

Some Notes on Dancing in Orkney

PART THREE

THE island of Flotta, is unique in my experience. There, until about 1890, the islanders knew only one dance, the Orkney Sixsome Reel. I found this very surprising at first, but all the older people on the island confirmed it. One elderly lady recalled a wedding held in her own home, at which there were about twenty couples present. The only dancing space available was a room about 12 feet by 15 feet, and there they danced six at a time, the fiddler sitting in one corner. When all had had their turn, the first set began all over again.

There was in fact no hall in Flotta at that time, so that the islanders had to dance in their own homes, where, as in the case of the wedding mentioned above, only six people could dance at one time. The restricted repertory becomes much more understandable when we realise that dancing only took place three or four times a year, and that even then one danced only one dance, out of every seven or so.

This simple state of affairs ended in 1890 or 1891 when a dancing teacher from Inverness, Mr. Smith, visited the island. The house of Windbreak was then being built, and was

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complete save for the internal dividing walls; and Mr. Smith was able to obtain the use of this. Part of the floor was of wood, and part was of stone, but this was a minor detail. He stayed only for a fortnight, but held classes every evening except on Sundays. In the twelve evenings which were available to him, he taught the Foursome Reel, and Reel of Tulloch, Lancers, Quadrilles, Petronella, Flowers of Edinburgh, Triumph, Rory O'More, Haymakers, Highland Schottische, Waltz, Dutch Polka, and the Ninepins Reel. It must have been a very intensive fortnight!

Before he left, Mr. Smith sold some copies of a little ballroom guide which he had written, and, after he had left, the young men and girls met on the grass by the Bu, and learnt further dances from this (the Cumberland Reel was one such dance). There was such a craze for dancing that the ladies would even practice the step for running the reel when following the fiddler.

Upon the advent of Mr. Smith, dances on Flotta had been seriously affected, with plenty of time between dances, and the fiddler was not overworked. At the New Year's Dance of 1891, Mr. Smith came, all this was changed, and the fiddler was so overworked that he wore the skin off the fingers of his left hand fingering the strings.

In spite of Mr. Smith and the dances which he brought with him, the Sixsome Reel survived in Flotta until about 1910. Up until then it was invariably danced as "The Bride's Reel" at a wedding. This was the first dance at a wedding, and was performed by the bride and groom, the best man and the bridesmaid, and the "honest folk" (the last a married couple, usually related to the bride). These six danced the Sixsome Reel once over. The fiddler then paused for a few seconds, while the men (or sometimes the ladies) changed places so that the best man now danced with the bride, and the reel was repeated. Then the dancers again changed places so that the honest man now danced with the bride, and the reel was repeated for a third time. (I shall give a precise description of the Bride's Reel in my last article.)

I also met this usage of the Sixsome Reel as the Bride's Reel in South Ronaldshay. In all other places which I visited, however, I met no one who remembered the honest folk taking part in a wedding, and the Bride's Reel the first dance at the wedding, was the Foursome Reel, and was performed by the bride and groom, best man and bridesmaid.

After Mr. Smith left Flotta, other dances were brought in by some of the islanders themselves, including a Threesome Reel, danced with handkerchiefs. I have met this from Aberdeen to the Borders, and the kissing dance, Babbly Bwister (under

the name of the Swine's Reel). The First World War brought hundreds of troops to Flotta, and a dance programme of about 1920, kindly presented to me by Mr. William Sutherland of Aval, lists a large number of couple dances from the south which presumably had been brought in by his troops, the Maxima, Boston-two-step, Winking Polka, French Minuet, Heavitation Waltz, Eva Three-Step and so on. Nevertheless, we still find the old Sixsome Reel appearing on the programme, and the last dance was still the Swine's Reel. The Sixsome Reel was in fact revived in Flotta for a short period round about 1920, but again fell into disuse.

I was not able to visit any of the North Isles, but I learnt a great deal about dancing in North Ronaldshay from Mr and Mrs. Roy Scott, now living in Rendall. North Ronaldshay has one dance, a superb Eightsome Reel, which does not seem to be known elsewhere in Orkney. I shall describe this dance in detail in my next article, so will not discuss it here except to say that it is one of the most interesting of all Scottish folk-dances.

The Sixsome Reel was also performed on North Ronaldshay, though it has not been performed there for some time now. It was not used as the Bride's Reel, however, this being the Foursome Reel. A teacher, Mr. MacKenzie, taught dancing there a good many years ago, and the repertory was then much the same as in the islands which I visited.

I have already written enough to show that, so far as dancing is concerned, Orkney has a distinct tradition of its own. This tradition actually lies midway between the Highland and the Shetland traditions.

In all three places, Orkney, Shetland and the Highlands, the principal dances until comparatively recent times, were reels. In Shetland, the commonest dance was a Sixsome Reel very similar to the Orkney Sixsome. And just as in Flotta and South Ronaldshay, the Sixsome Reel was used in Shetland as the Bride's Reel, the honest folk making the third couple. On the other hand, the Shetland Reel is in reel tempo only, while the Orkney Sixsome Reel is danced to both strathspey and reel, as are the reels belonging to the Highlands.

In the style of dancing, too, the Orkney reels followed those of the Highlands. Fairly elaborate setting steps were used (though on the whole simpler than those found in the Highlands), and the men at least raised their arms, snapped their fingers, and "heuched."

In the subsequent articles, I shall describe in detail some of the dances which I have mentioned here. I hope that people will think it worth while to revive these dances, and so preserve the Orkney tradition.

(To be Continued)