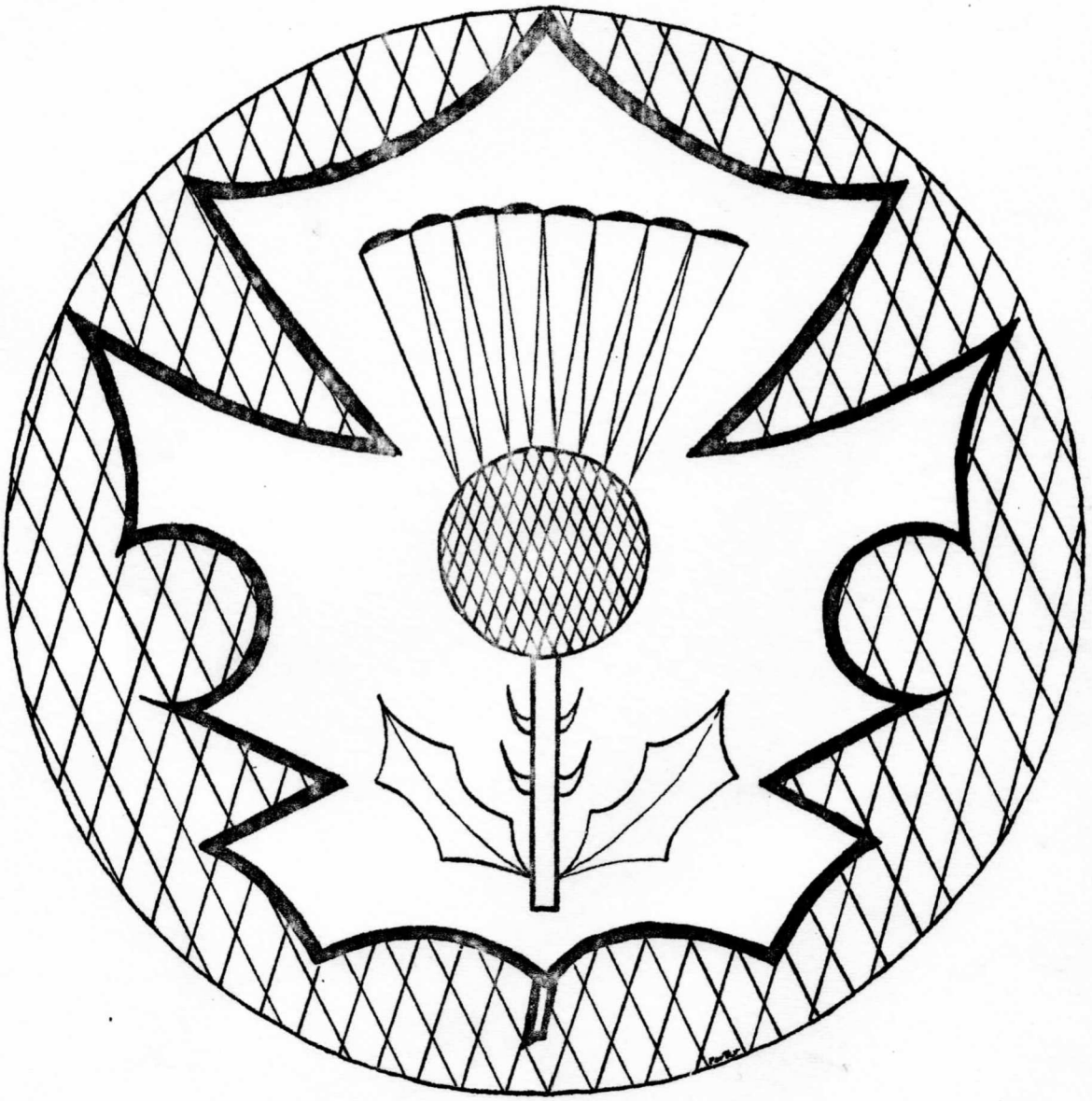
the thistle



a magazine of scottish country dancing & allied subjects

NO. 25. October, 1965.
Editorial Address - 3515 Fraser Street, Vancouver 10, B.C.

EDITORIAL.

Another summer has passed, another season's dancing begins, and we start the fifth year of The Thistle. This year you will get four issues of the Thistle, each twice as large as before. We continue our regular features. In particular, we continue the series "Our dances" : two dances, one new and one old - will be featured in each issue.

The handsome new cover has been designed for us by Alistair Ross and Pamela Porter.

OUR DANCES, No. 25 : THE NUT.

This is a simple and gay little dance which does not seem as popular now as it was a few years ago, possibly because its tune is not available on records. This is a pity, as the tune is, like many other country-dance tunes in 6/8 time, lively and attractive; it is to be found in most of the standard collections of the early part of this century, as well as in Scottish Country Dance Book No. 1.

The dance is yet another example of the typical 19th-century form - an individual and characteristic opening figure, followed by the standard ending down-the-middle-and-up-and-poussette. ("Petronella" and "Scottish reform" are two dances of this type that we have described in previous issues). The characteristic figure consists of the first man turning the second woman with one hand and then joining his other hand with the second man, so that the three of them form a pair of arches, under which the first woman then dances.

The first description in print was in "The Ballroom" in 1827 - the book in which so many of our traditional favourites were first put down on paper - where it was classed as an English country dance (as "Petronella" was also). As most readers well know, this was the date at which country dancing was fast dying out in England so, whether English or Scottish in origin, it was in Scotland that Petronella and other dances survived. "The Nut" is, perhaps, a slight exception to this rule. One of the few country dances which did survive in England is the Morpeth Rant - and this is the same dance as the Nut. That is to say, the figures are the same. The tune is different, being a fast vigorous hornpipe, and so is the style, for heavy stepping with some tapping goes with the hornpipe tune.

"The Nut" is found in a couple of later dance-manuals : that by Mozart Allan and David Anderson, towards the end of the 19th century, as well as in an interesting manuscript from Dundalk, Northern Ireland. The version in the manuscript is slightly different : in it, the first man sets to and turns the second woman, instead of just turning her into the "arches".

OUR DANCES, No. 26 : GREENWICH HILL (Reel) by Hugh Foss.

1 - 8 Figures of eight at the sides.
9 - 16 Reels of three at the sides.
17 - 24 Crossed figures of eight.
25 - 32 Crossed reels of three.

(For explanatory details see The Galloway Album).

This is a completely logical dance (is there another?) Any dancer would be justified in thinking it was conceived as a whole or that the last eight bars were thought of first and bars 1-24 added as an introduction.

In actual fact bars 1-24 were composed first and the dance put aside in despair because there seemed to be no suitable figure to end it. Years later came the idea that if no suitable figure existed one could be invented.

After the dance was devised a search through Gow's Collections and Repositories produced two tunes, Greenwich Hill and The Harriot, which seemed to suit the dance.

COVERING OFF IN REELS OF THREE.

Many dances contain simultaneous reels of three which start with the dancing couple, in between their corners, each giving right shoulder to second corner (or left shoulder to first corner). The aim of this article is to show that, in the opinion of the author and others, it is unsound for the second and third couples to cover off with partners in such reels, (as is sometimes taught) because the spacing of the reels is thereby spoilt. (The term "covering off" is sometimes used to denote a permanent turn of the head to see what one's partner is doing : it is used here simply in the sense of "keeping level").

A reel of three is performed by three dancers each tracing out the same figure of eight on the floor, at equally spaced intervals around the figure of eight, as shown in Diagram 1. This diagram depicts successive positions of the three dancers, and we can say that C is following B, B is following A, and A is following C.

Dances such as "The Gates of Edinburgh" contain "mirror" reels, so called because three ladies dancing a reel parallel to a mirror would give the effect of six ladies dancing mirror reels (three of them starting with the wrong foot) In mirror reels all three couples should of course cover off with partners. For the reason described above, mirror reels are said to be symmetrical about a line drawn down the centre of the dance.

The reels described in the first paragraph have a different kind of symmetry. In such reels, when the first man is at the points labelled A, B, C, D, etc. in Diagram 2, his partner should be at 1, 2, 3, 4, etc., so the centre spot between the two reels should be midway between the first man and his partner. The second man and third woman (who are following the first woman and first man in the reels) must also have the centre spot midway between them.

Likewise this spot lies midway between the third man and second woman. Because of this, the two reels are said to have central symmetry. The situation is shown in Diagram 3, in which no attempt has been made for partners to cover off.

Suppose now that partners do try to cover off. When the second man arrives at the point P in Diagram 4, the second woman, who is covering off with him, must be at Q. Therefore the third man must be at P also, since the centre spot must be midway between the second woman and third man; so the third woman, who is covering off with the third man, must be at Q. We now have the situation shown in Diagram 5; but a glance at Diagram 1 will show that, in a properly spaced reel of three, two dancers never come together at the centre.

Thus, although covering off with partners is possible and is often put into practice, this can only be done by spoiling the spacing in the reels. It seems preferable to keep the correct spacing and concentrate on "central covering off" as in Diagram 3. I have come across experienced dancers who, when converging on the centre of a reel almost simultaneously as in Diagram 5, have been unsure who should cross in front, because the rhythm of the reel has been spoilt. There will be no prizes for deciding correctly who in fact should cross in front in Diagram 5!

Similar remarks apply to reels across the dance as in "Montgomery's Rant" or "Mairi's Wedding". If the second and third men, and women, cover off, the spacing of the reels is spoilt.

(See diagrams on following page).

John F. Rigby.

COMING EVENTS.

The Annual Ball of the Vancouver Branch of the R.S.C.D.S., November 20th, in the Coach House Motor Hotel, Lillooet Rd., North Vancouver, at 8.00 p.m.

Miss Milligan's workshop, October 23 and 24th : further details will be announced by the Committee.

The Children's Festival (a country-dance competition) will be held in February, 1966.

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.

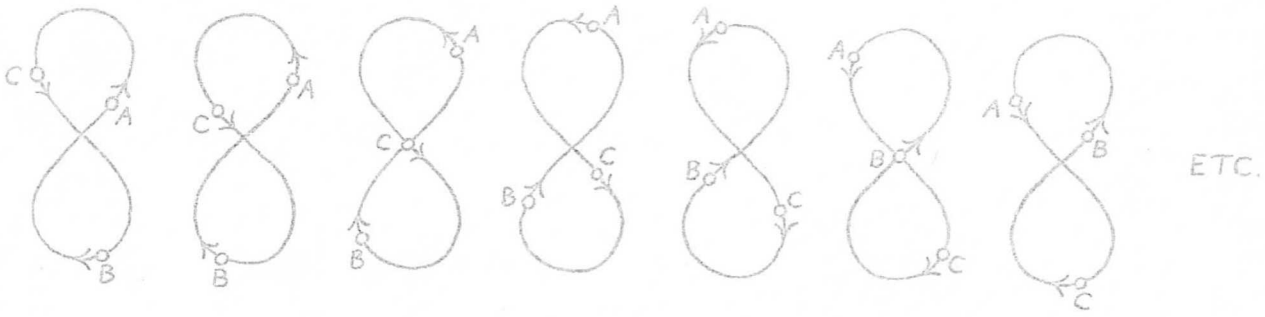


DIAGRAM 1

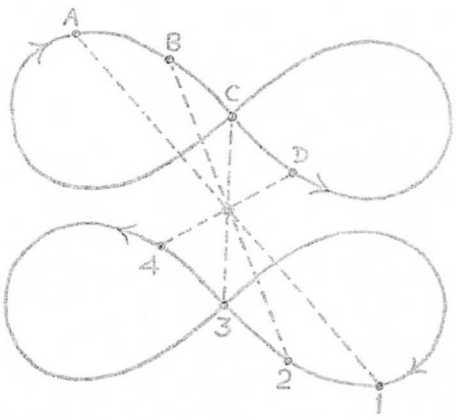


DIAGRAM 2

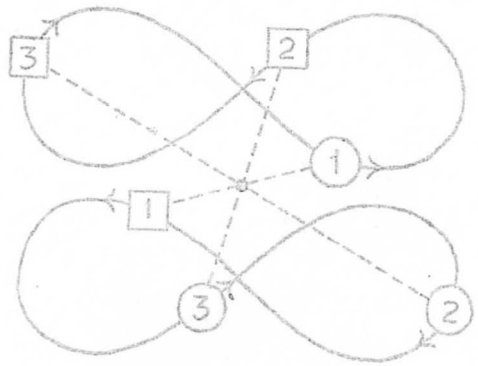


DIAGRAM 3

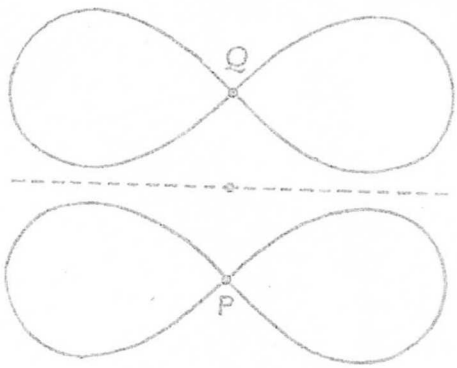


DIAGRAM 4

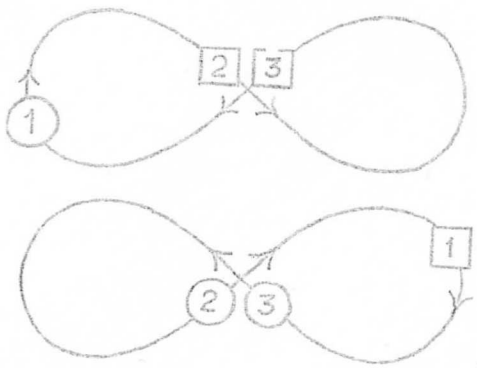


DIAGRAM 5

COMPARISON CORNER.

It is a while since we had an article under this heading; now for those who take a wider interest than in Scottish dancing alone we propose to say something about Manx dances.

The Isle of Man is just about as far from England as from Scotland or Ireland. Its native tongue - Manx - has died out for all practical purposes : scarcely ever is it used for sheer communication, though it is still sometimes spoken for sentimental reasons, and many names of dances are in Manx. The language is a Celtic one and is very similar to Scottish and Irish Gaelic : the appearance of the written language is rather what one would expect if someone who did not know the conventional spelling of Scottish Gaelic were to try to write it phonetically. The Isle of Man was occupied by the Vikings longer than any part of Ireland or the mainland of England and Scotland (though not as long as the Orkneys and Shetlands), and there is a discernible Norse influence in Manx customs.

Most of the work of collecting Manx dances has been done by one person : Mona Douglas, whose two books contain twelve dances between them. Her grandmother, whom she described as a beautiful dancer with "effortless grace of movement" taught her mainly from memory, but did have a few notes of her own father's (Philip Quayle of Glentrammon) and these helped to give Mrs. Douglas an idea of what to look for when she started collecting from other people.

Without doubt the best-known of the Manx dances is the famous "dirk-dance" or "Kirk Maughold sword-dance", a solo step-dance, with a slight resemblance to the Scottish sword-dance ; at one point the dancer puts the dirk on the floor and dances round it. The dancer has to be capable of a good deal of athletic high-kicking, and he finishes with a most spectacular leap forward onto his knees holding the sword vertically in front of his face. Mona Douglas learnt it from an old fisherman of Maughold, John Kermode, and we cannot improve on her own account:-

"Without much demur, the old man took off his sea-boots, reached down a thin old sword from its hooks above the chiollagh, and made ready to start. His wife poured out and brought to him a pewter beaker of whisky, which he drained and handed back to her; then she crouched down beside the turf fire and began to sing. He stood perfectly still for the first phrase of the air, holding the sword upright before his face, and then began to dance, at first slowly, then gradually quickening and moving with greater vigour, on to the thrilling final leap and salute, for which he knelt in the open doorway as though saluting the sun. That was my first and greatest experience of true art and tradition mingling in an evocation of sheer beauty which will be remembered as long as I live - the low-beamed white-walled room wherein the fireglow from the chiollagh mixed with the sunlight coming in from the open door, the old woman crouched by the hearth crooning the noble air in a vivid continuous rhythm, and the tall old dancer, vigorous and graceful despite his years, so utterly absorbed in the dance of which he carried the tradition on from the far mists of antiquity".

Quite different is "Eunysagh Vona" (for four couples in longwise formation), whose lively tune somewhat resembles a hornpipe. The main step is a "one-two-three hop" with an attractive little flick of the free foot on the hop. A striking characteristic is the unusually high carriage of the arms - the dancers in each line join nearer hands at shoulder level for most of the figures (even the dancers at the end of the lines hold their free arms up at the same level) and the grand chain is danced with a definite "over-arm" movement. The climax of the dance is a figure called "flying arches" - the first two women raise their joined hands to form an arch and the line of men rush underneath. Meanwhile, the line of women also rush forward, following the first woman, and both lines curve round in a circle so that the women can dash under an arch formed by the men - two complete circles are danced by each line in the space of ten seconds or so.

For a quieter contrast there is the solemn "Peter O'Tavy" for two couples, whose haunting and slightly mysterious-sounding tune fits the lilting movements to perfection. Other Manx dances are very like Irish jigs and reels - to my mind they probably show what the Irish dances were like before they became polished by dance-teachers under the stimulus of dance-competition. The Fathaby jig, for instance, is an eight-hand jig, starting and ending in the Irish fashion with a lead-round; Cum yn shenn oanrey cheh (Keep the old petticoat warm) is a solo jig, Car Juan Nan is an eight-hand reel, Car ny Ferrishyn not only means "Fairy reel" but goes in the same formation as the Irish Fairy reel (longwise for three couples) and to the same tune (which is the same as the Scottish "Fairy dance").

Other dances include a country-dance (Wedding reel), a circle dance with any number of couples and one extra dancer (reminiscent of the nine-pins), a number of ritual dances, and a most unusual dance for one man and one woman called Hyndaa yn bwoailley (Return the blow) in the course of which the woman slaps the man's face. Later he kisses her, and to finish she crouches down and he swings one leg over her head with an exultant shout - a movement which occurs also in the well-known Swedish Daldans and the Scottish "courting dance" which Mrs. MacNab collected from Lief Hansen.

The solo step-dances would be performed by a man on a spring-board sprinkled with sand. Good dancers would go about in small groups, carrying the spring-board and often their own special kind of sand, and would usually perform in pubs in return for a drink. The social dances would be danced either out of doors, in a house (on the flagged or earthen floor), or sometimes in a hay-loft.

It was easy enough to find people who had heard of a dance called "the Salmon Leap", but quite another matter to find someone to perform it. In fact, Mona Douglas was told that only one man - Kelly the blackguard "a hard man and wild mighty" was left of the boat's crew who used to do it in the old days. It took time and perseverance to find him, but eventually he was found - she describes him as "a particularly wild and shaggy Gipsy-man, a huge fellow with black hair, dark skin, and a most disreputable air". He turned out to be very civil, and told her all he knew about the dance, even showing her the movement which gave the dance its name - lying down flat on his back and leaping to his feet from that position.

The Isle of Man may not have many dances when titles are counted, but those it does have are unspoiled and delightfully varied.

THE BARN DANCE.

Hey! for the music o' Baldy Bain's fiddle!
Redd up the barn, an' we'll gie ye a reel.
In till it, noo! wi' a diddle-dum-diddle
Dod! that's the tune to pit springs in your heel.
Skirlin' o' lassocks, an' "hoochs" frae ilk fellow,
Cheers, when the gudeman himsel' tak's the flair,
Leads Petronella wi' hellicate Bella,
Brawest o' dochters, though gey deil-may-care.

Hey! for the music o' Baldy Bain's fiddle!
Lads frae the bothie, an' herds frae the hill
Cleek wi' young lassies, sae jimp roon the middle.
Gosh! but some auld anes are soople anes still.
Lang Geordie Craddock, the grieve o' Kilmadock,
Widowed sae aft that he's fain to forget,
Wha would jalouse he could loup like a puddock?
Faith! but there's spunk in the auld deevil yet!

Hey! for the music o' Baldy Bain's fiddle!
Syne we'll hae supper, for time's wearin' on;
Drinks for the drouthy, an' scones frae the griddle -
Bella's the lass that can bake a good scone.
Baldy's in fettle, an' swears he maun ettle
Ae hinmaist hoolachan juist for the last.
Cast yer coats, callants, an' yoke tae't wi' mettle;
Dancin' an' daffin' days suno will be past.

W.D. Cocker.

HINTS FOR BETTER DANCING.

Organizing an exhibition.

There are only two good ways to organize an exhibition : with extreme rigidity and with extreme flexibility. Anything between the two is asking for trouble.

In the first method, everything should be meticulously thought out. Every dancer should know the order of the programme, how many times through the dance is to be played, who his partner is, which position in the set he is to start, and just how the team are to enter and leave the dancing-area.

The second method seems at first glance easier but riskier : in fact it is more difficult but safer. The organizer does not specify who dances with whom, nor the order of lining up. The team do not worry how many times through the dance goes : when the music stops, they stop. They take their partners onto the floor in a natural manner, as they would at a dance or a ball. This method requires, of course, a certain amount of initiative, common sense and cooperativeness from the individual dancers. The reason why it seems easier is that the

work has been done in advance : over a period of time a repertoire has been established and a standard attained (and if this can be done in ordinary classes, rather than special exhibition-team classes, there is a consequent gain in naturalness). The reason why it is safer is that a tightly-organized exhibition can be badly disorganized by a small accident - a record is forgotten, or a dancer cannot turn up, or X suddenly takes a dislike to Y, with whom he has been detailed to dance. The flexible system can take these things in its stride - and sometimes even worse things, such as the gramophone needle being lowered on the wrong band of an LP record. One group we know, to whom this nearly happened, now has as its motto "If it plays the Duke of Perth - dance the Duke of Perth".

OUR CONTEMPORARIES.

We received in the course of the past year some publications from other parts of the world - a beautifully-printed invitation and ball-programme from Boston, a copy of the magazine "Hamilton Rant" from (you've guessed it) Hamilton, Ontario, and two issues of the "New Zealand Scottish Country Dancer". This last is a substantial publication of about 30 pages, with illustrations, and appears annually. Items that caught the Editorial eye were a photograph of dancers at the Summer School which included our friends June Gow and Rachel Robertson; an article by Hugh Foss on 40-bar dances in which he pretty well comes to the conclusion that, except for a couple of modern examples, they are mistakes; an article by a travelling New Zealander describing dancers in Scotland as "very rough .. at times .. a thing unheard of on the New Zealand dance-floor"; a reply suggesting that the contrast was probably due to the "spiritless stylised type of S.C.D. seen in recent years at many N.Z. formals" and stating that dancing was much livelier in earlier years; a description (as if to support the last argument) on dancing in Scotland in 1818 - "They kickit and jumpit with mettle extraordinary, and whiskit and friskit, and toed it and goed it, and twirl'd it and whirl'd it, and stamped it and sweated it, tattooing the floor like mad. The difference between our country dances and those Scottish figures is about the same as the leisurely stirring of a cup o'tea and the beating up of a batter pudding", [Guess who wrote this - the English poet, Keats!]; several poems; a thoughtful article complaining about dances being turned into class nights (club nights, they call them in N.Z.) by "someone calling out the figures while most of the sets walk through it and silence reigns" and suggesting that one of the M.C.'s duties is to "converse with those sitting out and find out why"; a remark from another travelling New Zealander "I'm thankful I learnt Schiehallion at Napier summer school, as it appears on most programmes"; and an article on S.C.D. in 1930, pointing out that then ladies danced in high-heeled shoes, and wishing that today ladies would wear "party dresses" at a ball instead of the "uniform virginal white frocks". [We hope the writer will be comforted to know that they wear party dresses in Vancouver].