



# The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

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## EDITORIAL

As our third year of "The Thistle" starts, we welcome new readers and welcome back old readers. Although "The Thistle" aestivates, and our regular classes have a summer holiday, Vancouver dancers have not been idle since the end of the last season. Our annual camp in July was bigger and better than ever (there are rumours that we may have to find larger quarters soon) and we were very pleased to have as "Visiting Professor": C. Stewart Smith, from the U.S.A. Throughout the summer, the usual exhibitions were asked for on occasions ranging from the low-brow gaiety of the Kitsilano Show-boat to the impressive opening of the million-dollar Killarney community centre. The American organization "North-west Folkdances Incorporated" held their first annual camp last June, and Scotland had the honour of being one of the four countries whose dances were chosen to give this camp a good send-off (the others were the Ukraine Yugoslavia, and South America). In August some of our members attended a similar but old-established camp in southern California, where they renewed acquaintance with Stewart Smith; they reported that, of the dances which he taught, the favorite seemed to be one of ours: "The Ceilidh".

So much for the past: for the future we wish every one good luck and good dancing.

## OUR DANCES, NO. 13

### Red House.

This is one of the earliest of our country dances. A glance at the footnote in Book 7 which gives the source of the dance shows that it was obtained from Walsh's "Caledonian country dances", dated 1731. This is a pretty early date, but as a matter of fact the dance is even older than that, for Walsh in turn got it from John Playford's "Dancing Master", to be precise, from the ninth edition, which appeared in 1695. We know that Walsh copied the dance from Playford, and it was not merely a question of the dance being a popular favorite over the forty-year period and being "collected" by two different writers, because the two descriptions are identical in phraseology. As actually printed, the dance was divided by special phrase-markings into eight-bar phrases. We have reproduced the same effect by numbering the phrases.

1. The first couple meet and set and cast off into second couple's place,
2. then meet and set again and cast off into their own places.
3. The first man cast off below the second man and go above the second woman into the second man's place, his woman following him at the same time.
4. Then the second woman cast up above the first woman and go below the first man into her own place, the first man following her at the same time.
5. Then the first couple and the second man go the Hey till they come into their own places.
6. Then the first couple and the second woman go the Hey on the other side and so cast off into the second couple's place.

The first thing which the reader will notice is that the dance is rather carelessly described. The "cast off" in phrase 2 should clearly be a "cast up". (And Walsh copied Playford's error). In phrase 4 something may be wrong, too: we shall return to this point later. Different reconstructors have realized these figures in different ways. A Scottish solution is to be found in Book 7; a rival (English) solution in "The country dance book (New Series)".

## Our Dances (cont'd.)

The reader may be wondering how the English came to reconstruct the dance; but as a matter of fact the boot is really on the other foot — English dancers have every right to wonder how we came to reconstruct it, for Playford's collection is purely English; and Walsh's plagiarism, although called "Caledonian", was published in London. That is why the word "Hey" is used: this is an English term — the Scottish term being "reel". (Walsh also published some pseudo-Scottish songs, which attracted certain amount of notoriety.)

A dancer with a feeling for music will probably sense that the music as given in Book 7 does not really fit the dance. The structure of the dance is ABBCC, where A symbolizes the opening setting and casting, B the chase, and C the reel; but the music is written to be played AABBC, that is to say, the first two strains are marked to be repeated, but the third is not. The effect would be vastly better if the structure of the dance reflected that of the music — as it is, the repeat of the A music corresponds to a complete change of figure; and then the "repeat" of the figure (i.e. the second chase) is accompanied by a new strain of music, and so on through the dance. The explanation of this discrepancy is now clear: in the original dance the music and the figures suited each other very well, both being of the form AABBC; and it is the condensing of the first 16 bars of the original into the first 8 bars of the Book 7 version which upset the correlation. (The English reconstruction does not make this mistake).

I have heard criticisms of the "coldness" of "Red House" because there is no physical contact — not so much as a hand-clasp — in the whole of the dance. However, this same lack of contact can be regarded in opposite way. Hugh Foss wrote, in *The Reel*, No. 52, "Surely any dance with two chases and no physical contact must always have been a flirting dance, even if one absolves the first woman of any desire to make her partner jealous when she dashes at the second man after being chased back home".

Now let us consider figure 4 of the dance. The R.S.C.D.S. instructions differ from the original in two ways: the first woman, (not the second) casts, and she casts up, not off. Now at the end of phrase 3 as reconstructed, the second woman is above the first woman and so cannot cast up above her. Thus if phrase 3 is correctly reconstructed, there must be at least one error in the original description of phrase 4. The English reconstructors assumed that "up" was a mistake for "off" and so reconstructed phrase 4 as "second woman casts off below first woman ---". They also assumed that "first man" is a mistake for "second man". In fact, in the English reconstruction the second couple repeat the chase which the first couple performed in the previous figure. The R.S.C.D.S. reconstruction, as readers will know, has the first couple repeating the previous chase in reverse. To reconstruct the figure this way, one only has to assume that Playford misnumbered the women. And, as a matter of fact, this is quite a plausible assumption, because at this point the second woman is in top place, and in actual fact the old descriptions quite often confuse the numbering of the dancers when they changed places. But J. P. Cunningham, in *The Reel*, No. 55, showed how this figure could be reconstructed without assuming mistakes in the original description. This can be done by assuming that in the first chase (figure 3) the first woman follows her partner only as far as her original place, and does not continue far enough to end below the second woman. (There is nothing in the instructions to tell her how far to go). Then the second chase can be performed exactly as described. Notice that now the second chase is performed by the first man and the second woman. This agrees very well with Hugh Foss's interpretation of the dance as a flirting dance — more so than when only one couple chases (as in the R.S.C.D.S. version) or even when each man chases only his own partner (as in the English version). Cunningham supports his suggestion by two arguments. The first is that it is unlikely for the original description to be in error, because it is the same in nine editions of Playford and two of Walsh. This is not a very convincing argument because the description was merely copied from one book to another, and so an error in the first description would automatically appear in all eleven. Moreover, there is certainly an error in figure 3 as we have seen, and this persists through all the descriptions. However, his second supporting argument is much stronger. There is a description of a variant of the dance in a manuscript by Ja. Turner, dated 1705. It goes as follows

The first couple cast off and back to back; then cast up and back to back again,  
then ye first man fall back ye first woman following him round ye second woman.  
Then ye first man follow ye second woman back again into their places.  
Then cross over and turn and figure.

## Our Dances (cont'd.)

This confirms that in the second chase it is the first man and the second woman who take part.

As so often happens, the solution to the problem looks easy and obvious now it is known. Anyone presented with the original description would — if he had never known the misleading English and R.S.C.D.S. reconstructions — have reconstructed the chase with no trouble at all. He would merely have interpreted the original description literally, without trying to correct "mistakes" in it.

Finally we might remark that this is another case where the correctly-reconstructed dance is — besides being correct — also more pleasant to dance than the incorrect reconstruction.

## HISTORICAL NOTE

From *The Ball; or, a glance at Almack's*, by G. Yates, 1829.

The description is of a ball at St. James', during the reign of George IV.

A country dance or two followed when the minuets were over; for cotillons or quadrilles were not then in fashion at court.

It is difficult to describe the whimsical appearance of the large court hoops during this dance. Must, however, be admitted that no extent of dexterity that could be employed by our noble Maies of that day, or their fair daughters, in disposing of this curious item of courtly costume, could render it other than the most absurd and grotesque appurtenance that ever disfigured and encumbered the female form . . . though everything was conducted with an air of reserve and etiquettish seriousness, the spectacle that these light dances afforded, notwithstanding the softening down that the utmost dexterity could effect, completely set gravity at defiance. Every lady attentively and politely endeavoured to accommodate her neighbour — but this could hardly be done, as the allotted space was not sufficient for the movement of her own person.

When the whole party was put in motion, but little trace of a regular dance remained; all was a perfect maze; and the cutting in and out of these cumbrous machines presented to the mind only the figures of a most formidable affray.

An entertaining variety of appearance arose also from the conformity of the steps to the diversified measure of the tune. The jig measure, which corresponds to the cantata in a horse's paces, produced a strong bounding up and down of the hoop — and the gavotte measure, which corresponds to the short trot, produced a tremulous and agitated motion. The numerous ornaments, with which the hoops were bespread and decorated — the festoons — the tassels — the rich embroidery — all of a most catching and taking nature, every now and then hitched together in unpremeditated and close embrace. To the parties in action it is not difficult to suppose these combinations might prove something short of perfectly agreeable, more especially as on such occasions as these, some of the fair daughters of our courtly belles were undergoing the awful ordeal of a first ballroom appearance, on whom these contingencies would inflict a ten-fold embarrassment. At the same time, it may be observed, that this concatenation of petty distresses — the pretty suffusion of countenance incident to them — the attentive assiduity of the gentleman to render assistance — the affable enjoyment of the whole scene by their Majesties, altogether disposed the company to an hilarity of tone, which was soon after enhanced by the opening of the buffets for refreshments, which took place on their Majesties retiring from the scene of action.

From: *Promenade autour de la Grande Bretagne par un officier français émigré*; published in Edinburgh in 1795.

La danse Écossaise, ou Reel, est extrêmement difficile à suivre pour un étranger; la mesure en est si précipitée et si différente des contredanses Françaises, qu'on voit fort peu qui réussissent, mais les habitans les dansent avec beaucoup de grace et de légèreté.

### NORTHERN JUNKET

The square-dance magazine that is different. \$2.50 for 12 issues, from Ralph Page, 117 Washington St., Keene, N.H., U.S.A.

Each issue brings you interesting articles on all phases of dancing: squares, contras, folk-dance, folk-song, folk-lore. Traditional recipes, too, for hungry dancers.

## NEWS ITEM

A Skye minister has forbidden his congregation to indulge in Scottish country dancing.

The Oban Times reports that the Dunvegan Further Education Centre arranged evening classes in Scottish Country dancing, piping, woodwork, drama, and psalmody. The minister of the Free High Church took particular exception to the drama and the dancing; and declared at morning service "These things are wrong and should be left alone". Later he told a reporter "I am convinced that the Prince of Darkness is behind the entertainment world. I think it is my duty to try to influence people to avoid things which could mar their relationship with God. Life is very serious business."

The Presbyterian minister also disapproved, but apparently in less dramatic phraseology.

## A MIRREAR DANCE MYCHT NA MAN SEE

By David Macaree

Despite William Dunbar's repetition of the above statement at the end of each stanza of his verses, "A Dance in the Quenis Chalmer", the searcher for information about, and references to country dances in Scottish poetry before Burns is likely to be disappointed on two counts: such references are few and fugitive, and they name dances of which we apparently know nothing. For this state of affairs Scottish Calvinism of the seventeenth century must bear much of the blame. There are remarks in the popular poetry of an earlier day but that of the late seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century is almost completely silent on the subject, so powerful was the feeling against social gatherings such as dances.

Thus the references in the early Scottish poetry are to a tradition that was later driven almost underground; we can only guess, therefore, from some fugitive pieces of description that the dances were energetic and contained a good deal of setting and high cutting. Dunbar, for instance, describes and names such a piece:

And thair he dancet the dirrye dantoun,  
He hoppet like a pillie wantoun,

but what kind of dance the "dirrye dantoun" was, we cannot say.

Poems dealing with dances at fairs and folk gatherings -- notably "Christis Kirk of the Green" and "Peeblis to the Play" -- provide us with a few statements about the dances of these bye-gone days. The music at Christ's Kirk was supplied by a wandering fiddler, at Peebles by a piper, who finally went on strike for money. Thome Lular, the fiddler played for at least two country dances, "Towsy tuke a trance" and "Auld Lychtfute" before acceding to requests for a measure from France, and for a Morris dance with which his programme concluded. Again, all we can say of these is that they were apparently active to judge by the activities of some of the young men. For example, "Steven cam stoppand in with stendis" (long strides), "Platfure he bobbit up with bendis" (bounds). "He lap quhill he lay on his lendis" (leaped till he lay on his buttocks). Robene Roy, with more agility than grace, seized his partner "And Owny till him druggit". At Peebles only one dance is named, the "Schamou's Dance" and once more the title does not enlighten us though we do know from a line of description -- "So hevelie he hockit about" -- that the men employed a kind of rocking step.

My blanket indictment of the seventeenth century needs to be slightly modified at this point on account of the activities of one clan, the Semples of Beltrees, who opposed themselves to the spirit of the times and gave us "Habbie Simson" and "Maggie Lauder". John Knox, indeed, scornfully nicknamed one of the family "the Danser" so it is not surprising that one of his descendants gave us the account of Habbie Simson, the piper of Kilbarchan, in mourning the fact that "now he's dead". Among Habbie's ploys was a fight with a tipsy villager who let the air out of Habbie's bagpipe while he was playing a dance, "Whipmegmorum", which seems to have involved a good deal of leaping since the word used for steps is "stots" (bounces). Maggie Lauder, the heroine of the other poem, too, was ready to dance to the playing of a piper whom she compares favourably with Habbie Simson; to which compliment he replies with another "It's worth my while to play, indeed, / When I hae such a dancer." In this case the dance that Maggie performed is not named, but it seems to have been distinguished more for vigour than for grace, at least as performed by Meg who "up and walloped ower the green, / For brawly could she frisk it".

But with Maggie Lauder there is the beginning of a revival of interest as evinced by the fact that her name is given to that of a lively air which we still dance to. With mention of her then, this brief account of the dances of long ago may come to an end.