

10th Annual Irish Set Dancing Weekend Canberra, 10 – 12 October 2014

Like the Olympics it was the ‘best Canberra Irish Set Dancing weekend ever!’ and so say all of us! This was the resounding verdict of our celebration of the 10th annual Canberra Irish Set Dancing weekend.

To set the party tone for the weekend, the Cook Neighbourhood Hall was decked out with banners, flags, balloons and shamrocks complete with dance phrases – *ladies chain, square the set, dance at home* – crafted by Jacqueline Jenkins. And because it was our 10th birthday, there were birthday presents. Every participant received a gift of a pair of stylish shamrock socks. For the ladies, there were ankle socks with shamrocks on either a white or green or black background, and for the men, business socks with shamrocks on a grey background. Perfect for the office. Some chose to ‘road test’ their new socks immediately making for some very stylish and up-to-the-minute fashionista sets.

During the tea and supper breaks we were entertained with a slide show of photographs from the weekends since 2005, curated by Irina Borissova. We had fun picking ourselves out in past years and identifying who’s who. We all looked so young!

Our MC for the weekend was Paul Wayper. His job was a little harder this year due to last minute constraints imposed by the managers of the Cook Community Hall which meant the weekend program had to be run to a very tight timetable. Paul Wayper and Kate Armstrong organised the first Irish Set Dancing Weekend in Canberra in 2005. The ongoing success of this now well established and popular weekend only happens due to their planning and enthusiasm. As one person said: ‘thank you for 10 years of dedication to keeping Irish set dancing alive. Every year we see new faces and that’s what keeps you going.’

The program for the weekend, including the choice of sets for the ceilis, was put together by David Arnold in discussion with teachers and the organising team. The format for the weekend was a mix of workshops and ceilis, with participants being able to pick and choose their preferences. Most chose the full weekend package, and others opted to come along to one or more of the ceilis. In all, a total of 101 people participated – 42 from the ACT, 40 from New South Wales, 18 from Victoria and a visitor from Ireland holidaying in Australia. Glad you could make it Liam!

The workshops held on Saturday and Sunday were conducted by some of the stable of experienced teachers that we are fortunate to have in Australia - Nora Stewart and Martin Largey, Margaret and Bill Winnett and Marie Brouder. By popular demand, Nora and Martin devoted part of their workshop to stepping classes – jigs, reel, polkas and hornpipes and additional rhythm steps. The classes were especially appreciated by those newer to set dancing (and pleasingly, the weekend continues to attract new people each year), and are always a favourite with dancers looking to polish their stepping.

Nora and Martin also taught two sets. The Aran Set – featuring ‘the waves’, and the Jack Canny Set, a new set being developed by Nora and Martin in honour of Jack Canny, a Clare man and fiddler, who lived in Canberra from the early 1960’s. Jack was the brother of Paddy Canny, a founding member of Tulla Ceili Band, and Jack and Paddy Canny were both uncles to Martin Hayes, the famous fiddler who plays each year at the Willie Clancy Festival with the current Tulla Ceili Band. Jack’s talents extended beyond music – in 1935 he was All-Ireland cycling champion. Here in Canberra, Jack Canny had a strong influence on local musicians and the next generation of musicians. The Jack Canny Set is designed to reflect many of the well-known Clare dance moves, with a twist. The idea was to incorporate some moves that could be danced by single couple, if they found great music and were without other dancers.

The creation of new sets is another way in which interest in set dancing is continuing to grow. Over the weekend we danced a number of newer sets (including the Merchant Set) and others created in Australia – the Jack Canny Set, the Antrim Set and the Australian Half Set.

With the help of a very competent demonstration set, Margaret and Bill Winnett taught two sets. The Clare Orange and Green – featuring a contrary and knot; and the South Sligo Lancers with the ever popular ‘line up’ figures. It was great to see Bill Winnett looking so well after the ‘not the expected holiday in Ireland’ earlier this year. Margaret and Bill Winnett were inaugural teachers at the 2005 Canberra weekend, and have taught at many annual weekends since. Great to have them also at the 10th Birthday weekend. At the Saturday evening ceili, Margaret and Bill presented the Canberra organisers with a 10th Birthday congratulatory message signed by their Sydney dancers. It was a lovely surprise! Thank you. We know Margaret and Bill are indefatigable, so it will come as no surprise that the weekend after teaching in Canberra, they were spotted teaching again at the Kangaroo Valley festival.

Marie Brouder from Victoria also taught two sets. The Set of Erin from West Cork made popular by dancing instructor, Timmy McCarthy, and the Cuchulainn Set. As always, it’s a great pleasure to have Marie teaching in Canberra. Her love of dance and witty sense of humour and fun is infectious and her classes were laughter-filled, especially as she tried to demonstrate swinging out as a couple from a swing-in-four: ‘you have to let me go!’ (the swing-in-four were repeatedly reluctant to do). It’s a pleasure to note also that Marie’s contribution to dance was honoured in July this year at the launch of 16th Lake School of Celtic music, song and dance (styled on the Willie Clancy Week in County Clare) where she was inducted as the 12th Legend of the Lake by Morgan McAlinden. Congratulations Marie!

There were three ceilis over the weekend with music by the Jimmy Mullarkey Ceili Band comprising Jimmy Mullarkey, John Joe Noonan, Gabriel Calgarno and Jody Moran. And the Band could not have been better received. As the participants said themselves:

*music was excellent!
great live music - this is the best band!
what I liked about the ceilis - the great music*

*brilliant music
the band was exceptional!
the music was excellent this year - I didn't want it to stop it was so good
best Canberra weekend ever - live music just wonderful*

Friday's welcome ceili opened with a firm favourite – the Clare Plain Set - and finished with another – the Ballyvourney Jig Set. As has been the case in previous years, a number of dancers from other genres (bush, Scottish, contra) came along to join in the fun and celebrate the 10th Birthday weekend.

Saturday evening was the 10th Birthday Ceili. The program included some more favourites – the Clare Lancers, Connemara Reel Set and the Kenmare Polka – and a selection of sets taught at the Saturday workshops – the Clare Orange and Green, the Set of Erin and the South Sligo Lancers. We also danced the Australian Half Set 'uncalled'. Compared to dancers in Ireland, we are spoiled in Australia as dances are routinely called. That said, we do tend to dance a broader range of dances. Each year at the Canberra event, we practise dancing 'uncalled' to test our brains a bit and enjoy the music without a call. The report card on dancing the Australian Half Set uncalled? Room for improvement.

Here seems an appropriate moment to acknowledge the contribution that callers make to the enjoyment of others at our ceilis. Not only do callers enable us to dance with greater ease, but they sacrifice their own opportunity to dance in order to call sets for others. So thank you to our callers over the weekend, including Kate Crowley who was a first-time caller this year at the Canberra weekend. It is great to see new callers joining the stable.

When we broke for supper on Saturday evening we celebrated our 10th birthday with an enormous chocolate mud cake complete with a photograph of the 2005 Canberra weekend, 10 gold birthday candles and a set of sparklers. Not that we needed cake after a wonderful supper, but it was our birthday and birthday cake is a must. Following supper, there was time for three more sets before concluding the 10th Birthday Ceili with a waltz.

Workshops continued on Sunday morning, with Nora Stewart and Martin Largey, and Marie Brouder. Following the lunch break, we cajoled our tired feet into taking the floor for one final ceili, again with the Jimmy Mullarkey Ceili Band. Fittingly, it ended as it had begun with the Clare Plain Set. And for those who *still* had energy remaining after the farewell ceili, there was a meal and socialising at King O'Malley's Irish Pub in Civic, before the farewells and 'see you soon somewhere on the dance floor'.

A big thank you to everyone who helped to make the 10th Canberra weekend such a success. To all the dancers who come along each year bringing such good will and spirit to participate, learn and enjoy, you keep the event fresh – thank you. And to all the Canberra volunteers who contributed in so many different ways to making the weekend a success – bringing fans to offset the rather hot Canberra Spring temperatures, offering billets to interstate dancers, supper contributions, staffing the registration desk, photographing, cleaning up during and

afterwards – thank you. And to my colleagues on the 2014 organising team – Irina Borissova, Jacqueline Jenkins, David Arnold, Paul Wayper and Kate Armstrong – warmest thanks. The participants perhaps say it best:

Congratulations to the organisers, the caterers, and the volunteers who worked so hard. Thank you for a wonderful weekend.

Best Irish weekend ever.

It was all just fantastic.

Good variety. Good range of teachers & styles

Greatly appreciated workshops on individual steps. Very helpful.

You have set the bar very high.

It was a birthday to remember.

Christine Briton
Co-ordinator
2014 Weekend Organising Team