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Adamson, father and son

*Catherine A. Shoupe*

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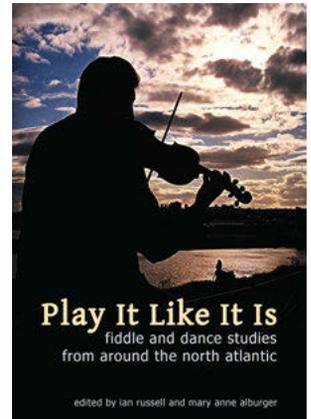
**Play It Like It Is**

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

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## The fiddle and the dance in Fife: the legacy of 'Fiddley' Adamson, father and son

CATHERINE A. SHOUBE

Examining the role of the fiddle in dance instruction and practice in Fife sheds light on the continuity of music and dance traditions in Scotland. The instrument and its repertoire, the reciprocal relationship between music and dancing, the practice of professional musicians and dancing masters, and the social and aesthetic features of dancing illustrate how the fiddle remains central to Scottish tradition.

Although the relationship between the fiddle and dance goes back to medieval times, what we know in any detail dates from the introduction of the modern instrument from Italy. David Johnson notes: 'By 1760 the violin had swept its competitors off the board and achieved a central position in Scottish music, just as it had earlier done in European music. It had become *the* instrument of Scottish traditional music'.<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth-century repertoire for the violin included both art forms like the variation sonata and the minuet, and dance and song tunes in the traditional idiom. Shortly after 1800, however, the European-based art forms had virtually disappeared, and '[I]n the centre of the picture, instead, were hundreds of short dance tunes, some of them old but the vast majority new ones, composed within the previous forty years'.<sup>2</sup>

The Romantic enthusiasm for native traditions, coupled with a defensive Scottish nationalism driven by political and social change, were two causes for this shift of emphasis. John Purser suggests that 'Scots turned their back on the new musical architecture of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven and on anything that seemed to be leading towards it, in order to defend a musical environment which they believed was too beautiful and too vulnerable to risk'.<sup>3</sup> Johnson argues that these repertoire changes were also driven by the professionalisation of music, including the possibility of earning a living as a full-time musician and the publication of collections of dance tunes: dance music was a meal-ticket, and economics strongly influenced the development of the repertoire. Thus it was that reels, jigs, strathspeys, and hornpipes came into dominance. This repertoire testifies to the reciprocal relationship between dance and musical forms. One cannot dance without music, and equally this music takes on its particular character when played for dancing. Not only do dance and tune types correspond, but well-executed music creates a

harmonious relationship between dancers and musicians. The fiddler-cum-dancing master is a key figure in effecting this harmony.

Scottish dance has been studied to understand its role in traditional life, in high society, and in popular culture: reels, jigs, and strathspeys, waltzes, polkas, and quicksteps are all part of the stuff of social life.<sup>4</sup> People from all social classes enjoyed dancing, in mansion, military, town, and rural settings. Scholars contend that, despite repression during the Reformation, dancing never faltered among the aristocracy and the lowest classes of folk who were outwith the moral reach of the kirk.<sup>5</sup> By the eighteenth century, dance instruction was considered essential to proper education among the emerging middle classes as it had long been among the aristocracy, and the profession of dancing master developed alongside the professional musician, often in the body of the same person. Dance teachers and musicians practiced in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Dundee, and visited country houses to instruct the daughters and sons of wealthy lairds. Country dancing schools were held at inns or in a farmer's granary. Robert Burns attended such a dancing school at Tarbolton in 1779. The following description from James Currie's 1803 edition of Burns's works details the enthusiasm for dancing in Scotland at the time:

The attachment of the people of Scotland of every rank, and particularly of the peasantry, to this amusement is very great. After the labours of the day are over, young men and women walk many miles, in the cold and dreary nights of winter, to these country dancing-schools; and the instant that the violin sounds a Scottish air, fatigue seems to vanish, the toil-bent rustic becomes erect, his features brighten with sympathy; every nerve seems to thrill with sensation, and every artery to vibrate with life.<sup>6</sup>

Itinerant dancing masters have thus been a feature of life in Scotland for more than two centuries. Scholars provide a portrait of some of these 'dancies', as they were known in Angus and Aberdeenshire, and we learn first-hand about the musician-cum-dancing master from James Scott Skinner of Banchory's autobiography.<sup>7</sup> The instrument of choice for the dancing masters throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the fiddle, and the 'Fiddley' Adamsons continued this practice well into the twentieth century in Fife.

The itinerant dancing masters came to my attention because so many older people whom I have interviewed in Fife talk about 'Fiddley' Adamson and his dance classes.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a father and son both nicknamed 'Fiddley' taught four generations of dancers. Alexander (1859–1939) and William (1880–1966) Adamson covered a territory that included Fife and parts of Kinross and Perthshire. They worked in a particular district for fourteen-week periods, holding classes in various locations on different days of the week. Friday and Saturday nights were reserved for ordinary dances, or for the 'balls' that marked the mid-point and end of the lessons. Some people who attended William's classes recall that their parents learned to dance from Alexander – a family tradition in both cases.

In contrast to the dancing masters north of the Tay, the Adamsons were not called 'dancie'. William Adamson is recalled by his former students as a rather stout, well-dressed and proper gentleman. He was a stickler for formalities, and no one called him 'Fiddley' to his face. He expected to be called 'Mr Adamson', and few people living today know his Christian name. Some people who were very young when they attended his classes called him 'Daddie' Adamson, perhaps reflecting his paternal care for his youngest pupils, who remember him with fond affection. His son, Bill, says that his father particularly enjoyed teaching children. The nickname 'Fiddley' however, clearly places the instrument at the centre of people's recollections of his dancing classes: he played the fiddle for the lessons, arriving at the village hall on his bicycle with his fiddle in a bag strapped to his back.

Alexander started work as a miner in Cowdenbeath, in west Fife.<sup>9</sup> A keen dancer, he learned to dance and to play the violin around 1875 from Andrew Doag, who held classes in Lochgelly and Cowdenbeath districts. Leaving the mines, Alexander followed in Doag's footsteps as a dancing master. After his marriage, he moved his young family (son William and daughter Jean) to Kettlebridge in the Howe of Fife – one may suppose in order to establish his own territory. Alexander started holding dancing classes in 1878-79, and continued until he retired in 1927 at the age of sixty-eight. His son, William, learned to dance and to play the fiddle from his father, and initially worked in partnership with him. William began teaching classes on his own at the age of twenty and continued the business after 1927 until his own retirement in 1953 when he was seventy-three. Teaching dance provided a good living for these men, as dancing was an important feature of social life.

Both Alexander and William were actively involved in the local economy. Bill recalls that his father continued to cycle to his classes even after he had a car, because he could meet people more easily while cycling; he maintained that this direct contact was the best advertisement for his services. Both father and son also provided bands for local dances such as a harvest home on the big estates, and, in the 1940s and 1950s, William ran weekly dances in the hall in Kettlebridge. Though they relied on their profession as musicians, band leaders, and dance teachers for income, they also donated their services to local organizations. A band was provided free for dances sponsored by the bowling club, tennis club, or Masonic Hall, as their contribution to the community.

In the manner of eighteenth-century 'dancies', Alexander also composed tunes – one that his grandson Bill particularly recalls was 'The Kettle Water Works'. The music was freely given out to band members, and was likely taken up by other musicians. When the family later received newly published music – which they did regularly through a subscription service – there often would be tunes very similar to ones his grandfather had written included in the packet. Alexander never published his tunes, however, a fact Bill now regrets.

Since the eighteenth century, fiddles have formed the core of instrumental ensembles for dancing in Scotland, a practice followed by the Adamsons' dance bands. William was taught the violin by his father and joined the band as soon as

he was able, just as he joined his father in teaching dancing. William took over the family home on Hall Street in Kettlebridge as well as the business, and his parents continued to live with him after he married and started a family of his own. There were five children, born two years apart between 1907 and 1915. All the children were given music lessons, starting with the violin at home. The oldest three took lessons at Forbes music shop in Dundee: Isobel and Joan were taught piano and Sandy was taught piano, cello, and drums. Bill, the next son, was taught violin by his grandfather starting at the age of five, learned cornet and trombone in the Kingskettle Silver Band from the age of nine, and took postal tutorials to learn the double bass. The youngest son, Bob, played guitar. For the Adamsons, dance teaching was a profession as well as a family business, and training was important for its success.

Isobel emphasized that her family were professional, 'literate musicians' who could read and write music, and who played classical as well as dance music. Both she and Bill spoke of 'violins', not 'fiddles', and added that Sandy played cello, not for dancing, but for the classical music they played at home. Although William's family were all musical and helped in the business, none of the three sons took up the mantle when their father retired, which was a great disappointment to him. However, by the 1950s, tastes in music and dance and lifestyle were changing in such a way that made the career of travelling dancing master an uncertain proposition.

William Adamson usually played the fiddle on his own for the classes, but for the 'half ball' which occurred in the seventh week of the session and for the 'full ball' in the fourteenth or final week, he provided a band including Isobel or Sandy on piano, or Sandy on drums, and Bill on double bass or trombone. In the 1930s, classes were sixpence, the half ball, lasting from eight to midnight was one shilling and sixpence, and the full ball, held from 10 pm to 2 am, cost two shillings and sixpence. Bill recalls that, in the 1930s and 1940s, the family could supply two bands for weekend dances. His father led one and Isobel or Sandy the other. The other children played as required, and other musicians were recruited as needed. Sundays were the days for practising, and Mrs Adamson did her part by providing sandwiches and tea for everyone.

William considered it important to keep abreast of new repertoire. Just as eighteenth-century dancing masters taught the popular minuet during its heyday, subsequent generations introduced the waltz, polka, quickstep, tango, and samba. Bill said that, in the earlier years, his father emphasized 'old time' dances, but he was latterly persuaded by the younger family members to 'modernize'. Older youths were then introduced to ballroom dances and even children were taught the basic steps of these dances, along with traditional dances. A former student, Ella Rodger, recalls learning ballroom dances: 'I remember Mr Adamson – he lived in Kingskettle, his father taught dancing to the generation before us. I went to Mr Adamson's classes in Newburgh Masonic Hall. . . Mr Adamson played the fiddle, his daughter played the piano for us dancing. Mr Adamson also had a son who was a very good dancer. We were taught the quickstep, foxtrot, modern waltz – happy days!'<sup>10</sup>

Former pupils also recall how the classes were organized according to age and experience, starting with the youngest children and going through to young adults.<sup>11</sup> There were two sessions each evening. The 'junior' session for children from ages five to fourteen lasted from 6:00 to about 8:00 pm. Children learned Highland or step dances, other 'Scotch' dances, and the basic waltz step. Jane Kennedy, who was allowed to start lessons at the age of four because she was so keen to learn to dance, believes that the classes were important for learning 'the basics, and manners for children'. More complicated set dances such as the Lancers and country dances and ballroom dances like the waltz and quickstep were taught during the 'adult' session for youths over the age of fourteen. These lasted from 8:00 until 10:00 pm and functioned more like an ordinary dance than a class. New dances were taught as they came up or when it was obvious that some people did not know how to do them, but well-known dances were simply danced. William insisted on maintaining decorum on these occasions, continuing the training in etiquette and manners he began with the children. Older boys sometimes cut capers, but if they were caught they would be told to dance properly and, according to Donald France, they would comply for fear of not being allowed to continue with the classes.<sup>12</sup>

William Adamson's style of teaching is vividly recalled: playing the fiddle, he would demonstrate a dance or drill steps. Jim Davidson of Newburgh comments: 'I wonder how many people who have enjoyed dancing in their lifetimes owe a debt of gratitude to a gentleman called Mr Adamson... [He] was a fine man and my abiding memory was to see him glide across the floor strumming his violin, demonstrating how dancing should be done. Today, when I see so many young people wandering aimlessly about, I think – oh for another Mr Adamson.'<sup>13</sup> Bill assured me that his father could indeed play the fiddle and dance at the same time. When he was teaching children the Highland Fling, for example, he would pluck the strings, slowly at first, one pluck for each position, gradually speeding up as the dance was learned. By plucking the tune as he demonstrated the steps for the students to follow, he could teach the tune and the steps at the same time. Eventually the tune was played properly when the dance was known. Flett describes the technique: 'When teaching solo dances Mr Adamson held his fiddle under his right arm, the bow in his right hand pointing forward. He strummed the strings with his right hand whilst fingering the strings with his left hand'.<sup>14</sup>

The aesthetic connection between the music and the dance is illustrated by the following comment from Jenny Blyth: 'I read with much interest the piece about Mr Adamson and his dancing classes in village halls. I went to one in Balmullo Hall. Listening to certain dance tunes for the Veleta or St Bernard's Waltz, when you hear that lilt you can still see in your mind Mr Adamson with his fiddle gliding across the floor. I have said to my husband many a time when I have heard a tune that I can still picture Mr Adamson'.<sup>15</sup> Elegance and grace were characteristics of William's own dancing – Jane Kennedy recalls that he had very dainty 'wee feet' and was a 'lovely dancer'. Jane also notes his insistence that steps were done properly: 'He didn't let you make a mistake'.<sup>16</sup> Others too have told me that 'you had to do your pas de bas

correctly', even though this training often went by the boards at an ordinary dance. Mary Maxwell insists that, to this day, she can tell who has been taught by 'Daddie' Adamson: 'Go anywhere in the Howe of Fife and you can tell by dancing with them', she says, because they have the right timing of the dance.<sup>17</sup> Well-executed step and playing, with attention to tempo and timing, create a pleasing harmony between dancers and musician.

Gentlemanliness is another characteristic that people recall about William Adamson. Mrs Davina Gray describes the social context in this way: 'Well do I remember cycling to his classes at Pitlessie and Dunbog, the cost of admission being sixpence. Mr Adamson arrived on his push-bike, his fiddle over his back, and then the class commenced. He was a strict disciplinarian, a fine teacher and a complete gentleman... My husband and I have many happy memories of Mr Adamson's dancing, for it was there that we met, courted and then married 62 years ago'.<sup>18</sup> Bill Adamson also describes his father and grandfather as sticklers for formality and propriety at the dancing. They insisted that the boys, who were seated on one side of the hall, go across to 'request the pleasure' of a dance from the girls, and return her to her seat at the end of the turn. Bill helped out at classes in the 1920s, being called on to partner girls who might not be as popular with the local boys so they would not be left out. Mary Maxwell remembers that William would tell the boys: 'You hold the girls like a flower, you don't hold a grip like you're holding a farm horse'.<sup>19</sup> For the end of session balls, boys were expected to have white gloves, and girls wore light dresses, sometimes with flowers given to them by their partners.

One anecdote Bill relates illustrates how seriously his father regarded the duty of his profession to instil manners and grace among the youth. In creating his model village at Forteviot, Lord Dupplin included a hall, but he forbade dancing in it, decreeing that it was for the community's use by such groups as the Scouts and Women's Rural Institute. Dancing was not considered an acceptable activity. Hearing this, William asked to see his lordship, and argued that teaching dancing was like teaching school – I think we can assume that the argument he made emphasized the civilizing habits of etiquette, deportment, and politeness. He apparently succeeded in convincing the laird, because he was given permission to offer classes in the hall, which extended his territory into Perthshire. Carrying the civilizing influence of the dance to rural communities, the career of the fiddle-playing dancing master, as exemplified by Alexander and William Adamson's work in Fife, Kinross, and Perthshire, represents a continuity of practice from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. At the same time, these professionals adapted to changes in society and in musical and aesthetic tastes, refashioning tradition as they did so.

While the typical eighteenth-century dance band consisted of two to four fiddlers, a cellist, and a harpsichord, if one were available, William Adamson's band included one or two fiddles, bass, piano, and drums. The continuity is obvious. But what can be said of the twentieth century's contribution to Scottish music, the accordion? Isobel told me that her father 'detested accordions and would never tolerate one in his band'. But Bill acknowledged that he later relented and accepted them, and

why not? Musicians and dancing masters from the seventeenth century onwards in Scotland endeavoured to keep abreast of the latest dances and newest instruments. Country dances and minuets were the rage in the eighteenth century, waltzes and polkas in the nineteenth, and ballroom dances in the twentieth. In the 1660s, violins were introduced from Italy, and Italian-designed accordions appeared in the 1930s. The famous Hohner 'Shand Morino', designed by Signore Vincenzo Morino to Sir Jimmy Shand's specifications, has a three-voice Scottish tuning that blends harmoniously with the fiddle. Most contemporary Scottish dance bands combine the fiddle and accordion to achieve their unique sound. The tradition continues to develop, and continues to reflect the legacy of the fiddle and the dance.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David Johnson, *Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century: A Music Collection and Historical Study*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1997), p. 4.
- <sup>2</sup> David Johnson, *Scottish Fiddle Music* (1997), p. 244.
- <sup>3</sup> John Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992), p. 200.
- <sup>4</sup> See G. W. Lockhart, *Highland Balls and Village Halls* (Barr, Ayrshire: Luath Press, 1985); George S. Emmerson, *A Social History of Scottish Dance: ane celestial recreatioun* (Montreal, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972); Evelyn Hood, *The Story of Scottish Country Dancing: The Darling Diversion* (UK: Collins, 1980); Johnson, pp. 4, 244; and Elizabeth Casciani, *Oh, How We Danced!* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1994).
- <sup>5</sup> See Hood, pp. 43-61; Johnson, pp. 213-14.
- <sup>6</sup> [Robert Burns], *The Works of Robert Burns: With an Account of His Life, and a Criticism on His Writings*, 4th edn, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1803), I, 33, quoted in Katherine Campbell with Emily Lyle, *Burns and Scottish Fiddle Tradition* (Edinburgh: School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> See Hood, pp. 84-107; J. F. Flett and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 7-30; James Scott Skinner, *My Life and Adventures* (1923); repr edn (Aberdeen: City of Aberdeen and Wallace Music, 1994).
- <sup>8</sup> Information gathered here is based on fieldwork in Fife from 1974 to 2001. See also Flett & Flett, 1964.
- <sup>9</sup> Personal information from interviews with Isobel Adamson Herd, 9 January 1975, and Bill Adamson, 21 July 2001. See also Flett & Flett 1964, pp. 8-14 and J. F. Flett and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Step Dancing in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996), p. 14.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Craigie' column, *Dundee Courier*, 4 June 2001, p. 10.
- <sup>11</sup> Interviews with John and Jean Adamson, 1 February 1996; 23 June 1998; Jane Kennedy, 12 February, 29 April 1996; Mary Maxwell, 24 January 1996; Dave and Betty Clark, 21 February 1996; Audrey Fenion, 11 March 1996; Mary and Bert Dalrymple, 1 May 1996; Isobel Crawford, 28 June 1981; Hilda Ronaldson, 6 January 1975, 11 June 1988; Donald and Joan France, 15, 19 December 1974.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Donald and Joan France, 15, 19 December 1974.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Craigie' column, *Dundee Courier*, 21 May 2001, p. 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Flett & Flett, 1996, p. 43.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Craigie' column, *Dundee Courier*, 24 May 2001, p. 14.
- <sup>16</sup> Interviews with Jane Kennedy, 12 February, 29 April 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mary Maxwell, 24 January 1996.

<sup>18</sup> 'Craigie' column, *Dundee Courier*, 4 June 2001, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mary Maxwell, 24 January 1996.