first introduced it was a trois temps, danced with a slow sinking step; the left hand of the lady was rested on the upper part of the partner's right arm, it is now placed on his shoulder. The other two hands joined, were held out and aloft, looking like a handle, and the further extended the better; they are now lowered and the step is a deux temps – rapid as human will make it. Then the shocking, vulgar, jerking polka was an introduction which seemed to herald the downfall of Almack's.”