THE THISTLE

Issued by the Thistle Club
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EDITORIAL

Yet once again the season draws to its close : the Thistle group has closed down for the summer and most other groups we know have done so or will do so soon. We are looking forward to the May week-end, and after to the start of summer activities, including the by now traditional open-air dancing in Stanley Park. We wish all our readers a pleasant summer.

Our Dances No. 47: RORY O'MORE

Here is another of the very typical nineteenth-century country dances to a formula that is by now familiar to all our readers, namely sixteen bars of a figure characteristic of the dance, followed by the sixteen-bar sequence down-the-middle-and-up-and-poussette. One traditional version of this dance has, however, a twist in the tail - the dancers do not turn round to come up the middle, but dance up in reverse gear.

The Irish name of the dance is accounted for by its Irish tune - nearly all country-dances were named after their tunes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rory O'More is not the only country-dance which was traditional in Scotland in the nineteenth century and had an Irish tune : two more are St. Patrick's day and Paddy O'Rafferty.

Rory O'More and St. Patrick's day are in the R.S.C.D.S. books (book 1 and book 3 respectively), and both appeared in the Ballroom guides by David Anderson which were described in last year's Thistle. Paddy O'Rafferty occurs in a number of sources. One version (from Kerr's collection) goes as follows:-

1- 8	Couples 1 and 2 advance and retire; half right-and-left.
9-16	Repeat this.
17-24	Hands across and back.
25-32	Poussette.

The "advance and retire" in this dance is done with a walking-step (three steps and a close, to be precise, for the advance, and the same for the retire), and so is the half right-and-left (eight steps).

There is an American contra-dance called Rory O'More - it goes, of course, to the same tune as ours, but the dance itself is quite different and there is clearly no connection between the two.

Our Dances No. 48: THE SHETLAND REEL

The Shetlands are situated some 100 miles north of the mainland of Scotland and are perhaps even more isolated than the mere distance would indicate because travelling is difficult in these blustery northern regions. Their dances have some interesting resemblances to the dances of the mainland, as well as some significant differences.

There are a number of reels in the Shetland repertoire, but the one we describe - a sixsome reel - is the only one that is at all well known : it has been described in print in a number of places and, besides being danced in Shetland, it is danced by such groups as the Shetland Association in Edinburgh. Anyone who wants to know about the other Shetland reels, or who wants more information about the sixsome than we have room for here, should turn to what is now the standard work on the subject : the chapters on Shetland in J.F. and T.M. Flett's Traditional dancing in Scotland.

The three couples arrange themselves as in the diagram, in which X represents a man and O a woman, partners being opposite one another.

O X O

X O X

The set is much more compact than in mainland dancing : the dancers are near enough that partners can, if they like, join hands while setting (they sometimes do), and the reader will see that the figure we describe needs compact or even frankly tight spacing to be feasible. The reason for the compact style of dancing may well be the smallness of the croft houses in Shetland. The dance, like all true reels, consists of alternate setting and reeling. In this particular dance, each of these takes eight bars (that is, one phrase of music), and the dance starts with the reeling.

The reeling is performed as follows. Each woman turns away from her partner, and the two dance throughout as one unit, although there is no physical contact between them. (Some teachers tell each man to place his hands on his partner's shoulders while learning the figure. This makes sure that they dance as a unit. It also emphasizes the closeness of the spacing). The figure is simply a reel-of-three: each couple goes round the same track as a single dancer in an ordinary country-dance reel-of-three. In our diagram the centre couple dance down towards the centre of the page, curving to their right (i.e. towards the left margin) to start, so that their complete track will be a figure-of-eight, the first loop clockwise and the second anticlockwise. The leftmost couple therefore start their reel by curving to their right, and pass through the centre of the reel before the rightmost couple. The dancers keep their compact spacing : the initial movement looks almost as though the left and centre couples are rolling round each other with right shoulders touching.

The commonest travelling step is a two-step or a "travelling pas-de-basque". The reel ends with three hearty stamps, one on each of the first three crotchets (quarter-notes) of the last bar. In

some districts the women turn about just before the end of the reel, and back into place facing their partners.

The usual setting-step is the "back-step with a hop", a step known all over northwest Europe. (In Denmark it is actually called "reel step" or rather, since the Danes speak Danish, "reeltrin"). It is danced as follows: beginning on the last crotchet of the previous bar:-

Count 4 Hop on the left foot, raising the right vertically a few inches in front
Count 1 Step on the right foot behind the left
Counts 2,3 Repeat, reversing the footwork

(The step can also start on the other foot, i.e. interchange left and right throughout the description).

The setting ends, like the reeling, with three hearty stamps. Some dancers stamp in the middle of the step as well. And some men stamp every two bars (thus: hop-step-hop-step-hop-stamp-stamp-stamp four times).

Other setting-steps are possible, including pas-de-basque (ending with stamps).

An attractive setting was shown to us by Tom Flett on his recent visit, and does not seem to have been described in print. It is called "gracing the dance", and the whole set has to agree beforehand to dance it. The lines join hands in threes, arms hanging loose, and all dance pas-de-basque, the men starting on the left foot. Each dancer turns his body to the left on the left-footed half of the pas-de-basque and to the right on the right-footed half letting the joined hands swing with the body.

The Shetland reel can be performed to any Shetland reel-tunes. Those who use gramophones will find a good selection on Tom Anderson's record (Dominion LP 1278 : Scottish Violin Music volume 2). We particularly like band 2 of side 1 (Oliver Jack and Willafjord). A very suitable sequence is

reel
back-step
reel
grace the dance

repeated until the music stops.

COMPARISON CORNER

American contra-dances, part 2.

We saw that, besides Scotland, there is one other region of the world where country-dances survived traditionally right up to to-day, namely a region centered in Northern New England, and we described their steps, style and figures.

There is one quite interesting parallel between New England dances and ours. Just as in the nineteenth century there arose a whole heap of dances in Scotland each of which consisted of a sixteen-bar sequence followed by the standard ending down-the-middle-and-up-and-poussette, so New England has a large number of dances with a very similar formula, the major difference being that the last figure is right-and-left instead of poussette. A second difference is that most of these dances are of the type where the first man is on the women's side and his partner on the men's side (as in our "Jacky Tar" etc.)

The New England way of dancing down-the-middle-and-up in these dances is most attractive. The dancers go down the middle with the dance-walk described in last month's issue for about two bars, make quite a leisurely turn to come up, taking the rest of the four bars; dance up the middle for two bars, and then cast off for two. As they come up, the man will have his partner on his left (remember that we are talking about dances in which the first couple are on "wrong" sides) and will cast off round the second woman. To do so he puts his arm round her waist and she puts her arm on his nearer shoulder, and they turn as a couple (clockwise) almost like a door swinging on its hinge. The first woman pivots similarly (anti-clockwise) with the second man.

We have remarked that no reels of three (or four) survive in contra-dances : the most complicated standard figure is "turn contra corners". This is like the "turn corners and partner" in The Duke of Perth, except that it starts by giving right hand to partner, so that corners are turned with left hands. Thus it is like the English, not the Scottish, corner figure.

New Englanders tend to dance in much longer sets than we do : a typical size of set for a three-couple dance would be six couples, and two-couple dances can be danced in sets of any length - sometimes stretching the whole length of the hall. They do not start only at the top : when the music strikes up, every other couple starts if the dance is two-couple (and, of course, every third couple in a three-couple dance). There is no introductory chord : some bands play an introduction of a few notes, others start right in, and dancers take their first step when they see the fiddler bring his bow down onto the strings (in this modern age "get set on the needle-hiss").

In a three-couple dance, the leading couple does not stop dancing when it gets one place from the bottom and slip to the bottom, nor is there a "modified version" for two couples, as in some of our traditional dances. Instead, the American couple dances, in last place but one in the set, with the last couple as their second couple and a totally imaginary third couple. It works!

A very interesting progression can be used in some three-couple dances, namely those where second and third men are never moving at the same time, nor are second and third woman. At first sight this looks strange but quite a number of dances are like this. (If you check our "Speed the plough" for example, you will find that it is like this). These dances can be performed with every other couple starting, even though they are three-couple dances. It works like this. Let us letter the couples from the top,

A B C D E ....

then A, C, E .... start with the music, and the first figure or figures will involve only one couple or perhaps two. After a while, the leading couple will progress to second place in the set, by a cast-off or some such movement. The order is now

B A D C F E ....

with the underlined couples dancing as first couple. Because second and third men do not move at the same time, there can be no figures like "advance and retire in threes". There might be a figure like "first and third couples hands-across ("star with the couple below" in American terminology) in which case A and D dance together, so do C and F, and so on; if the figure is "first and second couple hands-across" ("star with the couple above") then B and A dance together, so do D and C, and so on. The most interesting figure is "turn contra corners". Here couple A turns man B and woman D for their first corners, while couple C turns woman F and man D, and so on. Then, for second corners, couple A turns woman B and man D, while C turns woman D and man F, and so on. Thus couple D are used as corners twice in quick succession, once by couple A and once by couple C.

Just as in Scotland, there was a long period during which no (or very few) new dances were invented : it may have been even longer than in Scotland, lasting from about 1840 to 1940. However, there are now many new contras, though I suspect they are danced mainly by hobbyists in Boston and outside New England, rather than in the New England villages and country towns. Some of the historical contras from old books and manuscripts have been reconstructed by Ralph Page, and I suspect that the same applies to them. Ralph found that one of these, a dance of Revolution times called "British sorrow" went over very well on his recent trip to England (in spite of its name!)

The music for contras is of the same general type as Scottish and Irish reels, jigs and hornpipes. (Fast hornpipes, not the clog type). In fact, many Irish and Scottish tunes are in the repertoire. At least one American tune of this type has made its way eastwards across the Atlantic : the hornpipe Staten Island. New England dance-bands, like traditional Scottish bands (and unlike modern Scottish bands) play one tune all the way through a dance - they do not switch from tune to tune. It says something for the quality of the playing that this does not become monotonous.

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED.

Q. What are the correct tunes for (a) the Buchan eightsome, (b) Cadgers in the Canongate, (c) Ellwyn's fairy glen?

A. (a) The dance has no tune of its own, but can be danced to any reel or reels. Any tune that is correct for the ordinary eightsome is correct for the Buchan eightsome, though of course the Buchan eightsome is a different length, which means that a different arrangement will be needed.

(b) Cadgers in the Canongate has its own tune, which was published with the dance. For some reason, certain bands have made records labelled "Cadgers in the Canongate" using other tunes (played at a suitable length for the dance) but strictly speaking these are not correct.

(c) The tunes published with the dance (which was composed by John M. Duthie) are The fairy dance and Neil Gow's farewell to whisky.

Q. How do you change from a pas-de-basque to a slip-step?

A. If the slip-step is to the right, there is no problem. If to the left, the easiest and neatest way is probably as follows. The pas-de-basque consists of six movements : right-left-right left-right-left. Dance the first five as usual. Instead of the sixth (that is, the last "left"), bring the left foot beside the right without taking the weight on it. It is then free to start the leftward movement on the next step.

BOOK REVIEW

The Ormskirk Scottish dances, books 1 and 2, by Roy Clowes (2/6d. each).

The Liverpool area seems to be a focus of Scottish dancing, even though it is well south of the border. Now, from the same town (Southport) as Angus McLeod, but by a different composer, we have ten more dances. Although it is not easy to judge a dance without performing it, these do look attractive. I should guess that Mr. Clowes has been influenced by the dances taught by Mrs. MacNab, as most of his are set dances for a fixed number of couples, and contain such movements as the Petronella diamond in strathspey rhythm, and plenty of reels of four. "The lobster pot" is a bright little dance for children, that many teachers might find very useful.

SCOTTISH DANCING AND QUEEN VICTORIA

From Henry Ponsonby, his life from his letters, by Arthur Ponsonby, Chapter VI : Balmoral.

> But the gillies ball stood out as the recurring entertainment to which the Queen herself was specially devoted. She loved dancing, and danced very well. As years passed Ponsonby became doubtful not only of the necessity but of the desirability of her indulging with such zeal in dancing reels. Yet as late as 1891 when she was seventy-two, at an informal dance in the castle drawing-room, he is obliged to admit: "The Queen danced with Prince Henry; light airy steps in the old courtly fashion; no limp or stick but every figure carefully and prettily danced". But the usual gillies ball was a rough-and-tumble affair with a great deal of shouting, and she never missed it.
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> [Ponsonby also wrote in one letter that he danced a "Hooligan" with the Queen. This is presumably either a reel of Tulloch, a Hullichan-round-the-house, or a Hullichan jig. He also recorded that at one gillies' ball ".... Lord Ponsonby, while performing the Perpetual Jig, was tripped by a groom and fell flat, amid loud laughter"].

LOCAL NEWS

Last month two of your editors were invited to give a workshop in Kamloops, to which a sizeable group of dancers from Kelowna also came. In the course of a most enjoyable week-end we were initiated into the Kamloops Scottish country dance group - an experience quite unlike any other. The Kamloops group had particularly asked to be taught Schiehallion, and that was the main project for the workshop.

Hints on better dancing

By the very nature of things, people in charge of dance-groups tend to be the more experienced, keener and more able dancers. These are the people who make up dance-programmes, and it is natural for them to include a fair number of the more erudite dances. However, for a big occasion, like a ball, to which many dancers come from a wide area and from a number of different groups, there is some danger, if all the dances require a high level of proficiency, that many guests will enjoy only a few of them, and even if help is provided (such as "cheat sheets" or a preliminary dance through) this only partly solves the problem. So most good programme planners will put in a good proportion of easy dances. Now the obvious easy dances to include are old traditional favorites like "Petronella", "Scottish reform", "Dashing white sergeant", "Circassian circle" and so on. Now some programme planners regard these dances as hackneyed; perhaps they danced them too often while at school. But they need a few simple dances to clear their consciences, and so they include, instead, some equally easy but less familiar dances - "Back of Bennachie" is one that is often included for these reasons. Others are "Kilspindie", "Lauderdale lads", "The highland fair", and so on. Our hint this month is : resist this temptation - be bold and put in the old favorites. There are two ways in which the others fail. One is that though Petronella and Back of Bennachie may be equally easy to a dancer who knows both, to a dancer who knows only Petronella, that will be the easier. The other is that the advantage of the old favorites lies not so much in their simplicity as in their familiarity. Many people simply do like to dance the old familiar dances - especially people who dance only occasionally and not regularly once or twice a week. (Please notice carefully that we are not saying that Bennachie, Kilspindie etc. are not good dances - only that they are not effective for this particular purpose).

GRAMOPHONE RECORDS.

Step we gaily. Jimmy Shand. Parlophone PMC 1122.

Mairi's wedding	Scottish reform
Jenny's bawbee	The Braes of Tulliemet
Waltz country dance	Maxwell's rant
Miss Mary Douglas	The road to the isles
The Duke of Perth	The machine without horses

(This is an old record, but is still obtainable)

THE THISTLE

Subscription - $1.25 per year (4 issues). Most back numbers still available. 25¢ per copy to no. 24, 35¢ thereafter (except no. 33 - 50¢). (Photographic copies of back numbers out of print can be supplied at 25¢ each exposure). Bulk rates: six or more subscriptions to the same address: 95¢ per year.
Leaflets available: Schiehallion, Inverness reel - 10¢ each
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Sixteen Scottish country Dances (1945-1967) by Hugh Thurston ($1). This is a reprint of "Twelve Scottish country Dances (1945-1956)" with four newer dances added.

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