

Manx Notes 121 (2010)

“WHO IS MONA DOUGLAS?” (7)

“MANX DANCES AND MANX YOUTH.”

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Aeglagh Vannin has developed a new activity this autumn in the shape of a weekly meeting for the study of Celtic literature and Manx traditional dance and in connection with the latter subject the story of the revival of our national dances is of some interest.

When the late Dr Clague and Messrs W.H. Gill and A.W. Moore made their valuable collections of Manx folk music in the last years of the nineteenth century, they unfortunately, and one might almost say, inevitably, passed by much that we could have wished preserved both in the song-words and in the dances attached to many of the airs—a loss that can never now be wholly made good. They were pioneer workers, and they did actually preserve, just in time, the bulk of our national music, for which achievement Manxmen must always remember them with gratitude but they were men of a single aim, noting airs and nothing else in most cases, although Moore, fortunately, had also an interest in song-words, as his collection shows. But though dancing must have been a familiar part of Manx country life at that time, as witness the references to it in the poems of Kennish and George Quarrie, and even in T.E. Brown’s *Letters*, apart from oral tradition, even Moore is completely silent about the dances themselves.

During the progress of the present century most of the old traditional singers and dancers and fiddlers have passed away, to the great loss of Manx life, but still a few of the old school remain in remote corners of the Island: men and women who have danced at the *Mbelliea* or the Boat Supper in their young days, or who remember old customs such as that of a team of men, ceremonial dancers going round on the houses with or following the White Boys at Christmas or New Year or Hollantide. Here and there, too, may be found references to or descriptions of dances in old notebooks preserved for a generation or two in certain families but the bulk of the recorded dances come straight out of living memory.

I have always been greatly interested in all things Manx, and particularly in our folklore, and I was reared in an atmosphere of folk story and song, for most of my childhood was spent with my grandmother, a daughter of Philip Quayle of Glenrammon, who is still remembered by a few old people in Lezayre for his great interest in and knowledge of the old Manx songs and dances. My grandmother herself was a noted dancer, and could show and tell me about many Manx dances that had not been danced or generally known for about fifty years. She also had some notes of tunes and figures belonging to her father. So my collection of Manx dances

started when I was but a child but for some years it lay buried in various notebooks in company with the general folklore notes that I had begun to write down under the inspiration of the late Miss Sophia Morrison of Peel, as I grew older these notes were added to from time to time, most of my later material coming from fishermen, who seem to have been more recently addicted to dancing than any other section of the Manx community. Among my best friends in this respect have been the late Captain T. Craine of Douglas, Mr J. Kermode of Port Mooar, and Mr J. Kelly of Baldrine, who is happily still with us.

I did not, however, think of an actual revival of the Manx dances until in 1929, I was asked to lecture (on Manx folksong—nobody thought there were any Manx dances preserved) to the *English Folk Dance Society* during its Easter Vacation School at Douglas. Then out my dance notes and wondered if any of them could be used, especially the impressive Dirk Dance of the Kings of Mann described and danced for me long since by Mr Kermode, to a noble air sung by his wife. I took my notes to the late headmaster of the Albert Road School, Ramsey, Mr J.Q. Killey, who was most sympathetic and promised me all the help in his power—a promise well kept. He called into consultation Mr P.L. Stowell, a keen and knowledgeable folk dancer who was, and still is, in charge of the school dancing, and we three worked hard for some weeks to bring three of the Manx dances up to a demonstrable standard. We adults were not the only workers, for the children of the upper forms were simply splendid in the way they spent long hours working at those dances after their schooltime was over, and to them belongs much of the credit for the revival of our dances so far as it has yet advanced.

The Albert Road team showed these dances as illustrations to my lecture, and the result was rather startling. Mr Douglas Kennedy the Director of the EFDS, was so much impressed with young Billy Caine's dancing of the Dirk Dance that he asked me to bring the boy to London and I let the dance at the All-England Festival the following January. When the time came I was unable to go, but Billy went alone, danced in the Royal Albert Hall before 10,000 people, many of them expert folk dancers, and got the only encore of the evening. The Ramsey schoolboy and his wonderful dance were the sensation of the Festival, and received special notices in all the big London papers. The following year a team of six boys went to the Festival in charge of Mr Stowell, and Billy Caine himself has danced by special request at each Festival since his first appearance.

Mr Killey has passed away since then, to our great regret, but he lived long enough to see the first result of our joint work in Billy's triumph, and since his death Mr Stowell and I are continuing to work on the Manx dances, though of course the team of children changes from year to year as the older ones leave the school. About a dozen dances are recorded up to date, and I am still hoping to get details of a few more, while Mr Stowell is on the track of an old ceremonial dance in Castletown. The team is learning one after another of these, and this year it entered two of them

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for the Music Festival folk dance competition, thus again showing the pioneer spirit of the school. The team might easily have been disqualified for performing unpublished dances, but they took the risk willingly—and came home with the first and second prizes. I shall always be grateful to the Albert Road teachers and children who first helped me to revive our old dances, and their fine work is known to folk dancers all over the Kingdom. I hope the recorded dances will soon be published, with the teaching instructions “passed” by Mr Douglas Kennedy and piano arrangements of the tunes by Mr Arnold Foster, who has set so many of our Manx songs and in that volume Ramsey’s splendid share will certainly be recorded.

But I want to see those dances revived and used, not only by one team or in one school, but all over the Island, and especially among children and young people. I am pleased that the English Folk Dance Society finds them interesting, and grateful for the help and encouragement given me by certain of its members but the main point of my work will have been missed unless the Manx people themselves claim and use their heritage of national dance, which is as truly a part of national culture as its music or history. That is why I am glad to see Aeglagh Vannin—the Society of Manx Youth—beginning to learn and use the Manx dances. It must surely add to the national dignity of any young Manxman, for instance, to learn that Dirk dance which tradition says was performed centuries ago by the Kings of Mann at their taking of and which such an authority as Mr Kennedy has described as unique in the British Isles.

Source: Mona Douglas, “MANX DANCES AND MANX YOUTH.”, undated typescript, MNHL, MS 09545, Box 15, Mona Douglas Papers, [Folder label] “Aeglagh Vannin, Correspondence etc.”.



STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2011

