

SOAN SIDES

No matter whether you regard dancing as a natural form of exercise, or look on it with the jaundiced eye of a Wise Free minister, you are bound to agree that Dr. Tom Flett's articles on Dancing in Orkney make agreeable reading.

Through the many trials and tribulations which our islands suffered in the past we lost our songs, our natural fleetness of foot, and a suit there was one thing of which we could not be deprived, and that was our natural beatness of foot, and a light-headedness along with it, which going together formed natural expression in dancing.

If you have ever watched an old-fashioned country wedding from the safe vantage of the barn-door, or in a nook beside that immovable fixture—the mill, you may have noticed the remarkable agility and suppleness of the "old fellows," once they have been somewhat limbered with home brew, the intricate steps the toe work, the high stepping, not to mention the "hooching" and birling of partners, besides which the steady shuffle that passes for dancing today, seems entirely insignificant and alien.

Round about 1750 Kirkwall became conscious of the need for tuition in dancing and deportment, so a Mr. William Troup, along with his wife, came to Kirkwall to supply this want, and in his house in Victoria Street he taught his classes the graceful glide of the Minuet. After Mr. Troup's death the classes were carried on by his daughter, Mally, a popular young lady who had a ship named after her, the "Charming, Mally." That this vessel was used in the running of contraband spirits cannot of course be held against Miss Troup.

"Assemblies," as they were called—we call them dances today—were arranged for every second week during the winter season, and it might be of interest to quote a writer of 1775. He says:

"Here we have perhaps as brilliant an appearance of Ladies as any of an equal number in Britain, without exception, both as to figure, education, virtue, and every other amiable qualification which adorns our neighbouring Ladies, of a more Southern Latitude, notwithstanding their boasted superior advantages. Neither are our Gentlemen, especially those who have seen a little of the world, at all inferior, either in mental or bodily qualifications, to any of their Southern neighbours."

These assemblies were held in the old-Town Hall which stood where the Covenanters' Monument is today. It was demolished in 1890.

We also think the comments of John Malcolm, son of the Rev. Mr. Malcolm of Smea and Smea, are worth noting. He joined the army and fought at Waterloo, and after a long absence again visited the old-Town Hall to renew the acquaintances of his youth:

About the centre of Broad Street stands a quaint-looking building, containing a masonic lodge, the county jail and the town hall which also serves as a ball-room. Ascending the well-known stair I hear the inspiring strain of the violin. With what strange and mingled feelings of pleasure and pain do I once more enter the old hall, the scene of so many happy nights in my early youth! It is still the same as of yore, although to my eyes it does not appear a piece of such vast dimensions as it then did. At the very first glance over the room I behold some of my old sweethearts or Lammas sisters, but the Rogues have got the start of me, and are all married. But what have we here. As I live the identical old Ladies who were old ladies twenty years ago, still blooming like perennial roses, occupying the same favourite corner, while so many of the young have passed away.

This then, paints the scene for us. The "perennial roses" have gone, along with the old-Town Hall and the assemblies, and today if the shade of John Malcolm takes a look in at any of the modern dances, he will find no old ladies in the corners—they are all on the floor dancing!

Since that time there have been frequent visits from instructors of dancing, and history too, has repeated itself in that we now also have a resident instructor in the art.

With the risk of incurring the wrath of the rest of Orkney, we would repeat again what has been said many times, namely that "the Holm folks are the best dancers in Orkney." We do not suppose there is any verification for this statement, we merely recall it to memory. No doubt there are outstanding dancers in every community, just as there are good, bad, and indifferent fiddlers, and we appreciate the remarks of a young Orcadian who certainly took his dancing seriously and shouted: "Coats off for the Eva Three-Step!" While we entertain this spirit the art of dancing will not, we think, die out in Orkney.

It would be interesting to know if Dr. Flett has made any comparison between the Norwegian folk dances and those found in the outer isles of Orkney.