



The THISTLE

A MAGAZINE OF SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING AND ALLIED SUBJECTS.

Issued by the West Point Grey Scottish Country Dance Club of B.C.
President: Dr. Norman MacKenzie, C.M.G., M.M. & BAR, Q.C., LL.D.
Editorial address: 3515 Fraser, Vancouver 10, B.C., Canada.

No. 12

March, 1963

EDITORIAL

Now that St. Patrick's Day is over, the whirlwind of social activity is dying down to a moderate scamper. The next event that looms large in the calendar is the S.C.D. Weekend Camp, plans for which are now being laid. All who can are urged to take an interest in this project, which has been very successful in past years, and by either going themselves or passing on the gospel to help make this the most enjoyable yet. Letters are invited from those who have attended the others, and also from those who have not; let us discuss means and methods to improve the camp. What other similar gatherings have you been to? Or heard about? Can we learn from the type of programme offered by those in the east? Let us have your opinions, gentle readers, whether they are for publication or not.

OUR DANCES, NO. 12.

MacKinnon's Rant, from Helen MacKinnon, Melbourne, Australia.

Formation. As for the Dashing White Sergeant.

Bars 1 - 4 Join nearer hands in threes and set, and

5 - 8 advance and retire.

9 - 16 Six hands across and back.

17 - 24 Each centre dancer sets to and turns his partners (the right-hand partner first).

25 - 32 Each trio dances hands-across and back.

33 - 40 Each trio advances for two steps, retires for one step, claps (for one bar) and advances through the opposite trio (passing right-shoulder) to meet the next.

Suggested tunes. Bonnets o' blue; Barley bakes; Glendaruel highlanders.

Note. This dance was to symbolize the MacKinnons who have travelled back and forth several times in the past twelve years between Scotland, New Zealand and Australia, making many country-dancing friends en route.

ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM IN THISTLE NO. 10: Sixty-Eight.

Seventeen did not know Meg Merrilees, as we deduce from the fact that 83 out of the 100 did know it. Of this seventeen, ten did not know "The Nut", either. Thus seven knew The Nut but not Meg Merrilees. Therefore, of the 75 who knew The Nut, the remaining 68 knew Meg Merrilees also.

CORRECTIONS

1. To the description of "The Port of Vancouver" in The Thistle, number 10.

The Lions (Bars 13 - 16)

The phrase "now in third place" should read "now in first place".

Bridges (Bars 5 - 12)

Each of the moving couples should dance under both bridges in bars 5 - 12; thus the track of each dancer is a figure-of-eight round two bridge-piers. In fact, the second and third women lead down under the bottom bridge, cast up two places and lead up under the top bridge, and then cast off to places. Meanwhile the other pair of women dance up outside them, lead under the top bridge, cast off one place, lead down to the other bridge, dance under it, and cast up to places.

2. To the description of "The Montgomeries' rant" in The Thistle, number 11.

The last two sentences should read:—

"Undoubtedly this makes a smoother-flowing dance, more suited to modern tastes, and indeed The Montgomeries' rant is among the more popular dances. But dancers with any interest in the authenticity of the reconstructions which they dance may possibly wonder whether, in this case, the end justifies the means".

NEWS FROM SCOTLAND

Have you ever wondered how a tartan comes into being? The Guthrie tartan has just been devised by John R. Dalgety for Colonel Ivan Guthrie of Guthrie, the family chief. Its pattern is based partly on local and partly on family associations. The centre of the sett is taken from the Angus district check, the rest follows the Davidson tartan (to which clan Colonel Guthrie's wife belonged). The tartan has been registered with the Lord Lyon King of Arms (which makes it as authentic as a tartan can be.) According to "Scotland's magazine", Guthrie's school is to have curtains of this tartan and the first skirt is already being worn in Brooklyn.

HINTS FOR BETTER DANCING

This time we have a letter to start us off. One of our dancers feels that there must be some conventional rules of etiquette for forming sets and suggests that "good manners call for more attention than we presently seem to give".

He gives two detailed suggestions:—

1. Dancers should arrange themselves so that it is readily apparent which sets are complete and which are incomplete.
2. Dancers coming onto the floor should avoid walking through sets or breaking into them.

For dances of a fixed shape, like the Eightsome or the Bumpkin, all that is needed is for the dancers, once on the floor, to stand reasonably tidily: if prospective eightsomeers are neatly squared, a missing side is easily seen. In a longwise dance, however, the prospective dancers cannot know where each fresh set starts until the whole line has formed. If, for example, ten couples form up, and the first four decide to be one complete set, and the next four likewise, then the last two are left over.

The M.C. will decide how to divide up the line according to the dance. Anyone in his senses would rather dance The Duke of Perth in two fives than a four and two threes; anyone in his senses would rather dance "The Theeket Hoose" in a four and two threes than in two fives.

LIFE AND METTLE IN HIS HEELS (Cont'd. from Thistle No. 11)

When the profits from the Edinburgh edition of 1787 began to come in, Burns used some of the money to make tours through the Border country and the Highlands. It is thought that his experiences in the singing and fiddling Highlands helped to direct him towards the work that was to occupy him for the rest of his life: collecting, restoring, and creating anew the Scottish heritage of song. We could only wish, perhaps, that he had similarly interested himself in the dances of his time. One letter is extant, however, in which he mentions the programme of dances that was gone through in the home of one of his hosts, somewhere in the Trossachs:

On our return, at a Highland gentleman's hospitable mansion, we fell in with a merry party, and danced till the ladies left us, at three in the morning. Our dancing was none of the French or English insipid formal movements; the ladies sung Scotch songs like angels, at intervals; then we flew at Bab at the Bowster, Tullochgorum, Loch Erroch Side, &c. like midges sporting in the mottie sun, or craws prognosticating a storm in a hairst day.

(Letters, I, 98)

"Bab at the Bowster" is a dance game calling for a good deal of embracing and kissing, and Burns wrote a song to go with the lively tune — "The Cooper O' Cuddy":

We'll hide the cooper behind the door,
Behint the door, behint the door,
We'll hide the cooper behind the door
And cover him under a mawn (basket), O.

"Tullochgorum" is a strathspey reel, and the words to the tune of that name were written by the Reverend John Skinner of Linshart — Burns thought it "the best Scotch song ever Scotland saw, 'Tullochgorum's my delight!'" "Loch Erroch Side" is also a strathspey, and there is a "Loch Erichside" in *The Border Dance Book*.

As for dance-rhythms that animate Burns's poetry, they are to be found principally in the songs. The first one he ever wrote, "Handsome Nell" or "O, Once I Lov'd a Bonie Lass," was set to the girl's favourite reel tune, "I Am a Man Unmarried." "Mrs. Farquharson's Reel," published in *Bremner's Reels* (1757), started him off on one of his liveliest verbal scampers:

My love she's but a lassie yet,
My love she's but a lassie yet,
We'll let her stand a year or twa,
She'll no be half sae saucy yet.

And who, taking his partner through "The Lea-Rig," has not found himself singing as the dance progresses:

At mid-night hour, in mirkest glen,
I'd rove and ne'er be eerie, O,
If thro' that glen I gaed to thee,
My ain kind dearie, O.
Altho' the night were ne'er sae wild,
And I were ne'er sae weary, O,
I'd meet thee on the lea-rig,
My ain kind dearie, O.

Lastly, for the wild, eldritch, morality-defying spirit of the dance in Scotland, the most fitting expression is found in the vigorous rushing lines of "Tam O' Shanter":

Warlocks and witches in a dance:
Nae cotillion, brent new frae France,
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,
Put life and mettle in their heels.
A winnock-bunker in the east,
There sat Auld Nick, in shape o' beast;
A tousie tyke, black, grim, and large,
To gie them music was his charge:
He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
Till roof and rafters a' did dirl.

...

As Tammie glowr'd, amaz'd, and curious,
The mirth and fun grew fast and furious;
The piper loud and louder blew,
The dancers quick and quicker flew,
They reel'd, they set, they cross'd, they cleekit,
Till ilka carlin swat and reekit,
And coost her duddies to the wark,
And linket at it in her sark.

From one point of view, then, William Burnes was right to wish to keep his son from the dancing class. Dancing is the devil's work, as we have seen. But how immensely poorer our poetry and song would have been, if Robert Burns had not been overcome by the lilting music and the beauty of the lasses! Perhaps, too, it is through the abandon of the dance that the life-force enacts its triumph over all forms of repression:

An' now, Auld Cloots, I ken ye're thinkin,
A certain Bardie's rantin, drinkin,
Some luckless hour will send him linkin,
To your black Pit:
But faith! he'll turn a corner jinkin,
An' cheat you yet.

Sources:

- The Poetry of Robert Burns, ed. Henley and Henderson, 4 vols. London, 1896 - 97.
The Letters of Robert Burns, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2 vols. Oxford, 1931.
F. B. Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, New York, 1932.
J. Ingram ed. Interesting and Characteristic Anecdotes of Burns, Glasgow, 1893.
D. Daiches, Robert Burns, London, 1952.
J. Strawthorn ed. Ayrshire at the Time of Burns, Kilmarnock, 1959 (account of the Ayrshire fair taken from Aiton, Agricultural Report, 1811).
J. C. Dick, The Songs of Robert Burns, London, 1903.
-----, Notes on Scottish Songs by Robert Burns, London, 1908.

My work on this article was greatly assisted by the opportunity to use the Donaldson Burns Collection, now part of the Library of the University of British Columbia.

Ian Ross

THE KILT AND I

By Alex Holser (From "Let's Dance")

The terrible thing about it was that it crept up on me. The kilt, I mean. It started its campaign against my peace of mind the day I discovered that I was a real member of the Clan Fraser. Every time I passed the window in which the bolt of tartan cloth was displayed I had a peculiar tingling sensation, a desire to get rid of my prosaic "trousers" and don the real garb of the Highlander.

I fought back, of course. A physicist, a bachelor, a student piper and a folk dancer, I had (or so I thought) no ability to sew, no time to sew and no money to invest in material.

But, before long, I found myself discussing kilts with my pipe-instructor. A kilt, he told me, was made of a single piece of cloth seven to nine yards long and about twenty-six inches wide. Eight yards, he estimated, would do me nicely. He further intimated that no piper went around in anything but a kilt and pointed out that, since I was folk dancing, I would really be doing myself a favor by saving the cost of an additional folk-dance costume.

With this kind of propaganda ringing in my ears you can understand that I was at a disadvantage and realize why, when I next passed the store window, I went in — just to make a few inquiries.

Fortunately I work in a well-equipped laboratory and I recalled that we had a sewing machine and an electric iron among our more scientific apparatus. Thus it developed that there was no problem — except how to make a kilt and to obtain the necessary practice in sewing.

Our first night at the laboratory was spent facing one another. Neither of us moved or talked, but could almost hear the cloth saying "Make one slip with those scissors and your investment is gone, laddie!" It was un-nerving and I went home without having done more than make up my mind to investigate kilts and their habits a little more.

Two nights later I arrived at the laboratory and, pretending to have the upper hand, took my waist measurement and divided by two — thus arriving at the length of material I wanted after pleating. I jotted the figures on a pad, then doubled them to allow for the overlapping apron in front. Further arithmetical analysis showed what depth of pleat and number of pleats would most conveniently utilize the available material.

Backed by scientific calculation, I picked up the tartan cloth and, for the next few evenings, kept up a steady routine of pinning, pressing and basting — until the 8 yard strip was shortened by pleats to the 45 inches I considered mathematically correct.

During this time the kilt offered no resistance. But, when I stood alone in my shorts in the laboratory, a smile of victory on my lips, and wrapped the kilt around my waist, it struck! By no means — sucking in my breath, moving the cloth around or using cuss words — could I get the thing to fit.

A frantic visit to my pipe-instructor revealed the reason. A kilt, he told me, had to be measured to fit the hips as well as the waist. I could, he went on, use a box pleat where one single stripe of the sett occurs at each pleat or the knife pleat in which the full sett is shown in the pleated material. But, in any case, I would have to allow for my hips. Then he offered a bit of advice — start all over again!

On the following night I faced the kilt grimly, determined not to be bested by a piece of cloth. I took nail scissors and cut the ten million stitches I had made, laid the cloth out on the floor and went to work with a vengeance. A week later I was ready for my second fitting. This time the hip was perfect — but the bulk of the pleats around my waist made me look about as streamlined as Henry the Eighth. The kilt had won again!

Fighting for self-control, I put in a call to my pipe-instructor, getting him out of bed. He listened and then chuckled.

"Don't worry", he said, "just cut out most of the pleated material at the waistline so the fit will be snug.

"And by the way", he added, "don't forget that the bottom of a kilt is not hemmed. The selvedge of the cloth forms the bottom line and all adjustments to length must be made at the waist".

Four nights of labour with scissors took care of the bulkiness and I'm still working on the hem that really is a selvedge. Yet, if my encounter with the kilt is not a complete victory, neither is it a complete defeat. For I'm wearing the kilt, regardless of its imperfections, when I pipe and dance. What's more, I have confidence in myself and face future struggles with the kilt without qualms. I must not, I will not, fail!