



Some Notes on Dancing in Orkney

By DE TOM FLETT
PART ONE

MY career as a collector of folk-dances began only three years ago on a visit with my wife to the Outer Hebrides. When we made this visit, we had already spent a considerable time researching into the history of Scotland's dances. In the course of this work we had read in various books of a number of dances once common in the Western Isles but now (according to the writers concerned) "forgotten." Such descriptions of the dances as were given in these books were too brief to be of any real value, and in many cases only the names were mentioned. We hoped during our visit to discover whether any traces of these "forgotten" dances still existed. We found in fact that although the dances were long out of use, they were by no means forgotten, and, once we had discovered this, we spent every moment of our visit seeking out the older people and questioning them about dances. In all we recovered seven "forgotten" dances.

This visit to the Western Isles showed us how little we really know of dancing among the ordinary people of Scotland some fifty or sixty years ago. It convinced us, too, that there was much useful information to be gathered from old people in other parts of Scotland, and perhaps other nearly forgotten dances to be found. And since then we have, separately or together, used all our spare time and spare money roaming Scotland in search of dances and information about dancing. My visit to Orkney last September, which called forth from Spike the somewhat unflattering cartoon above, was part of our efforts to complete our picture of social dancing in Scotland, as far back as living memory will take us.

When I came, Orkney was very much unknown territory to me. I know of only two accounts of dancing in Orkney, written between 1905 and 1914. Both accounts mentioned Reels, Poursome, Sizsome and Eightsome as the principal dances, but I had no idea whether these reels were the same as were known elsewhere in Scotland, or were native to Orkney. I discovered that in fact Orkney had a strong and interesting tradition of its own, intermediate between the Highland and the Shetland traditions. As recently as seventy-five years ago, the dances in use in the country districts of the mainland were the Poursome, Sizsome and Eightsome Reels, and a kissing dance, known by various names, which was always performed as the last dance of the evening.

The Poursome Reel was the same as that done elsewhere in Scotland, but the Sizsome and Eightsome Reels were peculiar to Orkney. In these the dancers stand in two parallel lines, the men in one line, their partners facing them in the other. When the music begins, they "run the reel" or figure eight, the men following immediately behind their partners. At the end of the figure eight, they all return to their own places, and set to each other with suitable setting steps. The alternate "running the reel" and setting are then repeated as often as the dancers or the fiddler please.

John Firth, in his "Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish," tells us that these reels were danced with a vigour and abandon which would be considered out of place in a modern ballroom. "The men, with perspiration streaming down their faces, threw off both coat and waistcoat, and 'tripped it' in their 'sark sleeves' . . . When the music changed from slow to quick time, not a step nor a beat was missed, but in heavy walking shoes they 'toed it and heeled it' with per-

fect precision. The measure was accentuated by a loud tap of the iron shoe heels and a snap of the fingers. The men, waving hands and arms, made the rafters ring with many a "Heuch" and "Yesuch," in which the women did not disdain to join.

At the end of each reel, the fiddler drew his bow rapidly backwards and forwards across his strings, above the bridge, making a high-pitched squeaking sound. This was the signal for each man to seize his partner, and give her a good hearty kiss. The kiss was very much a bear-hug, and many a girl came out of it with dishevelled hair. Usually the girls were coy and would run from the fiddler immediately the dance ended, their partners in hot pursuit! The men had to be quick, however, for if a man failed to catch his partner before the end of the fiddler's coda, he had to forego his rights.

This custom of kissing your partner at the end of a dance was known as "mooter," presumably derived from multure, the toll paid to a miller, usually in the form of grain or flour, for his services in grinding your corn. Even when other dances began to take the place of the old reels, the fiddler would still make his "squeak" for "mooter" once or twice during the evening when reels were danced, and in this restricted form the custom lived on in Orkney until the first World War.

Accounts in old books show that the custom of kissing your partner at the end of a dance was once widespread throughout Scotland, but so far as I know the only other place in which it is still remembered is Aberdeenshire. It was known there as "Kissing Time" and again was accompanied by a squeak on the fiddle. There, however, it died out much earlier than in Orkney, and only very old people remember it now.

Another link with the rest of Scotland is the kissing dance which I mentioned earlier. This goes under a variety of names, but it is most widely known as "Babbly Bowster" (Bob at the "bolster"). I obtained various versions of this. In one, which was danced at weddings, the bride started. She walked round the room carrying a white handkerchief, while the fiddler played a march. After a few turns round the room, she threw the handkerchief to the groom, who joined her on the floor and kissed her, to the accompaniment of a squeak from the fiddle. The bride and groom then walked round the room, hand in hand, and after a turn or two the groom threw the handkerchief to the bridesmaid, who came on to the floor to receive a kiss from the groom. All three then walked hand in hand round the room, then the bridesmaid brought the best man on to the floor, he brought on another girl, and so on. This went on until all were on the floor, or the supply of men and girls ran out. When all were on the floor the dance "just broke up," and it was the convention that each girl was to be seen to her home by the man to whom she gave the handkerchief.

In another version, which I found (this one is also described by Firth in his book), the best man began by throwing his handkerchief to the bridesmaid, she to another man, and so on, the chosen dancers forming a ring. When all were on the floor, a chair was placed in the middle of the ring, and the best man took his place thereon, while the others danced round. The bridesmaid then stepped into the ring and took his hand to raise him from the chair. After kissing her, he ducked under the arm of the dancers in the ring and took his seat outside the ring. The bridesmaid then took the chair, when the same ceremony was gone through, and so

on until each one had kissed his partner out of the ring.

In yet another version (this time from Flotta, where it was known as "The Swine's Reel"), a man began, walking round the room until he came to the girl of his choice, to whom he threw his handkerchief. She joined him on the floor and received a kiss (always to a squeak from the fiddle), and the two walked on round the room. She threw the handkerchief to a man, who kissed her, and fell in behind the couple. This went on until all were on the floor in couples, when the dance concluded with a Poursome Reel.

I recorded the dance also from South Ronaldsay (where it was better known as "The Lang Reel"), and from Burray, but did not find it in Rousay. This dance is perhaps the most widely distributed of all the older folk-dances of Scotland. My wife and I found it from one end of Scotland to the other, from the Borders to Orkney, and from the East Coast to the Western Isles. It goes under a number of names, "Babbly Bowster," "Pesse Strae," "The Bonnet Dance" (done with a bonnet instead of a handkerchief), "These Kissing Reel," and "Blue Bonnets," but the general outline is always the same. The name "Babbly Bowster" arises from the fact that originally the first person carried a cushion, which was laid before the selected partner, and on which the couple knelt to kiss each other. Later, the place of the cushion was taken by a handkerchief spread on the ground, and the step from this to the versions described above is an easy one to make.

In most places, including Orkney, it has not been performed for many years, but it is still done occasionally in the Hebrides. Since I am not quite so elderly as Spike made me appear, I feel it is a matter of regret that the dance should have fallen out of use. (To be Continued)