



On 14 July John Drewry celebrated his 90th birthday. It seems more than just a coincidence that he was born in the same year as Mrs Stewart and Miss Milligan founded the Society!

John was born near Melton Mowbray in a thatched cottage which had been built in the 1490s, the same decade as the founding of the University of Aberdeen, where John was to spend most of his working life. Another coincidence?

It appears that none of John's family was particularly musical or interested in dancing, and it was not until he was working in Whitehaven in Cumbria that he began dancing with members of a Ramblers' group who, from time to time, held SCD evenings. From then on John became involved in dancing activities and he joined the RSCDS Carlisle Branch where he sat his Teacher's Certificate, tutored by none other than Jackie Johnstone. John and Jackie celebrated their 80th birthdays in 2003 and the strathspey *Double Eighty* (Book 45) was written in their honour.

In the mid 1960s John took up an appointment in the Biochemistry Department of the University of Aberdeen, and he has remained in Aberdeen ever since. Also a member of staff in that department was Isobel Cramb (Tibbie), and so John had an early introduction into the SCD community in Aberdeen. John's dance *Marischal College* in *The Rondel Book* is

Jean Martin outlines the remarkable achievements of John Drewry, perhaps the most brilliant SCD deviser of our time

dedicated to Tibbie, as it was in Marischal College that the Biochemistry Department was housed at that time.

Encouraged by Hugh Foss, John had begun to devise dances while he was in Cumbria, but once north of the Border his production of dances increased considerably. Although John continued to teach, it was creating dances which gradually took up more and more of his time.

The first of John's dances to be published by the RSCDS was *The Silver Tassie* with its new figure the Rondel, and John relates that it was Miss Milligan who encouraged him to give the formation that name because of the roundness of the shapes. She was later to call him 'Mr Rondel' when John attended her classes at Summer School in St Andrews.

In 1999, when he was awarded a RSCDS Scroll, nine of his dances had appeared in RSCDS books and since then the Society has published four more, not to mention dances using the formations for which he was responsible: The Rondel, Set and Rotate, Corners Pass and Turn, and Petronella in Tandem.

John is recognised worldwide as an imaginative deviser of dances. His dances always 'flow' and to date he has around 800 dances to his name. Some people think that his early dances were his best but that is to ignore recently devised dances such as *Thomas Glover's Reel*, written in 1998 to recognise the Scottish Samurai and for a visit to Japan, and *Out of Africa*, celebrating the golden wedding of a couple, now living in Banchory, who spent many years in Africa.

When devising a dance it is usually the pattern of the dance which comes first, though occasionally it is a tune, a place or a particular situation which prompts him to put pen to paper. Along with gardening and photography, another of John's leisure interests is hill-walking and he often found his inspiration in the Scottish mountains. That is how *Bratach Bana* came about. John was camping at Strontian beside Loch Sunart and he was listening to a country dance programme on Radio Scotland when the tune *Bratach Bana* was played. 'I like the tune very much indeed and as I listened I worked out the shape of the dance, walking it out on the shore.'

In an interview with Robbie Shepherd for *Take the Floor* in 2002 John said, 'The first of my dances to survive is *A Trip to Tobermory*, a 24-bar strathspey, though I had written a dance earlier for one of the Rambling group as a joke but it didn't survive.' In that broadcast John also explains why there are two chords at the beginning of several of his dances, 'It's because the dance is an unusual shape with 3rd and 4th couples beginning on the opposites sides and the second chord is there to remind dancers that they need to get into the right position straight away.'

In answer to Robbie's question on choosing an original tune John replied, 'I choose a tune that gives the correct impetus to the dance,' and on choosing titles, 'Other people often choose the name for a dance, particularly if it is one they have requested.'

Other titles are suggested by a tune, place or event. For example *The Bees of Maggie Knockater* was chosen by John when, on a car journey to Speyside, he saw the road sign for the Maggie Knockater Apiary. At that time just down from the road you could see a row of bee hives, but sadly they are now gone. There is still, however, a sign for Maggie Knockater though not the Apiary and dancers continue to enjoy the busyness of the dance!

Many of John's dances have titles which reflect his affection for his adopted city as do several of his books: *The Bon Accord Book* (Bon Accord is the motto of the city of Aberdeen), *The Silver City Book*, *The Deeside Books*, and *The Bankhead Books*. Others are connected with his travels: to Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Turkey, the United States and Canada. Wherever he goes he likes to create a dance for the occasion, and his many friends often request dances for specific occasions or people. John always does his best to oblige. Some of the titles of John's recent dances might raise an eyebrow – what indeed would dancers of earlier days have made of *Oompa Oompa*?

For many years John got a group together to try out his new dances and at times the dancers weren't always as accommodating as he might have wished! Faced with, say, eight to ten new dances, sometimes with rather complicated movements and new formations, the dancers often felt like the person writing this limerick:

A dancing class meeting in Newry
Collapsed in frustration and fury.

They became quite confused
And completely bemused
For the dance was composed
by John Drewry!

Those evenings are recalled with great affection by the participants as there was always a great deal of fun and the activity was rounded off with supper at John's house where all sorts of delicacies (including carrot cake!) were enjoyed.

John's interest in cooking may be in his genes. He enjoyed cooking even as a child. His grandmother used to make Stilton cheese and he recalls that there was a production line in pork pies at a family farm with each member of the greater family being allocated a task.

For many years John was on the Publications Committee of the Executive Council, along with other regulars: Nancy Arnott, Tibbie Cramb, Bill Clement and Bill Hamilton. In Miss Milligan's day she had, according to John, 'a strong influence on what was published'.



'Mr Rondel' with Miss Milligan

John does not feel that there is a problem of too many dances being published. It is 'a sign that SCD is still thriving'. He likes the imaginative dances that Roy Golding produced. His favourites among the traditional dances are *Monymusk* and *The Montgomeries' Rant* and among his own

dances *Blooms of Bon Accord*, *The Bonnie Lass of Bon Accord* and *The Colonel's Bed* (to be found in a Deeside glen), as well as *Miss Florence Adams, Strathmore*, *The Royal Yacht Britannia* and *The Duchess Tree*.

There is seldom a dance programme which does not contain a Drewry dance. John tells a story against himself with a certain wry amusement: 'At a ball I was sitting next to a woman whom I did not know, when the next dance, one of mine, was introduced, "Not *another* dreary dance," she said, and was a little surprised when I became convulsed with laughter.'

Many of you will know that John is now cared for in a nursing home in Aberdeen. He still enjoys having visitors and I know that the messages he received from near and far at the time of his birthday meant a great deal to him. John's sense of humour has never left him and when I told him on one visit that I was to be teaching at a day school and that Jennifer Wilson was to be playing, his response, accompanied by a wide grin, was, 'Well, the music will be good anyway!'