

# Manx Notes 616 (2023)

“PLEASE DO COME AND DO YOUR STUFF”

BILLY CAIN WRITES TO MONA DOUGLAS \*

(1948)

(1)

[*On headed notepaper of The English Folk Dance and Song Society*]

Mr.W.Cain.

[*left*] WCC/NP | Ref.A.H.5.

[*centre*] Central 1797.

[*right*] 24 Strand Street, | Liverpool.

23rd June, 1948.

Dear Mona,

Just a short note to acquaint you with the final arrangements for Edinburgh.

I have had a letter from D.N.K. [Douglas Neil Kennedy–sm] telling me that he has arranged with the Committee for me to perform at all the Public Performances and that he has no objection to Leightons chap being used at the Lectures etc. He says he does not want to look for trouble as it is easy to find it without looking!

I have not given up hopes yet that you will be at Edinburgh. You must not miss this Festival, Mona I feel it will be a long time before there is another like it. So please do come and do your stuff. Remember if you hadn't collected all this material there would not be any Song Dance Leighton or myself to do it! So please come along and present it on the very important occasion.

With all good wishes,

[*in ink*] p.p. Billy Cain,

North-West Area Representative.

Miss M. Douglas

(2)

[*On headed notepaper of The English Folk Dance and Song Society*]

34 Strand Street, | Liverpool 5th July 1948.

Dear Mona,

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\* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘Please do come and do your stuff.’ Billy Cain writes to Mona Douglas (1948),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* October (2023), [17]–[18].

Thank you for your letter which reached me O.K. in Edinburgh. How I wish you had come. Yours was by far the most interesting paper, and evoked much comment and useful discussion. Mrs Macintosh handled it superbly and I greatly admired her for the sincere loyalty she portrayed on yours and my behalf.

Douglas [*ie.* Douglas Kennedy–sm] was in rather an unenviable position when Leighton turned up with his chap to perform the ‘Dirk Dance’ and took the easiest way out and allowed him to perform on all occasions. Being employed by the Society, as well as a Member of the English Team placed me in a cleft stick rather, and I could do nothing about it. It was all very difficult for me, as after your paper had been read with its pleasing references to myself as its exponent I was inundated with requests to dance myself! I did on the last night, as the other chap had left to catch a train and could not dance at the final evening performance. I objected strongly to Douglas, but was firmly told to get on with it. I did of course but felt that I did not do it justice, as I was wearing Shoes and Breeches! However it wasn’t too bad I was told.

I am enclosing a cutting from the ‘Scotsman’ which deals with your paper. I object to Leighton’s reference to his team being the only one doing Manx Dances. He also said that only one person could do the Dirk Dance at a time, and that he had never had two people trained to do it at the same time. Being an Englishman I suppose I am a has-been as far as the dance is concerned! I don’t agree really, especially as the music and instructions can be purchased for anyone to use.

I did not think a great deal of the Manx Team’s technique and think the standard is lower than it used to be though I thought his fiddler was very weak and gave nothing to the dancers. Where did this long cord on the fiddle originate whilst the girls spin round and the men honour as an introduction? I felt it was not Folk and very Theatrical. Maybe I am wrong and it may have a religious significance, but it looked pure showmanship when it took place each time. I had one or two talks with L.S. and he wants me to over to the Island and do something about getting a bit more dancing done. Says he will have a word with Mr Fletcher about it, in an effort to do something in the schools. Have you any suggestions on the matter? I have an idea in my mind about trying a weeks dancing combined with a holiday next summer and think I can bring some dancers over to tour the villages etc. The idea is to dance in the streets ‘on tour’ and finish up with a Social Dance at each place each evening. What do you think about it? I would need some liaison with someone on the Island about the cost of the week re accommodation etc. Also the question of Halls. Douglas would have to be the Centre I think. The thing would have to take place in the summer when some of the dancers who are teachers would be on holiday. I think we could also plan an Edinburgh Festival for Douglas. I’m keen on the idea but it would require plenty of time an organising. Be a grand thing in the Season as you remark. Could you let me have Mrs Macintosh’s address? I want to drop her a letter of thanks for all she did etc. I also met her daughter (Mrs

Drummond) who is the most delightful person I have had the pleasure of meeting. I hope to link up with them again in the future. I do quite a bit of work in Cumberland and may slip over the border sometime. I have been invited to do so when possible. Must ring off for now, Take care of yourself and dont work too hard.

Yours,

[*in ink*] Billy

P.S. Edith Jones never answered my letter.

Letters from Billy Cain to Mona Douglas, 23 June, 1948 & 5 July 1948, MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15, [Folder] Billy Cain.

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By Edinburgh is meant the Folk Music and Dance Festival being organised by the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society and planned for 28 June to 3 July 1948: “The scope of the Festival is limited to the British Isles. It is hoped that England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the Isle of Man will all be represented by folk-singers and dancers.” It was intended to bring together the English Folk Dance and Song Society, the Scottish Country Dance Society, the Irish Folklore Institute, the Belfast Folk-Dance Society, the Folk-lore Society, and the Royal Anthropological Institute. Papers were to be delivered in the morning, and the evenings were for folk dancing displays and open-air performances. There was also to be an exhibition of material relating to folk dances and music.

Billy Cain by this date whilst well-known as the exponent of the Dirk Dance was now working for the English Folk Dance and Song Society. As seen, Mona Douglas was not able to be present in Edinburgh but did prepare a paper for it, one that was read in her absence not by Cain but by a Mrs Macintosh. It was later published as “Folk Song and Dance in Mann with Some Notes on Collection and Revival of the Dances,” *Proceedings of the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society*, iv.1 (1949), 51–60. Her paper had a definite impact as the English Folk Dance and Song Society reported: “While at these conferences the ‘old stagers’ heard comparatively little that was new to them (except in the extraordinarily interesting discussion following the paper on Folk Song and Dance in Mann) [...]” Cain’s second letter here as one can read has its own “extraordinarily interesting discussion,” in this case about Leighton Stowell and Manx folk dances.

Stephen Miller, RBV

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