



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

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GUEST EDITORIAL (by Bob Simpson)

A Chat with Miss Jean Milligan

During a relaxing cup of tea after a strenuous weekend of dancing under Miss Milligan, we were discussing many things in a general sort of way. She was very surprised that with the number of dancers we have and the enthusiasm of the group that we hadn't formed a Branch of the R.S.C.D.S. in Vancouver before now. We had been discussing teaching and training of teachers and their certificates. I discovered that there are two certificates and from what she said, was required to obtain them. I do hereby bow three times in the direction of any certified teacher and doff my head piece. If we formed a Branch, the teacher's committee would receive all the aid and assistance they would require to train a class of potential teachers from the Edinburgh office in outlines of study and teaching methods, standardized steps etc. When a group was ready someone would come over to examine the group and pass them into one or both certificates. The more teachers, the more groups we could teach and the more dancers we would have to form a large Branch. For this she felt demonstration groups are a necessity — well trained and well turned out. At this point she turned to C. Stewart Smith of San Francisco and asked how he managed his demonstration groups. He breaks his group into three parts. Highland for men — women's dances and country dances — any program to have all three for diversity and interest. His teams are trained together, one night a week always with the same partners and same sets. Dances are chosen to show off the dancers' abilities and to make a pleasing picture for the public. The dress for any particular demonstration being laid down and the dances to be done — well rehearsed. The ladies' dresses are of a pattern, style, and material chosen in this case by C. Stewart Smith himself; with some mention at this point of being all the same distance from the floor. (I don't know if this is quite right — what about very tall girls and very short girls?) The men in full dress if the ladies wear long dresses and shirt sleeves and plain day dress if the girls are in short dresses. Teams should be balanced evenly as to male and female as much as possible. This is a great asset from a public relations point of view and as we know who saw C. Stewart Smith's dancers at the last camp, they make a tremendous success of their dancing. Miss Milligan expressed her great pleasure at being with us and was only sorry she had to leave when she did, she had enjoyed her visit so much, and had many good things to say about her host and hostess, Nina and Hugh Thurston and many favorable comments on how well run everything seemed to be with compliments to Mary Shoolbraid and Dennis Lloyd and others. Quite a number of people expressed a desire to become individual members of the R.S.C.D.S. and Miss Milligan had a long list of names and quite a few Canadian dollars to take back with her to the old country. Miss Milligan was only sorry she couldn't have had more time to chat with everyone at the classes and evening dance but she did enjoy very much telling her stories on Sunday afternoon and those of you who did not hear her stories, surely did miss a born story teller.

OUR DANCES, NUMBER 15

The Glasgow Highlanders

This is a nineteenth-century country-dance, typical in some ways, and very untypical in others.

The first peculiarity of this dance which strikes most people is the unusual beginning — the two chords, on the second of which the dancers re-arrange themselves into a couple-facing-couple position. However, this is only one superficial sign of the real character of this dance — the fundamental, interesting, and unique point about it is that it is hybrid: half country-dance and half foursome reel. This becomes clear when we consider the first half on its own — right-and-left and down-the-middle-and-up are both very common country-dance figures (even though going down the middle in threes is not very common in Scottish country dances) — and then the second half on its own — set to partners in line and reel of four is precisely one cycle of the strathspey part of the foursome reel.

OUR DANCES, (cont'd.)

The unusual start of the dance now seems quite natural, when we realize that probably the commonest way of starting a foursome reel in the ballroom is in the couple-facing-couple position. Moreover, our way of starting the "Glasgow highlanders" by lining up in standard country-dance formation and then crossing on a second chord, is not the only way: another way was to line up directly in the starting-position; and one old ballroom manual said simply "stand up as for the foursome reel".

The division of the dance into two halves is shown very clearly in the music, when properly played, which, unfortunately, it very rarely is nowadays. The "Glasgow Highlanders" tune itself, though played in strathspey tempo, is not actually a strathspey — it lacks the characteristic rhythmic figure of the strathspey: the Scotch snap. This tune should be played without repeats, and will last for 16 bars and so accompany the first (country-dance) half of the dance. The music should then change to a strathspey — some such tune as "Loudon's bonny woods and braes" or "Lord Lynedoch". The typical highland strathspey is a 16-bar tune, and so will just fit the second (foursome reel) half of the dance. No-one who has ever danced the Glasgow Highlanders to the music properly arranged and also to the incorrect same-tune-all-the-way-through-the-thirty-two-bars arrangement can fail to notice how much better the correct arrangement fits the dance, and how much livelier and more enjoyable the dance is as a result. Those who use live music and have not experienced the correct arrangement are strongly urged to try it: unfortunately it is useless to urge gramophone-users to try it, because no record yet published is properly arranged.

Another point which might be urged is this: it is vastly better for men to dance men's steps in the eight-bar setting than women's. The step described in the country-dance booklet as the "recommended step" is in fact a woman's step. It is there because it is the simplest step and easily described in print. (A country-dance booklet is not a suitable place for teaching complicated steps). No male dancer should really be content with it if he has any chance at all of learning a man's fling step, such as the rocking step or the Back step. At the St. Andrew's Summer School men are encouraged to dance men's steps; so no man need be deterred from dancing them because the other is "in the book".

The name "Glasgow Highlanders" is a nickname of a battalion of the Highland Light Infantry, whose depot is in Glasgow. However, no-one seems to know just what the connection between the dance and the battalion is, and this is a point on which we would welcome information if any reader could supply it.

NEWS FROM SCOTLAND

This summer, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, officially opened the new Hall of Clans at the Royal Caledonian Schools, Bushey, Hertfordshire, England. She described the building of the hall as a "splendid achievement" and went on to say "I am very glad to see that so many of the boys and girls in this hall are wearing the kilt. It is a symbol of your pride in your Scottish heritage, a pride which you are right to feel, for, wherever you may go throughout the world, you will find your fellow-countrymen loyally and bravely upholding the great traditions of Scotland. These traditions, I know, flourish at the Royal Caledonian Schools, and I am so very pleased that in a few minutes I shall have an opportunity of hearing and seeing your piper and highland dancing".

According to a report in the Oban Times "all the boys are taught piping and highland dancing, and the girls Highland dancing and Scottish country dancing". This raises an interesting question — if only the girls are taught country dancing, with whom do they dance?

At the Royal Caledonian Ball this year over 200 dancers took part in the set-reels. Sixteensomes were raised by the Scots Guards, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, the Cameronians, the Black Watch (two sets), the Queen's Own Highlanders, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Cameron Highlanders, and the London Scottish. Eightsomes were raised by the Royal Scots, the Gordon Highlanders, the Seaforth Highlanders, and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The sets were led onto the floor by the Atholl Highlander sixteensome, at the head of which was the Duke of Atholl. The total attendance was about 1,200. The first Royal Caledonian Ball was held in 1849.

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.

DANCING THIRTY YEARS AGO

In 1930, Scottish Country Dancing along S.C.D.S. lines was just starting in British Columbia. One major concern of the Provincial Executive of those days was with uniform and accurate interpretation of the dances. They wrote "We find in Vancouver that absolute adherence to the published instructions avoids disputes on the part of our older members, many of whom have been taught . . . variations which may have been peculiar to their part of Scotland." They also decided that only Scottish dances as published by the parent society should be danced at their regular meetings. This, of course, disappointed those older members who like the Quadrille - Lancer - Eightsome reel - Waltz - Polka type of programme, for of these dances only the Eightsome was an S.C.D.S. dance. They therefore wrote to "request that the Edinburgh quadrille, the Lancers, and the Waltz be authorized as standard dances and inserted in future publications of the Society and . . . request explicit dance instructions for our use to be forwarded by the Secretary in Scotland covering these dances as soon as possible." (9th December, 1932). I can find no trace of any reply to this suggestion, but the Quadrilles continued to be danced (in January 1934, for example, the Executive modified their version of the fourth figure) and even today the Quadrilles and Lancers are still to be danced along with country dances, though less frequently than they used to be. Two resolutions on style (January 1933) were as follows. "That in the foursome, eightsome, threesome, ninesome, and sixteensome reels all the men hold their hands above their heads and the ladies hold their skirts while setting or reeling, and this is to be a recommendation to all the branches" and "that swinging in the foursome, eightsome, sixteensome, and ninesome reels as now done be continued and recommended to all branches, as otherwise the highland character of the dance will be lost, and that the pivot be used in the swing". The Executive's "Dance committee" studied the various dances as they were published by the S.C.D.S., selected interesting ones, discussed the interpretation of the written instructions and, when they were satisfied, recommended them to the branches. They also standardized sequences of highland steps in the Oxtan reel and the Foursome reel and reel of Tulloch. They introduced one non-S.C.D.S. dance; Barley Bree, which was sent them in manuscript by its collector, Ion C.B. Jamieson, in 1939. (It was later to be published in Book 13.)

One dance which gave trouble was the waltz country dance. The older dancers crossed over "originally as in the old days, i.e. with a turning movement" (to quote from a query to the S.C.D.S.) until someone noticed that the instructions in Book 4 show no turn. The turn was therefore eliminated "with regret, as all our older members, without exception, preferred the more graceful turn". However, one B.C. dancer had visited Scotland and found that the men only turned, and this agreed with information from Mrs. MacNab. The committee did not like to reintroduce the turn "to the probable accompaniment of 'I told you so'" without being quite sure - hence the letter from which I am quoting. The reply was: "With regard to the Waltz Country Dance, the man goes straight-forward without a turn but the lady does a waltz turn every time. This is because the man would have to take 1½ turns to get round to face the next woman, and he has not time to do this." The reply was accompanied by a promise to bring the matter to the notice of the publications committee.

Another dance which led to queries was the eightsome reel. Here is one. "If the Grand Chain in the Eightsome Reel is altered from 8 to 16 bars, how are the 16 bars fitted into the chain?" The answer was "No-one can get round gracefully and easily in the chain with eight steps. If the circle is kept wide, it is quite easy to divide the distance into four equal parts and take four steps to each quarter. Lord James Stewart Murray, the President, says that this chain may be done with pas-de-basque." Here is another: "In the eightsome reel, what is the correct position for the men's hands when setting to partners? The usual position of "holding the arms at the sides in a natural manner" seems out of place. The leading highland regiments here set the local ballroom fashions for the eightsome and foursome reels. The men usually place hands on hips when setting, the men holding skirts. When cutting the figure eight the arms are held above the head. When swinging, right arms are linked at elbow and passed behind partner's back, while left arms are held up similar to the reeling movement. Similarly, in the cartwheel movement, the outside man or woman holds the outside arm up. Two varieties of the step used in turning are found here; the committee favours the skip-change, but the ballroom fashion favours the pirouette. Are both permissible?" There is a comment "It is difficult to get members to change in these little things from acknowledged social custom, and an unsympathetic attitude towards such custom tends to alienate sympathy from the country dance movement". The reply was: "The man should slightly hold forward both hands toward the lady to whom he is setting. In the reel of three the man may put up his hands but the woman never. There is no swinging in the eightsome reel done correctly. In the wheel it is not necessary to condemn the man holding up his outside arm; it does not matter in the least. In turning, skip-change or pas-de-basque step is used."

A very interesting query is the following: "There are 17 dances in the seven books issued so far in which a reel of three is found. Of these, four have a footnote re dancing a reel of four across the dance when the last couple is reached. The B.C. society has followed this rule with success and thinks that it gives these dances a very attractive and characteristic closing note. In the other thirteen dances, no instructions for the closing movement are given. Does the rule apply equally to these others?"

DANCING THIRTY YEARS AGO (cont'd.)

Perhaps modern dancers will need a little explanation to clarify this. Most groups nowadays form up for dances like The Duke of Perth in four-couple sets. But traditionally, sets can range up to any size: four couples is merely a minimum. Let us consider, for example, a five-couple set. The first couple start off, and when they have danced through three times, they are in fourth place in the set. It is at this point that the new top couple start. The original top couple, however, need not stop here. They can continue to dance but only (and here is the point) if they can successfully modify the dance so as to require only **one** couple below them. Often the modification is obvious (e.g. a six-hands-round becomes a four-hands-round), and one common traditional modification is to turn reels-of-three-with-corners into reel-of-four across the dance. This is the reel of four about which the query was asked. The answer was: "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. Some of the dances do not lend themselves to a two couple finish, but such a finish where it **can** be used is always beautiful and the teacher can adapt the usual rules when it is possible to do so. E.g. set and turn corners becomes set and turn the **same** corner twice, and a cast off round one couple and then another as in "Merry Lads of Ayr is done round and up the middle and round the same dancer again". Other questions on the same subject elicited the following answers. In deciding whether or not to introduce the modified ending, a good rule to go by is "Does the actual pattern of the dance require three couples - if it does, do not try to turn it into something perfectly different as a finish". Here is a list of dances, and a definite statement as to whether they can be finished by the two-couple method or not.

Greig's pipes	No	Ye'll aye be welcome	Yes	Marquis of Huntly	Yes
Lady Mary Menzies	No	Dumbarton Drums	No	Braes of Tulliemet	No
Scottish ramble	No	Flowers of Edinburgh	Yes	Lennox Love	No
Light and airy	Yes	Lord Macdonald's reel	Yes	Highland laddie	No
Mrs. McLeod	Yes	Falkland beauty	No	You're welcome, Charlie Stuart	Yes
Duke of Hamilton	No	Edinburgh volunteers	No	Captain Macdonald's fancy	Yes
Hamilton House	No	Fairy dance	Yes	Princess Royal	Yes
Speed the plough	Yes				

Modern dancers will, of course, want to know the answer for all the three-couple dances in the later books, but with the rule to guide them and this list to compare, most answers are fairly obvious.

Another interesting detail: "When the final leading couple in Glasgow Highlanders have reeled with couples 3 and 4, is it permissible for these couples to take their original places, men on men's side and women on women's side?" Answer: "As this is a ballroom dance, the number of times the dance is repeated depends on the orchestra. When the music stops you may give an extra chord, crossing to places on the first and bowing on the second, but generally in the ballroom partners bow to each other and lead away as they are standing".

And, finally, the query to this answer is obvious "The setting up-and-down the dance in Speed the plough is done **only** when it is part of the Perth medley. As a dance by itself with correct corners turned the setting is done across the dance. This was a mistake in one edition". (It is still a mistake in the 1952 edition - the latest I have - and moreover a diagram showing the mistaken position has been added!)

HISTORICAL NOTE

From Coulon's Handbook (a dance manual of 1873, published in London)

The Scotch reel is a true national dance, and used to be performed by the nobility before Her Majesty at her state balls. This is certainly the most lively and characteristic dance known. The music is generally played by a piper, as at Her Majesty's balls, and is played very fast. When a band is provided instead of the piper, one half play while the other wait their turn as the Scotch are indefatigable when dancing the reel; they seem almost intoxicated with it - they snap their fingers - throw their arms and feet in the air - screech out - and make such quick and difficult steps that the eyes have trouble to follow them. The figure is danced by two ladies and two gentlemen forming a line of four, the ladies in the centre. They begin with a chain in passing in and out of each other, until the two gentlemen return to their places, the ladies finish facing the other gentleman; then they set (or balance) before each other, the gentlemen exhibiting all their skill, the ladies dancing as quietly as possible; after eight bars of this set they begin again the chain and set, and this they do as long as they can - in fact they never seem tired, and seem to acquire new strength each time they come to the balance.