



THE WHISTLE 1972-73

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*Editorial*

*A little while ago we stopped our practice of regularly including a new dance in each issue of The Thistle, and decided that from then on we would publish new dances only if they seemed exceptionally good. We have one that does seem to qualify: The Merrick has gone down well each time we have taught it, so we present it to our readers as our first new dance for some time. The Merrick is an informal tribute to Hugh Foss, and is named after a mountain near Castle Douglas.*

OUR DANCES No. 75: The Merrick

Music Any strathspey (64 bars) followed by any reel.

Formation Two men and two women stand in a diamond (see positions in diagram 1.)

The dance

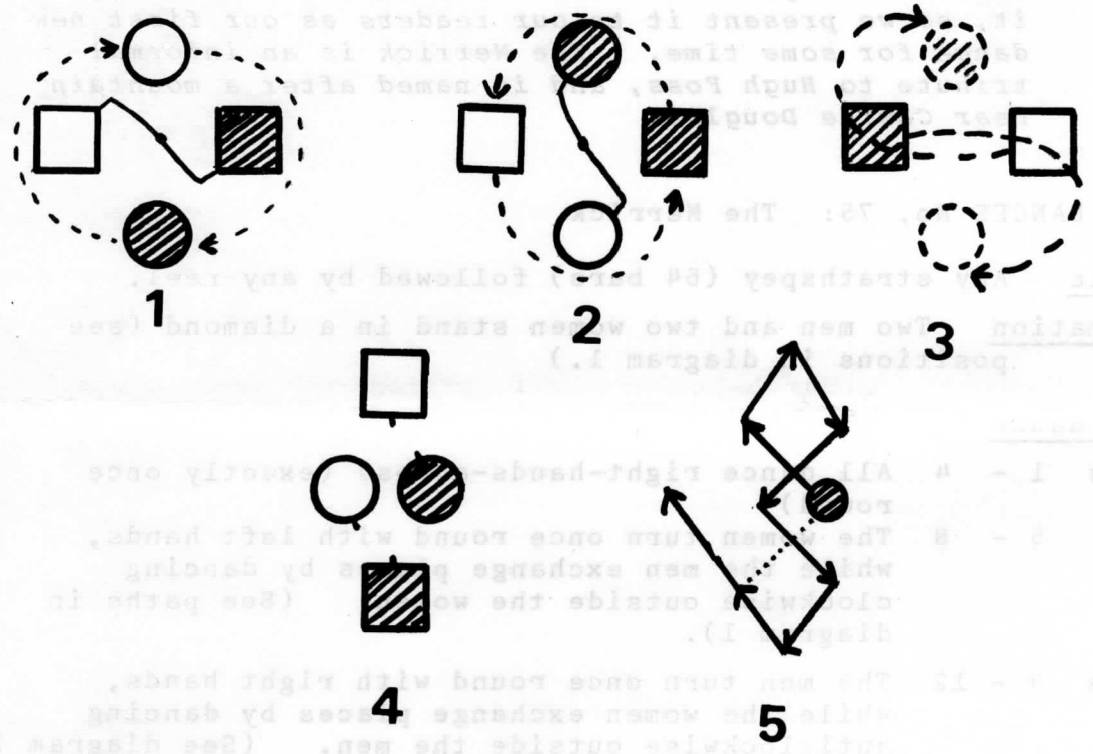
- Bars 1 - 4 All dance right-hands-across (exactly once round)
- 5 - 8 The women turn once round with left hands, while the men exchange places by dancing clockwise outside the women. (See paths in diagram 1).
- Bars 9 - 12 The men turn once round with right hands, while the women exchange places by dancing anticlockwise outside the men. (See diagram 2)
- 13 - 16 The women change places, giving right hands, and each dances to her right into the man's position at the point of the diamond. (See diagram 3). Meanwhile the men set (2 bars) and turn once round with left hands, ending facing away from each other ready for a reel of four, men in the middle, women outside. (See diagram 4)
- Bars 17 - 24 All dance a reel of four except that, on the last bar, the men, instead of changing direction to their right, which would take them to their starting places, continue on their

track in the previous bar, and so finish at the points of the diamond originally occupied by the women. (See diagram 5)

Bars 25 - 32 Everyone sets.

Bars 33 - 64 All is repeated with men and women interchanging roles.

At this point the music changes to a reel, and the dance is repeated at the faster tempo.



OUR DANCES No. 76: The Reel of Tulloch

This is the name both of a dance and of a tune. The tune goes back at least to 1740, for at that date it was written down (in the MacFarlan manuscript). It is a very typical reel tune, having all the characteristics which we noted in the article on Scottish music in The Thistle no. 43. The fact that it is modal gives it a feeling of antiquity; and in the opinion of many people it is a remarkably fine melody, especially when played on the pipes: indeed it has been nick-named *Righ nam port* (King of tunes).



The dance first came to light early in the century, the first known reference to it being in 1819, when it was danced at a ball in Edinburgh. It was also danced at the Highland Society of Edinburgh's piping and dancing competitions, the first time it occurred being in 1829. A historical note in this issue of *The Thistle* describes it at the Breadalbane ball in 1842, and refers to it as an "ancient" dance. (Whether it really was "ancient" in 1842 is not known for certain. Dance-teachers are not always reliable dance-historians). The dance was sometimes known as the Breadalbane ball reel. Indeed, it has been known by a number of different names. The *Ballroom Annual* of 1844 called it "The duchess of Sutherland's new highland reel", and it has also been called "Hullachan" or even "Hoolagan". These last two words are anglicizations of the word Thulaichain: the Gaelic name for the dance is "Ruidhle Thulachain", and Th in Gaelic is pronounced H.

The description of the Duchess of Sutherland's new highland reel is as follows:

Four stand up in line, ladies outside set and reel  
 Two gentlemen face and set  
 All go round each other in a circle  
 Ladies take the centre and set to partners  
 Reel as before  
 Gentlemen take the centre and set to reverse partners  
 Circle as before  
 Two gentlemen set and turn all round with right arms  
 locked  
 Again set and turn all round with left arms locked  
 Reel as before  
 Ladies take the centre and set and turn each other  
 Circle as before  
 Gentlemen take the centre and set and turn the ladies.

This early version was described again, under the name Hullachan in two later books (1865 and 1881). The new feature in this dance as compared with the older foursome reel, was the "turn all round with arms locked". Eventually the reeling and circling died away, leaving the version we dance today, consisting of alternate setting and turning. The "turning with arms locked" is known as "Hullachan turn" or "hands in Hullachan". In point of fact it is not new, being the same as a turn used in country-dancing about 1750 and then called "Allemande".

With its magnificent tune, its vigorous style, its high proportion of Scottish reel-stepping, and its complete lack of resemblance to any English, Irish, American or Scandinavian dance, the Reel of Tulloch is one of the most important and characteristic dances of the classical Scottish repertoire.

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?? ? YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED ? ? ?

Q. During the time that I have been dancing Scottish country-dances, there have been a number of changes in the way in which various figures have been danced. To wit

- (i) when I was young, "leading" was always done with the right hand. Then it suddenly changed to a nearer-hand hold. Then some people went back to the right-hand hold for down-the-middle-and-up, but used the nearer-hand hold elsewhere. And now various teachers seem to have their own "rules" which say when a right-hand lead should be used and when a nearer-hand lead should be used, but no two teachers agree completely with one another.
- (ii) We used to dance a "hands-round" with a travelling-step in all dances. Then (quite early on in my dancing career) people changed to a slip-step in some dances (but not in strathspeys). At the same time, the slip-step in down-the-middle-and-up seemed to die out.
- (iii) We used to dance fast one-hand turns with a wrist-elbow hold. Then a kind of twist-grip came in, in which each dancer takes the other's hand and they turn their wrists round one another in a way I could never quite manage.
- (iv) Some dances have a figure in which the first couple crosses over and dances two reels of three on opposite sides. When I first met such dances, the reels were both right-shoulder and consequently unsymmetrical; in later dances, however, the reels were symmetrical. (I only met this figure when I first came across SCDS dances - the dances I did when young did not have it, either way round).

There are other differences, too and they made me think "if all these changes took place in one generation, what changes will have taken place in the course of history?" Many of the dances we do today are dated in the 1770's and 1780's, and it would be interesting to know how the figures were danced in those days.

A. A full answer to this question would take more space than we can afford. You will find plenty of detail in the chapter entitled "The evolution of country-dance figures" in Scotland's dances by H. A. Thurston (1954) and in "The Scottish country dance, its origins and development II" by J. F. and T. M. Flett in Scottish Studies, volume 11 (1967).

To judge by your examples you started dancing in traditional style, and then switched to RSCDS style. Your fourth example makes this clear; and so does the first, as the change in handing was introduced by Miss Milligan in 1963. Thus the changes you have encountered are not those that

would naturally take place in one generation—they are due to a change of dance-milieu rather than to the passage of time. Although there have been changes over the years, they are not as drastic as your experiences suggest.

Some figures have remained unchanged (except possibly for the steps used in dancing them—much less was written about steps than about figures, and we do not know a lot about steps) from the earliest times until now: these included hands-across, hands-round, reel of three and reel of four. (The direction of the double reels of three did not change: they were always symmetrical. The apparent change is due to the fact that when the RSCDS first came across this figure they reconstructed it incorrectly, and later corrected it. But presumably you are interested in the sort of change that might be called "evolutionary development", not changes due to a mistake on the part of someone trying to reconstruct a dance from an old book).

Casting off  was originally danced with a "long way round" turn; about 1750 dancers began to turn the short way. Later they changed back to the original.

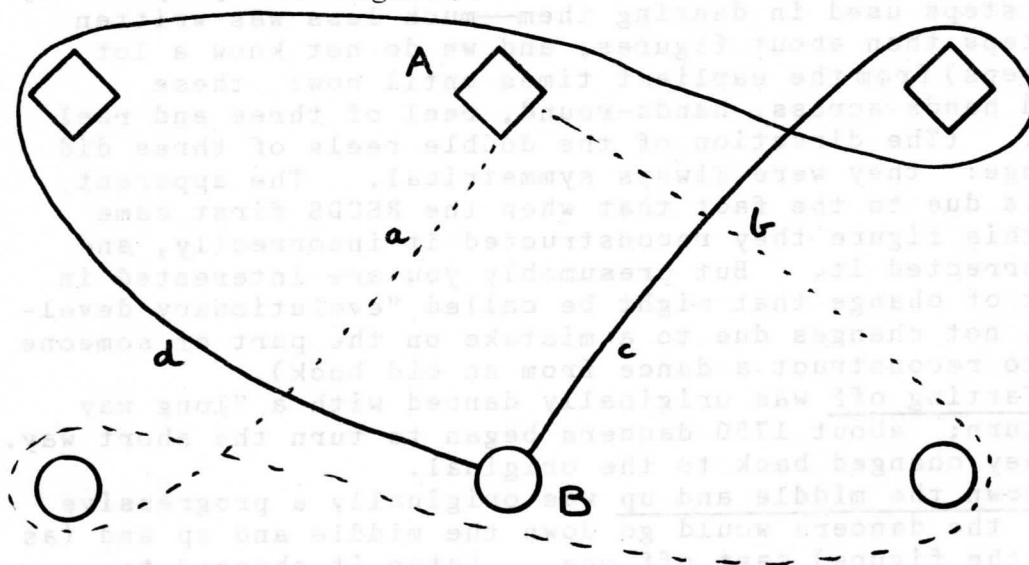
Down the middle and up  was originally a progressive figure: the dancers would go down the middle and up and (as part of the figure) cast off one. Later it changed to simply dancing down the middle and up to second place (called usually "down the middle and up and leave off one"); this happened at about the same time as the cast-off changed to an inward turn. Quite late, probably right at the end of the nineteenth century, it became usual to dance up to top place; thus the figure became non-progressive. At the same time the poussette changed from non-progressive to progressive, so the combination down-the-middle-and-up-and-poussette was always a progression.

Sometimes the changes which took place were of quite small details. For example, "sett cross corners" (i.e. set to and turn first corners and then second corners) is an old figure which was especially popular in Scotland; but it is certainly quite a modern technique for the dancing couple to manoeuvre themselves so that they are back-to-back with each other on a diagonal line while they set. Through most of history as long as each dancer is facing the dancer he or she is setting to, a convenient distance apart, that is all that is required. There is some evidence that the most usual place for the leading dancer to be while setting is on the side-lines, between corners.

Other figures which underwent interesting changes, which you can read about in the references mentioned above, are figure of eight, right and left, allemande and promenade.

Q. You have mentioned more than once in *The Thistle* that the figure "double triangles" as danced to-day is incorrect. What exactly was the original figure?

A. Here is Thomas Wilson's own description (he was the inventor of the figure).



#### The double triangle

The lady at A moves in the direction a round the top gentleman, then outside the second gentleman, round the third gentleman, and returns to her situation in the line b; at the same time the gentleman at B moves in the direction c and performs the figure on the opposite side, returning to his situation in the direction d.

Q. What is the difference between port and puirt?

*Port* is singular and means reel or dance-tune. *Puirt* is plural and means reels or dance-tunes. To translate "mouth-music" either may be used: *port a beul* if one tune is referred to, *puirt a beul* for more than one tune. (This refers to the nominative case. In the genitive and dative cases the words are modified and in fact the genitive singular is *puirt* and the genitive plural is *port*). The word *port* is also used in Irish Gaelic, where it means "reel" rather more specifically than in Scottish. Indeed, modern Irish writers contrast *port* meaning "reel" with *cor* meaning "jig".

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: : : HISTORICAL NOTES: a nineteenth-century programme : : :

The programme for "Mr. Lowe's third annual ball" in the assembly room Elgin, which took place in 1829, has been preserved in the National Library of Scotland. It goes as follows (we have not reproduced all the names of the performers):-

1. Entrance of the pupils
  2. Grand Masonic Procession and Miss Sellar's 'pas seul'
  3. Reels, by younger pupils
  4. Minuet [4 girls]
  5. Strathspey, highland fling, and reel steps [boy]
  6. Quadrille steps [8 girls]
  7. Pas de deux
  8. College hornpipe [4 men]
  9. Pas seul "oh Nanny, wilt thou gang with me" [girl]
  10. Scotch steps [12 men]
  11. My love she's but a lassie yet [boy and girl]
  12. Highlandman in Paris [6 men]
  13. Pas seul
  14. Pas de cinq
  15. College hornpipe [3 men]
  16. Pas seul "Low down in the broom"
  17. Elgin hornpipe [2 men]
  18. Miss Gayton's hornpipe [4 girls]
  19. Highland ballet
  20. Quadrille, first division
  21. Reels
  22. Pas de deux [2 girls]
  23. Quadrille steps, gentlemen
  24. Nid noddin' [12 girls]
  25. Cane hornpipe [3 men]
  26. Allemande de cinq [2 girls]
  27. Highlandman in Paris [3 men]
  28. Quadrille steps (ladies)
  29. Scotch steps [12 girls]
- Finale: Circassian circles.

This is just the first half. The second half is similar, ending with

Grand Caledonian ballet (includes "Highland fling in the full costume").

Apart from the fling and reel steps, most of this material has been lost. The only dance from this programme which has been preserved is Miss Gayton's hornpipe (collected and taught by Joan and Tom Flett). However, although the particular dances in this programme have been lost, a small repertoire of dances of this general type have been preserved, for clearly many of the dances collected and taught by Mrs. MacNab were of this type.

It is interesting to speculate whether the pas seul etc. were composed by Lowe for his annual ball or whether



there was a general repertoire of dances from which the dancing-masters of the period could draw. There are three pieces of evidence in favour of the latter. (i) The programme mentions no composers. If Lowe composed a dance he would have put his name to it: no dancing-master is loth to take credit for his compositions. (ii) When the Fletts collected Miss Gayton's hornpipe they did not find it attributed to Lowe. (iii) Mrs. MacNab did not compose the dances in her collection (in spite of innuendoes you may have heard or read to that effect) but learnt them from older teachers.

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: : : HISTORICAL NOTES : : :

From Joseph Lowe's "Reel o' Thulichan" (about 1850)

It was this reel that so delighted her majesty Queen Victoria when on a visit to Scotland in 1842. At the ball given by the Marquis of Breadalbane, at Taymouth castle, the original figure of the reel o' Thulichan was danced in the royal presence, with admirable characteristic spirit, by the Marquis of Abercorn, the Honourable Fox Maude, Clunie MacPherson, and Davidson of Tulloch. The queen seemed quite elated during the performance of this ancient reel, and expressed herself much delighted at the lively execution displayed by the dancers.

From Robert Forbes "The Lyon in mourning" (referring to Jacobite times; that is, about 1745).

Mr. Gib told me the highlanders were the most surprising men he had ever seen. For after making very long marches and coming to their quarters, they would have got up to the dance as nimbly as if they had not been marching at all, whenever they heard the pipes begin to play, which made him frequently say "I believe the devil is in their legs".

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Please note our new address is

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