



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

Issued by the West Point Grey Scottish Country Dance Club of B.C.
President: Dr. Norman MacKenzie, C.M.G., M.M. & BAR, Q.C., LL.D.
Editorial address: 3515 Fraser, Vancouver 10, B.C., Canada.

No. 16

January, 1964

EDITORIAL

As the New Year starts we wish our readers joy and prosperity, and survey the times ahead.

Probably the most important of our annual events is the Scottish dance camp, to be held on the Victoria-day week-end as usual. This year we are moving into larger and better quarters — the University of British Columbia, with accommodation on campus. We shall have all the old teachers except Rachel Robertson (now on her way round the world), and probably three new ones. Mrs. MacNab will be with us to give us some dances from her collection at first hand; and the committee has been working harder than ever. And those musical people who were ex-cruciated by the poor fidelity of the gramophones last year will be glad to hear that this year we shall have available at least three first-class machines in the various classes.

OUR DANCES, NO. 16

Boriston Ness.

This dance was sent us a year or so ago by someone whose name and address we have unfortunately lost. The composer remarked that the dance was based, to some extent, on Hugh Thurston's country dance "Rosslyn castle".

The dance looks very effective — particularly the opening, and (when well done) the circles melting into one large circle and redissolving into two. It is easy and pleasant to dance, provided that the performers are capable of a really good hands-round.

Formation. Four couples in a longwise set.

Music. Any lively tune in 6/8, such as "Rosin the bow".

Bars 1 - 4 The first couple set; and cross over, giving right hands.

5 - 8 The first two couples set, with nearer hands joined (man with woman and woman with man); and cross over, giving right hands.

9 - 12 The first three couples set, with nearer hands joined; and cross over, giving right hands.

13 - 16 All four couples set, with nearer hands joined; and cross over, giving right hands.

17 - 24 The first and fourth men and women dance round the centre couples, the first woman and fourth man clockwise, the other two anti-clockwise, giving left and right hands alternately (as in a right-and-left, but left hands first). They end this figure where they started it, namely the first couple in their original places, the fourth couple in each other's places.

25 - 28 The first and second couples dance hands-round once clockwise. The other two two couples do the same at the same time.

29 - 32 Eight hands round and

33 - 36 back.

37 - 40 The first and second couples dance hands-round once anti-clockwise. The other two couples do the same at the same time.

41 - 44 The dancers, splitting into two lines as at bar 24, and joining nearer hands in each line, dance towards the bottom of the room with slip-steps. The first couple should finish in fourth place.

OUR DANCES (cont'd.)

- 45 - 48 The first couple stand still, and the other three couples, still with nearer hands joined, dance between them towards the top, the second couple ending in first place, and so on.
(Note: the original version had the first couple forming an arch here and the others dancing under it, but we find this too hectic).
- 49 - 52 All four couples set, with nearer hands joined; and cross over giving right hands.
- 53 - 56 The third, fourth, and first couples set, with nearer hands joined and cross over giving right hands.
- 57 - 60 The fourth and first couples set, with nearer hands joined; and cross over, giving right hands.
- 61 - 64 The first couple set; and cross over giving right hands.
Repeat with a new leading couple.

BOOK REVIEW. Twelve Modern Scottish Country Dances in Traditional Form, R.S.C.D.S. 4/6d.

This year the R.S.C.D.S. has broken new ground in presenting modern dances – their previous 21 volumes contained between them only one: the Reel of the 51st division. We are naturally pleased to see two Canadian dances in the book – three if you count “The last of the lairds,” though this was composed by Hugh Thurston before he came to Canada.

The gem of the collection in our opinion is “Miss Janet Laing’s strathspey”, by Mrs. Cramb, which contains a most attractive figure in which two circles melt and recombine into two others, a figure which we have seen before at speed but not in a strathspey. Bob Campbell’s “Hamilton rant” is well-known to us, with its ingenious variation on turning corners: his newer “Middleton medley” has an equally ingenious variation on hello-and-goodbye setting. Even better-known is “The Last of the Lairds”, whose opening figure has been aptly described by Dr. Jack Bailey as “Maxwell’s rant cubed”. However, we prefer the original version to the altered version in Book 22, which breaks one of the ground-rules for country-dances – in the altered version all six couples are moving on the first bar and also on the last bar, a thing which should never happen in a correctly-composed dance.

“The laird of Milton’s daughter” is another dance with an effective variation on a known theme, this time on turning corners. “The Balmoral strathspey” is pleasant and effective, with a clever progression at the end. “Holyrood house” has a first-class opening – both pleasant to dance and effective to watch. If its second half were as good, it would have been the best dance in the book. “Peggy’s wedding” would be a useful étude, as it is made up largely of standard components – grand chain, allemande, poussette, double triangles. It raises the question of just what entitles a dance to be called “in traditional form”, for no traditional dance contains both allemande and poussette, common as those figures are; nor does it seem possible that any traditional dance ever could.

We have not room to mention every dance in the book, but will finish with the observation that the book as a whole contains an extraordinarily high proportion (five out of twelve) of dances for set of four couples (or, in one case, three couples) in which the first couple finishes at the bottom at each repetition. Of course, traditional dances like “Strip the willow” or “Cumberland reel”, in which the first couple ends at the bottom, are by no means unknown, but few or none of them are for a fixed number of couples. Perhaps we are here seeing the beginnings of a revolution in Scottish country dancing. If so, it is possible that the R.S.C.D.S. may regret having broken new ground in this way.

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.

HINTS FOR BETTER DANCING

This time we have some advice on organizing sets. For some dances this is simple enough — the eightsome, the Bumpkin, La Russe, each has its own individual shape of set. Although these "set" dances are simple to arrange in principle it does not follow that they are easy in practice: anyone will remember times when a whole roomful of dancers has had to wait while the last couple to complete an eightsome or the last trio to complete a Bumpkin is found. For country-dances, on the other hand, the principles are a little more complicated; but once they are understood, they give a very efficient and practical means of forming complete sets. Perhaps we should point out here that dances with a fixed number of couples, even if longwise in shape, count as set dances, not as country dances. Thus, what we are going to say does not apply, for instance, to The Gentle Shepherd, McLaine of Lochbuie, Lucy of Lammermoor, or the Oxton reel. Of course, round-the-room dances like Circassian circle are true country dances, but these are so easy to organize that we need not deal with them here.

Let us turn, then, to standard-type longwise country dances. There are two ways of organizing these — the right and the wrong. The wrong way is for the M.C. to make up his mind in advance how many people there are to be in a set, and then to try to complete the sets according to this pre-conceived notion. The right way is for him to see how many couples get up to dance and when they are lined up to count them and divide them into sets accordingly.

The disadvantages of the wrong way are obvious. If the M.C. decides, for instance, on four-couple sets, then he is going to have as much trouble completing his last set as if he was arranging an eightsome — in fact, he will have more trouble, because the square sets of the eightsome are self-contained and an incomplete square is easy to spot.

Rather than deciding that every set will be four-couple, the M.C. should decide on, say, four-couple sets as a basis, the odd couples to be worked in as five-couple sets. Or he might decide to have a four-couple basis, and put the odd couples in three-couple sets. Which he decides on will depend on the dance. For, say, Hamilton house, or Maxwell's rant, and probably for most three-couple dances, it would be better to have a few five-couple sets. For the Glasgow highlanders, and indeed for most two-couple dances, it would be better to have the odd couples in threes. The basis does not have to be four. For a long two-couple strathspey (such as The Theekit Hoose) three would be a good basis. There are many groups which would choose five as a basis for "The Duke of Perth" because they like to end with the "reel of four for two couples" at the end of the set, and this cannot decently be done in a four-couple set.

The next question is how to carry out these arrangements in practice. For small groups it is easy enough. If you are organizing sets of fours and threes, and ten couples get up, anyone can see, without even counting on his fingers, that they will be split 4 + 3 + 3. The only trouble comes at a large ball when there may be 15, 20, 30 or more couples in each line. A useful technique is as follows. Let us suppose that you are going to divide them into fours and fives. Walk down the line counting to yourself 1-2-3-4-1-2-3-4- and so on. If you end on a 3, you will need 3 five-couple sets; and the rest fours — in fact the number you end on will be the number of five-couple sets needed, except that if you end on 4 you do not need any five-couple sets.

The Procrustean practice of cutting all sets to the same four-couple size is regrettably common today, so common that we end with a few arguments against it. We have pointed out that it is inefficient. The other method is traditionally correct — indeed, a generation ago dancing generally took place in larger sets than we usually use today. Readers of the December issue of the Thistle will remember that when the Vancouver dancers, in the early days, wrote to ask the S.C.D.S. headquarters about the two-couple ending to three-couple dances (which, as we mentioned above, does not work well in four-couple sets), the official reply started "Before going into the question, we would like to point out that the better and more generally used number of couples to a set is six, not four. Four we use for practice only to allow of each couple quickly reaching the top and having a turn as first couple".

Those who use that excellent handbook "101 Scottish country dances" will notice that for every two-couple dance the instructions say "A new top couple begins on every second repetition", whereas for every three-couple dance they say "A new top couple begins on every third repetition". A little thought shows that this book must be assuming that the sets contain more than four couples, because if a three-couple dance is performed in four-couple sets, then a new top couple will start every second repetition.

HINTS FOR BETTER DANCING (cont'd.)

But perhaps the people who feel most strongly about the four-couple heresy are the half-dozen dancers (of whom the writer is one) who, some while ago now, went to a Ball given by a Branch in a nearby town. "The Glasgow Highlanders" was early on the programme, and we found ourselves at the end of a line. The M.C. counted in fours, and we were 1, 2 and 3. There were no couples sitting out (the "Glasgow Highlanders" was a great favorite in that district) and the M.C. said "I'm sorry, we can't make up a set: you'll have to sit this one out". It takes a little effort to learn to make up sets properly, but if it helps to avoid this kind of trouble, it is well worth it.

GLASGOW HIGHLANDERS

(Rondeau redouble)

O come to me, Muse of melodius sound
Combined with sense in one grand harmony,
But let not reason 'neath the rhyme be drowned.
Both should commingle in true poetry.

Shall I try sense and sound alternatively?
Come, any gems with which my thought is crowned
And then, with sparkling baubles meaning-free,
O come to me, Muse of melodious sound.

Can rhyme and reason with one chain be bound?
Or led, one by each hand, in amity?
When masters sing then is the music found
Combined with sense in one grand harmony.

Or shall I work alone with melody,
With her I'll neatly canalise the ground,
Then inundate it with tempestuous sea.
But let not reason 'neath the rhyme be drowned.

Sense must, if long I stir the potion round,
Mix in and verbalise my 'Umpty dee',
And, as my double rondeau I compound,
Both should commingle in true poetry.

The figures of a dance supply a key
With which the springs of fancy may be wound.
Might I your sisters meet, Terpsichore?
Sweet Muses all (my boldness must astound)
O come to me.

Hugh R. Foss

BROUN'S. (Ballade)

I feel I ought to dance with Jane
I've known her since we scarce could crawl
And many a memory I retain
Of hug and slap and kiss and brawl.
And one wild moment I recall —
Her mother came: we were polite.
Ah well! She'll have to prop the wall.
I'm dancing Broun's with Joan tonight.

Let June at Cocktail parties reign
A queen 'fore whom all men must fall,
And I am numbered with the slain;
Her wit and beauty could not pall.
But when she comes to Sydney Hall
She reels — or lurches — left and right,
A new rigged ship struck by a squall.
I'm dancing Broun's with Joan tonight.

Ah Jean, we follow in your train.
Your glide erect while others sprawl;
You know all dances; at each strain
Your soul interprets Music's call,
You never hasten, never stall;
Your toe fantastic's airy-light —
Terpsichore hath thee in thrall.
I'm dancing Broun's with Joan tonight.

Jane, June and Jean, I love you all.
Your friendship, charm and skill delight
But not just now; not at the Ball.
I'm dancing Broun's with Joan tonight.

Hugh R. Foss

NEWS FROM AUSTRALIA

Two pipe-bands — the Royal Caledonian Society of Melbourne's pipe-band and the Victoria Police Highland pipe-band — are advertising for pipers and drummers, and offering jobs and accommodation for immigrants. The Scottish tradition in Australia goes back to the days of Governor Colonel Lachlan Macquarrie, who arrived in 1810 with a complete Highland regiment. Melbourne's oldest "public school" is the Scotch College, and has a pipe-band, though it appears that most of the members find no time to continue playing when they proceed to University.