

Manx Notes 116 (2010)

“WHO IS MONA DOUGLAS?” (2)

AN UNTITLED TALK FROM 1934 *

[1] I do not wish or intend to take up much of your time this evening, because I know that you have really come here for the sake of the songs and dances which are to follow; but I think that a few words of explanation, particularly of the Manx items on the programme, may add to your understanding, and therefore to your appreciation, of them.

Our Manx heritage of folklore is small compared with that of England or any other large country, but in proportion to our size it is both rich and varied. Folk tales and songs and dances all over the world, of course, show certain basic similarities, and one of the most interesting things imaginable is the tracing of such resemblances and the relating of one legend in, say Finland, to another in India. But also, the lore of every race and nation, when isolated in bulk, shows certain distinct characteristics, an idiom as it were, so that the folk songs of Russia and [2] of England are very different in general effect, although they may show many similarities of theme and scale-formation. and this very difference in similarity is one of the things that are interesting the folk-dance experts in our Manx songs and dances, for it seems that we may justly claim a distinct national idiom for them, despite their small bulk in the general mass of folksong and dance. Certainly you will find in them things which are unmistakably reminiscent of airs and dance-figures and traditions belonging to the adjacent lands of England, Scotland and Ireland, and also to places much further a field, but, as I have been told recently by the Director and committee of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, there are also points about Manx songs and dances which are utterly different and characteristic, as though we had in the course of time assimilated many different influences into our native artistic impulse, but had [3] moulded all of them to a distinct idiomatic whole.

This evening you are to see a number of English Morris and country dances and also several Manx ones, so this should be a good opportunity for noticing the resemblances and differences between the two. Most of the Manx dances have been out of general use for half a century or more, and when I started trying to collect them, some ten years ago, I did not expect or even hope to recover more than two or three. but patient enquiries in various odd corners of the island going from one person to another whom I would be told “might remember to have danced or seen” such and such a thing—all among elderly folk, of course—have resulted in the reconstruction, from descriptions and partial demonstration in most cases, of some dozen or so virile and characteristic dances with their accompanying tunes. Several [4] of these latter have been previously noted by earlier collectors, and I confess to a

* All original material by Mona Douglas © 2007 Estate of Mona Douglas. Administered by the Trustees of the Manx Museum and National Trust (Manx National Heritage).

feeling of annoyance [exasperation] with some of these people, who must have been able to see the dances and note them completely in action—and ignored them because they thought only the airs were of interest.]

Mr P.L. Stowell and his team of dancers, working long and hard to turn my notes into concerted action; and Mr Stowell himself has now begun to take a share in the actual collection, the very interesting White Boys' sword dance having been recorded quite recently entirely by him.

The most remarkable of my finds is the Dirk Dance, and this was recorded from a complete demonstration by old Mr Kermode of Port Mooar, a fine dancer, like many of the other fishermen. It is purely a ritual dance, and Kerm[ode] told me that he learnt it from his father, who told him that it used [5] to be danced by the Kings of Mann when they came to manhood, and before the King on occasions of importance. Mr Douglas Kennedy says that it is unique in the British Isles, and he knows of nothing even remotely resembling it nearer than Central Europe.

Another ritual dance of a different kind is the Stick Dance, Mylecharaine's March, but as I am to describe this immediately before it is danced, I will only refer to it now as having been mentioned by Waldron in his description of Manx manners and customs published in 1796. The Hop-tu-Naa processional [danc]e used to be danced by a crowd of boys and girls round the bounds of Old Douglas on Hollantide Fair Night in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and probably from time immemorial before that. The dancers carried lanterns or torches and some of them had vegetables which they flung down and left at the house doors as they passed. [6] They sang the curious Hop-tu-Naa rhyme as they danced, and their gif[ts] were thought to bring luck to the houses at which they were left.

The other Manx dances, mostly reels and set dances, are more of the social type, but all, I think, are interesting and characteristic.

Mr Stowell and I are trying to make these Manx dances known all over the Island, and we hope that soon many other schools and teams will revive and use them. Perhaps that will be easier when the book of music and instructions which I am preparing in consultation with the E.F.D.S. becomes available. Meanwhile, the Ramsey team continues to demonstrate them, and as I think most of you know, they are going to give a programme of Manx songs and dances at a special joint meeting of the Mersey and Deeside and Manchester branches of the E.F.D.S. in the Picton Hall, Liverpool, on May 25th next. They are earning money with wh[ic]h to pay their fares to Liverpool for this [7] demonstration by chopping and selling firewood to all Ramsey, and making and selling toffee to the other Ramsey children who are not fortunate enough to be in the team, thus showing the independent spirit of true Manxfolk, who would rather die than beg or ask favours!

A group of our Aeglagh Vannin members are also now meeting once a week to learn and practise our national dances, and they are giving a few items to-night as well as the more expert team, partly with the idea of showing that these dances are

not only possible for experts, but can be danced and enjoyed by all of us if we will take the trouble to learn them. And I would finish this brief talk on our work with a plea for the more general revival of our dances. The invitation to the Ramsey team to Liverpool, and the fact that Billy Cain has shown our Dirk Dance by special request at the All-England Festival four times in succession, give some indication of the interest and appreciation [8] that these dances have won among folk dancers all over the United Kingdom, and in face of that interest, surely we ourselves should become more enthusiastic about their general revival, and use them more and more in our own social gatherings.

The Aeglagh Vannin team will start the ball rolling to-night with the Hop-tu-Naa processional, complete with lanterns of a purely Manx type.

Source: Typescript slips for an untitled talk, no date [but 1934], mnhl, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15.

*

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2010

❧