



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

Issued by the West Point Grey Scottish Country Dance Club of B.C.
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No. 18

April, 1964

EDITORIAL

At the end of our third year we pause to take stock. We have been gratified by the comments we have had about our back-ground articles, dance-descriptions and historical items; it certainly seems that we are satisfying a need. However, our circulation is still not large enough for us to feel that our future is really assured. If every dance-group in which there are one or two subscribers could increase that number to half a dozen, we should be safe. And perhaps we should also have more letters for publication — our correspondence columns are at the moment our weakest item.

The most important local event in the near future is the annual Camp, to be held on the third week-end in May. This year we shall have one of New Zealand's leading teachers: Margaret Laidlaw, from Auckland. The most important recent event in Scottish dance circles is undoubtedly the appearance of J. F. and T. M. Flett's book "Traditional dancing in Scotland", which covers dancing from as far back as living memory reaches until the Revival in the early twenties. We intend to give a detailed review of it in our first issue next year: meanwhile we recommend it to everyone who takes an intelligent interest in the dancing.

OUR DANCES, NO. 18

Strathummel

Composed by Hugh Thurston. The family likeness to "Schiehallion" will be apparent, and to those who know the topography of central Perthshire the choice of name will be no surprise.

Music. Any strathspey followed by any reel.

Formation. As for the eightsome reel.

Figure 1.

- 8 Grand chain.
- 9 - 16 Each couple, in allemande hold, dances anticlockwise once round the square. The man turns the girl under the raised right hands on bar 15, leaving her in the centre facing out, and retires to his place on bar 16. Thus the dancers are in a cross, the women in the centre facing out, the men at the ends of the arms of the cross facing in. (As for the double foursome reel, for example).
- 17 - 24 All set to partners.
- 25 - 32 Half reel of eight. Each man dances forward, passing his partner by the right shoulder (two travelling-steps) and keeping his left shoulder to the centre of the set. He then dances out with two more steps to where the man on his right was when he started this movement (thus the first man dances to fourth man's position) passing a woman coming in from this position by the right shoulder. Meanwhile each woman dances out to her partner's position, passing him by the right shoulder as he dances in, turns right about and dances in to the centre (thus travelling altogether in a loop); when she gets back to the centre she keeps her left shoulder to the centre, and faces her partner in his new position. All this has taken four bars. Without stopping, the dancers repeat the pattern from where they are now. Thus each man will end across the set from where he started, and each woman with her back to where she started.
- 33 - 64 Repeat from the beginning, ending in a cross as on bar 16.
Here the music changes to a reel.

OUR DANCES (cont'd.)

- 1 - 8 Partners turn with right arms
9 - 16 and with left arms.
17 - 24 The women dance right-hands-across, while the men dance once anticlockwise round the outside.
25 - 32 The women dance left-hands-across, while the men dance once clockwise round the outside.
33 - 48 Everyone sets to partners. Notice that this lasts for sixteen bars.
49 - 64 Reel of eight. Dancers cover the same track as in 25-32 of the strathspey part and, without stopping, repeat it, to end in their original square. (The women will have to accelerate a little right at the end to get into the square: with a uniform speed they would end in the cross).

CORRESPONDENCE

Sir:

The article in The Thistle No. 16 on organizing sets was interesting and moving. My heart bled for the three couples who were made to sit out Glasgow Highlanders. They deserved part of their money back.

There is another practice which, though efficient, makes me want to claim a rebate. It is asking the 4th and 5th couples in a five-couple set to be content with one turn each.

With a little ingenuity - and 'little' is the important word - odd sets of three or five couples can, for many dances, get more exercise and enjoyment than the normal four-couple sets.

The article in The Thistle No. 15 showed how some three-couple dances can easily be modified to suit two couples. So in a three-couple set for Rakes of Glasgow or The De'il among the Tailors each couple can dance the normal figures the first time and for their second turn end with four hands round instead of six. Similarly, in Jessie's Hornpipe the figure of eight on the sides can be changed, the second time through, to a figure of eight across, as in Corn Rigs. I have met a two-couple version of Hamilton House with a balance in line for bars 9-12. To dance Hamilton House the first time, and, say, The Duke of Atholl's Reel the second time would be, I think, to pass over the borderline between liberty and licence.

Some dances can easily be modified to suit a five-couple set. Lamb Skinnit is one. I know it is easy because at a Ball once I devised the method after the music had started and everyone in the set caught on almost immediately (perhaps they had all done it before). 1st couple dance normally the first time except that they slip to 3rd place and 2nd couple start from top place. Then and thereafter there are always two couples dancing. Cauld Kail, Speed the Plough and The Reel of the 51st Division are other dances that can be treated this way. The last named ends with two hands round the second and subsequent times.

But with three-couple dances the simplest scheme is to use the 3 plus 4 formation frequently employed in classes when there are seven couples to cater for. The seven are marshalled into a 3-couple set with a 4-couple set close below. The second (and every even) time the top, neutral, couple of the 4-couple set lends itself to the set above. Immediately afterwards it returns to its own set as dancing couple. The 3 plus 4 formation can, of course, be extended to 3 plus 3 plus 4, or even to 3 plus 3 plus 3 plus 4.

Hugh Foss.

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

Getting to the bottom.

In a two-couple dance like "Petronella" or a whole-set dance like "Barley Bree" there is no trouble in getting to the bottom of the set: you simply keep on dancing until, quite automatically, the figures of the dance take you there.

In a three-couple dance, like the Duke of Perth or Hamilton House, the situation is not quite so straightforward. Because in each round of the dance the leading couple progress from first place to second, with third couple still below them, the figures of the dance do not leave them in bottom place. In fact, when they have danced through as often as they can (which in a four-couple set will be twice) they will be in last place but one. This is, of course, a fact well known to every dancer. What is not universally agreed on is the actual details of getting from there to the bottom place.

One method has been touched on in previous articles, (see, for instance, "Dancing 30 years ago" in *The Thistle* No. 15): dancing a modified version for two couples from this penultimate place. But (as explained in the article) this cannot be done in some dances, and it can never be done in four-couple sets, though when it can be done it is by far the best way. In sets of more than four couples, the couple who have just finished as leading couple can finish the dance quite normally in the penultimate place and then, if they are not going to dance the modified version, simply step down to bottom place, while the bottom dancers step up. They have a whole round of the dance in which to do this. But in four-couple sets they do not have this time at their disposal: the new top couple start immediately and will be dancing with the new second and third — and the new third couple is the one that has just moved up. Thus it is four-couple sets that the getting to the bottom can pose a problem.

For some dances, a little thought shows the true solution. Sometimes a figure does not really take a complete eight-bar phrase of music: examples of this are given by the poussette and the allemande. Each of these is a six-bar figure. The last two bars of the musical phrase serve for the dancers to go to wherever they need to go for the next figure. (Usually they simply fall back to sides, but not always. In *Light and Airy*, for instance, the dancers use the two bars after the allemande to face corners.) Then clearly if a dance ends in such a figure, the dancers can use these last two bars to slip to the bottom. Thus to finish off "Tulloch gorum" all that is needed is for the first couple, on bars 31-32, to move down to bottom place in the set, instead of falling straight back. The bottom couple, of course, move up on these two bars, and everyone is ready to start again. Perhaps the commonest finishing-figure which takes six bars is reels-with-corners. Thus a dance which ends with these reels is easily finished — the leading couple cross diagonally down to the bottom on the last two bars instead of crossing straight back.

Apart from this obvious case, the way to decide how to finish a dance is to ask "Are all the dancers in motion on the first bar? Are they all in motion on the last bar?" In "Hamilton House" all the dancers are in motion on the last bar (the last figure is a six-hands-round). Therefore all six dancers will be employed right up to the end of the last bar. During the first two bars of the round, the couple that have finished dancing can step down and the bottom couple step up. In this particular dance the man will find he has just enough time: on bars 1 and 2 he steps up, and on bar 3 he sets (now as third man) to the first woman.

If all three couples are in motion at the beginning of the dance, as in *Cadgers in the Canon-gate*, then the move must take place during the last two bars, otherwise the opening figure (reels in this case) will be spoilt. This particular dance ends with a right-and-left, so the dancing couple have to put on a spurt in the last two bars to get to the bottom. (The right-and-left is not badly spoiled by this — certainly not as badly as the opening reels would be if the dancers were not in position ready for them).

What happens if neither at the beginning nor the end are all three couples wanted? Then there is a choice — it is usually easy to tell which method is the neater and more natural. What happens if both at the beginning and the end there are three couples in motion? Then there is no way of moving down neatly and effectively — in any particular dance something can be fudged (e.g. a turn can be hurried or hands released early) but there is no ideal solution. However, the fact is that no traditional dance does have the three couples in motion at both beginning and end (two dances that seem to — *Gates of Edinburgh* and *Maxwell's rant*, — are in fact wrongly reconstructed): nor does any well-composed modern dance. Or perhaps the last sentence should be turned around: if a dance is so composed that all three couples are in motion both at beginning and end, then that is a defect in the dance.

LOCAL NEWS

We were very pleased to hear from Revelstoke that the group there is now going again. From a little further afield, a letter came from Winnipeg to tell us that the Branch there is flourishing, to offer us copies of their newsletter *Light and Airy*, which comes out "about once a month in the skip-change season" and to promise a welcome to any dancers visiting Winnipeg. (Contact David Williams, 532 Newman Street, Winnipeg 10.)

DANCING IN BRITTANY (cont'd. from issue 17)

The men agreed to tone down some of their usual habits and not to shout or clap hands in the *Eightsome*, but there was a prolonged battle over the manner of doing the reel of four in Glasgow Highlanders. One dancer had recently qualified as an instructor and Glasgow Highlanders had been in the syllabus. He had been taught to complete the reel in six bars, leaving two over for the couples to take up their new positions. The London instructress wanted the reel done more slowly, with wider loops and its last twist omitted to make up for lost time. She and some of the women dancers were certain that Miss Milligan had made them do it that way at the Albert Hall. The recently qualified instructor had to give in, but comforted himself with the thought that the instructress who had pushed him through the examination was next week's coach. When she came he spoke to her in a low voice. She allowed no nonsense. The reel of four was to be completed in six bars. Next week the London instructress counter-attacked. "Try it both ways," she said. "Keep the loops wide," she added, begging the question, since the loops must be kept small to get the reel done in six bars. The women refused to be hurried, except spasmodically when the men came into contact with them, and so naturally the slower reel looked better. The majority vote was against the six-bar reel. Next week the other Birmingham coach was equally firm. "You cheated," she said, "You didn't complete the reel," The situation was explained. "No. Six bars for the reel," she said, looking determinedly into space. "Oh well," said the women, "Miss Milligan will probably change it all next week." But Miss Milligan didn't.

We found it difficult to say exactly how Miss Milligan was such a good teacher, but none of us had any doubt that she was. One of us said, "She didn't teach us anything and yet we learned a lot." She brightened up the *Eightsome*, which had become altogether too sedate, telling the men to clap their hands when setting. (In Brittany the shouts — 'vifs cris d'appel', as the newspaper called them, — also returned). She told us of a man in one of her teams who never seemed to touch the floor at all when he was in the centre. She told us to talk to each other when performing. We would be talking in an ordinary dance (and it preserved a natural expression of the mouth). She made the men dance an exciting *Fling* step in the Glasgow Highlanders.

She did not set out to tell us all she knew, but produced whatever was needed when it was needed.

The final rehearsal under Miss Milligan was undoubtedly the moment when the collection of the individuals became a team. She spoke with authority. The dances were her servants and not her masters. She invented one or two minor variations for smoothing out the performance in a way no lesser teacher would have dared.

The writers describe the journey and the performance, and continue:—

The subsequent panegyric in *L'Ouest-Eclair* has to be seen to be believed:

"Cette grace tantôt alanguie, tantôt narquoise et vive, ce rythme nonchalant suivi, puis dénoué, puis repris, ces engagements graduels des couples, en laissant un ou deux en marge, ces fausses sorties, ces retournements brusques, ces danseuses souples passant sans avoir besoin de courber la tête sous les bras en arceaux de ces beaux hommes et admirablement découplés, don't le kilt faisait encore ressortir l'elegance: tout cela constituait un spectacle d'une rare qualité artistique dont le public ravi n'arrivait pas à se lasser.

Certaines danses étaient animées de vifs cris d'appel et de claquements de mains, remplaçant les castagnettes espagnoles.

D'autres, sur de vieux airs populaires — et, pour notre part, ce sont celles que nous avons préférées — avaient une allure desuète de menuet, avec les danseuses pinçant leurs jupes aux genoux, pour se muer en une ronde au ralenti et revenir, dans un mouvement exquis à la reprise de la figure originale."

We laughed at the fine phrases then, but I am inclined to think that our hosts were draining to the uttermost the cup of pleasure at which we sipped, letting loose their French enthusiasm to glorify all the doings of those three days and raise them to a heroic level. Now, looking back over the ghastly chasm of the war years, we may be thankful for such a scene to grace our memories.

Hugh and Alison Foss.