

BALLAUGH AND THE FLITTER DANCE *



The Flitter Dance was collected by Mona Douglas from three individuals on the evidence of a notebook now amongst her personal papers in the MNHL. Her first informant was Eleanor Callow of Cardle Veg in Maughold. She recalled the dance as a young girl when it was performed on Good Friday, presumably on the shore at Cornaa, with a fire made of ‘*mychurachan*’ [ie, *moirchooraghyn*, ‘driftwood’] over which cakes were baked without any metal utensils being involved. Flitters were baked in their shells and these were subsequently eaten with the griddle cakes and milk. “Then food, milk, & a sod from the fire were thrown into the sea with a spoken charm, & after this everyone danced.” However, Callow did not remember the dance at all: “Could get no details, but that they were in couples & in a long line that wound round & about in a sort of S shape.” It was to be Ada Skillicorn, her third informant, again of Maughold, who remembered “the dance being performed on the Dhoon beach about 1900. Took part in it herself as a child & showed me steps & movements.” The notation of her dance is then recorded by Douglas. What then of Ballaugh? That lies with her second informant and the passage reads in full:

THE FLITTER DANCE

Mrs Teare, Ballaugh, also remembers this dance, & says it was just a sort of extension of the game “Pancakes & Flitters,” & was done to the singing of that rhyme, in English, at Ballaugh about 40 years ago, but there was there none of the food ceremony except that they made a fire on the shore & cooked oats & flitters there.

The rhyme is pretty well known itself as a children’s game, but it may as well go down here:

Pancakes & Flitters
is the way of cantailers,
I owe you my treasure
I’ll pay when I find it:
I’ll give you tomorrow
The first of my fortune:
Here comes the candle to light you to bed,
And here comes the tide for to drown your head

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“MRS TEARE, BALLAUGH”

The inevitable question is, of course, who was “Mrs Teare, Ballaugh.” There is, as can be seen, little as such to go on, no first name or initial even, nor where she was living in Ballaugh. The collecting of the dances was carried out in the 1920s, and with no access to the 1921 census, one has to fall back on the Valuations Lists for the parish—the (disgraceful) destruction of the Electoral Registers has clearly removed that source from consideration.

Teare is not a common name in the parish it must be said, though there is more than one family with that surname. Nevertheless, the list for 1924 throws up an Elizabeth Teare assessed for Ballacrosha. She was enumerated in 1901 as a Manx speaker, aged 54, born in Andreas, and living at “Railway View” with her husband, Philip Teare (53), the Coroner for Michael who spoke only English. Their son, Philip (25), was a baker, while Elizabeth (27), was a millner. A granddaughter, Millie [*ie*, Millicent] (3) was also living with them. The household was completed by Evan Gell (25), of Peel, who worked as a baker. Philip Teare Senior died aged 73 and was buried in Ballaugh on 25 May 1921. Clearly then, the property was inherited by Elizabeth and so the entry in the Valuation List for 1924. She later dies in 1933 aged 87 and was buried 8 December that year in Ballaugh.

She certainly falls in the age category that folklore collectors target, *ie*, the oldest inhabitants who can be found in a parish and there is here the added interest that she was also a native speaker of Manx. In any case, regardless of the identification suggested here, we can see Mona Douglas here collecting on the Northside of the Island in Ballaugh. We now know that the Flitter Dance was known in Ballaugh, danced on the shore there on Good Friday.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2016

