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“BUT ITS RITUAL WAS DIFFERENT” BELLA GARRETT AND THE DIRK DANCE OF THE KINGS OF MANN

THE DIRK DANCE OF THE KINGS OF MANN
(Recovered in 1925 by Miss Mona Douglas)

This is a solo ritual dance, formerly performed before the King of Mann as he sat on the Hill of Law surrounded by his Toshee or chieftain warriors. The hill was surrounded by a circle of large rock slabs called the Creggyn Casherick, ‘holy (or sacred) stones’ and it was inside this ring that the dancer performed his ritual dance before his king.

Miss Bella Garrett of Ramsey told me that she had seen the same dance performed when she was a girl, but its ritual was different. The young Celt or Norseman was dedicating his dirk to the service of a god of whom he knew nothing but whom by his agility and skill he wished to honour. In the last figure the dirk slipped in his hands and he held it hilt upward by the blade, revealing the symbol of the Cross with a leap of triumph he bounded high into the air, sank to the ground on one knee and with eyes closed held the Cross in front of his face. He had found his God.

It was traditional for only one dirk dancer to be considered able to perform the ritual dance, but on one occasion (Celtic Congress in Castle Rushen 1938) two dancers performed it before guests from other Celtic countries. This was because I could not decide which man was the more accomplished. Neither could Miss Douglas, so, to avoid any bad feeling, both performed it and excellently.

The first man to perform it, excluding myself, was Billy Cain. He was followed by others as time passed, each being very accomplished until at the time of writing (1966) Tony Archibald, a six-footer, is the present main exponent of the dance. I think I can say, and without boasting, I have taught all the Manx dirk-dancers, but I do hope a few more will eventually turn up!

Source: Leighton Stowell, “The Dirk Dance of the Kings of Mann (Recovered in 1925 by Miss Mona Douglas),” 1966, Manx National Heritage Library, MS 09683.



The background to the “Dirk Dance of the Kings of Man” and its collection (or, rather, its “recovery” in Stowell’s words) by Mona Douglas has been discussed

elsewhere.¹ An extract from the account above was included in that piece.² It is now reproduced here in full.³ By way of an introductory background, Leighton Stowell was instrumental (with Douglas) in the 1920s in teaching schoolchildren from Albert Road school in Ramsey the dances collected by herself.⁴

It is of note that Leighton Stowell gives 1925 as the date of collecting by Mona Douglas, a date that cannot be squared against her own account of the collecting of the dance, which placed it as happening at least ten years earlier.⁵

The segue between the first and second paragraphs is disorientating on first reading (as well as on subsequent readings) as it appears to place Bella Garrett back in the time of the Norse kingdom of Man and the Isles...

Douglas was responsible for the “recovery” of the dance, and above all for the explanation of its origins and meaning, and Stowell was responsible for training up the dancers after her direction. But at some date, he found that there was someone who, in his own words, “had seen the same dance performed when she was a girl,” and, of note for him, “but its ritual was different.”

What Stowell was struck by is not that Garrett saw a version of the dance independent of the one taught by Douglas, but that there was a competing explanatory narrative for the meaning of the dance. Or, rather, that its meaning had been intriguingly reinterpreted, and the pagan Norse gods vanquished, replaced by Christendom.

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VIENNA, 2006

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- ¹ Stephen Miller, “‘Manx Sword Dance (Solo)’: References by Mona Douglas to the ‘Dirk Dance of the Kings of Man’,” *“Completed and Restored to Use”: Revival and Dissemination of Manx Folklore and Tradition during the 20th Century*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004).
 - ² I am grateful as ever to Wendy Thirkettle, Deputy Archivist, Manx National Heritage Library, for drawing this to my attention following a general enquiry of mine about the papers of Leighton Stowell. Email of 4 December 2004.
 - ³ Since that email I have had the chance to fully examine the Leighton Stowell Papers now held by the MNHL.
 - ⁴ It is, however, not as simple as that—for a detailed discussion, see Robert Corteen Carswell, “The Revival and Reconstruction of Manx Traditional Dance,” *“Completed and Restored to Use”: Revival and Dissemination of Manx Folklore and Tradition during the 20th Century*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004). For further on Douglas, see Stephen Miller, “Introduction,” *“Restoring to use our almost-forgotten dances”: Writings on the Collection and Revival of Manx Folk Dance and Song by Mona Douglas*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004), “Introduction,” *“Completed and Restored to Use”: Revival and Dissemination of Manx Folklore and Tradition during the 20th Century*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004).
 - ⁵ See the discussion of this topic in fn 1. “I have taught all the Manx dirk-dancers,” wrote Stowell; truer words than he might have known.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- . “‘Manx Sword Dance (Solo)’: References by Mona Douglas to the ‘Dirk Dance of the Kings of Man’.” *“Completed and Restored to Use”: Revival and Dissemination of Manx Folklore and Tradition during the 20th Century*. Ed. Stephen Miller. Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004. 99–109.

