

The Caledonian Ball

by Tony Beckwith © 2007

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MANY YEARS AGO when the British arrived in Argentina and Uruguay, they came first as soldiers, which is how they did things in those days, and then as businessmen, which was a much better idea. Thriving new opportunities then attracted people from all over the United Kingdom, launching a wave of immigration that brought several generations from the old world to the two countries that border the River Plate.

The Scots who came to the region in the very early days trusted their native experience and settled in rural areas as sheep ranchers and shepherds. They brought with them their traditions, their music, and their dances; their kilt and bagpipe became recognizable icons everywhere. In time they blended into the larger British Communities in the area, whose members to this day are descended from those early adventurers.

This explains why the Caledonian Ball was one of the high points of the social calendar during my youth in Montevideo. The Ball was a very grand affair, held at the Parque Hotel, in their spacious ballroom with polished parquet floors, sparkling chandeliers, and waiters in dinner jackets. It was a gathering of the clans, a tribal experience, attended by a cross-section of the community and thoroughly enjoyed by venerable elders, frisky youngsters, and everyone in between. I was a teenager at the time and enjoyed the event to the full extent of my capacity for having fun, which in those days was prodigious. And why not? There was a most agreeable feeling of belonging. Plus, I was all spiffed up in formal attire, at a splendid hotel, surrounded by friends and music. It was always a night to remember.

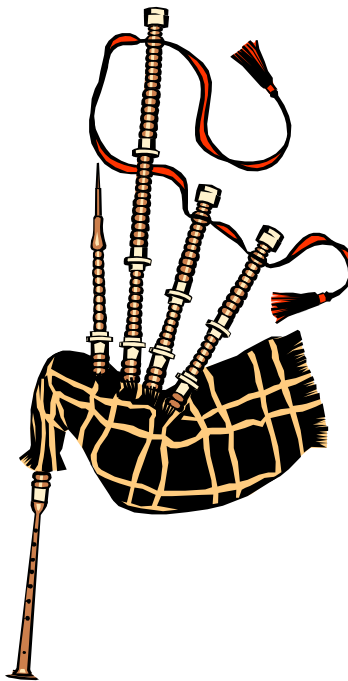
But you couldn't just show up at a Caledonian Ball. You had to be part of an eightsome, which hopefully included seven of your wildest friends. And you had to attend practice sessions for weeks in advance so that you and your wild friends could perform flawless renditions of the traditional group dances—the Eightsome Reel, the Schottische, the Dashing White Sergeant, Strip the Willow, the Petronella, the Highland Fling, and so on. Some of them were sedate,

some lively, some downright dangerous, in which excited couples careened up and down at breakneck speeds, occasionally colliding with others, which only added to the excitement. There was a giddiness in the air all night, like a carnival or a very popular wedding. People connected with their inner highlander and, by some unspoken understanding, certain codes of behavior acquired an unusual elasticity.

The dances were of the traditional variety: four couples form a square, with all dancers facing inwards. They raise their arms above their heads, thumbs touching their middle finger and the other fingers fully extended. Then they hop from one foot to the other, in time to the music, tapping the floor with the toe of the raised foot on the offbeat. Men and women perform this ritual jig in a prescribed order, then sashay towards each other, meeting in the center of the square for a sequence of approaches and steps that lead to a linking of arms and skipping around in a circle. There is much merriment and no restriction whatsoever on shouting or squealing with laughter. In fact, the more noise the better, or so it seemed back then at the Parque Hotel.

Some people actually wore a kilt of their clan's tartan to the Ball and there were, of course, the usual jokes about what went on under the family colors. If I'd had one I would certainly have worn it, probably over my rugby shorts, like everyone else. It would have to be a Campbell tartan because my family is descended from the Campbell clan through my paternal grandmother. Someone once told me that long ago, back in the misty highlands of Scotland, there were two clans, the Campbells and the MacDonalds. There was bitter animosity between them, like the Hatfields and McCoys in the United States, and one day my forebears invited the MacDonalds to a meeting and then massacred them all. I remember being extremely puzzled as to how all that affected me, and feeling a little uncomfortable around those who were descended from some of the more fortunate MacDonalds who presumably survived. I used to wonder if, in the excitement of the Ball, they might be contemplating a little old-fashioned revenge. After all, you never really know what's going through people's minds. A couple of whiskeys and some of them think they're Rob Roy himself.

My brother wore a kilt on at least one occasion, but I have no idea how it came into his possession.



Christopher, who was fourteen months older than I, was one of the bagpipers that night, and the pipers were the highlight of the Ball. They readied themselves in a private room, adjusting their kilts, straightening their stockings, and downing a ritual tumbler of neat Scotch whisky before exploding into the ballroom and filling the hearts of all present with the extraordinary sound of the Scottish bagpipe. It can be wild music, evocative of moor and glen, its intoxicating rhythm inciting you to give your inhibitions the night off and dance like one possessed. Or it can roll over you slowly like a dirge, its thick welling notes suffocating you with sadness.

Our ancestors were undoubtedly present amongst us on the night of the Ball. The event was a potent

manifestation of Scottish tradition that allowed those so inclined to create a Scottish persona they could wear like a fancy dress at a costume ball. People got into the spirit of the occasion and, as the evening progressed, started referring to young women as “lasses,” and saying “aye!” at the drop of a hat. They’d roll their “rr’s” like Sean Connery does and attempt a variety of linguistic experiments, saying things like, “aye, that’s a verra nice drop o’ whuskey, laddie!” Nobody minded these unscripted deviations from the norm. With bagpipes wailing and sips of Scotch warming one’s throat, who *didn’t* wonder aloud whether there was “a moose loose about the hoose,” or sing a nostalgic verse or two from “Auld Lang Syne”? Hoots mon, this was the Caledonian Ball! ★