

Manx Notes 235 (2016)

“SWORD DANCE.”

‘THE DIRK DANCE’ AS NOTED BY MONA DOUGLAS *

Sword Dance.

Danced by J. Kermode, Port Mooar: tune sung by M^{TS} Kermode, & noted. Have not found any corresponding air in Gill or Clague. K. said it was “the dance the old Kings of Mann” were using to do before now,” & he had learnt it from his father. He thought there would be a number of men in the Island that could do it, but it had never been a well-known dance so far as he knew. I got the impression that there was something ceremonial about it, but could not find out by questioning that it was connected with any special season, or custom, or that it was anything but just a dance executed for its own sake. The sword that he used, which he called simply a skynn, was quite a small thing, very short & light, & it looked fairly old. He said it had been in his family a long time.

He started by dancing round in a circle holding the sword in his right hand & leaning against his right shoulder. The step seemed to be just two steps forward & a hop, done with alternative feet. Then he did a leap & cross step, coming down in a crouching position, & laying the sword on the ground before him, & immediately sprang upright again, folding his arms. He said this was really only the introduction to the dance. Next he danced a sort of moving cross-step right round the sword. It was rather difficult to see exactly how this was done, but I think the moving impulse came chiefly from the body while the feet danced (1) slightly apart (2) right across each other, with R & L feet crossing alternatively in front. On to 16th beat of this step he flung his arms out & bent forward over the sword. Then he did 2 steps sideways to R & 2 back, 2 to R & 2 back, ‘twice’ & as he came back the 2nd time he picked up the sword & held it up above his head. Then he grasped it in both hands, holding it at arm’s length forward, & danced round in a circle as before for 16 beats. Then he held the hilt in his right hand & the point in his left, still forward at arm’s length, & danced to R & back, to L & back as before, but this time kicking the sword with R & L feet as he came back to position (i.e. 4 kicks altogether). This looks very difficult to do. On the 16th beat of this section he laid the sword down on the ground again before him. He then folded his arms & did the running cross-step round & round once, & then he sort of dives forward over the sword with arms flung outward, at the end of which he crouched & picked up the sword again. Then he turned round by the right in a hopping step while whirling the sword round his

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head & hopped on right foot while passing the sword right under his L knee & out at the other side. This turn was repeated, & the sword passed under the R knee while hopping on L foot. Then he held the sword in both hands at arms' length forward as before & danced round in a circle for 12 beats, & on the last 4 beats, which he danced very quickly, he did (1) step forward, (2) leap, (3) a stamp with feet wide apart, & (4) knelt on L knee still holding the sword upright at arms' length forward.

(This is easily the most impressive Manx dance I have seen, & ought to be made a feature of the Cruinnaght)

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Source: "FOLKLORE NOTEBOOK. | DANCES. | TUNES, DESCRIPTIONS, & NOTES." Undated notebook in the hand of Mona Douglas. MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 9.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2016

