

**NOTES
ON THE
BORDER
DANCES**

In speaking about some Border Country Dances, I do not want you to infer that they are purely local dances. Some of them are, but others are what the Borderer calls "in-comers". These in all probability would be introduced by the itinerant dancing master with his fiddle under his arm, who was to be found all over the country last century. He would go from village to village, and to the various farm-places, where he would teach the country dance to the few gathered together. In my very young days I encountered one, and many the sharp rap I have got over the fingers with his bow, for not attending to his teachings. His repertoire was great and it was mostly country dances and the Quadrilles he taught, with the highland schottische, Polka and the Waltz as round dances. The Quadrilles were varied, I think we were taught four varieties, the Edinburgh, the Caledonian, and there were two French ones. In the latter, each figure had a name which he would rap out at the beginning with the broadest Scotch accent, and woe betide if you forgot to bow and curtsy before each figure. Old Tripney (T.T. his initials were,) but I don't think he was must have been among the last of the old school of dancing masters, a race which long kept country dancing in the fore-front.

We, as a Nation, ought to be proud of our dances, they are as much a National heritage as our songs, and as such ought to be preserved. It is not only in this country that our dances are gaining in popularity, they are spreading all over the world. I know they are taught in Czecho Slovakia, and at the Scottish Country Dance Society's Summer School in St Andrews there were students from our Colonies, and one from Denmark who gained her two teaching certificates, and is going to teach them

there. Even such a modern as Jack Payne of B.B.C. fame, in an interview said "The only people who seem able to fling vigour and variety in to their dances are the Scots." great praise from the conductor of a famous jazz band.

It must never be forgotten that Scottish Country Dances are purely social dances, and as such were danced in the ball-room of our grand-parents. There are no ceremonial dances, although possibly there would be, in the remnants of paganism that long survived in out-lying districts. The nearest approach to ceremonial dancing I have come across, is in a dance called "The Three Sheepskins". I believe long ago the laying down of three sheep's skins to dance round was a test for drunkenness and if a man did this successfully, it proved that he was sober. This is incorporated in the dance, only in this case both the man and his partner have to reel round the three people immediately below them in the dance, and all I can say is , that it would be a very effective test.

Country dancing is really not difficult. There are certain steps and formations which put together in various ways make a whole figure. These mastered, the rest is plain sailing, or I should say dancing. Good poise and deft foot-work are needed to dance the figure with neatness and grace but once these are mastered, country dancing has no pit-falls. Unfortunately men are slow to come forward. If athletes , for instance, would take up country dancing, I am sure they would improve their game, whatever it may be, because in country dancing we have balance, quickness of mind, and above all splendid team work, three necessities for any kind of sport. Undoubtedly this is an age of women. They are pre-eminent in all

sports, business and professions, and even in the country the Women's Rural Institutes take the lead in rural matters. If the men would only make a start, they would go on and be upsides with the women folk, besides how much nicer that every Jenny should have her Jock. Every man and woman has artistic feeling latent within them, and Scottish Country dancing, gives them the experience of personal artistic enjoyment.

The form of the country dance is known to all. Two lines, the women on the one side and the men on the other. It is danced in couples, partners standing opposite to each other, and the top couple do not stop dancing until they come to the bottom of the set. There are various ways of ~~the~~ progressing all of which lead to the same end. There is a rollicking joyousness in the dance, which is infectious even to watch, and when the leader of the top set cries out "Best set in the hall" which brings a response from the remainder of this set of "Easy", only to be followed by the shout of "Aye, efter this yin" from someone in another set, as is always done in my part of the country, one feels that the dancers are thoroughly enjoying themselves, and dancing with a naturalness that is beautiful to see.

In the Borders we still have wide stretches of country sparsely inhabited, where the scattered folk had long ago to depend entirely on their own labours for food and clothing, and had to rely on the songs and dances of their fore-fathers for recreation. The wealth of the Border ballads is an example of this., and I am sure there are still many old dances yet to be found. Even yet in outlying parts, the people (especially the old folks) sing and dance as naturally as they talk.

In my small experience, I find no difficulty in persuading them to tell of the old dances of their youth, and hear the quaint terms they use, such as through the needle-i-bo, that is one couple making an arch, and the others passing under it.

Some of the dances are purely of local origin. The lassies o' Melrose, The laddies o' Dunse, for instance show where they originated, but to find dances such as "The Duchess of Gordon's Fancy" in the Lowlands, is due to the itinerant dancing master, and shows the distance of their travels. This is a Highland dance, done with Highland Schottische steps, and linked arm, which is unusual in Scottish country dancing. In other dances the formation tells its own tale. In The Lover's knot for instance we dance the pattern of a bow complete with knot and streamers at the top of the dance, and he must have been a very true lover as we dance it again at the sides. In another dance called "the tartan plaid," the formation is the weaving of the plaid. We go across the dance and up and down as with warp and woof, then we have hands across, which is the plaiding part, and finish up with an allemande, which corresponds with the fringe,

In many cases dances were set to existing songs, or vice-versa. We have such well known ones as Jenny's bawbee, Cornriggs, The rock and the wee pickle tow, and I have collected two, My love, She's but a lassie yet, and the lassie wi' the yellow coattie.

Perhaps the itinerant dancing master has introduced variants in to some of the dances. This is a moot point. He may have brought some of the traditional Highland steps that have crept in to the Lowland dances.

Personally I am not sure about the pas de basque step as used in the

there is a tune of this name, but it was probable that it was the air of an old anti-papal song, and it is possible that this tune had sprung up in some such way, among the ballads that were levelled against the Catholic clergy at the time of the Reformation. For many years it has been known as one of the trade tunes, and a copy of it is to be found in Oswald's Pocket Companion. The worshipful body who lay claim to it, are as may be supposed from the name, the incorporation of skimmers, and we are told it used to be played on the bells of St Giles' Cathedral on the day they held their annual procession.

An old ballad says-

"Remission of sins in auld sheepskins
Our souls to bring from grace"

but I think whatever the religious significance of the song, the dance has a more domestic appeal. At one part we have the dancers with hands held high above their heads, and going round in a circle which brings to mind the Maypole. In another part we have the leading man and woman dancing round the three people immediately below them. These three people represent the sheepskins, and the top couple are undergoing their test for sobriety. The dance is done with a running step all through, and was probably danced in the open air, as the robust joyousness of it would hardly be suitable for the ball-room of the times.

The Duchess of Buccleuch's Favourite was collected from an old herd, whose ancestors had been on the same farm for generations. The dance has been handed down from father to son, and although there is nothing outstanding about it, it shows what may be termed a local dance. The date is about the year 1790.

The lassie wi' the yellow coattie was collected among the hills of Selkirkshire, almost in to Dumfries-shire. There is, of course, an old song of this name, and probably the dance was made to suit the music of the song. I had an old song sheet of this song given to me, published in Glasgow many years ago. The words are rather interesting. After telling the lassie he has "a butt and ben fu'denty, and cakes and yill fu' plenty, he goes on to say,

Come my lassie to my bosom

While the bud is in the blossom

Flowers may fade and you may loose them

Flowers may fade, and so will you.

which is as much as to say, "hurry up and take me or you'll miss your chance."

The dance has one or two peculiarities from the usual Scottish country dance. In it we have a wheel advancing two and seyting two which is unique. Then we have the walking step down the middle, and the chasse coming back with the hands held above the head. I saw this done by old people the women having on very full long dresses-skirts and as they danced up the middle their dresses jigged with the music which was particularly

nice to see.

The last dance to be demonstrated is the Duchess of Gordon's Fancy. This is an instance of the itinerant dancing master. Probably this one went the length and breadth of Scotland, picking up dances here and there, and transplanting them to other places. This is undoubtedly a north country dance, and my informant was very insistent upon the linking of arms. The formation is simple, and the dance done in Strathspey time goes with a swing.