



THE

T H I S T L E

1970/1

EDITORIAL

The two wandering editors are glad to be back in Canada and are grateful to those who kept The Thistle going, and especially Barbara McPhail who, although not one of our editors, worked very hard and efficiently on our behalf.

OUR DANCES NO. 65: Mairi's Wedding

Readers will have noticed that we normally alternate well-known dances with lesser-known ones. All the brand-new dances are, of course, among the lesser-known, even-numbered ones; and most of the well-known, odd-numbered ones are old, the bulk of them over 100 years old and only one (The Reel of the 51st Division) less than 50 years old. However, time has passed, and now some of the dances composed after the second world war can be described as "old favourites". Probably the best-known of these is "Mairi's wedding" by James Cosh, of Glasgow.

Although, to a practical dancer, Mairi's Wedding seems to fit in naturally with the older traditional dances, yet to a connoisseur it reveals its newness in a number of details. First, it goes to a song tune, not a dance tune. It is not quite unknown for a traditional dance to do this -- the Dashing White Sergeant does. The march-like "Mairi's wedding" adapts even better to dance-rhythm than does the operatic aria "Dashing white sergeant", and the dance probably owes its popularity, in part, to the attractiveness of its tune. Secondly, the dance is 40 bars long; this is practically unknown among the older dances, though for some reason it is fairly common among new ones. Thirdly, the "diagonal half reels of four" is quite a modern figure. We believe that the first dance to use it is "The white rose of Scotland" by Elma Taylor. It is an excellent example of a new figure, being a slight variant of an existing traditional figure (the reel of four).

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OUR DANCES NO. 66: Inverness Gathering by Hugh Thurston

Formation: Longwise for four couples

Music: Reels or hornpipes; 4 x 48 bars. "Mrs. Hepburn Belches of Invermay" suits the dance very well.

Set and cross

- 1 - 2 All four couples set
- 3 - 4 and change places with partner, giving right hands.
- 5 - 6 All four couples set.
- 7 - 8 The men forming arches, everyone crosses back.

Cog-wheel turns

- 1 - 4 The first and second men turn once-and-a-half with right hands, the third and fourth men with left hands, the first and second women with left hands, and the third and fourth women with right hands.
- 5 - 8 All turn back with the other hands.

Middles figure

- 1 - 4 The second couple dance half a figure-of-eight round the first couple, and the third round the fourth.
- 5 - 8 The second and third couples dance right-hands-across once round.

Ends figure

- 1 - 4 The first couple dance half a figure-of-eight round the second couple and the fourth round the third.
- 5 - 8 The first and fourth couples turn partners once round with right hands.

Progress

- 1 - 4 The first couple dance down the middle (to what would be fifth place). Meanwhile the other couples dance up two steps and lead down two steps.
- 5 - 8 Everyone casts up one place.

Turn to own sides

- 1 - 4 Everyone sets and
- 5 - 8 turns partners with right hands once-and-a-half.

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????? YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED ?????

- Q. How many newly-composed dances are current nowadays?
- A. Last time we counted them, about 400. There is, of course, no such thing as an official list. One thing you could do is to write to Hugh Foss for his latest catalogue (his address is Glendarroch, Dalry, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland) and count them. This should give you nearly all of those that are published. The number that exist but have never been written down is anyone's guess.
- Q. I always understood that leading in Scottish country dancing was done with right hands; but everyone now seems to lead with nearer hands. When and why did the technique change?
- A. In 1963 (see The Thistle no. 14). At least it was officially changed by the RSCDS then -- there will always be some traditionalists who continue to do it the old way. We don't know why the change took place.
- Q. Is "Rory O'More" really Scottish? It sounds very Irish to me.
- A. Yes : the dance was common in Scotland in the 19th century. You cannot always judge a dance by its name; otherwise "Petronella" would be Italian, "Circassian circle" Russian and "The golden pheasant" Chinese.

--- OUR CONTEMPORARIES ---

The 1970 edition of the New Zealand Country Dancer contains, as always, many items of interest to all Scottish dancers, not only New Zealanders. The chief one this time is an article by Isobel Cramb on the step-dances she found in a notebook dated 1841, and which she reconstructed with the aid of an 80-year old retired dancing-teacher, Flora Cruikshank, who remembered one of the dances (The Earl of Errol). The Editor is Harry Bruce, 420 Moray Place, Dunedin, New Zealand.

We have also received a number of copies of The Tartan Times (published by the RSCDS Boston Branch, P.O. Box 89, Cambridge, 02138, USA), a good mixture of news, views, background information and a touch of humour. The Thistle came to an agreement with The Tartan Times editor a short while ago that we could reprint any of each others items that struck our fancy; and in this issue of The Thistle we are taking advantage of this.

Finally, we have been sent some copies of "The News Reel" published by the SCDS of Washington. It is published quarterly (at \$1.00 per year, from the Secretary, SCDS of Washington, 5034 Eskridge Terrace Northwest, 20016 USA). It contains news, new dances, background articles and relevant news items. The editor appears to have a sense of humour (there are some delightful light-hearted articles) and a proper sense of cynicism. After a rather headily technical article on music, reprinted from another magazine, she writes "Mostly I haven't a clue of what Mr. Travis means ... perhaps we could have a demonstration program ...". She has our sympathy: music is very hard to read or write about; much easier just to listen to.

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Notes on Devising Scottish Country Dances

by Ralph Sizer

(Reprinted from The Tartan Times, vol. XLV no. 1, by permission)

Once you have decided to write a dance, the next thing to decide is how many people you want to confuse. If you are a beginner with no high ambitions, you may come up with something simple, such as

	Sample Dance	32-bar reel	2 couples
1 - 8	Slipping circle left and right		
9 - 16	Rights and lefts		
17 - 24	First couple down the center and back		
25 - 32	Allemande		

This dance is really quite negligible; any beginner could follow it; it shows no ambition at all towards that highest rank of choreography, Chaos-Creator First Class. (Yet even here advanced confusion makers will see great possibilities -- move the rights and lefts to the end and nobody will remember it. It is such minor points that make the difference between an interesting dance and a floor full of beautiful chaos.)

Devisors with higher ambitions usually measure their success by the number of separate instructions required. The above example, a 32-bar dance with only four separate instructions, is close to the low limit; the ideal, of course, would be 32. Although many have tried, I don't believe anyone has yet reached this Nirvana -- comparable to Xenakis' achievement in music of writing 61 parts for a 61-piece orchestra, it would produce equally beautiful cacophonies. Not for us modern dancers the limitations of the men -- names now justly forgotten -- who devised the traditional dances with a mere eight or fewer instructions per 32 bars, mistakenly trying to come up with something people could remember -- we talk them through nowadays, and the caller can darn well make himself useful. How often does an advanced group do a traditional dance, except as a warmup -- once a year? Get where the action is folks : any dance that can't confuse at least half of a good demonstration team is no dance at all.

One of the greatest aids to creating confusion is the unexpected change of direction or position. For example, any beginner can end facing his corner after, say, cast off or allemande; but have you ever tried it from a slipping circle? Or allemande after a left-hand wheel? It is such ironic twists as these that add spice to otherwise routine dances (especially on well-waxed floors). Too much security is bad for all people, including dancers -- a dancer who is bearing right should occasionally have to make a sudden left turn, just to keep him awake and remind him that all Scottish country dances are not the same.

Once you get 32, or however many, bars put together, it is a good idea to check up on the phrasing. It is often this alone that spells the difference between a routine dance any fool can enjoy and a mad scramble that keeps the dancers alert and on their toes. For example, there used to be a rule that for a circle to get once around you need one bar of music for each person in it. But modern Scottish country dancing, like all modern art forms, is, and must be, breaking free of the old conventions, with very interesting results -- if you think it's fun watching six people try to get around in eight slip-steps, just wait until you see it tried with eight people. I don't think this particule one has been tried yet, but it's a natural and is bound to be as soon as some smart young choreographer manages to assemble eight enemies he wants to kill off all at once. And the intelligent devisor can surely think of many other equally amusing ways of getting more into a dance.

--- Not to be continued ---

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* * * COMPARISON CORNER Irish Dancing * * *

Our last comparison was with a kind of dancing very different from Scottish, namely Serbian. Now we come much nearer home. Not only are the resemblances between present-day Scottish and Irish dancing quite striking, but there is every reason to believe that the further back into history we go, the more closely we shall find that the two types of dancing resemble one another.

Probably the most striking resemblance, to the layman as well as the expert, lies in the music. Not only are many individual tunes common to the two countries, but so are three very definite and special types of tune : the reel, the jig, and the hornpipe. (For details about these types of tune, and lists of well-known tunes of each type, the reader can turn to the article on Scottish dance-music in *The Thistle* nos. 43 and 44). The differences are as follows. In Ireland the jig is the commonest of these tunes, being slightly commoner than the reel, whereas in Scotland jigs are comparatively rare. Ireland lacks the rather special slow type of reel known in Scotland as the strathspey reel (or, more shortly, as the strathspey). The fast hornpipe (known in Scotland also under the name "Scotch measure") is rarer in Ireland; and the slow hornpipe (known in Scotland as the "clog") much commoner. In fact, some of the finest Irish dance tunes are slow hornpipes, and this rhythm is probably the commonest one for solo dancing, whereas in Scotland it has all but died out. Ireland has also a fair number of tunes in triple/triple rhythm (written in 9/8 time) called hop-jigs or slip-jigs. These are rare in Scotland, though one example, "Drops of Brandy" is fairly well-known as a favourite tune for "Strip the willow".

Ireland has also a piece of interesting nomenclature. Tunes which are not reels but are in pure duple rhythm (i.e. tunes naturally written in 2/4 or 4/4 time) and are played at reel tempo are called "single reels". Most tunes in this category are marches or fast hornpipes; there are a few polkas, song tunes and others. Tunes in triple/duple rhythm (i.e. tunes naturally written in 6/8 time) played at jig tempo which are not jigs are called "single jigs". By contrast, true jigs are often called double jigs.

Now let us turn to the dances. It may be partly coincidence, but just as there are three main types of Scottish dance (reels; highland dances; and country-dances in the wide sense) so there are three main types of Irish dance : rinncé fíchte; step-dances; and ceili dhances. And the three Irish categories correspond to the three Scottish ones respectively.

First of all, the step dances play the same role in Irish dancing that Highland dances do in Scottish. They are mostly solos; they are spectacular; and they require a highly-perfected technique, honed by years of competitions at Feiseanna, just as our Highland technique has reached its present pitch as a result of competition at Highland games. The dances do not, however, resemble the Highland dances in appearance. The Irish dances are one hundred percent footwork, the body held quite stiff and the arms still. Most of them are danced in hard-soled shoes, with brilliant tap-movements. A few are danced in soft shoes : the Irish have not developed a special type of soft shoe like our highland dancing pumps, and one can sometimes see men dancing in cycling shoes and women in ballet slippers. Even in

these "soft" dances, the foot movements themselves are not like the highland ones : there is nothing analogous to the placing of one foot carefully high on the other shin, as in many highland fling steps. Rather there are plenty of hops, brushes, and quick transfers of weight from one foot to the other. One very individual movement is as follows : first the dancer steps on one heel, then on the other, so that he is momentarily balanced on both heels, a few inches apart, and while so balanced he quickly flicks his toes together. To some extent, the type of dance, hard or soft, goes with the music. Hornpipes are always hard; double jigs are usually hard (those that are not are specifically called "light double jigs"); single jigs are soft; slip-jigs are soft; and reels are usually soft (those that are not are called "hard-shoe reels").

The Irish step dances seem to be cast in a much tighter traditional mould than the Scottish. For example, our Highland Fling consists of any succession of fling steps drawn from the traditional repertoire, and theoretically the fling dancer is free to choose any steps he likes, even though, in practice, nearly everyone chooses the same first step and nearly everyone chooses the same last step. In Irish step dancing there is much less choice. First of all, there are a large number of dances with no choice at all : they are called "set dances", and each consists of a fixed sequence of foot-movements danced to a fixed tune. The name of the dance is that of the tune, and the best-known is probably "St. Patrick's day". Many set-dance tunes are irregular in structure ("St. Patrick's day" for example, has a strain of 8 bars followed by a strain of 14 bars) and among them are some of the most beautiful of Irish dance tunes : The king of the fairies, Madame Bonaparte, The garden of daisies, The piper in the meadow straying, and so on.

Apart from the set dances, there are the regular solos, in which the dancer has more choice of steps, but there are still some quite definite limitations. The dancer must first choose a step in which he dances round a circle; this step is called a "lead round". His second step takes him to the right and back : this is the "side step". The next three steps he can choose as he likes. He then repeats the lead round and side step; and he finishes off with one more step. These solo dances are named after the type of music and step, "hornpipe", "light double jig", "reel", "hard-shoe reel" and so on. The hornpipe can be danced to any regular hornpipe tune, the light double jig to any regular (double) jig tune, and so on. There is a slight exception to the description above : the first step of a hornpipe takes the dancer forward and back instead of round in a circle, and is called a "lead up" instead of a "lead round".

There are one or two dances for two or three performers that follow the pattern above, with names like "reel in couples" or "three-hand single jig". Moreover any solo can be danced by a pair of dancers as follows : they dance the opening step simultaneously; then one rests while the other dances the second step, the other rests while the one dances the third step, then they both dance the fourth step, and so on.

(to be continued)

-- Records --

- Jimmy Shand. Guid luck go wi' ye. PMC 70 0
 - Miss Bennet's Jig (8 x 32) Lamb Skinnet (8 x 32)
 - Braes of Breadalbane (8 x 32) Neidpath castle
 - Mrs. Cholmondeley's reel (8 x 32) (3 x 32)
 - Honeymoon Jig (4 x 32) Light and airy
 - Queens Bridge (4 x 40) (8 x 32)
 - Elliot's Fancy
 - (32S + 32R)
 - Linton ploughman
 - (8 x 32)
 - Waltz country dance

- Jimmy Shand jr. invites you to come to the dance. GEM 1018
 - Reels (4 x 32) Glens of Angus (4 x 32)
 - Alyth burn (4 x 32) and miscellaneous Scottish music

- Heather showcase ZLP 2114
 - McLeod of Harris (4 x 32) Within a mile of Edinburgh
 - and miscellaneous toun (4 x 32)
 - Scottish music

- Jim McLeod. SCL 1258
 - Hooper's jig (8 x 32) Eightsome reel
 - and miscellaneous Scottish music

- Max Houliston. ZLP 2112
 - Montgomery's rant (6 x 32) Donald Bane (2 x 32)
 - Scottish ramble (2 x 32) Blue bonnets (6 x 32)
 - River Cree (4 x 32) Isle of Skye (6 x 32)
 - Petronella (6 x 32) Bonnie Anne
 - Linton ploughman (4 x 32) and miscellaneous Scottish music

- Jim Johnstone. MFP 1317
 - Jigs (4 x 32) Dumbarton drums (4 x 32)
 - Da Tushker (4 x 32) Campbell's frolic (4 x 32)
 - Miss Hadden's reel (4 x 32) Swilcan (4 x 32)
 - Jessie's hornpipe (4 x 32) and miscellaneous Scottish
 - Roxburgh castle (4 x 32) dance music

- The Olympians. Thistle BSLP 59
 - Baldovan reel (4 x 32) Maxwell's rant (4 x 32)
 - Swilcan (4 x 32) New-rigged ship (4 x 48)
 - Jennie's bawbee (4 x 24) Glasgow country dance
 - Across the Tay (4 x 48) Miss Hadden's reel (4 x 32)
 - Happy returns (4 x 32) and miscellaneous Scottish
 - dance music

- John Ellis CBS 52632
- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Johnny Groats' house (4 x 32) | Starry-eyed lassie (4 x 32) |
| Swilcan (4 x 32) | "Longwise" eightsome reel |
| Highland laddie | Reels (4 x 32) |
| A trip to Aberdeen (4 x 32) | |
- McBain's Scottish country dance band DJ 1019
- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Wild geese (8 x 32) | Flowers of Edinburgh (8 x 32) |
| Rest and be thankful (8 x 32) | Corstorphine fair (4 x 40) |
| Strathspeys (4 x 32)
(two sets) | Robertson's rant |
| Mairi's wedding (8 x 40) | Bonnie Anne |
| Schiehallion | Scottish reform (8 x 32)
and miscellaneous Scottish
dance music |

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