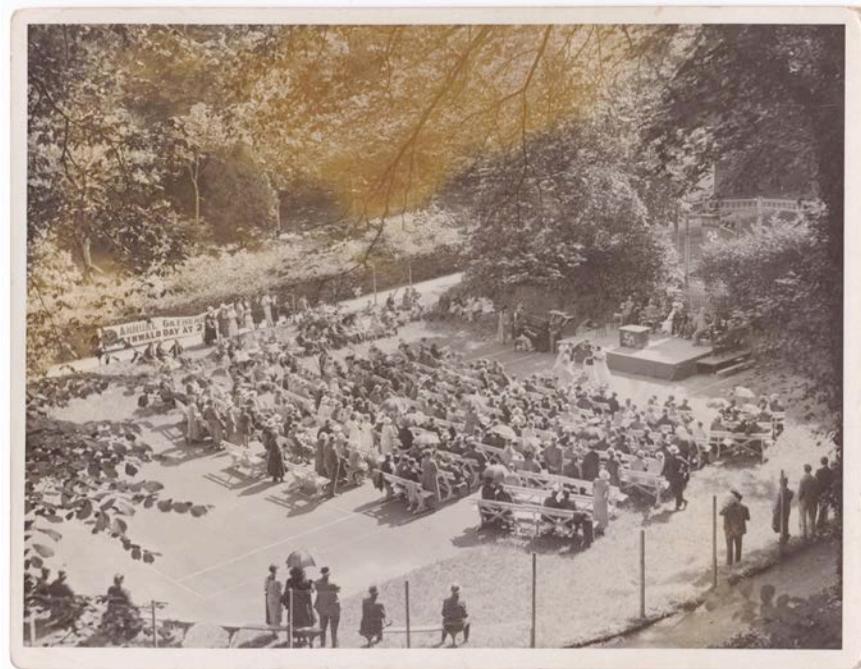


PHILIP LEIGHTON STOWELL

“MY FOLK DANCING DAYS”



AMUSING INCIDENTS WHICH HAVE
OCCURRED IN MY FOLK DANCING DAYS
(1965)

FOLK DANCING IN THE ISLE OF MAN
(1965)

CHIOLLAGH BOOKS
FOR
CULTURE VANNIN
2018

PHILIP LEIGHTON STOWELL

AMUSING INCIDENTS WHICH HAVE
OCCURRED IN MY FOLK DANCING DAYS

(1965)

[9] It was only this summer my wife and I met an old man near the Chasms and, being a true son of Manxland, he wanted to know who we were. After finding out he was a distant relative of my wife, he said to me, "Ah, I know you alright. You're the fella that dances up an' down the street in the Port with your braces on!" (Referring I presume to my Morris baldricks I wore in street dancing!)

Some years ago when my team was dancing behind the Castletown band through the streets of the town on the Agricultural Show Day, the route included the Crofts. Outside one house, by the pavement, workmen had dumped a large heap of wet sand, into which half of us plunged to the amusement of onlookers and the detriment of our white flannels, so that by the time we reached the Square, we did not look particularly handsome!

In 1951, when I was rehearsing the Jig in Demesne Road School, I spent over an hour practising with about thirty dancers, and I was most emphatic that they should "hold the stance" in the final salute. First one would fall over, then another, then another—all expert dancers, so at least I showed them how to do it myself, and after a lot of effort it was perfect. *Then*, we went to the Festival of Mann Pageant at Peel, where the massed Jig was to be performed. I danced in front with Walter Clarke and Arthur Watterson, and everything went well—then came the final salute AND I was the only one who fell flat on his face! I haven't got over the veiled grins of the dancers to this day!

I suppose many of you remember how we danced at The Nunnery the next week in pouring rain. Do you remember how, the red of our shoulder sashes came off on our white shirts just as if we had been in battle?

On another occasion we danced along the Promenade at Peel, but no band could be procured. In desperation, the organisers fixed a gramophone on an old lorry with a most foul exhaust, so that those of us in the front were nearly overcome and had to drop out. I well remember Walter Moore and myself walking along watching the others fleeing, until only a half-dozen dancers remained.

[10] My team always followed the band at the Port St Mary Regatta Carnival. On this occasion there was a large crowd on the upper promenade, and we weren't half showing off, until without any warning one of my bell-pads became loose and the dancer behind stood on the braids and sent me flying headlong into the crowd standing by the Town Hall. By the time I had the wretched thing tied on again, I had to run nearly 200 yards to catch up. Talk about indignity!

We danced the Street Dance at practically every Castletown Carnival, feeling very bucked up with so great a crowd watching. One visitor asked me why I did not dance with my two arms up as the other dancers did. Little did he know that the two top buttons of my flannels (a borrowed pair), burst on the way, and I danced the whole way with one hand holding my trousers up! Why did it always happen to me?!!

Many amusing incidents happened at the Guild. This time I had an expert drummer, a boy of fifteen. My "A" Team were dancing "Eunnysagh" with the boy standing five steps above us on the Palace platform. Suddenly his drum fell off, bounced down amongst us in the middle of the "hey," bounced off the stage missing the Secretary's head by an inch and finally came to rest at the judge's feet. AND we didn't stop dancing, but that drummer didn't half get a telling off afterwards! Yes, but we had 57 out of 60!

On another occasion we danced "Juan Nan," and I had an excellent team, with whom I hoped to gain full marks. Everything went well until the girls jumped up on to our out-stretched arms, and then the man next to me fell on to the stage with the girl on top of him. I fell over her and my partner over me, and so on until we were a struggling heap of humanity, especially as the girls wore the long, full dresses then. The judge roared, as did everyone else except us. We then found a screw had worked itself loose on the stage and it was over this the dancer had tripped. However, we danced it again and had 59 marks out of 60!

On another occasion I was adjudicating at the GFS Rally at the Villa and the dance, I think, was "Old Mole." Flo Moore's team won, but one dame came up to me afterwards and told me, I knew "no more about folk dancing than our tomat." This was followed by a lot more abuse and how the affair would have ended I do not know, only for Flo who rushed up and said I was wanted outside!

We once danced in St Ninian's Hall, when our [11] men did "Beaux of London City" Morris dance. In the "shooting" movement we all had to step back on the right foot. Imagine the commotion, when one dancer stepped right over the stage landed awkwardly and finally sat on the "lap" of a very stout lady on the front row. This good soul exclaimed, "You're alright, luv! I've got yer!" AND he immediately jumped on to the stage and we began again.

One summer evening we were asked to lead the fancy dress possession at the Castletown Carnival on the "Show" Day. About a dozen of us stood in a group discussing the route we had to take, when suddenly a lady came up, handed me £4 and said "This is your prize for the Best Group, Mr Stowell" AND we hadn't even entered for the group contest!

I well remember another evening when we danced before Lorne House guests, always an hilarious occasion. I taught them the "Courting Dance" and Margy Stewart was dancing with a negro whose name was Austin —. At the end, Margy went down in the "bunch" position, *but* so did the negro, and they just looked as if they were saying their prayers.

“MY FOLK DANCING DAYS”

My Ramsey team was asked to do “White Boys” in the Villa, at a Rechabite Convention, and I must say we had a grand team. In the play which preceded the dance, Tommy Quayle, taking the part of St George had to be “killed” by Donald Maddrell. Down he went and struck his head on the leg of the piano. Imagine my horror when I knelt down by him to express my “grief” to see him lying in a pool of blood. There was no dance; Tommy had to go to a doctor to be stitched! But the audience all thought I had slipped a piece of red paper under Tommy’s head to make the duel look more real!

Douglas dancers, do you remember that evening at Port St Mary when you could not get your lock up in Flamborough? We danced round you about six times while I gave instructions, and then off we went, but right before the crowd your lock fell to bits! And one visitor said to me, “I was sorry for those *little girls!* You are all a lot older than they.” How old were you then Doris, Marjorie, Mildred and Co.?

That was the night we danced Car-ny-Ferishan, Arthur Watterson and myself being in the middle. My wife and another dancer retired to the edge of the arena and heard one man say, “The old bloke with the white head can’t half jump, and he can’t be a day under *seventy!*”

Another amusing incident happened when we were [12] in Edinburgh. All the various dance teams were marching in procession through Princes Street, Doris Larsen leading with the large Manx flag. Just as we reached a policeman on point duty, the flag enveloped him and knocked his helmet off! When we came back, he was more wary and kept well out of our way, but shook his fist at us.

That was the time too, when we danced before Princess Margaret. When we had danced, she said to Douglas Kennedy, “I suppose these are all peasants belonging to the Island”! Next time we’ll bring our tom-toms and grass skirts!

Well, you’ve asked for a few yarns. Here they are, just a few I can remember, but there are dozens more. There are bound to be in 55 years, aren’t there?

FOLK DANCING IN THE ISLE OF MAN (1965)

(A summary of the Lecture given by Mr Leighton Stowell on 15th September 1964 to the members of the Liverpool University Extra-Mural Summer School in Port Erin)

[12] “Today I left Derby House (Castle Rushen) and mixed with the peasants on Market Square, this being their market day. I was greatly pleased with the excellence of the goods on the benches, the order and genteel manners of the townfolk, but most of all by the fiddling and dancing, so much so I was minded to join in myself, but for the hip injury I told you about in my last letter.”

So wrote James, 7th Earl of Derby, the Great Stanley in 1646, to a friend in Lancashire.

Was this dancing Manx or English? We do not know, but it is quite probable that the Manx by then were acquainted with the English dances, seeing that in those troublesome times of the Civil War, so many exiled Royalists fled to the Island to be befriended by the Great Stanley.

[13] Indeed, until 1925, we heard little or practically nothing of Manx dances, yet we know that they were danced all over the Island, as we have mention of them in the folk songs.

“Soon in the barn they’ll be smoothin’ the floor,

Soon there’ll be fiddlin’ and dancin’ dy-liooar”

In England, the Puritans, long ago almost succeeded in killing folk songs and folk dancing, believing such cult was evil, and were it not for folk like Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, Douglas and Helen Kennedy and others, we would not now have Morris, Sword or many of the country dances, for these people went round collecting dances from the older generation who fortunately could remember them.

In Mann we had a parallel—not from Puritans, but from a great spiritual leader and church dignitary of the greatest enthusiasm and highest character, Bishop Wilson (1698–1755). It is difficult to understand how so great and so generous a soul could be so Puritanical in outlook in many ways. He condemned “all looseness and frivolity as acts of the devil and a few dry sticks on Sunday or drawing water from the well, it is no wonder that he levelled his bolt at folk music and dancing, which he called “evil and idolatrous foolishness.” Had it been Morris dancing, I could have understood his attitude, as these do concern the worship of the God of Fertility, Baal or Bal in Mann, but Morris Dancing was unknown in the Island.

Indeed at one time one could be imprisoned in Peel Castle for singing folk tunes or indulging in folk dances!

Then, in 1777 came the great John Wesley, and Methodism was established in the Island, followed in 1823 by John Butcher’s founding of Primitive Methodism.

Methodism had a great hold on the Manx people, and at an age when Mann had sunk into a low irreligious order (as it has today), the Methodists attacked sin with fire and vigour. Like the Puritans they believed all fun was evil, and so it was that the suppression of folk culture, started by Wilson was continued four-fold in strength.

I am a Methodist and proud to say so, but I know that round about where we are now, there are still older Methodists who look askance at folk dancing, yet they will listen to folk songs and folk stories.

[14] One church not very far from this hotel some years ago asked me to bring my company of Manx dialect players along to give a concert. The main feature was “Mylecharane,” a dialect play in which I took the main part, a murder being committed by me in the second act. To begin the concert I had a few soloists *and* six

little girls who danced two Morris dances. Because of these dances—there was no concert, *yet* the folk were looking forward to seeing a murder play.

Also a few years ago in this port, because it was suggested that I should teach Manx and Scottish dances to a chapel Youth Club, the officials of the Sunday School threatened to resign in a block!

I well remember too how a few members of my own chapel in Castletown were greatly distressed because the six little girls were going to dance “Rigs of Marlow” and “Country Gardens” at the annual Chapel Christmas Concert. However, advised by my mother, I called the dances “Stick Drill” and “Handkerchief Drill” and everything in the garden was lovely! A rose by any other name, etc.

By 1922, folk dancing in the Island was practically unknown. Some interested Douglas teachers, Flo Moore, Nance Cain, the Misses Lacey, Lottie Gawne and a few others had begun to establish English Country dances, and Mr Bolland, a Laxey headmaster, was teaching his *girls* Morris dancing, for which there was a class in the Guild.

I started Morris dancing by accident. An Oxfordshire Scout Troop came to Douglas for a holiday, and on wet days the Scoutmaster taught them Morris. My uncle was a Scout official and I, then 13 years old, accompanied him to visit the camp. One boy had hurt his foot, so I, an Island scout, was roped in to take his place—and so I started my dancing career, and I have now been dancing for 55 years, so you now all know my age!

My first appointment as Assistant Master was in Ramsey School, and of course I began to teach Morris dancing to both girls and boys, although some years later an HMI advised me to drop the girls’ Morris for country.

In 1925, Miss Mona Douglas, the well-known Manx scholar and poetess, found in an old chest belonging to her great-grandfather, Philip Quayle of Glentrammon, hidden away, some rough notes of a few Manx dances. These she brought to Ramsey School to the headmaster, Joss Killey, who in his youth had been a Morris dancer in Yorkshire.

I was sent for and Mona showed me her notes. Between us, she doing the deciphering and I doing all the jumping about [15] we eventually unravelled first of all, the now famous Dirk Dance which I taught to six boys, one of whom, Billy Caine, was chosen to dance it in the Albert Hall. Since then, I am proud to say I have taught all the Island’s Dirk Dancers—Donald Maddrell, Arthur Watterson, Doug. Clucas, Roadley Archibald, Stephen Newbold and Tony Archibald, the last two still performing it.

After that, we worked out “Car-ny-ferishyn” and “Eunnysagh Vona,” *but* what a job I had to induce the boys to dance with the girls, whose hands they held as they were hot potatoes. However, they soon paired off, and “Peter O’Tavy” and “Car Juan Nan” came into being next. In 1933, I brought the team to Liverpool and London, where the boys performed the most difficult of all Manx dances

“Mylechranes March” a Manx Stick Dance which I again taught the men of the Manx Folk Dance Society a few years ago.

In 1936, we again visited the Albert Hall and gave a performance of [the] “White Boys,” “Sword Dance,” the “Dirk Dance,” the “Jig” (danced by myself) and “Mylecharane’s March.”

In 1937, we tackled the remaining Manx dances, but, I was transferred to Castletown School, so my activities in Ramsey came to an end. In Castletown I had a class of over 60 adults as well as several school teams, and so it was that Manx dancing came south.

In 1948, the Manx Folk Dancers visited Edinburgh and performed for a week, twice daily, at the Edinburgh Folk Dance Festival, Doris Larsen being my partner on that occasion.

But it was in 1951, that Manx dancing reached its zenith, for that was the year of [the] “Festival of Mann” and the wonderful pageant needed Manx dancing. I was roped in and taught representatives from all parts of the Island, with the result we had close on 80 dancers, including a dozen men, performing reels and jigs.

So successful was this, that folk dancing was included in the list of subjects taught at Night School the next winter, and from these classes arose the Manx Folk Dance Society, whose secretary, Miss Griffiths, is still in office and keeping us all in order with great enthusiasm and efficiency. The Society soon had a good display “A” team in action, four men and four women, *six* of whom are still in the “A” team. By 1959, this team had visited Manchester and had spent a week in Northern Ireland at the CCPR Festival, again dancing twice daily. This is the display team seated near you now, together with Tony Archibald and Aileen Hall, members of the Castle Rushen Folk Dancers.

[16] What of the future? Has folk dancing had its hey-day? There is not the enthusiasm there used to be, and young people do not want to learn anything inclined to be difficult. More so, in certain quarters, there seems to be a apathy towards teaching *anything* Manx. Miss Griffiths has insisted in her capacity as PE Organiser in Island schools that folk dancing should be taught in all primary schools, but after transfer to high school, there it ends.

In *all my teaching career* I have had only *four* pupils who have gone right through High School yet dancing in my teams! Three are now teachers and the fourth, Tony, goes to Leeds University next week—and so I am short a Dirk Dancer.

Daphne Corlett in Castletown at present has country dance club, boys and girls up to fourteen years, and she has so far had excellent results. I hope that as they grow older, their enthusiasm will not wane.

Before closing, I would like to pay tribute to all the dancers who have helped and encouraged me through the years—dancers of Ramsey and Castletown Schools, the Manx Folk Dance Society, the Castle Rushen Folk Dancers, Miss Griffiths, the “A” Team and lastly my daughter, Aileen, who stands behind me in everything—not

“MY FOLK DANCING DAYS”

forgetting my *wife* who allows me to “gad” about so much with other women! She says she’s going to divorce me soon!!!

I do hope that sincerely that with so many proficient teacher dancers near me now, that our fine old dances may be saved from the fate which befell them of old. May this branch of our heritage be kept alive, dancers, for, as a great British composer once told us in the Villa, “A country which loses its traditions loses its soul.”

*

Phillip Leighton Stowell. “Amusing Incidents which have occurred in my Folk Dancing Days,” *Yn Lioran* 12 (1965): 9–12 & “Folk Dancing in the Isle of Man,” *Yn Lioran* 12 (1965): 12–16. The cover photograph was taken in 1936 at Laxey Glen Gardens and shows the performance of the eight-hand reel, *Ennysagh Mona* (MNHL, MS 09683, Philip Leighton Stowell Papers).

STEPHEN MILLER 2018

