



THE

T H I S T L E

1970/1

Issued by the Thistle Club

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No. 46

December, 1970

EDITORIAL

The time has come, we feel, to discontinue one feature of *The Thistle* that no longer has a strong justification: namely the presentation of new dances. When we started, there were many recently composed dances, some extremely good ones, that had never been printed and were being passed round by word of mouth; and there were many dancers who were interested in trying new dances, and wanted to know how to get hold of them. Now, nine years later, there is no scarcity of new dances. Many albums are available, and Hugh Foss's *Glendarroch Sheets* are an excellent medium for distributing individual dances. Not only is there now no difficulty in obtaining new dances, but there are some dance-groups that have lost their sense of proportion and are concentrating almost entirely on brand-new choreography at the expense of tradition. (More than one club we know has changed from doing far too few recent dances to far too many, with no intervening period with a reasonable balance between old and new.) If *The Thistle* is sent a worthwhile new dance, not published elsewhere, we shall print it; but not as part of a regular feature. And, with so many new dances available, a new dance nowadays has to be pretty good to be worth printing.

OUR DANCES No. 67: The Perth Medley

Although it is quite common for reels and highland dances to change tempo, either by a sudden speed-up (as in the foursome reel, the Broadwords, Seann Triubhas etc.) or a gradual one (as in the Axum reel), it is not at all common for country-dances to do so. (Cauld kail is generally presumed to do so, but the original instructions simply say "part I" and "part II", and it is a mere guess that the two parts are danced at different speeds). And it is rare for a dance of any kind to slow down; so *The Perth Medley*, which starts to a reel tune and switches to a strathspey, is very much an exception. However, the strathspey finish would not be such an anticlimax as it might appear to modern dancers, because the traditional strathspey was played (and the steps thereto were danced) quite briskly.

6. *In which Scottish country-dance do you never touch your partner?*
7. *What dance has two titles - one the name of an Englishman and the other the name of a Scotsman?*
8. *Who is the most prolific composer of country dances known?*

We offer no prizes, but will publish the names of everyone who submits a complete set of correct answers.

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* * * COMPARISON CORNER IRISH DANCING (continued) * * *

We saw in the first part of this article that there are three main types of Irish dancing (rinnclí fighte, step-dances and ceilidh dances), and we had a detailed look at the step-dances. Now let us turn to the rinnclí fighte.

These dances seem to me to play the same role in Irish dancing as reels (the foursome reel, the reel of Tulloch, the sixsome reel, and so on) do in Scottish dancing. They are essentially social dances; they are clearly old; they are full of character; and they are built up by assembling components from a traditional repertoire according to a set structure, just as the foursome reel is built up by choosing setting steps from a traditional repertoire to fit into the sequence reel/set/reel/set ... The main difference between the two systems is that in the rinnclí fighte the components are figures, whereas in the Scottish reels they are steps.

A rinnce fighte is essentially a figure-dance performed by a fixed number of couples to a fixed type of music, either reel or jig. Thus the rinnclí fighte can be listed: four-hand reel, four-hand jig, six-hand reel, six-hand jig, eight-hand reel, eight-hand jig, twelve-hand reel, twelve-hand jig, sixteen-hand reel, sixteen-hand jig. Of these, the eight-hand and four-hand dances are commonest; and the Irish look on the sixteen-hand dances in much the same way as many Scots look on the double eightsome reel - as a challenging novelty for those who have mastered (and are perhaps becoming satiated with) the eightsome reel.

The couples stand in a circle (which, in the case of four-hand and eight-hand dances comes to the same thing as if they stood in a square). A typical eight-hand dance will go as follows:-

Introduction.

Body,

Figure led by the first couple,

Figure led by the second couple,

Body,

Figure led by the third couple,

Figure led by the fourth couple.

Sequence of bodies and figures again
but with a different figure.Sequence again with yet a different
figure.. . . and so on for as many
figures as the dancers like,

Finale.

The introduction is not tied to an individual dance; any given group of dancers will use the same introduction to all their dances, while a different group might use a slightly different one. The introduction is usually a simple figure that employs all the dancers: for example "lead your partner clockwise round the circle with nearer hands joined, for four bars; turn about, changing hands, and lead her back to place for four more bars".

The figures are drawn from a traditional repertoire, and the dancers have to agree beforehand what figures they are going to use. The figures are built up of such movements as hands-across, one-hand turn, hands-round, figure-of-eight, and so on.

The body is a fairly short fixed sequence of figures involving all the dancers. Each dance has its own body. In fact the body is, in a sense, the dance: learning a new dance consists simply of learning its body. A very typical movement which is included in every body (or nearly every body) is "siding". This movement occurs in a number of different forms, in all of which the dancers move sideways with a characteristically Irish step called the side-step. In one version, each man moves right and each woman left (the men passing behind their partners), and then move back to place (the women passing behind the men). Or partners might join nearer hands and move together, one couple passing behind another couple, and so on.

If all this sounds complicated, try to write a description of the progression in a Scottish country-dance for someone unfamiliar with it, and compare your description with the above, and you will see that the Irish system is in fact reasonably simple. Moreover, it is easier to explain on the dance-floor than on paper. Nevertheless it is complicated enough to be worth while only in a community with a flourishing tradition of rinné fighite; if you learn only one dance, you will probably learn it right through without bothering to analyse the system.

The structure of these dances is interesting historically because it resembles that of two other types of dance. It is quite like that of certain English country-dances of the seventeenth century, so that the two types of dance may well have had a common ancestor. (In fact, for all we know, one may have been an ancestor of the other). There is an even stronger resemblance to the structure of a certain type of square dance from the backwoods of the southern Appalachian region in America. (This type of dance was uncovered by the English folklorist Cecil Sharp about 1914 and called by him "The Kentucky running set"). The resemblance is so close that it is almost certain that the Appalachian dances are descendants of the rinní fighthe.

The steps used in rinní fighthe are few but attractive. For moving forwards (or backwards) the southern Irish use a travelling pas-de-basque (not under that name, of course; they call it a promenade step); but many dancers in the North put in a hop, making it something like the traditional Scottish "hop-one-two-three" travelling-step. For setting on the spot to reel tunes, the Southern Irish again use a pas-de-basque (danced with a rather higher knee-raise than any of the Scottish types of pas-de-basque) which they call "two threes", while the Northern dancers have a rather unusual step which goes by the same name. If the tune is a jig, however, the setting-step is (in both North and South) a more elaborate one called "rise and grind", the "rise" being a high leg raise and the "grind" a quick series of taps. Finally, there is the famous side-step. Imagine a Scottish slip-step in which (i) the trailing foot does not close up to the leading foot but slips behind it (thus overlapping and allowing the dancer to cover more ground), and (ii) the rear foot carries most of the weight, giving a kind of syncopation to the movement, because the rear foot contacts the ground on the off beat: this will give you some idea of the sideways-moving part of the side-step. The side-step itself consists of this sideways movement for two bars, followed by setting on the spot for two bars.

to be continued

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OBITUARY

We announce with deep regret the death of Mrs. Thomas Bingham, who was for over thirty years a leader in Scottish country-dancing circles in Vancouver. Many of the older generation of dancers will remember her efforts with gratitude and affection.

THERE WAS A STAR DANCED AND UNDER THAT WAS I BORN , . .

Some astrological jottings reprinted, by permission, from The News-Reel (which magazine is published quarterly by the SCDS of Washington. Editorial address: 5034 Eskridge Terrace, NW, Washington, D.C. 20016, USA. Subscription \$1.00 per year).

AQUARIUS (the water-carrier)

Dance: Across the Tay
Liberal, progressive, broad-minded, loves the challenge which tests his ingenuity, but tends to be absent-minded. "O, I love this dance - how does it go?"

PISCES (the fishes)

Dance: The Creel
Idealist, perfectionist, prefers the realm of the intellect. Skeptical. "I don't think you can get there from here in four bars."

ARIES (the ram)

Dance: The Gentle Shepherd
Fearless, impulsive, daring. "Bonnie Glenshee with just a talk-through? - why not!"

TAURUS (the bull)

Dance: The Hereford Rant
Stable, dedicated, determined. "I will do the strathspey traveling step perfectly."

GEMINI (the twins)

Dance: Two and two
Vivid imagination, keen intellect, given to fantastic flights of fancy. "What do you mean, down the middle and up - let's improvise."

CANCER (the crab)

Dance: Lobster in the Pot
Patient, tenacious, creative, likes to teach and convert others to his point of view. "It's social dancing - enjoy it!"

LEO (the lion)

Dance: The Hunter's Reel
Authoritative bearing, strong pride, immense courage. Punctual. "It's 8:15 - let's begin."

VIRGO (the virgin)

Dance: She's ower young to marry yet
A realist; level-headed and steady, makes decisions on the basis of facts. "That formation doesn't work that way - look it up in the book."

LIBRA (the balance)

Dance: For Lack of Gold
Believes in justice, fairness and equality; particularly sensitive to the misfortunes of the underdog. "Hey, two more rounds - there's a fifth couple in our set."

SCORPIO (the scorpion)

Dance: The Golden Weaver
Shrewd, skillful, deft. Perceptive and attentive to detail. "Now what do we do on bars eleven and twelve?"

SAGITTARIUS (the archer)

Dance: Ladies Fancy

Outspoken, direct and candid. Wise and fond of dispensing advice to others. "It's left shoulder to first corner to enter this reel."

CAPRICORN (the goat)

Dance: Ca' the Ewes tae
the Knowes

Stately grace, tact, diplomacy. Conservative, holds ideas sacred merely because they are old. "But that's not what it says in the book."

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HISTORICAL NOTES

The following extracts are from a book called "A corner in the North" by Ella M. Leather. It is about dancing around the turn of the century in the Anglo-Scottish border country: to be precise, in the village of Ford, which is on the English side of the border, about ten miles south of Berwick.

Among those things which keep up the social unity of our people is their fondness for the dance, which is the most sociable of all amusements. In our case it is a striking instance of extremes meeting. You would never expect to find, in so reserved a race, slow of speech, deliberate of movement, a passionate love of dancing. But so it is. And they never tire of it. It is not a craze or fashion which lasts a winter or two and then fades away, until the interest in it is in time again revived. To meet together in the dance is with the Border people a strong hereditary taste. It is as much a passion as the instinct for fighting in warlike people. And it is doubtless quite as primitive. You seem to see, indeed, in the intricate figures of the reels and contra dances in which they delight, and the inspiring shout and stampede which accompanies some of them, an evident reminiscence of the ancient war dance. And one might easily believe that some of the circular dances, such as the Pin Reel, were remnants of the ritual of the worship of the Sun. Here, at any rate, you have an ancient custom in full force at the present day, a thing in which our working people are intensely interested, and of which, although a sober and serious race, they thoroughly approve. It is not easy as a rule to get people to amuse themselves, but here is an innocent amusement, always successful, and only needing proper management and supervision to render it a most elevating social influence. It is a marvellous thing, this spirit and enthusiasm with which our Border people give themselves up to dancing. The tidings of a coming dance stirs them as nothing else will. Very few will decline your invitation, and although you will be careful to choose

a moonlight night for your ball, you need not think that either darkness, distance, or bad weather will prevent the arrival of your guests. And when all have come, and the Master of Ceremonies announces the first dance, what a transformation scene it all is compared with the work-a-day world which the young people have for a few bright hours left behind them. There is nobility in all labour, but a stranger to our country looking at our guests taking their partners at the sound of the first strains of the "Triumph" country dance, would never suppose that these well dressed and well mannered young people represent the real workers of our country-side. How different those tastefully made light dresses, to the usual costume of the field worker. How immense the contrast must be to those girls, the brightness, warmth and movement of the ballroom, with the dull and cold routine of cutting turnips on the bleak hillside, or feeding cattle in the byres. Our friends from the South, who sometimes attend our balls, are surprised by their heartiness, and greatly interested in them. They naturally enquire how the people obtain and keep up the knowledge of the many complicated dances which our programmes contain. Probably the farm kirk or harvest-home party, a very ancient custom still observed, has kept alive this knowledge.

There has long been a practice at the farms for the young people of the farmsteads to have an occasional dance in the open air of an evening, in any open ground there may be adjoining the cottages. Such dancing in isolated farm places is not to be commended, as it takes place generally on winter nights by candle light, and without any supervision by the elder folks; but the practice proves how strong the passion for this amusement is, and that it forms a natural antidote to the laborious lives of the people. This practice has, no doubt, helped to keep up the knowledge of dances which, although not always so light and graceful as those of southern countries, are yet wonderfully complicated in their figures and steps, and, to a looker-on, picturesque to a degree.

There are still many who remember the visits to our villages of the travelling dancing master. These were men of the working class, and often of an idle jovial disposition, fond of dancing, and good fiddlers. The travelling dancing master would stay in the village for two or three months in the winter, and give his lessons in a hired room, or a loft lent for the purpose. The members of the class and a few friends paid him a small sum. From time to time he gave a more public dance, which he called "a small occasion," and at the close of the season "a grand ball" for his own benefit. This practice was long in vogue, and no doubt it did much to preserve the knowledge of the old Border and Scotch dances. It ceased in the English border about thirty years ago, but is still maintained in some parts of Scotland. Since the establishment of Reading Rooms, which now exist even in our smallest villages, their committees often organize public dances. But these cannot be so beneficial as private balls given by the Parson or Lord of the manor, under their own management and supervision.

-- to be continued --

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