The History of the Scottish Reel as a Dance-Form

I

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In the early years of this century, and for as far back in living memory as we can go, the term 'Reel' meant one of the four main types of social dance in use in Scotland, *i.e.* Reels, Country Dances, Square Dances (Quadrilles, Lancers, *etc.*), and Circle Dances (Waltz, Polka, *etc.*). Today the distinctions between Reels and Country Dances have become blurred, and the name Reel is often applied to any Country Dance set to a common time tune in quick tempo.[1] However, to older people Reels and Country Dances were clearly differentiated, both in their structure and in their style of performance.

A true Reel consists of setting steps danced on the spot, alternated with a travelling figure—the setting steps can be as varied as the dancers please, while the travelling figure is usually the same throughout the dance. In many Reels there is also a change in musical rhythm in the course of the dance, an unusual feature in social dances.

A typical example of a true Reel is the Scotch Reel, now more commonly known as the Foursome Reel, which is performed by two couples.[2] In this dance the setting steps are performed with the dancers in a line of four, and the travelling figure, which is known as a 'reel of four', has the pattern of a figure 8 with a third loop added (Fig. 1(a)). This particular Reel also displays the change in rhythm, for it is usually begun to a strathspey, and in the course of the dance the music changes to a reel.

The patterns of the travelling figures of some of the other Reels mentioned later in this article are shown in Fig. 1(b)–(d).

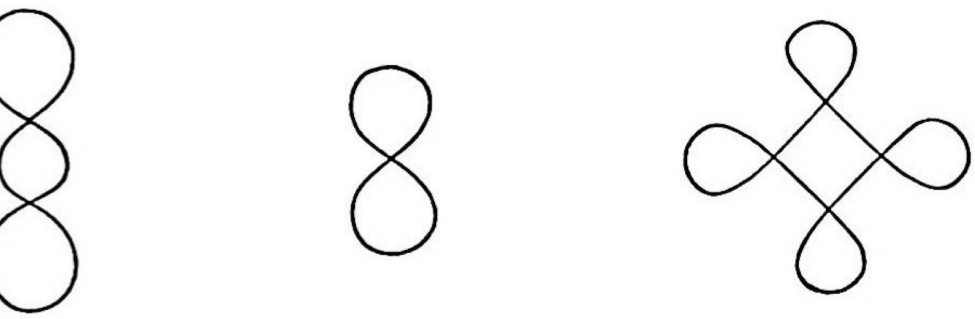
In addition to the true Reels, the general class of Reels also includes a few dances, not constructed in the manner of the true Reels, but performed in the same style as them; the best known of these dances is the modern Eightsome Reel, which was composed about 1870.[3]

The traditional style of performance of Reels was vigorous, and distinctive features were the use of arms, either raised or placed akimbo, and the snapping of finger and thumb; in Scotland these were regarded as part of the dance, even by professional dancing-masters.

In contrast, in Country Dances and Square Dances the dancers held their arms loosely by their sides (ladies held their skirts if they wished) and there was no snapping of

fingers. Another feature of Reel dancing was the 'heuching' by the men (and sometimes ladies), though this was frowned on by the dancing-masters.

In our book *Traditional Dancing in Scotland*, we have given descriptions of the Reels that survived in Scotland within living memory, together with details of steps and style of performance. In that work, which we refer to as TDS, we confined ourselves primarily to a record of what could be gleaned from oral tradition, and we gave historical references only where we wished to establish the antiquity of the customs and usages which we recorded from our informants. In this paper our object is to complement this traditional account with a study of the history of Reels as a form of dance, and to put forward some theories concerning their origins. To some extent this note is a sequel to an earlier article, 'The Scottish Country Dance; its origins and development', published in two parts of volume II of *Scottish Studies*, which we refer to as SCD I, II.



(a) Foursome Reel

(b) Threesome Reel

(c) Axum Reel

(d) The circular Reel

(e) The Eight Men of Moidart

FIG. 1

The study of Reels divides naturally into two periods, from 1525 to 1600, and from 1600 to the present day. In the first part of the second period, up to about 1820, almost all the known references to Reels are concerned with the Threesome and Foursome Reels, and other Reels, although they undoubtedly existed, are hardly mentioned. Fortunately, even for this period up to 1820 we are able to supplement our literary research with information drawn from oral tradition.

In this first part of the paper, we are concerned primarily with literary sources of information, and we introduce only such traditional information, mainly concerning the West Highland circular Reel and its allied forms, as is necessary for our purposes. In a second part, we will deal with the remaining Scottish Reels, including the Reel

of Tulloch, various double forms of the Threesome and Foursome Reels, and the Reels of Orkney and Shetland, and there our reliance on traditional information will be much greater.

Early References: 1525–1600

The earliest reference to 'reeling' as a form of dancing occurs in Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil, *c.* 1525 (Douglas 1839:895):

> And gan do dowbill brangillys and gambatis,
> Dansys and rowndis traysing mony gatis
> Athir throu other *reland*, on thar gys;
> Thai fut it so that lang war to devys
> Thar hasty fair, thar revellyng and deray,
> Thar morysis and syk ryot, quhil neir day.

'Reilling' is also mentioned in the poem 'Peblis to the play', allegedly written by James I (1394–1437),

> All the wenchis of the west
> war vp or the cok crew
> ffor reilling yair micht na man rest
> ffor garray and for glew,

but the earliest extant version of this poem is in the Maitland Folio MS, compiled *c.* 1580 (Craigie 1919:176).

The word 'brangillys' used by Gavin Douglas is presumably the same as the word 'branles', and this is the name of a type of choral dance, in which the dancers linked hands in line or ring formation. A large number of such dances, including a 'Branle d'Escosse', are described by the French priest Thoinot Arbeau in his *Orchesographie* (Arbeau 1588), and seven tunes for the Branle d'Escosse can be found in Jean d'Estrée's *Premier Livre de Danseries* (Paris, 1559). The meaning of 'gambatis' is less clear, but the word is obviously derived from the French *gambade*, to leap or caper. In any case, Douglas makes a clear contrast between those who performed 'dowbill brangillys and gambatis, Dansys and rowndis traysing mony gatis' and those dancers who reeled 'athir throu other'. However, it should be noted that Douglas does not tell us that there were dances called Reels at that time, but only that there was a dance movement which was sufficiently described by the word 'reeling'.

It is not until about 1583 that we find the word Reel (or rather reill) definitely used to mean a dance, and this occurs in an obscure line in Montgomerie's *Flyting with Polwart* (Stevenson 1910:168):

> Bot rameist ran reid-wood, and raveld [in] yc reill[s].

The only other reference to a Reel in the sixteenth century occurs in the trial of the North Berwick witches in 1591, as reported in *Newes from Scotland* (Ritson 1794):

> Agnes Tompson being brought before the king's [James VI] and his councell . . . confessed that vpon the night of All hollon euen last she was accompanied . . . with a great many other witches, to the number of two hundreth; and that they all together went to sea, each one in a riddle or ciue . . . with flaggons of wine, making merrie and drinking by the way in the same riddles or ciues, to the kirke of North Barrick in Lowthian; and that after they had landed, tooke handes on the lande and daunced this reill or short daunce, singing all with one voice,
>
> Commer goe ye befor, commer goe ye,
> Gif ye will not goe before, commer let me.
>
> At which time she confessed that this Geilles Duncan [a servant girl] did goe before them playing this reill or daunce vpon a small trumpe, called a Jewes trump, vntill they entered into the kerk of North Barrick. These confessions made the king in a wonderfull admiration, and sent for the saide Geilles Duncane, who vpon the like trump did play the saide daunce before the kinges maiestie.

The same incident is described in Pitcairn's *Criminal Trials* (Pitcairn 1833:239, 245), but although Geilles Duncan is reported there to have 'led ye ring' playing 'on ane trump', the word 'reill' is not mentioned in Pitcairn's account.

We note that the witches 'reill' was a 'short daunce', and the word 'short' may again have indicated a contrast with the long line dance of Branle type. But the witches 'tooke handes', which seems to conflict with Montgomerie's dancers who 'raveld' in their Reels.

The period 1600–1820: The Threesome and Foursome Reels

We have remarked (in SCD 1) that the seventeenth century saw little social dancing in Scotland, particularly in those parts that came most strongly under the influence of the Presbyterian Church.[4] There are very few references during this century to any form of social dancing in Scotland, and we know of only one such reference which mentions a Reel. This occurs in a manuscript Cantus, 'not older than 1670 or 1680', which now appears to be lost, quoted by Dauney in his *Ancient Melodies of Scotland* (Dauney 1838:55):

> The reill, the reill of Aves
> The joliest reill that ever wes.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, a more tolerant attitude towards dancing began to develop in Scotland as a whole, and this is the period that saw the introduction of the English Country Dance and the Minuet to Scottish Society. Dances called Reels now reappear, presumably having been preserved in the remoter parts of the country; it is also possible that they were preserved in less remote spots as dances to be performed behind closed shutters when the Church elders were elsewhere.[5]

The first signs of the rapid rise in popularity of Reels appear in the music collections of the early eighteenth century. Approximately contemporary with the revival of

dancing about 1700, and obviously related to it, is the appearance of dance music set for the fiddle and the pipes in Scottish manuscript collections. This may be taken to be evidence of the acceptance of these essentially folk instruments in polite society, for the ability to write down music presupposes a fair level of education. Tunes called reels appear immediately in such collections as a fully developed musical form, and this is exactly what we might expect from the prior history of Reels as dances.[6]

For example, George Skene's Music Book of 1717, a collection of fiddle and pipe tunes (Adv. MS. 5.2.21), contains two tunes labelled simply 'Reill' (or 'Reel'), two 'New Reills', 'A Reell Jannie', 'Mr David Skene's Reell', and 'Mr Campbell's Reell'.[7] Again, the Duke of Perth's manuscript, compiled by David Young in 1737 for the Duke of Perth, contains, in addition to the four dozen Country Dances referred to in SCD I and II, a second part consisting of '*A collection of the Best Highland Reels*'. This second part contains 45 reel tunes, and is the earliest source for a number of well-known tunes, including the Reel of Tulloch (unfortunately it does not include a description of the figures of the Highland Reel). An even more extensive collection of reels is to be found in the two extant volumes of the McFarlan Manuscripts (N.L.S. MS 2084–5), written by David Young 'for the use of Walter McFarlan OF THAT ILK', the first volume in 1740, the second *c.* 1743. There are also a number of reels with Country Dance figures set to them in the Young Manuscript of 1740 (SCD I: 4), and also in the various volumes of the Walshs' *Caledonian Country Dances* published in London from 1733 onwards (SCD I: 8; II: 144).

Rather surprisingly, strathspeys are absent from the early Scottish manuscript and printed collections of music. There are slight traces of the distinctive strathspey characteristics in the McFarlan Manuscript, and also possibly in a tune entitled 'Strath sprays Rant' in Book III of the Walshs' *Caledonian Country Dances* (*c.* 1740), but the earliest tunes known to us that are unmistakably strathspeys are two tunes each entitled 'A new Strathspey Reel' (and marked 'slow') in Part 3 of Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion*, *c.* 1751. There is also a note 'a Strathspey Reel(e)' against two of the Country Dances in the Menzies Manuscript of 1749 (SCD I: 5), namely 'The Montgomrie's Rant' and 'Conteraller's Rant', but this manuscript does not give the music for the dances. John Bremner's *Collection of Scots Reels*, of which the first twelve parts were published in Edinburgh between 1757 and 1761, contains over ten tunes labelled as 'Strathspeys', but even at this date Bremner thought it necessary to add an *N.B.* to the first such tune (The Fir Tree, in Part 5, 1758) stating that 'The Strathspey Reels are play'd much slower than the others'.

Popular tradition current in the north-east of Scotland about 1785 named the Browns of Kincardine-on-Spey, and after them the Cummings of Castle Grant, as the first composers of strathspeys (Newte 1791: 163), and there seems no reason to doubt this tradition. Certainly the absence of strathspeys from the early manuscripts indicates that they evolved at some time after 1700, for had they been a fully developed musical form by 1700, they would have appeared in the manuscripts at the same time as reels.

We should mention also the conclusions reached in SCD II (pp. 141–2) that, before about 1740, tunes in Common time for Country Dances were played at a tempo of about 28–32 bars per minute, *i.e.* less than half that of present-day Country Dances in quick tempo. These conclusions tend to confirm that at this period the distinction between reels and strathspeys had not yet emerged.

The fact that the early strathspeys are referred to as 'Strathspey Reels' indicates that they were played for the dancing of Reels, and there is confirmation of this in the titles of some of the later music collections, for example Angus Cumming's *A Collection of Strathspeys or old Highland Reels*, published in Edinburgh in 1780, and Alexander McGlashan's *A Collection of Reels, consisting chiefly of Strathspeys, Athole Reels, etc.*, published in Edinburgh in 1786. However, it should be mentioned that there was also another dance that was performed to strathspeys, namely the Strathspey Minuet. This repeatedly intrudes into our story, and we return to it in an Appendix.

The term 'Athole Reel' used above was simply a new name for the old fast reels, to distinguish them from 'Strathspey Reels'. In 1798, the poet and song-collector Alexander Campbell makes the following comment on their distribution (Campbell 1798):

> The reel seems prevalent in the Braes of Athol, and over the west part of Perthshire, and is pretty universal throughout Argyleshire. The strathspey seems peculiar to the great tract of country through which the river Spey runs. Through the North-Highlands, and western Isles, a species of melody, partaking somewhat of the reel, and strathspey, seems more relished by the natives, to which they dance, in a manner peculiar to these parts of the Hebrides. The Athol reel is lively, and animating in a high degree. The strathspey is much slower, better accented, . . . The movements to the former are spirited, yet less graceful.

We note for future reference the sentence concerning the North-Highlands and western Isles.

Although the manuscript and printed collections of Scottish music provide plentiful evidence of the popularity of Reels in the eighteenth century, they tell us little of the nature of these Reels, and for this we have to turn to the literature of the period.

In the glossary to Ruddiman's edition of Douglas's Virgil, printed in Edinburgh in 1710 (Ruddiman 1710), we find the term *Reel* defined as 'a *dance*, as *a threesom Reel*, where three dance together'. Ruddiman also defines the terms *Ring Dances* and *Rounds*, and these definitions are of interest since they describe two types of dances that Ruddiman considered were *not* Reels. To Ruddiman, Ring Dances were 'a kind of dance of many together in a ring or circle taking one another by the hands, and quitting them again at certain turns of the Tune (or Spring, as Scot. we call it,) and sometimes the piper is put in the center'. On the other hand, Rounds were '*merry* Dances in which the body makes a great deal of motion, and often turns *round*. The country Swains and Damsels call them S. *Roundels*'.

Although Ruddiman's definition of the term Reel leaves open the possibility that

at that time there were Reels for more or fewer than three people, until 1775 those references which mention the number of dancers refer to three people only.[8]

The first such occurrence is in Allan Ramsay's second Canto to 'Christ's Kirk on the Green', written in 1716 (Ramsay 1800):

> Furth started neist a pensy blade,
> . . .
> They said that he was Falkland bred,
> And danced by the book;
> . . .
> When a' cry'd out he did sae weel,
> He Meg and Bess did call up;
> The lasses babb'd about the reel,
> Gar'd a' their hurdies wallop,
> And swat like pownies when they speel
> Up braes, or when they gallop,
> But a thrawn knublock hit his heel,
> And wives had him to haul up,
> Haff fell'd that day.

Another such incident is recorded in the autobiography of Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk (Burton 1910). In 1741 Carlyle was at Lucky Vint's, a celebrated tavern in Edinburgh, with Lord Lovat and Erskine of Grange. The latter had provided a piper

> to entertain Lovat after dinner; but though he was reckoned the best piper in the country, Lovat despised him, and said he was only fit to play reels to Grange's oyster-women. He [Lovat] grew frisky at last, however, and upon Kate Vint, the landlady's daughter, coming into the room, he insisted on her staying to dance with him. . . . Lovat was at this time seventy-five, and Grange not much younger; yet the wine and the young woman emboldened them to dance a reel, till Kate, observing Lovat's legs as thick as posts, fell a-laughing, and ran off. She missed her second course of kisses, as was then the fashion of the country, though she had endured the first. This was a scene not easily forgotten.

The 1745 Rising brought many Lowland and English people into contact with the Highlanders for the first time, and might be thought to have given rise to several descriptions of Reels, but unfortunately this is not so. The Highlanders certainly danced; indeed James Gib, who served Prince Charles as 'Master-Houshold and provisor for the Prince's own Table' told Robert Forbes that 'the Highlanders were the most surprising men he had ever seen. For after making very long marches, and coming to their quarters, they would have got up to the dancing as nimbly as if they had not been marching at all, whenever they heard the pipes begin to play; which made him frequently say, "I believe the devil is in their legs" ' (Forbes 1895: II. 171). It is highly probable that the dances performed on such occasions were Reels, but the only confirmation of this is from Lord George Murray, who recorded that on crossing the Esk

'the pipes began to play so soon as they pass'd, and the men all danced reels, which in a moment dry'd them' (Murray 1908:126).[9]

Robert Forbes also records that when Prince Charles arrived at the house of Lude on 2 September 1745, 'he was very cheerful and took his share in several dances, such as minuets, Highland reels (the first reel the Prince called for was "This is not mine ain house", *etc*), and a Strathspey minuet' (Forbes 1895: I. 208). This is the earliest reference to the Strathspey minuet, and indeed is the earliest reference to the term 'strathspey' in connection with dancing or music.[10]

It is interesting to note that although Reels were danced from the highest to the lowest strata of society, from the Prince, the Duke of Perth, and Lord Lovat, to Grange's oyster-women, the dances performed at the Edinburgh Assemblies from their inception in 1723 up to as late as 1753 seem to have consisted only of Country Dances and Minuets (Flett 1967).

The next reference to Reels is given by Giovanni Gallini (Sir John Gallini), a London dancing-master, in his *Treatise on the art of dancing* (London 1765):

> It is to the Highlanders of North-Britain, that I am told we are indebted for a dance in the comic vein, called the *Scotch Reel*, executed generally, and, I believe always in *trio*, or by three. When well danced, it has a very pleasing effect, and indeed nothing can be imagined more lively and brilliant than the steps in many of the Scotch dances. There is a great variety of very natural and pleasing ones.

This description of the Reel as 'a dance in the comic vein' sounds as though Gallini may only have seen it as a 'character' dance, performed as an interlude on the London stage. Although there was at this time a 'Scotch dancing assembly' in London (Alexander Carlyle mentions that in 1769 it 'met in the King's Arms Tavern, in Cheapside' (Burton 1910:524)), it is probable that Gallini, as a prominent dancing-master, would not have visited it.

Gallini is the first writer to use the name 'Scotch Reel'. Later this name appears to have been applied to both the Threesome and Foursome Reels, and it was then retained by the Foursome Reel as the Threesome Reel died out.

Yet another reference to a Reel for three occurs in Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Boswell 1936:323). At Inchkenneth, on 18 October 1773, 'I [Boswell] proposed a reel, so Miss Sibby and Coll and I danced, while Miss MacLean played' [on a harpischord]. Earlier, on 10th September, Boswell took part in another Reel on the top of Duncaan in Raasay, where 'we danced a reel, to which he [Malcolm, son of Raasay] and Donald Macqueen sang' (*op. cit.*: 137). This reel on Duncaan, which was described simply as a 'Highland Dance' in the printed version of the tour issued by Boswell (Boswell 1785), was the subject of the cartoon reproduced in Plate I; this was issued in 1786, and is one of the earliest known pictures of a Reel.[11]

There is substantial evidence that the eighteenth century Threesome Reel consisted of setting steps danced on the spot, alternated with the travelling figure known today

THE DANCE ON DUNCAT.

"Col McMahon M'Leod who had originally promised to accompany me was at my bed side by seven o'clock, sprang up immediately and he & attended by two other Gentlemen travelled the Country during the whole of this day. Though we had passed over not less than forty Miles of very rugged ground & had a Highland Lance on the top of THE CAT, the Highest Mountain in the Island, We returned in the evening not at all fatigued & pleased ourselves at not being outdone at the Nightly ball, by our less active friends who had remained at home."

Life Journal. p. 102.

Published May 15th 1786 by F. Jackson N°21 Mary le bone Street Golden Square.

PLATE V Boswell's Reel on Duncaan. This cartoon is one of the earliest known pictures of a Reel.

as a 'reel of three', in the pattern of a figure 8 (Fig. 1(b)). This evidence, which is set out in detail in SCD II (pages 132–7), is to be found in the early Scottish manuscript collections of Country Dances, where the term 'reel of three' is used as the name of one of the Country Dance figures. We remark here only that, although no description of a 'reel of three' figure is known before 1811 (see p. 105), the meaning of the term 'reel of three' as used in the Scottish manuscripts can be positively identified, for the 'reel of three' of the manuscripts can be shown to be the same as the English Country Dance figure 'hey', of which a clear description was given in 1752.[12]

The first explicit mention of a Reel for four people (as well as a further mention of a Reel for three) occurs in the letters of Major Topham, an English soldier stationed in Edinburgh in 1774–5 (Topham 1776). Although Topham's description of Reel dancing has often been quoted, it conveys so vividly the Scots' attitude to Reels that it will bear repetition:

> The general Dance here is a Reel, which requires that particular sort of step to dance properly, of which none but people of the country can have any idea. . . . The perseverance which the Scotch Ladies discover in these Reels is not less surprising, than their attachment to them in preference to all others. They will sit totally unmoved at the most sprightly airs of an English Country Dance; but the moment one of these tunes is played, . . . up they start, animated with new life, and you would imagine they had received an electrical shock, or been bit by a tarantula. . . . The young people in England . . . only consider Dancing as an agreeable means of bringing them together. . . . But the Scotch admire the Reel for its own merit alone, and may truly be said to dance for the sake of Dancing. I have often sat a very wearied spectator of one of these Dances, in which not one graceful movement is seen, the same invariably, if continued for hours. . . . A Scotchman comes into an Assembly-room as he would into a field of exercise, dances till he is literally tired, possibly without ever looking at his partner, or almost knowing who he dances with. In most countries the men have a partiality for dancing with a woman; but here I have frequently seen four gentlemen perform one of these Reels seemingly with the same pleasure and perseverance as they would have done, had they the most sprightly girl for a partner. . . .
>
> The Ladies, however, to do them justice, dance much better than the men. But I once had the honour of being witness to a reel in the Highlands, where the party consisted of three maiden ladies, the youngest of whom was above fifty, which was conducted with gestures so uncouth, and a vivacity so hideous, that you would have thought they were acting some midnight ceremonies, or enchanting the moon.

And again:

> Besides minuets and Country Dances, they in general dance reels in separate parts of the room. . . . Their great agility, vivacity, and variety of hornpipe steps[13] render it to them a most entertaining dance; but to a stranger the sameness of the figure makes it trifling and insipid, though you are employed during the whole time of its operation, which is indeed the reason why it is so peculiarly adapted to the Scotch who are little acquainted with the attitude of standing still.

The references here to the 'sameness of the figure' and the variety of steps are highly suggestive of the alternate setting and reeling of the true Reels, and the other comments are to be expected of a spectator who had the misfortune never to have danced a Reel himself.

Topham is not the only writer to comment on the vigour with which Reels were danced. For instance, the Frenchman de LaTocnaye recorded that in Elgin in 1793

> j'aperçus une danse, cela me donna envie de connaitre quels étaient les reels écossais, . . . j'en avais bien vu, mais c'était parmi des gens riches dans un bal. Ici c'était la simple nature, je fus surpris de la vivacité des pas; ils n'étaient pas élégans, mes ces bonnes gens semblaient avoir bien du plaisir; ils se tournaient et se retournaient faisaient des sauts, poussaient des cris de joie; il y avait particulièrement quelques montagnards dont la joie excessive dérangeait souvent le philibeg, mais personne n'y prenait garde—L'usage fait tout (de LaTocnaye 1801).

There are also contemporary references to the raised arms and the finger-snapping, for example, in Alexander Ross's *The Fortunate Shepherdess* (Ross 1768):

> When dinner's o'er, the dancing neist began,
> An throw an' throw they lap, they flang, they ran;
> The cuintray dances an' the cuintray reels,
> Wi' strecked arms yeed round, an' nimble heels.

Again, in 'Pate's and Maggie's Courtship' in David Herd's *Scottish Songs* (Herd 1776):

> They danced as well as they dow'd,
> Wi' a crack o' their thumbs and a kappie.

And yet again, in a description of a kirn at Harviestoun in 1813 that deserves to be reproduced in full (Wake 1909):

> At Harviestoun the kirn always took place in a very large building, a sort of barn loft, at one end of which was one of the many agricultural machines in which the laird delighted, and which for the evening was covered over with napery, and thus was transformed into a splendid buffet, on which there was a profusion of everything that was most esteemed in the way of refreshment by the class of guests for whom it was prepared. Whisky toddy, punch, cold and steaming hot, and mountains of shortbread cake, were the most favoured among the good things provided for the occasion, and innumerable were the visits made to the buffet by the panting couples, who for a brief space broke away from the dance at the upper end. Fast and faster still, each foot kept that wonderful time, of which none who have not witnessed real Scottish dancing can form the faintest idea . . . every limb answers to the marvellous music of the Scottish reel and Highland strathspey. Feet stamping, fingers snapping, eyes as it were on fire, heads thrown back, while shouts mark the crisis of the dance,—it must have been seen to be imagined.

Finally, we cannot forbear from quoting Felix MacDonough's exquisite male who finds a 'set of ultras' in Edinburgh, among whom

> one is not obliged to look all flurried with their d-d reels, whereby, (from ill-judged complaisance) I once broke my stay-lace, and which make a man's hair all out of order, and render the active performer not a *aspiring*, but a *perspiring* hero . . . we dance nothing but waltzes and quadrilles . . . (MacDonough 1824:179).

After 1775, when a Reel for four is first mentioned, there are several references to Reels that seem to imply that the only Reels in current use were Threesome and Foursome Reels. For example, there are the well-known lines

> There's threesome reels, there's foursome reels,
> There's hornpipes and strathspeys, man,

in Burns 'The De'il's awa' wi' th' Exciseman', which appears in the fourth volume of *The Scots Musical Museum* in 1792 (Johnson 1839). The 'strathspeys' here may well have been the Strathspey Minuet, as may also have been the 'Twasome' in the following lines written by the Duke of Gordon to the tune 'Cauld Kail in Aberdeen' (*op. cit.* vol. 2):

> In Cotillons the French excel,
> John Bull, in Countra-dances;
> The Spaniards dance Fandangos well,
> Mynheer an All'amande prances;
> In Foursome Reels the Scots delight,
> The Threesome maist dance wondrous light,
> But Twasome ding a' out o' sight,
> Danc'd to the Reel of Bogie.

Another interesting reference, which we return to in the Appendix, occurs in Robert Riddell's *Collection of Scotch Galwegian and Border Tunes* (Edinburgh, 1794) in a note on the tune 'Symon Brodie':

> Tunes of this measure were in use formerly to be danced by two persons. Generally a Man and a Woman—on the west-border, these dances were called Cumberland's, In the Midland Counties they were Called Jigs, and in the Highland and Northern Shires, Strathspeys: and when danced by two men, armed with sword, and Target, they were called the Sword dance—of late years Reels, danced by three, or Four persons, have supplanted, the more ancient dances above mentioned.

In this context we should mention also Francis Peacock's *Sketches relative to the history and theory but more especially to the practice and art of dancing*, published in Aberdeen in 1805 (Peacock 1805). The fifth of these sketches consists of: 'Observations on the Scotch Reel, with a description of the Fundamental steps made use of in that Dance and their appropriate Gaelic Names', and contains the earliest (though unfortunately rather imprecise) description of Reel steps. The value of these 'Observations' is considerably enhanced by the fact that Peacock was an old man when he wrote them. He taught dancing in Aberdeen from 1747 until his death in 1807 at the age of 84,

so that his observations presumably refer to the period about 1750–1800. Moreover, as he remarks, his position in Aberdeen gave him a knowledge of the different styles of dancing used throughout the Highlands:

> Our Colleges draw hither, every year, a number of students from the Western Isles, as well as from the Highlands, and the greater part of them excel in [Reels] . . .; some of them, indeed, in so superior a degree that I, myself, have thought them worthy of imitation.

Concerning the Scotch Reel itself, Peacock remarks that

> The fondness the Highlanders have for this quartett or trio (for it is either the one or the other) is unbounded; and so is their ambition to excell in it. This pleasing propensity one would think, was born with them, . . . I have seen children of theirs, at five or six years of age, attempt, nay even execute, some of the steps so well as almost to surpass belief.

On the music for the dance he comments that strathspeys are 'in many parts of the Highlands, preferred to the common reel'. On the other hand, the reel, 'by reason of its being the most lively of the two, is more generally made choice of in the dance'.

Among his Reel steps, Peacock gives a 'Forward step', which 'is the common step for the *promenade*, or figure of the Reel', and he tells us that this figure (which is unfortunately not described) occupies the first 8 bars of the measure (*i.e.* the first half of the tune played twice). The setting steps similarly occupy the second 8 bars of the measure.[14]

Not until 1804 do we find a reference that allows the possibility of Reels for more than four dancers. This occurs in one of the notes to Alexander Campbell's long poem *The Grampians Desolate* (Campbell 1804), in which the dances of the Highlanders are classified as (i) 'Dances of one performer', (ii) 'Dances of two, or twa-some dances, as they are called by the lowlanders', (iii) 'Dances of three or more . . . are reels and Strathspeys . . .', (iv) 'Dances of character or dramatic cast'.[15] In the poem itself (*op. cit.* p. 128), Campbell seems to imply that the musician may change the tempo in the course of a Reel by switching without pause from a strathspey to a reel. Earlier references do not preclude such a change of tempo in the course of the dance, but the passages from Peacock's *Sketches* already quoted seem to imply that Reels were usually performed either entirely to reels or entirely to strathspeys, and it is likely that this was the normal usage for most of the second half of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the use of a combination of strathspeys and reels, and indeed other types of tune, seems to have been firmly established by about 1820, for in *The Companion to the Reticule* (Edinburgh, *c.* 1820)

> each page consists of a Reel, Strathspey, and a Jig, upon the same key; so that by playing each of them three or four times over alternately, the dancing, by undergoing so many changes in the time, is kept up with the utmost spirit throughout a whole Reel, which may be performed by three, four, six, eight, or twelve ladies and gentlemen, agreeable to the number or taste of the party.

This, incidentally, is almost the last reference to a Threesome Reel.

The earliest precise descriptions of true Reels in either manuscript or printed works are dated between 1808 and 1818, and these are discussed in the next section. Slightly earlier than this, however, we have descriptions of dances called Reels that do not possess the 'alternate reeling and setting' structure of the true Reels. The first of these occur in a manuscript collection of dances taught at Blantyre Farm in 1805 by a dancing master, Mr William Seymour, from Kilbride (a copy of the manuscript is in the Atholl Collection in the Sandeman Public Library, Perth). Most of the dances described in this manuscript are Country Dances but it also includes a version of the Bumpkin (Flett 1965) and three Eightsome Reels.

These three Eightsome Reels are in longways form, and consist of sequences of Contry Dance figures, but there is no progression of the couples down the set as in a Country Dance. For example, the instructions for the first Eightsome Reel in the manuscript are: 'Gentlemen all come up—follow after head gentleman. Ladies do same after head lady. right and left full round to places, change sides with right hand, change again with left, Allaman all,[16] change sides, chace, change sides, back again, right and left, hands all round' (it is likely that this sequence of figures was performed as a complete dance in itself, without any repetition, but the manuscript gives no instructions on this point). It is not clear why these dances should be called Reels, for they have none of the characteristic features of the true Reels. It is possible that they were performed in the same vigorous style as the true Reels, but it is also likely that the name 'Reel' was used simply to distinguish their non-progressive character from the progressive longways Country Dances.

Another such non-progressive longways Reel of Eight is described in a manuscript of 1818 (N.L.S. MS 3860; see the next section), and this manuscript also contains a Reel of Eight in square formation, involving simple figures from the Quadrilles. This latter dance persisted for the next 50 years or more, and was then embodied in the modern Eightsome Reel to form the opening and closing sequences of that dance (see Flett 1966–7: part III). Other dances called Reels, but again lacking the characteristic Reel structure, are described in a manuscript collection of dances compiled by a Frederick Hill in Aberdeenshire in 1841. However, here the dances are at least performed to a combination of strathspeys and reels.

In addition to these dances, there were a number of dances in use in Scotland in the nineteenth century which combined the increased variety of figure of the preceding dances with the characteristic 8-bar setting periods and the vigorous style of performance of the true Reels. A number of very fine dances of this type, some of which have been published in pamphlet form (MacNab 1947–62), were collected in Canada from the descendants of emigrants from Scotland by the late Mary Isdale MacNab of Vancouver. Several others, collected from oral tradition in Scotland, can be found in Professor H. A. Thurston's *Scotland's Dances* (Thurston 1954: Appendix B), and also in TDS, pages 164, 175 and 197.

All these dances are of considerable interest in themselves, but they add little to our

knowledge of the development of the Reel as a form of dance, and we therefore leave them aside, and confine our attention only to those dances that exhibit the 'alternate reeling and setting' structure of the true Reels.

Detailed descriptions of the Threesome and Foursome Reels: 1811–1914

The first detailed descriptions of true Reels occur in Thomas Wilson's *An Analysis of Country Dancing*. Thomas Wilson was a London dancing-master who practised from about 1800 to at least 1852, and was the author of a number of books on dancing, all published in London. He composed well over six hundred Country Dances, and it is through some of these that he is best known today. Most of the Country Dances that he composed were published in two of his own books, entitled *Treasures of Terpsichore* (1809) and *Companion to the Ballroom* (1816), but he also composed the figures of the Country Dances in three collections, each entitled *Le Sylphe*, published by Button and Whittaker in 1813, 1814, and 1815. To some extent his Country Dances were not typical of his time. The history of the Country Dance in England shows a long decline throughout the eighteenth century, ending in utter triviality by about 1820, and Wilson, in his books on Country Dancing, was attempting to inject fresh ideas into the Country Dance with the aim of restoring it to its former popularity. However, the decline had gone too far, and his attempts failed. None of Wilson's Country Dances survived in either England or Scotland within living memory, but a substantial number of them, particularly those set to Scottish tunes, have been reconstructed from his original descriptions by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society and published in their books.

In the section on etiquette in his *Companion to the Ballroom* Wilson makes an interesting comment on the style of performance of Reels:

> Snapping the fingers in Country Dancing and Reels, and the sudden howl or yell too frequently practised (introduced in some Scotch parties as partly national with them),[17] ought particularly to be avoided, as partaking too much of the customs of barbarous nations; the character and effect by such means given to the dance, being adapted only to the stage, and by no means suited to the Ballroom.

In view of his comment about 'barbarous nations', it is amusing that Wilson's own compositions should have been so completely forgotten in England, and yet are so enthusiastically danced in present-day Scotland.

The frontispiece to the *Companion to the Ballroom*, which shows a ballroom in which a Reel, a Country Dance and a Waltz are being performed simultaneously, is reproduced in Plate II.

The first edition of Wilson's *An Analysis of Country Dancing*, which was published in 1808, is a small handbook containing diagrams showing the various figures used in Country Dances. It includes also descriptions of some 'New Reels' composed by

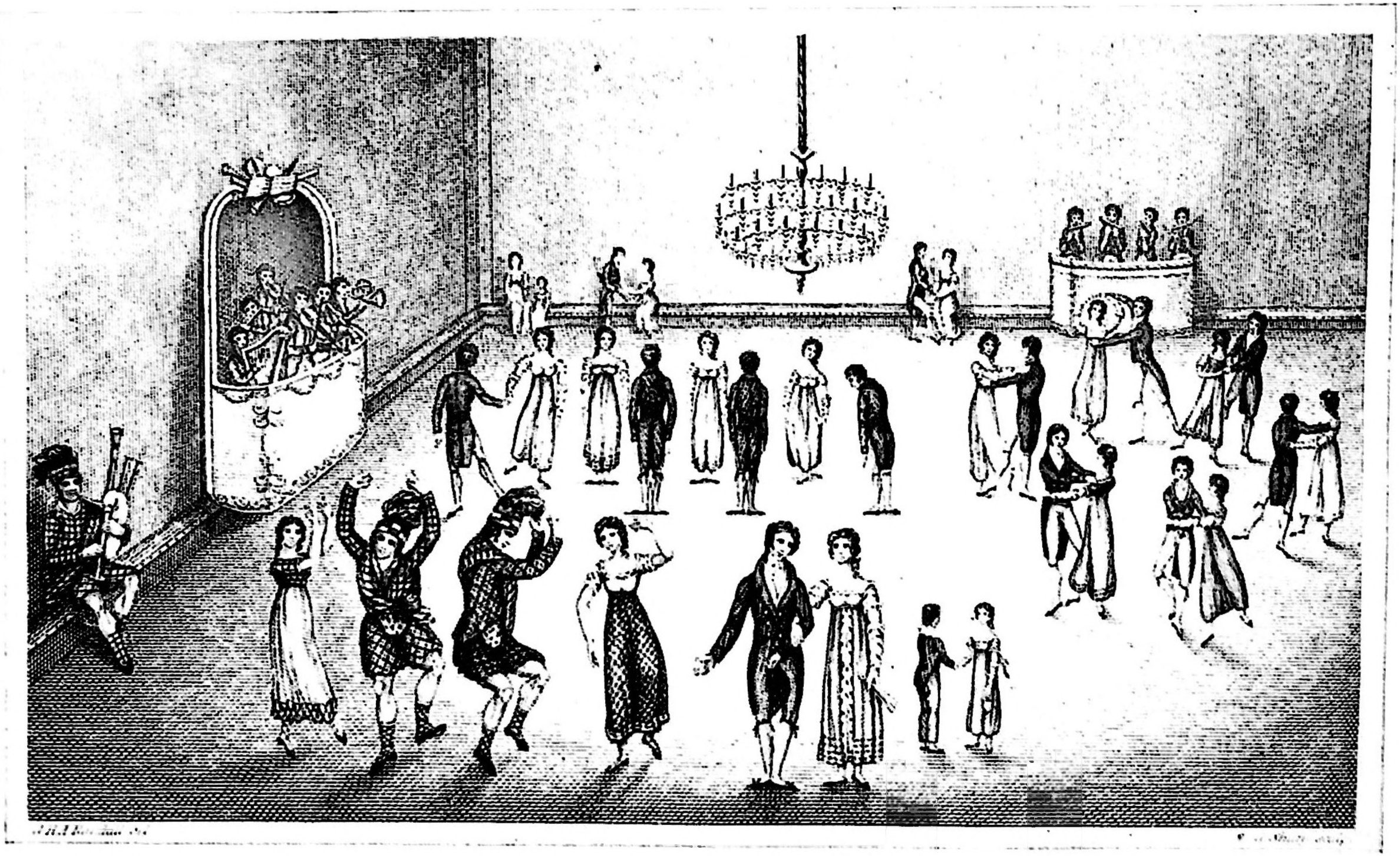


PLATE VI Frontispiece to Thomas Wilson's *Companion to the Ballroom* (1816), showing a Reel, a Country Dance and a Waltz.

Wilson, and also that of 'the common Reel of five', which was added 'to render the work more complete'. The second edition of the *Analysis*, published in 1811, is a much larger book, which contains not only diagrams of Country Dance figures (including many of Wilson's own ideas), but also elaborate rules which enable the reader to compose Country Dances for himself, together with hints on technique and etiquette. The section on Reels is extended, and it now includes descriptions of a 'Reel of Three' and a 'Reel of Four'. A recension of the *Analysis* entitled *The Complete System of English Country Dancing* appeared in 1821, and in this Wilson prefaced the descriptions of the Reels of Three and Four with the following introduction:

> *The Old Scotch Threesome and Foursome Reels.* These reels have for a number of years been a very favorite, and most generally approved species of dancing, not only with the English, but also with the Irish and Scotch, and particularly with the latter, from whom they derive their origin. They have, likewise, been introduced into most of the foreign Courts of Europe, and are universally practised in all our extensive Colonies, and so marked in their favoritism, that not only among the amusements afforded at all Balls, these reels are invariably introduced, but Assemblies are very frequently held for the purpose of dancing them only . . .

Before describing Wilson's versions of the Threesome and Foursome Reels we mention two further sources, almost contemporary with Wilson, which contain a little detailed information about Reels.

One of these is Barclay Dun's *Translation of nine of the most fashionable Quadrilles . . .*, published in Edinburgh in 1818,[18] which gives an incomplete description of the Foursome Reel, here called 'the Scotch Reel'.

The second is a manuscript entitled *Contre-Danses à Paris* 1818 in the National Library of Scotland (N.L.S. MS 3860). The title of this manuscript is misleading, for the author was evidently an expert on dancing in Scotland, and the manuscript, which is written in English, is concerned primarily with Scottish practice. It is in the form of a small bound notebook, and contains descriptions of steps and figures used in Reels, Country Dances, and Quadrilles, together with the descriptions of a few Country Dances. The numbering of the pages is not consecutive, suggesting that the manuscript may consist of extracts from some larger manuscript or printed work, but no such larger work is known either in this country or in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The manuscript was bought some years ago in a Paris bookshop by a London bookdealer, and nothing is known of its origin. It is possible that it was written by a Scottish dancing-master while studying in Paris under one of the leading French masters.

The descriptions of the Foursome Reel given in these various sources are best discussed with reference to the version of the dance that was most widely used within living memory. In this version, the setting steps are performed with the dancers in a line of four, with the ladies at the ends facing inwards and the men back to back in the centre. The dancers begin the 'reel of four' (Fig. 1(a)) by passing the person facing

them with the right shoulder, so that the end loops are described clockwise; each lady dances the complete figure and returns to her own place, while the men exchange places by omitting the last half of the centre loop. To begin the dance, the dancers stand in a line of four, facing partners, with the men in the centre, and the dance commences with the 'reel of four', followed by setting, then the 'reel of four' again, and so on, each man setting first to the opposite lady, then to his partner, and so alternately. There is also an alternative starting position for the dance, with partners side-by-side facing the opposite couple, each man having his partner on his right. Whichever starting position is used, the setting is always performed with the dancers in line.

The version of the Foursome Reel described by Wilson in his *Analysis* of 1811 differs from this traditional version in several ways. In Wilson's version the dance begins with the dancers in a line of four, with the *men* at the ends and the ladies back to back in the centre. Further, the dancers begin the 'reel of four' by passing with the *left* shoulder (so that the end loops are described anti-clockwise), and *all* the dancers return to their original places, where they set to partners. In *The Complete System* of 1821 Wilson adds a footnote to say the dancers 'may, with equal propriety', begin the 'reel of four' with the right shoulder.[19]

Barclay Dun's description gives only the starting positions (in line) and the initial movements of the dancers in the 'reel of four', and, as far as it goes, it agrees exactly with the traditional version, *i.e.* the men are in the centre, and the reel is 'right-shoulder'.

The manuscript *Contre-Danses à Paris* gives only the pattern of the 'reel of four', and, as in Wilson's first version, the dancers begin by passing with left shoulders. The manuscript does not give the position of the men and ladies, but it does mention that the men set alternately to the ladies, so that there is some change of position with each 'reel of four'.

The manuscript mentions also an alternative travelling figure in which the dancers follow each other round in an elongated circle, and it adds the comment 'that the practice of going quite round [in the circle] is not nearly so elegant [as the "reel of four"] but it was introduced from England two or three years ago under the name of "fashionable", most probably because in England this reel was never properly understood or valued'. We return to this circle figure in the next section.

None of these sources mentions the alternative side-by-side starting position of the traditional version.

The Threesome Reel (or Reel of Three), like the Foursome Reel, consists of alternate reeling and setting, and here the reeling figure is the well-known 'reel of three', in the pattern of a figure 8 (Fig. 1(b)). In the *Analysis* of 1811 Wilson states that the dance can be performed by either a man and two ladies or a lady and two men, and that the dancers start in a line of three with the odd person in the middle facing one of the others. The reeling figure is begun by the two dancers who are initially facing each other passing with the left shoulders, and all three return to their own places. In *The Complete System* Wilson adds that in each setting period the centre person sets for half

the time to one partner, then sets for the remaining time to the other, and then turns back to the first partner to begin the reeling figure. He also mentions another version in which each dancer comes into the centre in turn.

The manuscript *Contre-Danses à Paris* gives both the versions of the Threesome Reel described by Wilson, and it also specifies that in the version where the dancers change position this is achieved by the centre person and one partner repeating half a loop of the 'reel of three'. However, it does not state the direction of the 'reel of three'.

Following the books of Wilson and Dun and the Paris manuscripts, we have a long series of small pocket ballroom guides and other books published by Scottish dancing-masters,[20] of which the earliest containing information about Reels is *Lowe's Ball-Conductor and Assembly Guide*, published by J., R., J., and J. S. Lowe, four members of a family of dancing-teachers. This work ran through several editions, and the only surviving copies known to us are a copy of the third edition, *c.* 1830, in the National Library of Scotland, and an incomplete copy of a later edition, *c.* 1860, in our possession. The first author, Joseph Lowe, taught in Edinburgh in the winter and in Inverness in the summer, and *circa* 1840 was the leading member of his profession in Scotland. At the time of the third edition, the other three authors covered between them the towns of Glasgow, Perth, Dundee, Montrose, Brechin, Arbroath, and Elgin, as well as parts of Fife!

The *Ball-Conductor* contains descriptions of Reels of Four, Five, and Six. In the Foursome Reel the Lowes place the ladies at the ends, as in the traditional version, but they do not state the direction of the 'reel of four'. They are also the first to mention the alternative side-by-side starting position.

The Foursome Reel is described in every Scottish ballroom guide subsequent to 1830, and in every case the description agrees with that of the traditional version. On the other hand, the Threesome Reel is described only by J. G. Atkinson in his *Scottish National Dances* (Atkinson 1900), and his description agrees with that of the first version described by Wilson. We ourselves have never met anyone in Scotland who has actually danced the Threesome Reel as a social dance, though one of our informants remembered having seen it performed several times in his youth, at Tomnahurich Bridge near Inverness, about the year 1895. In view of its omission from the Lowes' *Ball-Conductor*, it seems probable that it began to drop out of use about 1820. There is also confirmation of this in the manuscript records of the piping and dancing competitions organised by the Highland Society of Edinburgh, for, from at least 1816 onwards the only Reels performed at the competitions were for four dancers (Flett 1956*b*).

The West Highland circular Reel and its allied forms

In order to complete our history of the Threesome and Foursome Reels, it is necessary to take into account another group of Reels, of which the most widely known was the West Highland circular Reel. This circular Reel is a dance for two couples, its travelling

figure being a simple circle in which the dancers follow each other round in a clockwise direction, without joining hands.

To begin, the dancers stand beside their partners, each lady on her partner's right, facing the other couple. The ladies start by passing across in front of their partners, and the men join in the circle behind them. They all finish in a line of four, and set to partners. The circle figure and setting are now repeated as often as desired, all the setting being performed in line as before.

There is good evidence that this dance was once the principal Reel in the Western Highlands and the Western Isles, and that in these areas the ordinary Foursome Reel with its 'reel of four' was introduced only comparatively recently. This evidence is provided partly by our own researches in Scotland (Flett 1953–4; TDS: 156–9), and partly by the researches of Dr Frank Rhodes in Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia (published in the appendix to TDS).

We have ourselves recorded the circular Reel in the mainland districts of Moidart, Morar, and Arisaig, and the islands of Barra, South Uist, Benbecula, Eigg, and Skye. In South Uist, Benbecula, Eigg, and the Torrin district of Skye, the circular Reel was in general use up to about 1885 or even later, and at that time the Foursome Reel with its 'reel of four' was not danced at all there. In the other places mentioned, Moidart, Morar, Arisaig, and Barra, the circular Reel was understood to have been the 'original' Reel for four danced there, but the actual date when it began to be replaced by the Foursome Reel was outside living memory.

This information, which was gathered in 1953–6, enables us to speak with absolute certainty only for the period from about 1860 onwards. However, the information gathered by Dr Rhodes in Cape Breton Island provides evidence covering a much earlier period.

The western part of Cape Breton Island was largely settled *c.* 1800–1820 by emigrants from the Western Isles and the West Highlands, and also from more central regions of the Highlands such as Lochaber (the eastern part of the island was settled earlier by emigrants from all parts of Britain). Among the descendants of these Scottish settlers, the only social dances of Scottish origin found by Dr Rhodes were 'four-handed Reels', together with traces of 'eight-handed Reels' and a few of the old Gaelic dance games.

The 'four-handed Reel' existed in a variety of forms, and most of these had close affinities with the form of circular Reel described above, *i.e.* they consisted of setting steps danced on the spot alternated with a circling figure, the setting steps being performed with the dancers either in a line or in a square formation. The most primitive version found by Dr Rhodes was in square formation, with the women on their partner's left, facing the opposite couple, and the dancers simply alternately circled clockwise (one behind the other) and set to their partners, without changing their relative positions. Other versions more closely resembled the circular Reel described above.

Up to 1939 the Foursome Reel with its 'reel of four' was known only to those people on Cape Breton Island who had travelled outside the island, and Dr Rhodes could find no indication that it was ever danced among the descendants of the old Scottish settlers. From this evidence, together with that from Scotland itself, we may reasonably infer that the Foursome Reel was absent from the West Highlands and the Western Isles at the time, *c.* 1800–20, when the emigrants left for Cape Breton Island, and indeed right up to about 1870, and that the circular Reel was then in general use in those parts of Scotland. It is possibly this use of the circular Reel to which Alexander Campbell was referring when he wrote in 1798 in the passage quoted earlier that the people of the North Highlands and the Western Isles 'dance, in a manner peculiar to those parts of the Hebrides' (Campbell 1798).

We have already mentioned in the preceding section that the circle figure is given in the manuscript *Contre-Danses à Paris 1818* as an alternative to the 'reel of four' in the Foursome Reel, with the comment that the circle figure was introduced from England. Since the circle figure was then quite widely used in parts of Scotland, this comment seems unlikely, to say the least. The circle is also given as an alternative to the 'reel of four' by Atkinson in his *Scottish National Dances* (Atkinson 1900), but apart from these two occurrences it is not mentioned in the literature.

The existence of the circular Reel in Nova Scotia and the absence there of the Foursome Reel were first brought to light by Mr Angus MacDonald, the late premier of Nova Scotia, in a letter to Professor Thurston (Thurston 1954). On the basis of this letter Professor Thurston inferred that the circular Reel was the predecessor of the Foursome Reel in Scotland, but the evidence from oral tradition concerning the distribution of the two dances in Scotland itself was not then available.

We should add that the circular Reel, both in Scotland and in Nova Scotia, was performed to a combination of reel and strathspey tunes. However, in Nova Scotia the tempo for reels was about 52 bars per minute (*i.e.* slower than the traditional Scottish tempo), while that for strathspeys was about 44–48 bars per minute (*i.e.* faster than the traditional Scottish tempo of 40–42 bars per minute).

A number of other Reels have been recorded in the West Highlands and the Western Isles which have obvious affinities with the circular Reel. Two of these are Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha (The Reel of the Blackcocks) and Cath nan Coileach (The Combat of the Cocks), which were performed in Barra up to about 1885. Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha is essentially a version of the circular Reel containing an element of mime occasioned by the words of the dance-song with the same title[21]; it differs from the circular Reel principally in that the four dancers join hands in a ring for the circling figure.

Cath nan Coileach is also a dance for two couples, who stand in the form of a cross, opposite to their partners, with whom they join crossed hands. The hand-holds are retained throughout the dance, which consists of alternate setting and circling. It is performed to a 6/8 jig, and alternate repetitions of the complete sequence of setting

and circling are danced at tempos of about 60–64 bars per minute (*i.e.* normal quick tempo) and about 75–80 bars per minute (*i.e.* as fast as the piper can play!).

The titles of both these dances are mentioned by Alexander Carmichael in his *Carmina Gadelica* (Carmichael 1900:208–9), but he gives no description of them. Both were recorded by us in 1953, and precise descriptions can be found in Flett 1953–4 and in TDS, chapter 6.

We should add that another dance called Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha was collected by Dr Rhodes both in South Uist and Cape Breton Island. This too is danced by two couples, but it involves alternate swinging and a crossing figure (TDS: 172, 278–9).

Another dance which is obviously derived from the circular Reel is The Eight Men of Moidart, which belonged to the district of Glenuig in Moidart. This fine dance is a 'double' version of the circular Reel, in which two circular Reels are performed simultaneously in a 'St Andrew's cross' formation, the two circles being flattened and interlaced (Fig. 1(e)). It was first recorded by Dr Rhodes and one of the authors in 1956, and a detailed description is given in TDS, chapter 6.

The only other Reel which has affinities with the circular Reel is Ruidhleadh Mòr (The Big Reel), which is essentially a version of the circular Reel for as many dancers as please. It was performed up to about 1895 in the Torrin district of Skye, where one of our informants had seen it danced at a wedding (Flett 1953–4; TDS: 159). On that occasion the twenty or so people present formed one big ring round the room. When the music began—the dance was performed to reels throughout—the dancers moved round clockwise in a circle, one behind the other (without joining hands), then stopped and danced ordinary Reel setting steps, then danced round in the circle again, and so on.

It should be noted that the most primitive version of the Cape Breton 'four-handed Reel' recorded by Dr Rhodes has precisely the same form as this dance.

It is interesting to observe that, although the traditional evidence proves that the circular Reel was the principal Reel in use in the West Highlands and the Western Isles from at least 1800 to about 1870, the existence of this dance cannot be deduced from any literary references, either in a printed work or in a manuscript, before about 1950. All we have are the references in the Paris Manuscript and in Atkinson's book to the circle figure as an alternative to the reel of four, and these give no indication that the figures belonged to different dances, while the Paris Manuscript adds the misleading information that the circle figure came from England.[22] Moreover, the only reference before 1950 to the four allied dances described above is Carmichael's mention of the names of Cath nan Coileach and Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha in 1900, and this reference does not allow us to assert even that these dances were Reels. *Thus a widely distributed type of dance can exist for 150 years and yet leave so little trace in the contemporary literature that its existence would not even be suspected by a dance-historian who relied on literary evidence alone.*

The circular Reel, particularly in the primitive form discovered by Dr Rhodes in

Cape Breton Island, and in its 'big' form Ruidhleadh Mòr, is an unsophisticated dance which could be of very great antiquity. Moreover, many parts of the West Highlands and the Western Isles retained their Catholic faith throughout the Reformation period, so that social dancing would have taken place there in an unbroken tradition dating back to mediaeval times, and the circular Reel could be part of this tradition.

It is possible that the big Reel, Ruidhleadh Mòr, is actually the progenitor of the circular Reel, for it would obviously have been well suited to the old 'black houses' of the West Highlands and the Western Isles, with the fire in the middle of the floor—the dancers could simply have circled the fire. It is also possible that Ruidhleadh Mòr is itself in turn descended from some mediaeval ring dance, in which the ring of linked hands was broken while the dancers performed steps on the spot. In this connection, it is of interest to note that John Leyden, writing in 1801, records that, although the Ring Dance, which 'was formerly a favourite in the south of Scotland, . . . has now gone into desuetude', it 'is still retained among the Scottish Highlanders, who frequently dance the Ring in the open fields, when they visit the south of Scotland as reapers, during the Autumnal months' (Leyden 1801).

We should mention also that we have recorded a dance on Eigg, An Dannsa Mòr (The Big Dance), which may be a survival of a ring dance of the type of the mediaeval carole. In this dance, which was performed by men only, to a particular song, the dancers form a ring round the room. The verses are sung by two of the dancers who come inside the ring to do so, each singing alternate lines, while the other dancers stand still. These two men then jump back into the ring, and all the dancers join in the chorus as they dance round with linked hands (Flett 1953–4).

The origins of the Threesome and Foursome Reels

We have seen in the preceding sections that a Threesome Reel was the earliest form of Reel to be recorded when social dancing again became generally possible in Scotland at the end of the seventeenth century. Explicit references to Reels for four occur only much later, the earliest being that of Topham in 1776, but we can infer from Peacock's mention of the Scotch Reel as a 'quartett or trio' that Reels for four were almost certainly known in 1747, when Peacock first began teaching. Although there remains a disparity of nearly 40 years between this last date and the earliest reference to a Threesome Reel (in 1710), it would be rash to conclude that the Foursome Reel was unknown at the beginning of the eighteenth century, for the example of the circular Reel shows that a dance may exist for far longer than 40 years and yet leave no trace in the contemporary literature.

The eighteenth century Threesome Reel almost certainly possessed the characteristic Reel structure, its travelling figure being the 'reel of three', in the pattern of a figure 8. We cannot be so certain that the travelling figure in the early Foursome Reel was the

'reel of four', but it is extremely likely that this was so, and that the Foursome Reel of Topham, Burns, the Duke of Gordon and Riddell was more or less the Foursome Reel as known today. Further, if our theories concerning the antiquity of the circular Reel are correct, we may also infer that the Threesome and Foursome Reels are primarily dances of the Eastern Highlands and the Lowlands.

It is obvious from these remarks that the origins of the Threesome Reel, and possibly also those of the Foursome Reel, must be sought in the period before 1700, but for this period the Scottish evidence is fragmentary. However, a possible clue may be found in the fact that the 'reel of three' figure of the Threesome Reel is the same as the English figure 'hey' (for three).

The English figure 'hey' is derived from one or more dances known by the name *Hey* or *Hay*. The earliest occurrences given by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED for short) are in the works of John Skelton (1529): 'Enforce me nothing to write but hay the gy of thre', and 'To dauns the hay and run the ray'. Further references to 'hay the gy', with spellings varying from 'Hey de Gie' to 'hey-day guise' (Hey de Guise?) continue up to 1638 (see Cunningham 1962), though it is not certain that all these refer to the same dance, and only the passage from Skelton quoted above specifies the number of dancers.

In addition to these references to 'hay the gy', there are also numerous further references to dances simply called Heys (Heyes, Hays), continuing to an even later date than those to 'hay the gy' (see, *e.g.* note 12). It is not clear whether the earliest uses of the term Hey refer to a type of dance rather than to a single specific dance, but certainly by about 1590 the word Hey was used, both in England and France, to mean a general type of dance or dance figure in which the dancers wound in and out among each other (for instance, Sir John Davies in his poem Orchestra (1596; see Cunningham 1962) speaks of 'winding Heyes'; *cf.* also Butler (1609; quoted in OED), 'playing in and out as if they were dancing the Hey', and Arbeau, *Orchesographie* (Arbeau 1588, fo. 90 r°), 'Les danceurs . . . s'entrelacent & font la haye les uns parmy les aultres'). This usage is still strongly evident some fifty years later in the earliest extant collections of English Country Dances (Playford's *The English Dancing Master*, London 1651, and the British Museum Sloan Ms 3858, *c.* 1645), and there the figures called Heys include heys for three and four in a line, a 'double hey' for six, a hey for four in a square, and, in a long line, 'the single Hey all handing as you pass till you come to your own places'. Most of these figures disappeared in the next 50 years as the longways progressive Country Dances slowly superseded the earlier forms (SCD 1: 7), and by about 1730 the only surviving hey in English Country Dancing was the hey for three.

It is of particular interest that Sir William Davenant in one of his plays (1656; quoted in OED) refers to an 'Irish hey', for in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the word Irish could mean 'belonging to the Scottish Highlands or the Gaelic inhabitants of them'.[23]

The word hey is derived from the French *haie* or *haye*, a hedge, with derivative

meanings of a row of shrubs or stakes forming a hedge, thence a row or line of people (particularly troops), and thence a dance.

The number three in the earliest reference to the 'hay the gy' is suggestive of the three dancers in the Threesome Reel, and it is possible that about the year 1500 a dance, involving a figure similar to the 'reel of three' or 'hey for three', was imported from France to both Scotland and England, and that this dance was the original source from which both the Threesome Reel in Scotland and the Hey in England descended. A possible candidate here is the 'haye d'Alemaigne' mentioned in 1538 in the works of the French poet Marot[24] (Mayer 1964:107), for this, under the title 'alman haye', is one of the dances listed in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (Murray 1872–3:66).

It is obvious that any dance which was imported from the Continent would be more likely to be a court dance than a folk dance, and this accords with the nature of the Threesome Reel and the 'hay the gy of thre', for the uneven matching of the sexes in these two dances is suggestive of the artificial atmosphere of a Court, where 'one saw . . . between two ladies fair a knight unblemished dance'. The word 'reeling' might well have been applied in Scotland to the figure of such a dance,[25] and in time this could have led to the name Reel being applied to the dance as a whole.

If the Threesome Reel were a development during the sixteenth century from such an importation, then it is likely that the Foursome Reel also developed at about the same time, for we might expect the development of these dances in Scotland to parallel that of the Hey in England. The subsequent disappearance in Scotland of forms involving more than three or four dancers could well have been caused by the religious prohibitions on social dancing during the seventeenth century, for only compact forms such as the Threesome and Foursome Reels would have been suitable for performance in secret behind closed doors and shutters.

This theory, that the Threesome and Foursome Reels were derived from some importation from Europe, would also explain the restriction of the Threesome and Foursome Reels to the Lowlands and the Eastern Highlands, for any such imported dance would certainly have arrived first in the Lowlands, and would then have spread slowly into the more accessible parts of the Highlands as it was adapted to the native idiom.

Appendix

The Strathspey Minuet and the Jig

A short account of the history of the Strathspey Minuet has been given (in Flett 1956*b*), and here we amplify only one or two points.

The Strathspey Minuet is first mentioned on the occasion when Prince Charles visited Lude House in 1745 (see above). That it was a dance for two is clear from a reference to it in 1756 when two Scots danced it at a ballroom run by a Scotsman in Spa in Belgium: 'There was a family of Jews there . . . [who] were the keenest dancers

and the worst at it ever was. . . . Lady Hellen and Lord Garless danced a strathspey minuet; whenever the Jews saw that they fell to it, they lap, they flaghtered so like hens with their feet tied together, that you might have bound the whole company with a straw' (Calderwood 1756).

The Strathspey Minuet is almost certainly the same as the 'Straspae' which was seen by Topham in the Edinburgh ballrooms in 1774–5. This was again a dance for two people, 'a kind of quick minuet. . . . We in England are said to *walk* a minuet: this is gallopping a minuet . . . every idea of grace seems inverted and the whole is a burlesque: Nothing of the minuet is preserved except the figure; the steps and time most resemble a hornpipe' (Topham 1776).

Riddell, in his note on the tune Symon Brodie quoted above, says that the Strathspey, as a dance for two persons, belonged to the 'Highland and Northern Shires', and refers to the Jig as being the counterpart of the Strathspey 'in the Midland Counties'. The Jig is also mentioned by John MacDonald, a coachman, who performed it *circa* 1778 at a ball given by a gentleman's servant to his friends in London. MacDonald first danced a minuet with his partner. Then

> when we had danced the minuet, I asked the favour of the lady to dance a jig; she answered she would. She buttoned up the skirts of her gown, and I called for Lady Kitty Carstair's Reel. We both danced together in the form of the minuet, though quick. When we were done, the company called *encore, encore* (MacDonald 1790).

Riddell comments that in 1794 these dances were becoming obsolete, and nothing more is heard of the Jig after that date. However, the Strathspey was resurrected for a brief period by the organising Committee of the Edinburgh piping and dancing competitions. In 1812 the Committee resolved 'that Robert Gunn, Alexander MacLellan and two others dance a Strathspey Reel at the Competition if they can be learned to do so against next year'. The 'Strathspey Reel' here may be a copyist's mistake for 'Strathspey', or may have been a genuine misunderstanding on the part of the Committee. In any case, whatever the intention of the Committee, the dance which Robert Gunn and his fellows brought to the competitions in 1813 in response to this resolution was the twasome Strathspey. This dance was almost certainly the same as the Strathspey Minuet, and it was performed regularly at the competitions until 1832. At the next competition, in 1835, there was one competitor who wished to perform it, but no one could be found to partner him, and there appears to have been no fresh move to preserve the dance (Flett 1956*b*).

At this period the Strathspey was presumably almost an exhibition piece, and at the Peer's Ball on the occasion of the visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822 'a lady and a gentleman in a Highland dress danced a strathspey with much taste, which the King so much admired, that he clapped his hands in token of approbation' (Mudie 1822). However, not even royal approbation was enough to restore the dance to popularity, and it does not seem to have survived in the ballroom after this date.

NOTES

1 The confusion also extends to tunes, and the name 'reel' is nowadays often wrongly applied to other quick common time tunes such as Scotch measures. Properly, a reel (we use the small 'r' in contrast to the capital 'R' for Reels as dances) is a very smoothly flowing tune—good examples are 'The High Road to Linton' and 'Mrs Macleod of Raasay'. The essential musical rhythm of a reel is a quaver rhythm, and the four beats in each bar are almost evenly accented. A Scotch measure is a much more 'bouncy' tune than a reel, typical examples being 'Corn Rigs' and 'Flowers of Edinburgh'; it has a crotchet rhythm, with two main beats, and two weaker beats, in each bar.

2 This and other Reels were often performed with only men or only women taking part. However, since we are writing here of social dances, we assume in our descriptions of dances that they are being performed by both sexes together.

3 For an account of the development of the modern Eightsome Reel see Flett 1966–7: part III.

4 There is one point in SCD 1 where we may not have been sufficiently explicit. Our remarks there concerning the religious disapproval of dancing during the seventeenth century refer to *social* dancing by *adults*. There are a number of references from this period in old family papers concerning payment of fees for dancing lessons for children, which indicate that children were encouraged to dance, as a healthy form (indeed possibly the only form) of exercise. On the other hand, social dancing by adults, in which members of the opposite sex danced together, was 'promiscuous dancing', and, as such, came under the condemnation of the Church. We do not know of any explicit references to social dancing in seventeenth century Scotland where the dancing did not evoke censure by the Church, though there are perhaps two implicit references. These occur in the Journals of Sir John Lauder, Lord Fountainhall (Lauder 1900), and refer to payments to musicians at the weddings of two of Sir John's servants, in 1670 and 1673: it is a fair assumption that the presence of musicians implies dancing.

5 A vivid account of a situation of this type in Lewis in the nineteenth century is given by Alexander Carmichael in his *Carmina Gadelica* (Carmichael 1900: xxv).

6 The account of the history of reels and strathspeys that follows is an amplification of what we have written in Flett 1956*b*.

7 As far as we know, the first occurrence of a tune labelled 'reel' is in Henry Playford's *A Collection of Original Scotch-Tunes* (London, 1700). The tune in question is 'The comers [cummers] of Largo, A reell', and is in 9/8 time!

In George Skene's Music Book, 'A Reell Jannie' is in 12/8 time, but all the other tunes from this manuscript listed here are in common time.

8 Between 1700 and 1775 there are some fourteen references to Reels as dances. We quote all those of value, omitting only those of the 'lambkins dance reels on the green' type.

9 A very similar account is given in Mounsey 1846.

10 A writer in *Notes and Queries* in 1861 put forward the theory that the term 'strathspey', referring to a dance (and so presumably to a tune as well), was a popular corruption of the word 'stravetspy', said to be the name of a dance mentioned in the works of Zachary Boyd, *c.* 1610. However, as remarked in Flett 1955, the writer's 'stravetspy' is probably a misreading of 'strive to essay', and is certainly not the name of a dance.

11 We are indebted to Dr. J. L. Campbell of Canna for telling us of the existence of this cartoon.

12 The first precise description of the 'hey' occurs in Nicholas Duke's *A concise and easy method of learning the figuring of country dancing* (London, 1752), and is given by means of a diagram. However, there is a much earlier description implicit in a passage in the play *The Rehearsal* by George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham, published in 1672. In this passage, a playwright explains how he would attempt to represent on the stage an eclipse of the sun followed on the same day (!) by an eclipse of the moon:

'But, Sir, you have heard, I suppose, that your Eclipse of the Moon, is nothing else, but an interposition of the Earth, between the Sun and Moon: as likewise your Eclipse of the Sun is caus'd by an interlocation of the Moon, betwixt the Earth and Sun? . . . Well, Sir; what do I, but make the Earth, Sun, and Moon, come out upon the Stage, and dance the Hey. . . . And, of necessity, by the very nature of this Dance, the Earth must be sometimes between the Sun and the Moon, and the Moon between the Earth and Sun; and there you have both your Eclipses. That is new, I gad, ha?' (Arber 1869).

13 The reference here to steps as 'hornpipe steps' does not necessarily imply any particular style of performance, since at this period the term 'hornpipe' seemed to apply to any solo step or dance.

14 Peacock's descriptions of steps are too long to be reproduced here. Some information about them can be found in TDS, chapter 5.

15 For further information about the solo and dramatic dances mentioned by Campbell see Flett 1956*a*.

16 It should be noted that the Allemand (Allaman) was originally a non-progressive figure. The progressive figure of this name used in present-day Scottish Country Dancing seems to be a modern invention.

17 In the original this parenthesis is a footnote.

18 Barclay Dun was a dancing-master who practised in Edinburgh from about 1800 to at least 1838.

19 We recorded a version of the Foursome Reel in Roxburghshire and Berwickshire in which the strathspey portion was exactly as in Wilson's last description (TDS: 147). The starting-position with the men at the ends also survives in two Four-handed Reels recorded in Dorset and Devon by the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

20 A list of these ballroom guides, many of which are now very rare, can be found in the bibliography in TDS.

21 On the subject of such miming, see Flett 1956*a*.

22 The circle figure is also used as one of the movements in the earliest recorded version of the Reel of Tulloch, in 1844 (see part II of this article), but again there is nothing to indicate the existence of the circular Reel as a separate dance.

23 For example, Skelton in 1529 speaks of Scottish Highlanders as 'Irish keterings', while Spottiswood in 1655 (quoted in OED) says 'We oft finde the Scots called Irishes, like as we yet term commonly our Highlandmen, in regard they speak the Irish language'.

24 The words occur in *Le Temple de Cupido*, in an edition of Marot's works published in 1538:

'Les hayes d'Alemaigne frisques;
Passepiedz, Bransles, Tourdions'.

The poem was written *c.* 1515, but in a version published at about that date the two lines above appear differently, *viz*:

'Branles gays alemandes frisques
Basses dances et Tordions'

(Mayer 1964: 107). The OED refers to the former version as '15th century French'.

Huguet's *Dictionnaire de la Langue Francaise du Seizième Siècle* mentions also a reference to a 'haye de Bretaigne' [Brittany] in Marot's works. We are indebted to Professor Mayer for the information that the reference actually occurs in an anonymous poem *Epitre du Biau fys de Pazy*, first published in 1549:

'Pour dansez haye de Bretaigne
Et les passepié d'Allemaigne'.

25 The use of the word *reel* to mean to waver, to stagger, and to sway unsteadily from side to side, goes back to about 1400 (OED).

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