



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

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EDITORIAL

Burns Night has come and gone for another year and it has been instructive to read the reports of these affairs in the Provincial Press.

One is struck by the number of Dance Displays given in conjunction with the celebrations, ranging all the way from the Highland Fling and Sword Dance through the Eightsome Reel to the Shepherd's Crook and Petronella. (In Whitehorse, Y.T. they even danced the Twist which, done in the kilt, was apparently a sight to be seen!

It seems to us that in these local manifestations of interest in the dances of Scotland lies a fruitful field for the expansion of Scottish Country Dancing in B.C.

OUR DANCES, NO. 11

The Montgomrie's Rant.

This is one of the earliest country dances to be found in Scotland. It comes from a manuscript called "Register of Dances att Castle Menzies 1749", more often referred to as "the Menzies MS." The spelling above, improbable though it may look, is the original.

Here is the original description, copied from the manuscript.

The Montgomrie's Rant a Strathspey Reele.

1st pair goes back to back and cast off then back to back again and ye woman casts up, and ye man down, then reels above and below then the 1st pair sets hand in hand to ye 2d woman then to ye 3d man then to ye 3d woman and then to ye 2d man: then leads out att ye sides. A few comments might be helpful. In these early days reel music was of two kinds: "ordinary" or "quick" reels and "strathspey" or "slow" reels. Later the term "strathspey reel" was shortened to "strathspey", and so the slow tunes were designated from 1800 or so until today. Thus the Montgomrie's Rant was originally a Strathspey. The manuscript gives no music, only descriptions of the dance-figures. The tunes in S.C.D. book number 10 have evidently been chosen for their titular association: they are "Lady Montgomery" and "Lord Eglintoune". "Lead out at the sides" was a very common, yet rather obscure figure in the older country dances. Evidence from text-books and other sources shows that it must have meant different things at different times. It is the usual practice in the S.C.D. books to replace it by "reels of three at the sides" as here and in Moneymusk. The first figure in the S.C.D. book seems unusually inaccurate - the "back to back" has been completely eliminated. Undoubtedly this makes a smoother flowing dance, more suited to modern tastes, and the authenticity of the reconstructions which they dance may possibly wonder whether, in this case, the end justifies the means.

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor of The Thistle

Dear Sir,

Mr. Paul Rising expresses a common fear: that carefree Scottish Country Dancing for 'folk' may be ruined by the more precise technique required from demonstration teams that are to be worth watching.

He takes too limited a view. Scottish Country Dancing is bigger than he thinks. Like music, it can embrace the 'pop', the 'light', the 'classical', even the 'contemporary'. Mr. Rising would, I am sure, laugh at anyone who asserted that attending an expert performance of Handel's Messiah ruined ordinary folk's hymn-singing.

Scottish Country Dancing can include not only different styles of dancing, but also different types of dances. And though 'pop' and 'classical' music (or dances) may appeal to entirely different customers, composers of one sort can frequently learn from composers of the other sort. Folk-tunes find their way into symphonies and any of your readers old enough to remember the 'pop' songs of the 1920's will recall that if it hadn't been for Handel we should never have had no bananas.

Long live 'pop' music and dances! Yes, but don't let their merits blind us to those of other sorts.

Yours faithfully,
Hugh Foss.

(Paul Rising's letter (in our December issue) also stimulated some oral comments, from "Scottish country dancing is not like other folk-dancing" to "Miss Milligan says that Scottish country dancing is not folk-dancing". Everyone agreed that women should not dance as men in a public display. Another comment was "A pre-rehearsed performance by a dancing-class always reminds me of an inspection by a General when the troops have been forewarned and everything is white-washed and unnaturally tidy".

We showed this note to Paul and he remarked "My main point is that teams should not polish their dancing to the point where it becomes a painful and intricate process. Audiences enjoy watching dancers who are themselves enjoying the dance, and a mixed team or two dancing the Duke of Perth as we actually do it in our classes and at our parties would be a better spectacle than what we saw". Ed.)

I've been getting the Thistle regularly and enjoy it very much. You asked for comments in the last issue - or if not you, somebody else - sooooo why not use LARGER type? Some of us are getting old and have trouble reading the real fine tiny print.

Ralph Page, Keene, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

(We can, of course, use a larger font, but only by having less material in each issue. What do other readers think? Ed.)

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

"Amor saltus excitat me" means, literally "The love of the dance excites me." Hugh Foss's poem is an imitation of the well-known poem by Dunbar whose refrain is "Timor mortis conturbat me". At least, we thought the poem was well-known until we discovered that many readers of the Thistle didn't know it.

LOCAL NEWS

A very pleasant ceremony was performed on Tuesday, January 22nd at the Lady Aberdeen S.C.D.S. when Mrs. John Forbes presented three electric razors, purchased from funds received at the Armistice Tea Dance, to Shaughnessy Military Hospital. This is the 17th annual gift made by this group.

COMING EVENTS

Miss Milligan will come to Canada again this summer and will be at Crystal Cliffs, near Antigonish, Nova Scotia, for the Labour day weekend (August 26 - September 2). Further information from Mr. A. F. Bilson, The Nova Scotia Scottish Country Dance Society, Port Hawkesbury, N.S.

NEWS FROM SCOTLAND

Have you ever wondered how a tartan comes into being? The Guthrie tartan has just been devised by John R. Dalgety for Colonel Ivan Guthrie of Guthrie, the family chief. Its pattern is based partly on local and partly on family associations. The centre of the sett is taken from the Angus district check, the rest follows the Davidson tartan (to which clan Colonel Guthrie's wife belonged). The tartan has been registered with the Lord Lyon King of Arms (which makes it as authentic as a tartan can be.) According to "Scotland's magazine", Guthrie's school is to have curtains of this tartan and the first skirt is already being worn in Brooklyn.

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS

Cincinnati. The Scottish Dance Society meets on Wednesdays, at the YMCA (9th & Walnut) from October until June, and at Belleview Hill Park in the summer. Further details from Miss A. Kindness, 4040 Huston Avenue, Norwood 12, Ohio.

Kelowna. The second course of thirteen weekly lessons in Scottish country dancing started on Friday, January 4th at St. David's Presbyterian church hall. Visitors are welcome. Further information from Mrs. J. T. Russell.

Dartmouth, (N.S.) Scottish country dance group. First, third (and fifth) Mondays, in Dartmouth High School. Secretary: Mrs. Eric Whynacht, Ellenvale Avenue, Woodlawn, Dartmouth, N.S.

LIFE AND METTLE IN HIS HEELS: Burns and Dancing

By Ian Ross, University of B. C.

Writing an autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore on 2 August, 1787, Robert Burns described one of his first encounters with the national pastime of dancing. The attendant circumstances had made the incident memorable for him:

In my seventeenth year, to give my manners a brush, I went to a country dancing school. -- My father had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was, what to this hour I repent, in absolute defiance of his commands. -- My father, as I said before, was the sport of strong passions: from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe, was one cause of that dissipation which marked my future years. -- I only say, Dissipation, comparative with the strictness and sobriety of Presbyterian country life.

(Letters, I, 109)

Gilbert Burns tried to tone down this account of the clash between his brother and his father:

I wonder how Robert could attribute to our father the lasting resentment of his going to a dancing school against his will, of which he was incapable. I believe the truth was that he, about this time, began to see the dangerous impetuosity of my brother's passions, as well as his not being amenable to counsel, which often irritated my father; and which he would naturally think a dancing school was not likely to correct . . . He has indeed that dislike of dancing schools which Robert mentions; but so far overcame it during Robert's first month of attendance, that he allowed all the rest of the family that were fit for it to accompany him during the second month. Robert excelled in dancing, and was for some time distractedly fond of it.

(Snyder, 93, n. 11)

Despite Gilbert Burns's views, as expressed here, there is some reason to believe that Robert's feelings about dancing were mixed ones. However as much as he may have appeared to enjoy dancing, he must also have felt guilty at having disobeyed his father to learn the art. It is therefore not surprising to find that the dancing in his poems is done by rather disreputable people -- the witches and warlocks of the Kirkalloway coven, for instance. Also, we recall that Burns was an exciseman, and we may wonder if he was awarding himself a fitting punishment for filial disobedience in the well-known song:

There's threesome reels, there's foursome reels,
There's hornpipes and strathspey's, man,
But the ae best dance e're cam to the land
Was The Deil's Awa wi' th' Exciseman.

The dancing school that Burns attended was probably a decorous affair. At least, Sootie Reid, his dancing master, seems a genteel enough figure:

Erect, finely-proportioned, with well-turned limbs, very agile, he was an excellent dancer and a good fiddler. He taught dancing for many years in the west country, generally at some farmstead where there was a capacious barn . . . He generally wore a black suit with breeches buttoned at the knee, so that with a good pair of stockings, his well formed-jambes were shown to advantage. He boasted that he had learned Burns to dance, and according to his account Burns was no great shakes at the exercise.

(Ingram, 23)

One of Burns's first editors, Dr. James Currie, has left a vivid picture of the kind of institution which Reid and his like conducted:

The School is usually a barn, and the arena for the performers is generally a clay floor. The dome is lighted by candles stuck in one end of a cloven stick, the other end of which is thrust into the wall. Reels, strathspeys, country-dances, and hornpipes are here practised. The jig, so much in favour among the English peasantry, has no place among them. 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 night of winter, to these country dancing-schools; and the instant that the violin sounds a Scottish (? tune), 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. These rustic performers are indeed less to be admired for grace, than for agility and animation, and their accurate observance of time. Their modes of dancing, as well as their tunes, are common to every rank of Scotland, and are now generally known.

(Daiches, 325-61)

Burns used an idealized version of this kind of assembly as the setting for "Mary Morison", a song which he called "one of my juvenile works":

Yestreen, when to the trembling string
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard or saw:
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd and said amang them a'
'Ye are na Mary Morison.'

All of this is innocent enough, and Burns's father could find little to object to here, but dancing was far more vigorously and demonically engaged in by the country folk on other occasions, and these a stern father might well fear, when seeking to keep his son free from moral taint.

At the fairs in Ayrshire, for example, there were scenes of orgiastic behaviour which would need the hand and eye of Bruegel to do them justice. There was clearly something in Burns, too, which responded to such festivities and made him join the "hairum-scairum, ram-stam boys, / The rattling squad":

In the ale-house, the lad treats his lass, with ale, whisky, and sweet-meats, (called fairings), hugs her in his arms, tumbles her into a bed, if one can be found, though many persons be in the room, then, with one arm under her head, the other, and one of his legs over her, he enjoys a tete-a-tete conversation, longer or shorter, as the market happens to be brisk or slow. After a little time, they adjourn to some long-room, mason lodge, or barn, to dance reels. If the hall be much crowded at the time, they are obliged to maintain a struggle for the floor; which is done by the lad laying hold of his partner by the sides, and pushing her forward to the front of the crowd.

Towards night, when John Barleycorn has obtained the possession of the upper story, these struggles for the floor often lead to blows. During the affray, the weak part of the company, with the fiddler, get upon the benches, or run into a corner, while the more heroic, or those who are most intoxicated, take the post of honour. Few blows are struck in these uproars; they only pull and haul, and make a hideous noise. A few minutes exhaust their rage; -- new company arrives; -- the fiddler becomes arbiter; -- the tattered nymphs collect their shoes, and adjust their deranged dress; -- the fiddler strikes up a reel; -- the dance proceeds, and the affray ends as it began, no one can tell how.

(Strawthorn, 14)

Unfortunately, "The Holy Fair," which deals with this kind of social activity, and belongs to the genre of the "peasant-brawl poem", has no dancing scene in it. The Muse of Dancing's sister deities, Sex and Drink, however, are very much in evidence:

There's some are fou o' love divine;
There's some are fou o' brandy;
An' monie jobs that day begin,
May end in houghmagandie
Some ither day.

With the appearance of the Kilmarnock edition of his poems (1786), which contained "The Holy Fair", among other pieces, Burns became a national figure, and he set off for Edinburgh with the idea of publishing another edition of his poems. In Edinburgh he was lionized by polite society, though there was general agreement that he kept his head despite all the flattery. Among the ladies who received him was Jane, Duchess of Gordon, famous for her vivacity as hostess and her indefatigable energy when dancing reels. The Gordon household, of course, provides excellent evidence of the unified culture of eighteenth-century Scotland, which could bring together aristocrat and peasant. The Duke was a poet -- his merry song "Cauld Kail in Aberdeen" was duly entered by Burns in the Scots Musical Museum -- and his butler, a man by the name of Marshall, was described by Burns as "the first (i.e. best) composer of strathspeys of the age." On one occasion, the Duchess ended a quarrel between Lords Kames and Monboddo, Session Court judges and men of letters both, by asking them to dance a reel with her. Burns described her as "The lightest louter o' them a'." To charm her, he no doubt relied upon the manners he learned in Reid's dancing school rather than those favoured at Mauchline Fair. His social success in Edinburgh is well-attested by Mrs. Cockburn, authoress of "The Flowers of the Forest".:

The town is at present agog with the ploughman poet, who receives adulation with native dignity, and is the very figure of his profession, strong and course, but has a most enthusiastic heart of love. He has seen Duchess Gordon and all the gay world The man will be spoiled, if he can spoil; but he keeps his simple manners and is quite sober. No doubt he will be at the Hunters' Ball tomorrow, which has made all the Women and milliners mad.

(Snyder, 197)