



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

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EDITORIAL

The main article in this month's issue belongs to that era of time which, though perhaps not enough in the past to be classed as history, nevertheless contrasts pleasantly and nostalgically with the present. It is an account of a visit to Brittany just before World War II by a team of dancers none of whom will be known personally to many of our readers (for which reason we have removed names from the narrative), but whose preparations will be vividly relevant to any team which has had to prepare itself for a serious public exhibition. We suggest that it is worth reading twice — once for pleasure, and once for the implied precepts.

OUR DANCES, NO. 17

Cald Kale

1st part. Cross right hands and go round all four; cross left hands and go back to your place, then sett to your partner, and cast off one pair, then right and left.

2nd part. First go down on the Woman's right side then come back to her left, and again to the right, then sett round and clap hands, then go to the next woman.

This description of the dance which we know as "Cauld Kail" is from a notebook containing of six or seven pages of dance-instructions found in the Holmain Charter chest, and usually referred to as the Holmain MS. The whole diary has been published in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (series 5, volume II, 1925), and can be found in any good public library by anyone who would like to see all the dance-descriptions in it. The dances are

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|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| ✓ Green Sleeves | ✓ The Birks of Abergeldie (9) | ✓ Cald Kale (9) |
| ✓ Lennon's love to Blanter (6) | ✓ The Old Way of Killiecrankie | ✓ Hunt the Squirrel |
| ✓ Reel a Down a Mereken | This is not my own house (15) | ✓ Miss Hyden (17) |
| ✓ Bathget Bogs, or Pease Straw | ✓ Argile's Bouling Green (15) | ✓ The Dusty Millar |

The writer, A. S. Carruthers, of the article in Proceeding suggested a date of 1710 - 1720 for the MS, but he based his calculations on the dances being children's dances (not unreasonably for anyone writing in 1925, for at that date Scottish Country Dances were to a great extent being performed by children); allowing for this, and using certain other evidence (the details are in "Scotland's dances") we suggest that 1740 or so would be more likely. This would make the MS contemporary with two other early ones — the Young MS in the Bodleian library and the Castle Drummond manuscript.

Quite a number of the dances have been reconstructed by the R.S.C.D.S. — in fact all those with numbers in parenthesis in the above list (these are the numbers of the books in which the reconstructions are to be found). In addition, Reel a Down a Mereken is probably the same dance as the Menzies Rant (Ruidhle a duine na Marachain) whose reconstruction in book 7 is based on a description in the Castle Menzies manuscript of 1747.

* The description is fairly typical of those found in early manuscripts. There is no mention of "repeat, having passed a couple" — the dancers of the day would take this for granted. There is no mention of steps, either. The dancers of the day would have to know the technical terms used, such as "set round". This has been reconstructed as the "hullo-and-goodbye" setting, as previously described in Lady Susan Stewart's reel (Book 5) and later in "There's nae luck about the house" (Book 10) and other dances. (There is nothing, except what can be gleaned from the name, to show what the figure really is. No-one can say for certain that it is hullo-and-goodbye setting, nor can anyone prove that it is not).

OUR DANCES (cont'd.)

The descriptions in these old manuscripts are apt to be wordier than ours to-day. Here is how the figure "turn corners and partner" comes out:-

"Take arms with the 2d woman, She with the 1st man then one another then take arms with the 1st woman, she with the second man, then one another".

Throughout the MS, the instructions are addressed to the first couple; and the couples which we should call second and third are there called 1st and 2d.

Those of us who know book 22, containing "Hamilton Rant" will find an old friend in the following figure (which is actually the concluding figure of "Bathget Bogs":-

"Set to the 2d woman, she to the 1st man and turn them, then set to your partner and turn her then set to the 1st woman, she to the second man and turns them, then set to your partner and turns her".

If the phrase "there is nothing new under the sun" had not been invented, it would be necessary to invent it now.

HINTS FOR BETTER DANCING

Bridging the gap

In the course of time a keen dancer learns many dances and spends many hours in step-practice. But steps are only the beginning, and complete dances the end, of what should be a graduated chain of teaching. And the middle rung of the ladder - which is quite as important as the first and last rungs - is the teaching of the dance-figures. Experience in visiting dance-groups shows that often teaching would be more efficient if figures were taught more slowly, more thoroughly, and more accurately, even if the time for this had to be taken partly from step-practice and partly from periods which would otherwise be spent in learning new dances.

The teaching of dance-figures as a part in its own right of a teaching-programme is a long-term policy. If a new group has just mastered steps, it is possible to go on and teach them complete dances - say Petronella, Circassian Circle, Hooper's jig or what not. The teaching will be slow, but a group which makes for "Petronella" first will undoubtedly find itself able to do the complete dance sooner than a group which interposes some figure-practice. But after a while the second group will catch up, and experience shows that it will then be dancing the same number of dances (or very slightly fewer) much better.

The reason, when one comes to think about it, is fairly clear. Let us imagine two groups of beginners, each of whom has just obtained some degree of proficiency with the skip-change and the pas-de-basque. Group A is then set to learn "Petronella"- They have to learn three things - the moderately difficult "Cutting the diamond", the fairly easy "down the middle and up", and the quite difficult poussette (assuming that the dancing is being done following R.S.C.D.S. practices: other poussettes are not difficult). One thing which nearly always happens is that the "down the middle and up", being easy, is skated over lightly. But although it is much easier than the other figures, it is by no means foolproof, and it is, in actual practice, often very badly done - sometimes even worse than the more difficult figures. Hands can be awkwardly held, the turn can be mismanaged, the man can dash off down towards the bottom of the set with his mind on his toe-tips instead of on his partner, the phrasing can be poorly judged (this may well be the first time the dancers have to phrase a movement for there is no phrasing in the average step-practice) and the distance which the couple come up the middle can be misjudged (when in Petronella a set shifts its position on the dance-floor, it is nearly always this figure which is at fault).

Now let us turn to Group B. After learning the skip-change, they will be taught to turn about with the step, and then they will be set to dance four steps, turn and dance back four steps and so on until the four-bar phrasing becomes second nature. When taught like this, with the dancers' attention fully on the music, instead of partly on a dance they are in the middle of learning, accurate phrasing becomes second nature very quickly indeed. And nice phrasing, once mastered, will stand a dancer in good stead through the whole of his dancing career. Finally the dancers will be arranged in a set, and down the middle and up will be danced, starting as it is in actual dancing, with the dancers in the side-lines. The poussette will be built up in the same way from the pas-de-basque, and then the two will be put together.

HINTS FOR BETTER DANCING (cont'd.)

This will of course take time, and by now the other group, A, will have "done" Petronella. But group B have only a little way to go to finish the dance, and by the time both groups have added, say, Scottish reform and Corn Rigs to their repertoire, group B will have caught up. It is true that the teacher of Group A can try to take advantage of the fact that these dances have the down-the-middle-and-up-and-poussette in common by teaching the first half of the Scottish reform and then saying "the rest is the same as in Petronella", but the fact that "the rest" was taught as part of another dance makes this lose much of its impact. The difference between the two approaches shows up very clearly in the hands-across-and-back figure. The teacher who has taught this on its own can rely on the dancers doing it reasonably well when it occurs. But we have all heard teachers who cannot trust themselves to say just "hands across and back"; they have to say "hands across round with the right hand for four skip changes of step and back round with the left hands for four"; this clumsy and inefficient mode of speech is necessary only if the figure has not been clearly taught on its own. Moreover, this way of putting it shows a lack of proportion — the normal and standard way of dancing a figure should have a succinct and standard name. When a variation occurs, such as the hands-round-and-back in six bars in Camp-H's frolic, the class used to the standard name will at once take notice when they hear the full description "right hands across for three steps and . . .", whereas the other class can more easily miss the difference. One method puts the rule and the exception on the same footing; the other makes the proper distinction between them. And the same applies to the teaching: the standard forms of the figures will be taught in their own right; each variation will be taught only in the course of teaching the dance in which it occurs.

We could expound at great length on further advantages of figure-teaching as a bridge between step-teaching and dance-teaching; but we have no doubt that the intelligent teacher (and this magazine is not intended for the un-intelligent) will see most or all of them for himself. (So will the intelligent pupil). We end with a check-list of standard figures which dancers should be familiar with.

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Down the middle and up | Turn with both hands |
| Cast off; cast up | Turn with one hand |
| Poussette | Set and turn |
| Allemande | Reel of three |
| Hands across | Reel of four |
| Hands round | Figure of eight |
| Advance and retire | Balance in line |
| Right and left | Ladies' chain |
| Back-to-back | Promenade |
| Set to and turn corners | Hullo-and-goodbye setting |
| Turn corners and partner | |

A FAMOUS BAND

The City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band was formed in Govan in 1885, and was one of the first pipe-bands ever to be formed outwith the regular army. When Glasgow annexed the Burgh of Govan it acquired the pipe-band too.

The first uniform was a homespun tartan with a purple stripe, and dark blue doublets, but in 1913 it was changed to the Royal Stewart tartan. In early days, when Inspector Hutcheon was Pipe-major, the pipers and highland dancers would be taken in a four-horse stage coach to their performances. The band has won the world championship and the drumming championship on many occasions — indeed they held the championship from 1936 to 1946 inclusive.

NORTHERN JUNKET

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DANCING IN BRITTANY

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It was Taldir (Arch-Druid) Francois Jaffrennou who wrote to the Scottish Country Dance Society asking for a team of dancers. Scotland being a long way from Dieppe, Miss Milligan thought that the team should be provided by the Scottish Country Dance Society's London Branch.

The first difficulty was the lack of men. There were several good dancers among the women members, but few men to approach their standard. To be more precise, two men: one was also a member of the Highland Club, which specialized in Highland Dancing. The other was Vice-Chairman of the Chelsea Reel Club, which went in more for the Scottish Country dances. He was therefore asked to approach some likely men. He consented to act as go-between, but felt guiltily responsible for the defects of each party in the eyes of the other.

The five couples were paired. A difficult job, pairing, since the coupler cannot usually give the real reasons, but must murmur irrelevancies about height and weight to explain why the two best dancers must go together and the two worst be kept apart.

Why did we go? Well, wouldn't you? It is true that it was not just a free holiday abroad, since there were six weeks of training first. We were not racially minded Celts, though one knew a few words of Gaelic. Two were Anglo-Saxons, wearing shepherd's plaid kilts to avoid claiming poor relationship to any proud clan. They were prepared to hold the view, just for the sake of argument, that there were no such people as Celts. A Celtic language, yes, but not a Celtic race. Nor were we 'folk' by any definition we could think of. We had not been trained to reels from childhood, but, with one or two exceptions, had discovered them late (was it too late?) in life. One of us had reached the stage of saving thought by never refusing any invitation to any reel party. It landed him in queer company at times, but it was more restful to have a policy that admitted no exceptions. Two were as keen dancers as the others, but still rather diffident about confessing their mania. They came, but did not let anyone at their offices know how they proposed to spend that week-end.

For training the team there were to be six official classes, in a small dance studio, supplemented by other team practices in various people's flats and, no doubt, by private practising in front of mirrors at home. Three of the official classes were to be taken by different Scottish Country Dance Society teachers who came up to London for the purpose. In between whiles the London instructress carried on with the coaching. Miss Milligan would come for the final polish.

Miss Milligan had chosen the programme: Meg Merrilees, to show the poussette; Isle of Skye; Duke of Perth; The Montgomeries' Rant; Glasgow Highlanders; Haughs o' Cromdale; The Rakes of Glasgow, to show the allemande; and Monymusk.

Angus Macaulay was coming as piper and he attended some of the rehearsals and practices, speaking very little (though he had been working some time in London he still felt English to be a foreign language and he did his thinking in Gaelic), but producing on demand a suitable pipe tune for each dance. We practised all the dances with him as well as with the piano, a very necessary precaution as the rhythm was often difficult to pick up quickly when one did not know the tune. If one starts following a pipe tune with the wrong cadence it is almost impossible to think one's self on to the right beat.

The programme also included an Eightsome, a men's Foursome, and a Highland Fling.

The steps to be used in the Foursome were discussed and agreed by the men. The last step was to be a frenzy of sixteen high cuts, a tour de force beyond any of the men's powers, though one got fairly near it. One of the women, a highlander, who had constituted herself unofficial coach to the Foursome, demonstrated them and made them look easy. She was full of youthful enthusiasm and the dogma of her Inverness school. "Always, always, always," she said, "Turn with your hands on your hips." The men agreed, but felt bound to display their erudition by reciting lists of good dancers and instructors of whom some did so and some did not. In Highland dancing there is hardly anything that is always done.

The same thing is true, though to a lesser extent, of Scottish Country dancing and here also uniformity had to be imposed and accepted. Every dancer of experience, to say nothing of others, has his own way of doing each step or figure, picked up by mimicking an attractive exponent or following an impressive teacher. To ask him to change it is like asking him to change his accent and seems to him just as reasonable. Some pas de basques were at first too Highland for the country dances. The common schottische step was done by some of the men in a way that worried Miss Milligan, though she did not advertise the fact. One instructress asked someone if he could bend his knees and induced a momentary inclination to resign from the team forth-with.

(to be continued in next issue)