



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

Issued by the West Point Grey Scottish Country Dance Club of B.C.
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EDITORIAL

Signs of the approaching season are rapidly making their appearance (lighted trees in shop windows, sales, visits by that well-known philanthropist, S. Claus, to stores, and a worried air on the faces of some partygoers as they make up their lists and con their datebooks). It's a busy time of year for dancers, and sweeps right through to January, ending we suppose around Burns Night. We cannot go to all these festivities (perhaps it is just as well) but it is advisable to spread oneself around, so to speak, and taste several different varieties. One becomes stale in a non-changing environment, and seeing new faces on the floor makes every dance worthwhile.

OUR DANCES, NUMBER 9

The New-rigged Ship.

The dance comes from a manuscript, usually called the Blantyre MS, whose full name, as written on the MS itself is as follows:

"Blantyre Farm. 19th Aug. 1805.

A list of country dances according to Mr. William Seymour from Kilbride which he taught at Blantyre farm above date."

The dance itself is described as follows.

Fire ship or New Rigged Ship.

4 hands round, cutt 2 couples, outsides, chace 6, lead down 1st couple, come up to place, lead down 2nd and come up to place — cross over 2 couples, lead up, throw off 1 couple, sett cross partners and reel. Finish common.

Comments. "Throw off" was quite a common alternative for "cast off" in this MS (see also "The Duke of Perth" in Thistle number 1.) "Finish common" refers to a kind of finishing-off figure with which many dances in the manuscript ended. It goes as follows:

End with 4 round, hands across, both full round and back, right and left once.

The manuscript does not give tunes, and no tune is known by the name of "The fire ship", but "The new-rigged ship" is, of course, a very well-known, sprightly, and danceable one.

TUBBY BOY CHARMS FESTIVAL AUDIENCE

Francean Campbell (Reprint from *The Province*, 3rd November, 1962)

The Thirtieth Annual Vancouver Folk Festival continued Friday night at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre with the songs and dances of nine nations rivalling each other in color and dash. But it was a tubby little Swedish boy of about five who stopped the show.

Not literally, of course. The dance did go on, and the little boy may not be Swedish at all. But it was the Swedish portion of the program, and practically a whole community from baby to grandfather were on stage for the Harvest Dance.

The little lad led his group with such gusto and aplomb, clapping and stamping, that the whole house rocked with delight. Plainly a leader in the making.

The program had opened with long, neat lines of Irish dancers, heads erect, arms straight by their sides, feet flying in the intricate, rule-ridden steps of the reel, the jig, the hornpipe, and the Blackbird.

The French-Canadians had a corn-husking party; the Alpen Choir, Sons of Norway, and Volga Ensembles reminded us of where the roots of so much of our music lies; the Ukrainians threw themselves into vigorous dance competition, and the Polish, with the handsomest costumes of the evening, offered a proud Polonaise.

The Scots were there, but alas, without their pipes, and short of men — not as good a show as in earlier years and a disappointment to at least one member of the Campbell clan.

Actually, the Folk Festival badly needs to find ways of improving standards, brightening the presentation, and attracting the public.

COMING EVENTS

The Vancouver Night School Scottish Country Dance Club is holding its annual "betwixt and between" Christmas and New Year Party at the Masonic Hall, 4426 10th Avenue West, on Friday 28th of December at 8 o'clock. There will be games as well as dancing. Price - \$1.

The Vancouver Branch's New Year's eve party will be held (on December 31st, of course) in the Dunbar Community Centre from 8:30 to 1:00 A.M. Price - \$2.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Vancouver Branch S.C.D.S. wishes to remove any impression, that they have started a beginners' class, as might have been assumed from an item in the November Thistle. They are merely carrying on their usual instructions in steps and formations as has been the practice for a number of years.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir:

Demonstration Teams - ?

Will you, Mr. Editor, or perhaps one of your readers, explain what is meant by the above term or phrase.

My acquaintance with Scottish Country dancing indicates it as a form of folk dancing originating in Scotland, the kind of dancing which the country, the village, and the town's folk, all and sundry, may join in and enjoy as a recreation and a social pastime.

Assuming this is more or less correct, why is it necessary here in Vancouver to pick "Demonstration Teams" who, presumably, consist of certain Scottish Country dancers of greater skill, with more perfect style and precision in step and movement than that possessed by the ordinary country folk, village, or town's folk in Vancouver.

It appears that Miss Francean Campbell ("Province", Saturday, 3rd November, 1962) did not see it this way. Her comment on the shortage of men is worth noticing. There is at least one Scottish Country dance group in the Greater Vancouver area where it is not an uncommon sight to see two men dancing opposite each other, having the alternative of sitting out the dance.

This enquiry is prompted by Miss Campbell's comments above referred to. Perhaps a team of Scottish Country "Folk" dancers would be less perfect but more representative, possibly more "brightening" and more "attractive"?

Yours truly,
Paul Rising

Dear Sir:

It will not have escaped the attention of those who read last month's article on the history of Scottish Country Dancing in Vancouver that in 1932 the Scottish Country Dance Society of B.C. formed a "Provincial Executive" to do those things which individual Clubs cannot do. In particular we were told that it runs the Annual Ball.

What other function it performs remains a mystery. And the fact that all five Clubs comprising the Society and its Executive are based in Vancouver makes nonsense of its claim to represent the Province as a whole.

The time has surely come for this body to subject itself to a searching examination of its aims and objectives and of its ability and willingness to carry them out.

There is no question that there is an enormous amount of work for such a body to do in developing Scottish Country Dancing in B.C. Even now it should be busy building up a development Fund, training new teachers, standardizing technique in accordance with the latest word from St. Andrews, encouraging the formation of new branches throughout the Province, training a Demonstration Team representative of the Society as a whole and above all doing everything possible to build up public interest in and awareness of this form of recreation.

It seems, however, that in the Scottish Country Dance Society of B.C. as it is at present constituted there is neither the will nor the desire to do anything more adventurous than run an Annual Ball. This does nothing to justify the levy of 10 cents a head on Club Members nor the work involved in collecting it. And in any case the Ball would be much better left in the hands of a small informal Committee of the Groups involved.

It is obvious that the Society, though it has done great work in the past, has long since outlived its usefulness and that in these circumstances no time should be lost in winding it up. Out of its ashes there may well grow a more representative body in tune with modern conditions. In the fulfillment of this hope lies the future salvation of Scottish Country Dancing in B.C.

Yours faithfully,
Andrew Shawyer.

HISTORICAL NOTES

From: The games and diversions of Argyllshire,

By R. C. Maclagan, 1901.

There seems to have been more unpremeditated dancing in older times than is at present the custom. People who admit this give as a reason that there were so many gatherings in connection with certain kinds of work, spinning kemps, waulkings, and the like, all of which invariably wound up with a dance.

At weddings, the occasion on which dancing is now most practiced, the dancers to a great extent make steps for themselves. How much of the organized methods of dancing is native and how much has been introduced from the low country, it would be very hard to say. For example, there seems to be no Gaelic name for the Highland Fling. Even the very old people call it by this name.

An old man, a native of Islay, says that he danced Seann Triubhas when a youth as a somewhat slow dance, a reel of four, and one of the figures consisted in bringing the knee down to the floor. Several other old Islay people confirmed this, at any rate so far that it is not now danced as in olden times.

Dannsa nan Tunnag was known in Long Island. A native of Bernera says she has seen it as a reel, the dancers "sitting on their hunkers" with their hands clasped under their thighs.

Dannsa nam Bioran (dance of the sharp points) is variously described. Some say that it is the same as the sword-dance, but so called because sticks and not swords were danced over.

Am bonaid ghorm is described by a native of Sutherlandshire, who saw it danced in his native place, as resembling the sword-dance. Two sticks were laid crossways and a bonnet placed at their intersection; in certain movements the performer lifted the bonnet and replaced it. It was slow in some movements and rapid in others.

A reciter in Islay told how an Islay lady and gentleman were such accomplished dancers, and so nimble and exact, that when dancing the sword-dance they used to place a lighted candle at the crossing of the swords, and would snuff the candle with their toes without putting it out.

Ruidhil nam pog. This, as may be supposed, is a favourite, and generally concludes the evening, even if it has already formed part of the entertainment. The manner of dancing it varies; it also being said to have changed. One old fellow describing it said "A nis 's a rithist sgreach iad, 's phog iad le cheile". The general description of it is: A young man dances round the circle holding a white handkerchief, singing a port. At the end of the verse he places the handkerchief on the floor before the girl he selects; he then kneels and she kneels, and they kiss each other, or he throws the handkerchief over her head and kisses her under it. In some cases when the girl sees the lad standing before her, she takes to her heels round the room, and he, of course, gives chase and catches her, and the ceremony is completed. The girl who has been kissed takes the handkerchief, and, following her partner, dances round the room, until she takes up another young man. Generally she throws the handkerchief at him, and again there is a chase and a capture. This continues until all the company are on the floor, when they form themselves up and finish with a foursome or an eightsome reel, according to their fancy and the number dancing. The tune for Ruidhil nam pog is The White Cockade.

(Editorial notes. The "low country" is, of course, the lowland part of Scotland, not the Netherlands. A modern Gaelic dictionary will contain a translation of "highland fling" - but for that matter it will also contain a Gaelic word for radio. If Maclagan really means that the old highlanders, even while speaking Gaelic, used the English words "highland fling" this is very strong evidence that the fling is not an indigenous highland dance. It seems to us that the most likely origin for the fling is that it is simply a number of steps from the foursome reel put together to form a solo step-dance for competitive purposes. Note that the first highland-dancing competitions were held in the lowlands. Dannsa nan Tunnag means the dance of the ducks: it seems to have been more of a musical game than what we would call a dance. "Am bonaid ghorm" means "the blue bonnet". "Ruidhil nam pog" means "reel of the kisses; the Gaelic description means "Now and again they chase and kiss one another". A "port" is a tune, nowadays more often called "port a beul" (mouth music). Maclagan says later, "These ports are single verses generally fitted to a specific tune suitable for the dance proposed, and are sung by one of the girls present who has the necessary talent, or by one or more in succession according to their capabilities. If the young men have to be the musicians, they generally fulfill that duty by whistling". He also mentions that the usual instruments are the pipes, fiddle, or Jew's harp.)

DANCE NOTE JARS AT CREMATORIUM (BRIGHTON)

Mourners at a crematorium in this seaside resort were horrified to find an advertisement for courses in Scottish dancing on the back of their hymn-sheets.

An official of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, which supplied the sheets, said: "It does seem an unusual advertisement."

HINTS ON BETTER DANCING

In "setting to corners" the first couple are supposed to be back-to-back in the middle of the set, so that they and the two corners are on one (diagonal) line. At first sight, it seems as though they need eyes in the back of their heads. However, the line is easy to form if the corners play their part. Just before the setting, the two corners should turn to face each other; i.e. each faces along the diagonal of the set. Then, when the first couple face corners, if they face really squarely on to the corners, they are bound to be on the diagonal line.

For instance, "Speed the Plough" goes

9 - 16 First couple down the middle and up

17 - 24 Set to and turn corners

The corners should turn to face each other on bar 16: then the movements of bars 17 - 24 can be neat and accurate.

NEWS ITEM

The editorial eye alighted the other day on the report of a piping competition which was held in Singapore on St. Andrew's day last. The first Battalion of the Queen's Own Highlanders invited the Brigade of Gurkhas and the Royal Malay Regiment to compete. There is a romantic fascination about exotic names, and even readers familiar with Gaelic orthography might take two glances at the Singapore prize-list, which included the names of Corporal Padambahadur Rai, Lance-corporal Bhudiparsad Gurung, and Corporal Abdul Chaffar bin Bhadat. The eightsome and foursome reels were danced, but apparently only by the Scottish soldiers. This year the 1st/6th Gurkha Rifles will be stationed in Great Britain, and will no doubt be heard in Scotland.

PROBLEM

Abercrombie, Bruce, Cameron, Dalgleish, Erskine, Fraser, Gordon and Hunter, and their wives danced a sixteensome. No-one danced with his own wife, but the top side did consist of two men and their own wives. Abercrombie's partner's husband danced with the wife of the man whose partner's husband danced with Mrs. Bruce. Bruce danced with the wife of the man whose partner was married to Mrs. Cameron's partner.

Who danced with Abercrombie?

Henry Ward Beecher said:

"A man without mirth is like a wagon without springs. He is jolted by every pebble in the road."

EIGHTSOME

The couples gather. Eightsomes form.

A shimmering calm before a storm
Stirs up to frenzy a mad sea:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

The piper has begun to play.
His rippling notes are wild and gay.

As every he salutes his she,

Amor saltus excitat me.

Our hands are joined and round we whirl.

All round us other circles curl.

As round, about and round go we,

Amor saltus excitat me.

The circle now becomes a wheel.

I cling to Mary and we feel

Like happy costers on a spree:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

Now Mary smiles as if to say

The others might be miles away.

We set and turn with rising glee:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

I meet the others in the chain,

Annette, plump Rose, and fair Elaine

(Rather like handing cakes at tea):-

Amor saltus excitat me.

Mary is first. How oft I burn

To see her reel steps, set and turn,

Her smoothly woven reel of three:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

For women come and women go,
But none can make so brave a show

As Mary dancing gracefully:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

"Now is the time for all good men."

Out of my way, Annette. And then

Into the centre I spring free:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

Oh, how I wish that I could dance!

But still, despite my clumsy prance,

My earthbound foot, my awkward knee,

Amor saltus excitat me.

Elaine has eyes alone for Joe,

And Rose emits a loud "Bravo!"

When Mac achieves his apogee:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

But Jock's the champion of the set.

At any rate so thinks Annette.

At Mary's smile let envy flee:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

Then quickly to the final chain.

Though pleasant memories remain

An end of all things there must be:-

Amor saltus excitat me.

Hugh Foss.