

Notland.

Meyle St.

G. Alshuels.

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Dear Mrs Stewart.

For some time past I have not been in agreement with certain aspects of our B.C. dances as published in the Dance Books. This winter I have spent a considerable time in trying to make a survey of the dances with a view to finding the correct laws governing the dances. I am now sending a copy of the enclosures I have come to to each of the members of the Publications Committee as there is rather little time now of opportunity

to discuss them at a meeting which  
now only takes place when the dances  
for a new book are being held.

I trust you will excuse the liberty  
I am taking.

I hope you are keeping in good health  
With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

J. M. D. S.

"Norland",

Meigle Street,

GALASHIELS.

To the Members of the Publications Committee of the  
Scottish Country Dance Society.

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At last meeting of the above committee when the dances for Book XIV were being considered, any ideas I brought forward regarding the dances were given practically no consideration and not even a trial. This, to me, was a little surprising seeing that when the Victory Book was being prepared I twice pointed out that a technical mistake was being made in the arrangement of "Barley Bree" and that, if my advice had been taken then, the committee would have been spared the humiliation of having to issue an erratum note soon after the publication of the book.

I feel compelled therefore to place before you individually the following statement of my views as there is no time available at a meeting of committee.

I feel that the treatment of the dances has for some time been on the wrong lines. The individualistic method of treating dances has led to anomalies in treatment, to mention only three examples:-

(1) In "Red House" (Bk. 7, No. 2, bars 25 - 32) and "The Duchess of Atholl's Slipper" (Bk. 9, No. 8, bars 1 - 8) we have two different Reels of Three for exactly the same words.

(2) In "Monymusk" (Bk. 11, No. 2, bars 25 - 32) the dancing couple turn to the dancer on their right to begin the Reel of Three, but in "Miss Cahoon's Reel" (Victory Book, No. 2) they begin with the dancer on their left. One of these must be wrong and the strange thing is that it is the second one that is erroneous.

(3) "Miss Nancy Frowns" (Bk. 14 - No. 5, bars 17 - 24) where two left-hand reels are danced, and "Keep the Country" (Bk. 14, No. 6, bars 25 - 32) with two right-hand reels.

There/

There was perhaps some excuse for this when few dances were available for comparative purposes, but now that we have access to about 190 dances it is time an attempt was made to use more comparative research to ascertain the basic principles which governed the composers of these old dances.

I take exception (1) to the use of the left foot by men in Poussette, a relic of the time when poussette was done by the two couples circling round with a polka or waltz step. (2) to the interpretation given to many of the reels of three of the type that one of the three dancers has to approach the figure 8 from outside it.

The treatment I propose to follow is to omit in the first place these two contested points and, making a complete survey of all the dances that do not contain these particular reels, but including the other sections of these dances, try to find the general rules governing the dances. After that I shall show that by the application of one simple general rule all sections of the dances can be made to conform.

The Principal basic laws are, I suggest:-

1. All steps begin with the right foot, except slip step where the left foot must be used in order to conform with the important Rule 5 below.
2. Men and women take an equal share in the movements.
3. Movements are in symmetry either across or up and down or diagonally.
4. The Dance Phrase is fitted to the Music Phrase. Neglect of this caused Glasgow Highlanders to be somewhat of a scramble until it was altered on my suggestion to the present form and the case of Barley Bree is of too recent occurrence to require mentioning. A careful study of the dances will show also that there is an "interior timing" which must be observed in the movements. Sometimes there is a lengthening of the final steps in order to reach a position suitable for beginning the next section of the dance, e.g. "finish facing Corners".
5. All movements begin "with the Sun" - in a clockwise direction. When one considers that these dances can be traced back to the pagan dances associated with/

with sacrificial rites of the pre-Christian era when the Sun was one of the chief objects of worship and also considers the omnipotence of the superstition of doing things "with the Sun" right up through the ages in Scottish folk lore, the importance of retaining it as a vital element in our folk dances cannot be exaggerated. But it must be noted that although a movement must begin in a clockwise direction, not all the dancers need do so. In a right-hand Reel of Three, two dancers do so, the third does not. In a left-hand reel only one dancer does. In "casting-off" one dancer goes clockwise, the other does not. In "Right and Left" two go clockwise and two do not. In "Grand Chain" the same occurs. It seems then, that from a study of these cases, we are correct if at least half of the dancers go "with the Sun" and incorrect if less than half do so.

One of two people who gave Mr. Jamieson "Oxton Reel" after seeing it danced at the Border Musical Festival by Oxton W.R.I. pronounced it wrong because in figures 2 and 3 the dancers went off "against the Sun" and he added, "I don't know where your left-hand reels come from; there were none in my young days." Judging from his age, his young days must have been before the advent of the Eightsome Reel.

6. Dancers should finish one section or phrase of a dance moving in a direction that will give a good and easy flow into the next phrase. In reality, this should not be included in the rules. If the above rules are observed, a good and easy flow follows as a matter of course.

I hope you do not feel I have invented these rules to suit my own argument. They are, I feel, quite justified after an examination of all the dances not in dispute between us, and if an action can be found to offend against any of these rules and is the only one to do so, then it is wrong. For example, in Poussette the use of the left foot in Pas de Basque is a solitary exception to Rule 1. Also the fact that the second man has a longer distance to go in joining up than his partner has offends Rule 2 and is the only case I know where the rule is broken. Also the turns in the left-foot Poussette offend against Rule 2 as one dancer acts as a pivot and "Pulls" the other round. In all other turns, an equal share of the turning is taken by both dancers. The right-foot Poussette, as danced in the Borders, offends against none of the rules.

Before I go on to the question of "reeling", I wish to refer to a remark made at last meeting of the Publications Committee/

Committee - that "reels should not be too rigid". The question of wrong timing and therefore wrong rhythming of reels was under consideration at the time. Now, I ask, why should this liberty of timing be allowed in the case of the reel while we insist on strict, internal timing in all other movements e.g. "Right and Left", "Corners", etc.? The fact is that, just as one lie leads to another, it is the introduction of movements invented without reference to what are standard movements that actually require mistiming for their performance. The Reel of Three has its own timing and rhythm just like all the other movements and we, moderns, have no right to interfere with it. A study of standard dances will show that there is only one variation permitted - an acceleration during bars 7 and 8 in order to reach a position suitable for beginning the next section of the figure. Thus in "Glasgow Highlanders", the men, after dancing the first six steps of the Reel of Four with the women, double their speed by lengthening their steps during bars 7 and 8 in order to cross the dance in two steps ~~during bars 7 and 8~~ to get beside their partners. Also in "Dalkeith's Strathspey" and "Fight about the Fireside", acceleration takes place in the final steps to reach Corners. This acceleration was a standard allowance with the old composers of dances as we find it in other movements than the reel, e.g. bars 13 - 16 in "Greig's Pipes", where the final steps of the Highland Schottische step are accelerated to reach Corners. Other cases will occur to you. But what you will never find is any acceleration or mistiming of any movement until the final bars and then only for the one definite purpose.

The reels we are discussing are all of the type where, before the reel begins, one of the three spaces is blank, to be filled by a dancer coming in from outside. The whole lot can be brought under one very simple rule - "The dancer from outside joins the reel in two steps at the spot he would have reached in two steps if he had started from the blank space."

To illustrate this, and as an example of the use of the research method, let us take "Willie with the Tartan Trews" where the blank space is at the top of the reel. When I first read over this dance in the notes supplied for Book XIV, I was struck by the fact that "on opposite sides" occurred before "on own sides" and felt there was a connection between bars 1 - 8 and 9 - 16. This impression was strengthened when I read "Bonnie Kate of Aberdeen" where the two reels occur again in the same order. I considered then whether there was any precedent for considering 16 bars as a continuous movement. I found as a parallel, "Petronella" where at the end of bar 8 the first couple are on opposite sides and then go on to repeat in bars 9 - 16.

"The/

"The Flowers of Edinburgh" provided me with what I was looking for. Here, at the end of bar 8, the first couple are again on opposite sides, but during bars 9 - 16 they continue with the man following the track of the woman in 1 - 8 and vice versa. I saw then that the composer of this dance was following "The Flowers of Edinburgh" and substituting a reel of three for the chase in the former dance. See Fig. 1 for the result. The man and woman both make for the spot they would have reached in two steps had they started from the blank space, and then use the remaining 6 steps of the figure 8 with correct timing and rhythm, finishing at the top of the dance on opposite sides. Then during bars 9 - 16, exactly the same thing is repeated with the man taking the woman's track and vice versa. This is the plan I proposed at the meeting of the Publications Committee and which was practically strangled at birth.

Well, the proof of the puddin' is in the preein' o't! I should like you to have the diagram of this dance as given in Book XIV before you now for reference. Call it "A" and my diagram "B" to save trouble. In "A" balance and symmetry is lost at the very beginning as the man and woman do not take symmetrical courses. "B" has symmetry all the time. No "ordinary" dancer - and the dances are for ordinary people - could reach the centre of the reel in two steps as the man is asked to do. But he must do so for correct timing as the third woman is there in two steps and they must pass left to left there. "B" has perfect timing and rhythm throughout on the part of all 6 dancers.

As regards "flow" in "A", the man has an awkward double back after recrossing the dance (bar 8) in order to begin the next reel at bar 9. Also the woman has not the best of finishes at bar 16 for the Pass Down which follows. In "B" the finishes to both reels are perfect as both man and woman come in from the outside, ready for the cross over at bar 9 and the Pass Down at bar 17. After all that I venture to say that any unprejudiced person could have little trouble in saying to which of these plans the original composer of the dance would give his blessing.

The other type of reel is where the blank space is in the centre of the reel. Let us approach this class by endeavouring to find out first which is the standard form for Reel of Three both across and at the sides when the first (dancing) couple is in centre position. I make it to be as in Fig. 2. Please understand that I am not inventing anything. I have taken this formula of reeling from the standard dances, e.g. the reels across from such a dance as "Fight about the Fireside" and dances in which Reel of Three follows "Woman casts up one and man casts down one". The reels at the side are found in "Monymusk" and in reeling after corners.

The/

The results here are so simple as to savour of the remarkable, but remember that the old folks who composed the dances were no mean mathematicians. The rule is the same as before - the dancer from outside joins the figure 8 in two steps at the spot he would have reached in two steps, had he started from the centre - the blank position. So simply does this work out that all he has to do is to make for the left-hand end of the reel he is joining. Every reel will be a right-hand reel, correctly timed and rhythmied and, what is most important, the dancing couple will end every reel by coming in from outside and is thus ready for the next section of the dance. Further, the two end dancers never have the slightest hesitation as to how they begin the reel. When the centre person is awaiting, they are without guidance from him, but in this scheme they require none because in every reel they go off on the outward curve and pass left to left in the centre. In some of the dances in Book XIV they begin on the outward curve - Fig. 2 of No. 6 which is in accordance with my plan, but begin on the inward curve in Fig. 2, No. 5, where we have two left-hand reels.

When considering the above, I saw for the first time that "reeling" could be taught just as we teach Right and Left, Hands across, etc. I taught it in one lesson to my class thus. I gave an "improvised" dance to each couple as follows:-

#### 1st Couple

Bars	1 - 8	Lead down, cross below second, dance behind third, lead up and cast off one.
	9 - 16	Reels on opposite sides.
	17 - 24	Reels on own sides.
	25 - 32	Six hands round and back.

#### 2nd Couple

	1 - 8	Down and up and cast off one.
	9 - 16	Reels on own sides.
	17 - 24	Reels across - finish facing Corners.
	25 - 32	Turn Corners and Partners.

#### 3rd/

### 3rd Couple

- 1 - 8 Down and up. Finish in 3's across.
- 9 - 16 Reels across.
- 17 - 24 Reels on opposite sides.
- 25 - 28 Advance and retire in threes.
- 29 - 32 First couple turn one-and-a-half times.

### 4th Couple

- 1 - 8 Down and up. Finish in 3's across.
- 9 - 16 Reels across.
- 17 - 24 Reels on own sides.
- 25 - 28 Advance and retire in threes.
- 29 - 32 Three hands round on men's side and on women's side.

- Only the two general instructions were required -
- (1) Centre dancers join the reel in two steps at the left end of the reel.
  - (2) End dancers in every case begin on the outward curve of the figure 8 and pass left to left when they first meet.

They had now learned "Reeling" and in tackling the dances in Book XIV I merely had to tell them where the reels lay. In fact, they are now able to jump at once to a reel in any position if I merely call out any reel while another figure is in progress.

Before leaving this type of reel, I wish to point out that in "Miss Nancy Frowns" - Fig. 2, the minor importance of getting flow into the next movement would seem to have taken precedence over the major consideration of beginning "with the Sun" and two left-hand reels are the result with 4 out of the 6 dancers beginning "against the Sun". Quite correct a flow can be obtained by following the correct reeling in "Keep the Country" - Fig. 2 (See my Fig. 3.) The men reach the men's side of the reel in 6 correctly timed steps and then do the permissible acceleration during steps 7 and 8 to bring them to the side line in good time and position for Four Hands Across. Again I am not inventing a new movement. You/

You will find it correctly shown in Bk. XIV, No. 10, Fig. 3.

The universality of the scheme of reeling I am following can again be seen in its application to the two similar dances "The Red House" (Bk. VII, No. 2), bars 25 - 32 and 33 - 40, and "The Duchess of Atholl's Slipper", Bk. X, No. 3, bars 1 - 8 and 9 - 16. The words "on the men's side" and "on the women's side" in the former must be discounted as they do not appear in the original copy and were added before publication as a kind of "stage direction", after the committee had somewhat doubtfully acquiesced in this form of the dance. I remember I suggested a diagonal reel instead, but more intensive study has shown me that these dances are variants of the general scheme. A "variant" is not an "exception"; the former, although slightly different from the general scheme is always in strict accord with the general rules governing Scottish Folk Dances which I detailed at the beginning, an "exception" breaks one or more of them.

I cannot admit that a Reel of Three can be danced in the space occupied by only two people. In this respect alone this figure is the sole exception to all the scores of reels throughout the books and is therefore wrong. Several other objections could be taken. I shall mention only one. In the figure to "The Duchess of Atholl's Slipper" when the first woman reaches the centre of the figure eight on the men's side, the first and second men are also there, so you have three people meeting together. This never occurs in a Reel of Three; when two people meet at the centre, the third is always at one of the two ends. I have heard the argument used that this figure can be danced all right. That does not prove it to be a Reel of Three. I have seen some weird figures danced in the sacred name of the Reel of Three during performances of the Eightsome Reel.

These two dances fall easily into the general scheme. The two end people of the reel are the first man and first woman; the blank space is between them, and the second man and then the second woman are to enter the reel from outside. It is a variant because we have only one reel being danced at a time and only one person entering, and both from the same side instead of the usual doubles. It is simply the ordinary reel across the dance - the one at the top in Fig. 2. Note how again the ordinary rules apply (see Fig. 4). Off go the two end people on the same outward curve to pass left to left at the centre while the second man as usual makes for the left-hand end of the reel in two steps - the correct number for that distance and reaches the women's side with correct timing at the end of the sixth bar. He then uses the common acceleration during bars 7 and 8 to dance home. The woman then takes a corresponding course, giving a perfect symmetry in sequence.

The/

progression

The programme required in "Red House" at the end of the second reel is equally simple. The first man and woman and the second woman simply dance to their new positions at the end of the second reel while the second man moves up.

I have just noticed that "Tulloch Gorm" (Bk. VIII, No. 1), bars 1 - 16 is exactly the same as "Willie with his Tartan Plaidie", making a third dance where Reel of Three on opposite sides is followed by Reel of Three on own sides, thus further confirming what I previously said about the inter-connection of the two reels.

I should like to quote one other instance to show that the old choreographers composed to a definite code of rules. Two things have always worried me about that fine dance "The New-Rigged Ship", (Bk. IX, No. 7). The Reel of Three, bars 9 - 16, is an "exception" as regards symmetry. (see Fig. 5 (a)). The rule all over is that when one dancer moves out, the companion dancer moves out and so on. Secondly, I never could understand why the composer of this grand dance should have given the man such an awkward flow into the Reel of Three after the Hands Round. See Fig. 5b. Apply the general scheme of reeling which I am endeavouring to propound and both difficulties disappear. See Fig. 5c. The men now have as good a flow into the reel as the women have. I feel certain the composer of this dance had this scheme in mind.

after Corners

- The Reel of Three<sup>^</sup> is my final point. Three cases occur -
- (a) Reeling after setting to Corners (without turning).
  - (b) After turning Corners and Partners.
  - (c) After setting to and turning Corners.

In (a) we have the correct form of two right-hand reels, but in (b) and (c) two left-hand reels. After setting to second corner in (a), you are on what for brevity we may call "the spot" from which you enter the figure 8 from outside it at the point you would have reached had you started from the blank space in the centre, that is as usual at the left-hand end of figure 8. In the case of (b), a single turn left-hand with your partner after turning second corners brings you back to "the spot" and off you go into a right-hand reel as in (a). This is surely possible because in making the left-hand turn with your partner after turning first corners, you made  $1\frac{1}{2}$  turns. In the case of (c), you are again on "the spot" after you have turned second corners and for the third time off you go in a right-hand reel.

There is no doubt whatever that the producers of Book I in the letterpress description of the reeling after Setting to and Turning Corners in "Brown's Reel" and "The Merry Lads of Ayr" have described a right-hand reel. The language can have no other interpretation. If further confirmation is required, look at the diagram for the latter dance where a right-hand reel is clearly shown. In spite of this, the reel continues to/

to be danced by beginning left-hand with the first corner dancer. An attempt to make this a right-hand reel was tried in the Foreword to the dance books with the futile argument that the turning of the second corner is really the beginning of the reel and that as this is a clockwise movement, the reel is a right-hand one. This is too futile to require refutation. And how does it apply to case (b) above where there is no turning of the second corner to precede the reel.

I claim that I have now shown that all these reels can be brought into one system of reeling by the simple application of the rule that the dancer coming in from outside joins the figure 8 at the spot he would have reached had he started from the blank space and that this, together with the right foot poussette would make every dance from Book I to XIV and onwards conform to the general laws I gave at the beginning. Every reel would be right-handed, properly timed, of correct length, of correct balance or symmetry, with acceleration, if required, only at the end and all would have that result of the correct observance of the rules, a good flow into the succeeding section of the dance, because in every case the dancing couple end the reel by coming in from outside. In short "Reeling" becomes a system. Is not this what one would expect in Scottish Folk Dances? It is generally understood that Folk Dances spring from a common source - the old circle dances associated with the pre-Christian sacrificial worship of the sacred groves and that their varying developments in the different countries reflect the characteristics of the peoples. What would one expect from Scotland, the country unsurpassed for its shipbuilders - yesterday in wood, to-day in iron, its unsurpassed farmers - whether as corn-growers or as stock breeders, its weavers in wool and linen, its stone masons in whinstone and granite and so on? Add to this the Scotsman's love of logic and system which gave us a system of Common Law long before England had such and it is not surprising to find dances with a comparatively intricate footwork and arranged to conform to a system of rules, such a system as I have enunciated above.

Finally, although this is sent to you privately, I reserve the right to publish the above if thought necessary.