



THE

THISTLE

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Editorial

We have decided to bring *The Thistle* to an end shortly: in fact, after three more issues, this being the time when most current subscriptions will have run out. There are a number of reasons for this, no one reason important in itself, but adding up to an inescapable conclusion. We remarked some time ago that *The Thistle* is no longer needed as an outlet for new dances: they can now find their own outlet with no trouble. As for old dances, we naturally started by writing about the most interesting ones first; then those not quite so interesting, and so on. Inevitably there must come a time when all those really worth writing about will have been dealt with: we estimate that in about three issues that time will have come. We have already presented all our "hints for better dancing" (we hope readers have made practical use of them) and no new ones are coming in. When we started, we hoped that there would be a fair number of contributions from readers—correspondence or articles or both; but in fact these contributions are a long way from being enough to keep the magazine going. The main contribution from readers has always been questions; and we are now finding that most questions duplicate those answered in earlier issues. Finally, the unfortunate death of Hugh Foss cuts us off from a convenient organization for dealing with subscriptions in the sterling area; and postage has increased so much that if we did continue, we would have to raise our prices substantially.

Thus those of you who get a renewal notice with this issue will find that it is for only three more issues: renewal notices with the next issue will be for two more, and so on. Those of you who subscribed beyond next February will have your excess returned.

*Please note. Our address is now
4242 West King Edward, Vancouver 8, B.C.*

OUR DANCES NO. 73: The eightsome reel

Although the eightsome reel as we know it is a late-nineteenth-century dance, its origins go back to the early part of the century. The dance is essentially a "sandwich". First we have the introduction (in which everyone is dancing all the time); then we have the "meat", in the course of which each dancer goes into the middle in turn, and finally we have the introduction again.

It is the introduction that can be traced back quite definitely to the early nineteenth century. In the national library of Scotland there is a manuscript (MS 3860) dated 1818 which contains the descriptions of many dances, among them the following:

Reel of eight No. I

Eight hands all round 8b

Ladies right hands across; gentle-
men outside; - half round 4b

Gentlemen's right Hds across Ladies
outside back again 4b

Set and turn partners 8b

The Grand chaine [right and left
all round] 8b

In all 32b

If the "gentlemen's right hands" is a slip for "gentlemen's left hands", this is precisely the introduction to our eightsome, except that we take sixteen bars for the chain. [Incidentally, the manuscript gives a clear description of the steps to be used. The setting step is a Pas de Basque, which is quite like the modern one used by most country-dancers to-day except that there is no pointing of the foot off the floor (or "jété", as it is often mis-called) on beat 4. The step used for the rest of the dance, including the hands-round, is a "chassé", which is something like our "skip-change", but without a hop on beat 4—it is replaced by a "lift". The manuscript says, in fact, "rise on right toe as left passes". There is no pointing of the free foot on beat 4].

Dances of the same general character as this "Reel of eight" seem to have arisen quite suddenly around 1820 in England and Scotland, and to have died out equally suddenly, with the exception of this particular one, which was reprinted in several later books. (Of course, some of the dances passed on orally, whose origin is unknown, might be survivals of this type of "reel". Some of the dances collected by Mrs. MacNab, for example, could be).

These dances were fairly short and simple, made up of standard country-dance and quadrille figures, for a fixed number of dancers in a geometrical formation (usually a

square, sometimes a column). They are not reels in the true sense of the word—a true reel is a dance like the threesome reel, foursome reel, Shetland reel, Axum reel etc. in which setting-steps alternate with a chorus-figure. They were presumably called reels because they were danced to reel tunes (which were very popular in England, as well as their native Scotland and Ireland, at this time).

The rest of the modern eightsome—the "meat in the sandwich"—is, when you look at it closely, surprisingly different in character. It bears very little resemblance to a quadrille; the solo reel steps give it a definite and striking Scottish flavour, (which the introduction does not have—it could equally well be English, Scottish, French, or German); and the main figure (set and turn and reel of three) also has a strongly Scottish flavour: it is one form (and in early days probably the commonest form) of the Scottish Threesome Reel; and although these figures are also found in country-dances, this particular sequence is much commoner in Scottish country-dances than in English ones. Above all, this part of the dance has a "progressive" structure. There is one moderately short sequence which is repeated according to a definite pattern. Here the sequence is

solo in the middle while the others circle;
set to and turn partner and the dancer opposite
and reel with them;
the same with the dancers at the side.

The pattern is that the figure is led by the first woman, then the second, then the third, then the fourth, then the men in order.

Where did this idea come from? The eightsome reel is the only dance with this structure; but there is a whole class of dances with a structure fairly close to it: the Irish dances known in Irish as *rinnclí fighte*. In these dances it is not the individual dancers but the couples that lead each figure in turn; but the idea of one figure being repeated systematically until everyone has had a turn to lead it is clearly at the bottom of both the eightsome and the *rinnclí fighte*.

Thus the eightsome reel has a fairly complex ancestry—mostly Scottish (and entirely Scottish in style and steps when danced properly) with some structural help from the Irish, and a touch of English in the figures of the introduction.

The dance has also undergone an interesting development, and we are able to follow it in some detail, because, while it was developing, a comprehensive little text-book was going through a number of editions. This book, as readers of Tom Flett's articles in *Thistles* number 29-32 will know, is David Anderson's *Ballroom guide*, first published in about 1885, the last edition appearing in (probably) 1902.

an eight-hands round comfortably with the slip-step; and a dance in which an uncomfortable figure comes eighteen times is not likely to last.

Besides the minor variations described above, there were also well-established regional versions. In particular, a west-coast version called *The Eight Men of Moidart* (one of at least four very different dances with this name) collected by the Fletts and described in their book; and an east-coast version called the *Buchan Eightsome*, collected by Isobel Cramb, and eventually published by the RSCDS in their book 21. (There is a legend that when the RSCDS were first told about this dance they wanted to change the turns to two-hand turns, as they had done for the standard eightsome, but Mrs. Cramb was not willing to let them publish the dance until they agreed to publish it in traditional form).

Finally, of course, there is the "doubled up" version of the eightsome, known as the double eightsome or the sixteensome. This is formed from the eightsome in exactly the same way as the double quadrilles from the quadrilles. The army produced a thirtytwosome (see *Scotland's dances* for one version, and *The Thistle* no. 42 for another). For a fictional account of higher multiples, see *The Thistle* nos. 49-50.

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* * * NEWS FROM AFRICA * * *

This article is reprinted (without permission but we are sure they will not mind) from the annual magazine of a girls' boarding-school in Msalato, Tanganyika.

The Scottish Dancing Club

The Scottish Dance is quite interesting and exciting. It was introduced in our school by a teacher from the Alliance Secondary School, Mr. Elson. He comes to our school every Tuesday afternoon.

At first we found it very hard as we didn't know the styles. It was very comical to see girls jumping here and there like toads without knowing where to go. However, Mr. Elson didn't despair but instead encouraged us. By and by we came to understand it well.

Soon he taught us many new styles such as Chase Me Charlie, Patronila, Figure of Eight. The one girls enjoyed extremely was Chase me Charlie. The two partners chase each other twice and go back to their positions. They go down the middle, back again and they poussette. They repeat this and after the poussette this time they go to the end of the line and then the new top couple starts.

But goodness me! The figure of Eight? It is done in a most comical way. Instead of making a Figure of

Eight we make extraordinary figures as you can't imagine. We turn around looking for our places as if we were lost lambs. Some girls who understand the dance push us back into place.

As a whole the Scottish dance is very interesting to play as well as to watch. Its members have improved so much that they play as well as the real Scots, with their heads in the clouds and the whole school admiring them.

Therefore, if there will be any chance don't miss it - join quickly.

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CORRESPONDENCE. From Arthur Williamson

In J. F. and T. M. Flett's book "Traditional Dancing in Scotland", it is mentioned that within living memory nearly all Strathspeys were danced at a tempo of 42 bars or slightly less. 42 bars would probably be too fast for today's fast ballroom floors and for those dances with complicated figures, although most of these figures are to be found in Reels and Jigs also. Over the last three hundred years, various English and Continental Dancing Teachers have expressed amazement at the speed at which the Scottish people have danced the very complicated steps of their dances. If a tempo of 34 to 36 bars a minute is not too fast for the Highland Fling, then why is a tempo above 30 bars a minute considered too fast for the far less difficult Strathspey Country Dance Steps? I feel that those who keep wanting to slow down the music for Strathspeys are the unskilled dancers who cannot be bothered to learn their steps properly, or the immature show-offs who like to show how beautifully they can point their toes, or those who are weak minded enough to believe that our ancient and traditional ways of dancing are barbaric and not in keeping with modern civilised ways of thinking. If these people must have a slow dance then why not give them some Waltzes on the next Social Dance Programme that their Club holds? There are many excellent Scottish Waltzes for either one or two or more couples. For example why not include one or two of these waltzes on their next programme: Scottish Waltz; Lomond Waltz; Pride of Erin; Waltz Country Dance; Janet's Delight; Fiona's Fancy; or a 3/4 Time dance; Lochanside; Tweedside; Yellow Haired Laddie.

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ACROSS

- 1 A little bit of the county (4,2,5)
 7,23 Not grown by Glaswegian gardeners (7,2,9)
 8 Girlish owner of the ship (5)
 9 Used by Glaswegian gardeners? (5)
 10 The Reel of Tulloch as a jig (9)
 11 Devised the rondel (6)
 12 A small island in Scotland, even smaller elsewhere (2,4)
 15 Russian agency that is going after silver (6)
 18 She wi' a yellow coatie (6)
 24 Geographical description of the tiny barrel maker (1'4)
 25 McConachie's player (5)
 26 Description of a two beat setting step in country dancing (9)
 27 Wild men living in elevated surroundings (11)

DOWN

- 1 Remote oriental situation (6)
 2 Way the ewe's horns were (7)
 3 Supervise o'er Eve's confusion (7)
 4 Disturb the frill (6)
 5 Village dance for a companion of honour in the clan (7)
 6 To keep the dancer's wits sharp? (5,3)
 8 Whisky component from maize (5)
 10 His job is to "ca' the ewes" (4)
 13 One rhythmic step in a pet reel (1,7)
 14 Certainly the white sergeant could drink (4)

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Crossword Puzzle by Peter Barton, Department of Biochemistry, University of Alberta, Edmonton 7, Alberta. Peter has very generously offered a small prize for the first correct answer to reach him.

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-- ADVERTISEMENTS --

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Vancouver 2. Tele: 681-6616. Pipe-band
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NORTHERN JUNKET

The square dance magazine that is different.
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Each issue brings you interesting articles on
all phases of dancing: squares, contrás, folk-
dance, folk-song, folk-lore. Traditional
recipes too, for hungry dancers.

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THE THISTLE

New address: 4242 West King Edward, Vancouver 8 B.C. Back
numbers: 2-6, 8-18 25¢; 32,33,34,36 to date 35¢. The
rest out-of-print, but Xerox copies available on request
at 15¢ per exposure. Other publications: Schiehallion
10¢, Inverness Reel 10¢, Inverness gathering 5¢, Argyll
broadswords 20¢. Sixteen Country Dances (1945-1967) by
Hugh Thurston 60¢.

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