

PHILIP LEIGHTON STOWELL

HOW I COMPOSED NEW MANX DANCES



CHIOLLAGH BOOKS

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(I)

GORSE STICKS

[79] It was a fine October morning and I was walking from the Chasms through the fields towards Spanish Head when I met an old man, a Mr Harry Moore, who was collecting gorse bons in a sack. I noticed he had broken the bons into small pieces and tied them in bundles of four with rushes. When I asked him why he had tied the pieces together, he told me that each bundle was a “kiare” (four) and called after the four Gospel writers. He said he was storing them for lighting his fire in the winter months. I sat by the cairn on Spanish Head and it was there I composed the poem which I called “Gorse Sticks.” My solo dancer at the time was Tony Archibald, a keen dancer and very quick to learn any dance, so I decided to compile a solo dance for him using the poem as a *purt-y-beeal*, or mouth-music. I had to use time and I found it rather difficult to compile a solo to that time, but in the end, I had an A and B arrangement, A in the minor key, B in the major. I used the stick-tapping in the six-man team dance, “Mylecharane,” and Tony mastered the whole vigorous dance in one afternoon session.

And so “Gorse Sticks” came into being. My daughter, Aileen Hall, who had already done quite a lot of *purt-y-beeal*, sang while Tony danced and the combination proved a great success, not only in Mann, but also in Stafford, Dublin and Cork.

DAUNCE SON TROOR (‘DANCE FOR THREE’)

When I was headmaster of Ballasalla school, I was most fortunate to have two excellent folk dancers on the staff, Margy Stewart and Anne Gawne, and in the dinner-hour we taught folk dancing to the children, who gave many displays in morris, country and maypole dancing. One day, Margy asked, “Why don’t you compile a dance for the three of us to do together?” and that evening I set to work on a threesome reel based on practically all the Manx Steps and figures I knew, for one man with a girl on each side, the man taking the predominant part.

Like most folk dances the reel was in 16-beat time, but I had no music for it. One morning I was sitting on the Stack Rock at Scarlett trying to compose a dance tune, when I found myself humming a lovely, lilting melody, “Springtime clothes the meadows in robes of richest green” and suddenly decided to mould my dance tune from a children’s hymn, which had just been sung at our 55 anniversary. Unfortunately, I have never got down to writing a *purt-y-beeal* for it.

“Daunce son Troor” has been performed quite often recently by my own team, a younger section of the MFDS, and because it needs only three dancers, it can be used on concert platforms where a full team of eight could not perform creditably.

DAUNCE NOO GEORGE ('DANCE OF ST GEORGE')

Most of the many displays I have arranged during the last forty-five years have been given indoors, often under cramped conditions, where it was impossible for more than four dancers to perform properly (on one occasion, I found the platform was two trestle tables!). We had the solo Dirk Dance of course, and a jig, both of which need quite a lot of room too, but there was a need for more solo and duet dances.

My Ramsey team in 1937 had performed the six-man reel, "White Boys" in the Albert Hall, London. I have often taken part in the White Boys mumming play when I was a boy, but we did not dance at the end, as my adult team did in London. Miss Lizzie Corrin, who had a small private school in Castletown, told me that in the play as she remembered it, St. George danced alone. She remembered seeing a man whom she called Tommy the Councillor doing it when he was a lad of seventeen. I was fortunate too in enlisting the aid of Miss Ada Corrin and Mr James Mylchreest, but as none of these three could dance then, often I was simply bathed in perspiration after being "instructed" by them. The dance was done over crossed swords like a Scottish dance, but some of it was performed behind the swords. It was not until the winter of 1948 that I had succeeded in compiling the whole dance and its first performance in Port Erin literally brought the house down.

[80] The tune I composed myself, modelled from an old Manx fiddle tune in a book my father had and Miss Mona Douglas very kindly provided words in Manx for the *purt-y-beeal*, sung always by Aileen.

Rod Archibald and his brother Tony both learned the dance, and, although it is a man's dance, Margy Stewart learned it at the same time. A few years ago, Tony and Aileen presented it in Cork, Kilkenny and Dublin and later on in Stafford at a display given by the Stafford Morris Men's team.

At the present time of writing (1972) the dance is performed only by a lad of fifteen, who is really only learning to do it properly.

CHAGLYN OARN ('GATHERING BARLEY')

It was late September, and one sunny afternoon I sat on a hedge at Grenaby watching a field of barley being cleared. It had been cut by a reaper and long lines of shapely stooks stretched across the field. Men were busy with horses and carts bringing the sheaves home to the nearby haggart, where other men were building a large Stack and much of the field was soon bare, the men working hard, as there was a feel of rain in the air.

While I sat there, I started to compose a poem about the harvest and I called it "Gathering in the Barley." At that time in the Castletown school PTA there were two members, Maisie Allison and Daphne Corlett who were talented Manx dancers and members of my demonstration team. In connection with PTA concerts, they had often danced the Courting Dance, then our only duet dance, but they wished for

something new. One evening they came and asked me if I could compile a dance for them and I immediately thought of my poem.

I spent long hours composing a dance tune to this poem, long before I had started to compile the dance itself, but during the next few days music and dance were completed. Maisie and Daphne came along and in two sessions they had more or less learnt the dance right through.

After that they performed it regularly, Maisie taking the man's part, for I intended it to be performed by a man and a girl. It has now been performed often by members of my selected team. Tony and Aileen danced it as a duet in Ireland and in England.

MADALCOGH

After the success of "Barley," Maisie and Daphne came again and said, "Compile another duet for us, Leighton," and once more I agreed.

While I was teaching in Ramsey, I was greatly helped by Miss Bella Garrett, who had been a keen dancer in her youth. It was she who told me of a side-step which she called the back-side-step, but which for obvious reasons I altered to side-back-step!! It was something like the Irish $\frac{7}{3}$ step and it took me a while to perfect it, [81] a task in which I was helped by a Wren officer, Mrs Armour an accomplished Irish and Scottish dancer.

I decided to use this step in the dance, and in a few weeks I had compiled a duet, each figure having two parts, A and B, A in the major key and B in the minor, but I had difficulty in providing a tune for it, a tune which had to be lively and fast. One morning I sat on the rocks at Scarlett (I always get Inspiration on Scarlett rocks!) and watched a motor-boat with a noisy engine approaching. "Chig-chig-chig-chig" went the engine and at once I knew I had found the timing for my melody. I composed a tune there and then, and that is the tune we use now. When it is danced I can almost hear the "chig-chig" of the little engine as the boat sped along to the harbour.

Maisie and Daphne worked hard at it and in a month performed it with a piano accompaniment. At present I am at work composing a *purt-y-beeal* for it, but the singer will have to be "mighty slick," as the tune is so fast.

It too was danced by Tony and Aileen in Ireland and England, and at present I have an excellent pair performing it, Margaret Killey and Pat Nicholson, the latter in my estimation being the finest dancer in the Island. I called the dance Madalcogh after the two dancers who asked for it. MAISIE ALLISON, DAPHNE CORLETT with GH flung in to make it Manx.

DAUNSE NY MOAIN ('THE TURF DANCE')

I had often thought that the Manx folk song, "The cutting of the Turf" was an excellent dance tune, but I honestly dislike to hear it used as an accompaniment for "The Widow's House." This dance is almost, if not entirely, like the English country dance, "Put on thy smock on a Monday" and therefore not Manx at all. I was asked

to compile an easy dance for a team of young Methodists from Arbory Street Chapel, Castletown. Maisie Allison was training them so I knew they were becoming proficient and not exactly beginners. I agreed, and told them we would do a dance about the turf gathering and use the Manx melody. I compiled the dance, having in mind the joy the Manx folk would have when all the turf had been brought home from the mountain. I had a large piece of turf fastened on the top of a tall red pole, the turf itself being decorated with streamers and evergreens, and the eight dancers danced round it with a deal of rhythmic hand-clapping. The result pleased me very much, but unfortunately I lost the notation, and it was only about two years ago I found it again. The Arbory school dancers performed it at their annual parish festival, *Laa Columb Killey*, that year and this year (1972) it was chosen to be one of four dances to be performed at the Junior Tynwald before Elizabeth, Lord of Mann.

(2)

[41] When the English Folk Dance Society held their first vacation school in the Island in 1929 a surprise was prepared for them in the demonstration of three Manx traditional dances by the children of the Albert Road School, Ramsey. The Manx dances were at that time almost forgotten although many dance tunes had been recorded, but one well known singer and dancer, Phillip Quayle of Glentrammon, Lezayre, had fortunately made notes of some of them, and from these, with the help of a number of elderly people who knew Steps and figures, the dances were revived under the supervision of the Headmaster, Mr J. Killey, by Leighton Stowell and myself for this demonstration, one of them being our most famous dance, the Sword Dance of the Kings of Mann, performed by the twelve-year-old boy who later became our most famous solo dancer, Billy Cain.

From then until the present time Leighton Stowell, a keen Morris and folk dancer before he started to work on the Manx dances, has been continually performing, coaching and displaying them, and in recent years he has composed a number of new dances in the Manx tradition, most of which have been demonstrated by his own dance teams. This article tells the story of their origin.

MONA DOUGLAS

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THE MANX JIG, "KEEP WARM THE OLD PETTICOAT"

When Mona Douglas found the notation of several Manx dances in a chest belonging to her grandfather, Philip Quayle of Glentrammon, one of them was a solo jig. I was taught part of it myself, but somehow the matter ended there. It was later included in Book 2 of *Manx Dances*. In the meantime I had worked out a succession of figures for a jig which we called "Cum shenn oanrey sheh" after Mona's

original melody, and I was honoured to be asked to dance it at the International Festival in the Albert Hall in 1937.

I did not want to interfere with Mona's version, so I decided to have another tune. One day I met a sheep farmer up on the Carnanes and we spent an hour or more "yarning." Our talk drifted towards Manx tunes and I casually asked if he had ever heard of one called "Keep the old petticoat warm." He said he had heard one called "The Red Petticoat," and it was all about a grand wedding which was going to take place at St Marks and it had ten verses in it. (I thought, "Pity help the poor *purt-y-beeal* singer!") Mrs Watterson from the Level knew the tune so I notated it while she sang it to me. I was unable to find the words so I composed a poem myself, all about the great wedding and how they must keep the old petticoat aired.

This jig is still performed fairly often, but Pat Nicholson performs it ideally, as her dancing is sheer perfection of movement.

DAUNSE BILLEY KEIM ('DANCE OF THE MOUNTAIN ASH')

[42] I have always been interested in Manx folk lore concerning natural phenomena, birds, trees, rocks, etc. and have collected quite a few stories about them. One tree stands out from all the others, the keim or mountain ash, which was sometimes called the *billey-noo*, "the holy tree" or *billey casherick*, "the sacred tree." because Manx folk lore says the Calvary Cross was made of mountain ash. Consequently the wood of the tree had wonderful properties to ward off evil, etc., being even used as a sign to summon men to war. I have five *keirns* in my garden, and one morning a couple of years ago, they were laden with red berries which we call "berrishyn." I must have been in a poetic state of mind that day, for before evening I had composed eight verses about the *billey-keirn*. Later on I thought, "Why not a dance about it too" so I started on a six hand reel for three men and three women. I wanted it to be different from the others, so I introduced quite a lot of step-dancing and reels-of-three and in the end another Manx dance was born.

The music came to me quite simply, and in keeping with Manx tradition, I used "A" and "B" music again, "A" in the major, "B" in the minor.

The dance was performed this year at the Guild (1972) by a team of dancers from Tynwald Street Girls' School, trained by Doris Larsen to such a high standard of perfection that I awarded them 94%. The *purt-y-beeal* was delightfully sung by a little choir of twelve girls, the first time we have heard a dance accompanied by a choir.

DAUNSE STRAID ('THE STREET DANCE')

It was the summer of 1937 and I had just been transferred to Castletown school from Ramsey. In order to raise funds for the Malew Street Methodist Chapel, I was asked to organise a Rose Queen Festival, which was to begin with a procession round the

town behind the Castletown band and end with the crowning ceremony and a folk dance display.

I had taught Ramsey and Kirk Michael dancers a dance to be performed behind a band when in procession, so I set to work to train Castletown dancers too (I had 84 in my class!) On the appointed day I selected twenty-four dancers to perform it while the others walked behind in pairs.

The applause from all sides exceeded our expectations, as the streets were packed with visitors. The music of course was supplied by the band, and the whole of our dance was done in the Gaelic reel Step. We loved it, because it was amazingly how the music of the band and the “booming” of the drums filled us with real energy. The dance is performed in sets of first and second couples, with three figures altogether, “C” being very complicated as it is a reel-of-four across the street.

We danced it many times after that, the most memorable being when we danced behind the Scottish pipers all the way from the Douglas Town Hall to the Villa Marina on the occasion of the crowning of the Hospital Queen in 1943. I think Doris Larsen and myself are the only two of the twenty-four dancers who still dance. These young ones have a nasty habit of falling in love and then it is goodbye to dancing!

CONCLUSION

I have now compiled over a dozen dances. People ask me why I still do it at my age, 76. The traditional dances are very beautiful but I think our repertoires should expand and not stay “put” at fifteen dances. After all, English and Scottish dancers are continually issuing new dances, so why not Mann. I have never pretended that my dances are traditional: they are based on traditional steps and figures with a bit of Celtic Imagination thrown in as “dhooragh!”

Anyway, if my dances are worthy of preservation, in a couple of hundred years time they will be tradition, won’t they? At least, they have all been compiled by a true-blooded Manxman, whose great wish is, and always has been, to preserve all things belonging to Manx culture in dance, song or poetry.

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Philip Leighton Stowell, “How I composed New Manx Dances (Part 1),” *Manninagh* 2 (1972): 79–82 & ——— (Part 2),” *Manninagh* 3 (1973): 42–44. The cover photograph was taken *c.* 1936 at Albert Road School in Ramsey and features the performers of *Daunsyn Noo George*. From left to right: —, Tommy Quayle, Teddy Christian, George Percival (as The Doctor), Leighton Stowell, Donald Maddrell, Steven Carine (MNHL, MS 09683, Philip Leighton Stowell Papers).

STEPHEN MILLER 2018

