

ADDENDA ET CORRIGENDA

SOME HEBRIDEAN FOLK DANCES

A FURTHER CONTRIBUTION BY T. M. FLETT

The following brief notes are supplementary to the article "Some Hebridean Folk Dances" which my wife and I published in this Journal last year.¹ They give some of the results of a further search for old Scottish dances undertaken this summer. I add also some references to the literature which we have found since HFD was written.

(i) **The Kissing Reel.** I obtained several more versions of this dance. From Farquhar MacNeil of Eoligaray, Barra, now living in Jedburgh, I learnt that the version described in HFD (p. 112), which we found in Benbecula, S. Uist and Eigg, was also performed in Eoligaray within the last twenty-five years. Old people there had told Mr. MacNeil of the first man dancing a few steps round the handkerchief ("like the sword dance") before choosing his partner, though he himself had never seen this. I also recorded, from Duncan Morrison of Ersary, Barra, a version almost exactly like that described by MacIntosh (5)², save that the "sword dance" was missing.

In the West Highlands most old people (who had danced at all) remembered the Kissing Reel. Strangely enough, the sword dance over the twisted handkerchief at the beginning seems to have lingered on here longer than in the Isles, comparatively young people (i.e. below 70!) having seen this. On the other hand, the piper's playing "pòg an toiseach" when the couples kissed seems to have been peculiar to the Isles, and I found no one elsewhere who had encountered it. The dance also went under various names. Thus, on Skye Duncan MacPherson of Breakish and Hector Robertson of Harrabol (who had seen it at Portree) both knew it as "Ruidhleadh nam Pòg", while Charles Mathieson of Torrin knew it as "Dannsa nam Pòg". At Achintraid, Ross-shire, Duncan Murchison knew it as "Pease Straw"³, while Murdo MacKenzie (who had seen it at Lochcarron) knew it as "Blue Bonnets"; and in Arisaig Lachlan Gillies knew it as the "Bonnet Dance" (and it was performed with a bonnet instead of a handkerchief). The versions described by these people all differed slightly from each other, but all except the last began with the "sword dance".

The Border countryside also had a kissing dance, "Babbity Bowster" (Bob at the Bolster). Several descriptions of this dance have been published [e.g. (4); see also Gilchrist (3)], but the two versions which I found correspond more closely to the Highland "Kissing Reel" than to those published. The following description was given to me by Mr. Douglas of Askdalemuir, near Langholm, now living in Jedburgh.

The fiddler would play a Highland schottische, polka, or some other couple dance. To begin the dance the M.C. took a handkerchief and walked round the room. When he came to the girl of his choice, he gave her the handkerchief and kissed her. Before joining him on the floor, she gave the handkerchief to a nearby man who also kissed her. The M.C. and his chosen partner would then begin the dance appropriate to the music. The second man then chose his partner in the same way, and so it went on until all were on the floor. Often, the girl would throw the handkerchief to some nearby man and run to join her partner on the floor without waiting for a kiss from this other man. He, however, had the right (usually exercised) of chasing her and claiming his kiss. When the dancers kissed, the fiddler would run his finger up and down a string to make a squeaking noise. This was the last dance of the evening, and it was usual to see your partner to her home.

¹ J.E.F.D.S.S., vol. VII, No. 2, 1953, pp. 112-127. I shall refer to this article simply as HFD.

² The numbers in brackets refer to the list of references at the end.

³ According to MacIntosh (5), "Pease Straw" was both the name of the dance and the tune used for the Foursome Reel with which the dance concluded.

A somewhat similar description was also given to me by James Inglis of Deanfoot, near Denholm. He, however, added that the dance was supposed to be performed with a cushion, but that the handkerchief had taken its place. It was wrong just to give or throw the handkerchief to your chosen partner; you had to spread the handkerchief on the floor in front of her and kneel on it to kiss her.⁴ The dance was very popular in Roxburghshire about forty years ago.

More information on the subject of this Border kissing dance would be welcome. It might have been expected that it would have been recorded from the North of England, but the only reference to a dance of this type (other than the Cushion Dance itself) known to me is that in Brockett (2), 1829, presumably referring to Northumberland. Here "Peas Straw" is described as "the final dance at a rustic party; something similar to the ancient *cushion dance* at weddings".⁵ It is interesting that the Highland "Kissing Reel" was known as "Pease Straw" at Achintraid. Oddly enough, Brockett also mentions "Kiss-her, a peculiar squeak with the fiddle, at country dancing parties, . . . calling on the beau . . . to take the long established fee". There is no special reference to the dance "Peas Straw", however, and it must be remembered that in country districts at that time it was not unusual for the men to kiss their partners at the beginning of each dance.

(ii) **Cailleach an Dùdain** (HFD, p. 119). The *dùdain* is the dust from a small variety of oats which now seems to be grown only in the Isles. When this oats is threshed with the flail, the *dùdain* makes the thresher's face quite black. The tune as ("Cailleach an Dordon") is in the MacFarlan MS. (c. 1740) in the National Library of Scotland.

(iii) **Dannsa na Tunnaig** (HFD, p. 119). John MacNeil of Castlebay, Barra, had heard of a version of this dance from his grandmother which was apparently a hunkering dance of the follow-my-leader type but was danced by only four couples. It was performed to the tune "Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha" given on p. 118 of HFD.⁶ This, so far as the tune was concerned, was confirmed by several other people on Barra and S. Uist.⁷

(iv) It will be recalled that the two Eigg dances "Dannsa Mòr"⁸ and "Marbhadh na Béiste Duibhe" (HFD, pp. 120-5) were supposed to have come from the Strathaird district of Skye. I visited this district (Torrin, Strathaird and Elgol), but could find no one there who had any recollections of these two dances.⁹ My enquiries there for "Dannsa Mòr", however, led me to another dance not previously recorded, namely "Ruidhleadh Mòr" (the Big Reel). The following description was given to me by Neil MacKinnon of Torrin (aged 73), who had seen it performed at a wedding there nearly sixty years ago. As done on that occasion the twenty or so people present formed one big ring. When the music began they danced round clockwise in a circle, one behind the other (without joining hands), then stopped and danced ordinary reel setting steps, then danced round in the circle again, and so on (the circling and setting presumably occupying eight bars of the music each). Mr. MacKinnon could not remember whether or not they faced the centre when setting. It was in reel tempo throughout, the music being supplied by a fiddler.

This dance has an obvious connection with an obsolete form of the Foursome Reel.¹⁰ To begin this, two couples face each other, the men on the left of their partners. The two ladies dance across in front of their partners, who fall in behind them, and they all dance round clockwise in a circle, the ladies returning to their own places, while the men finish back to back, facing their own partners.

⁴ MacLagan (6) mentions this in his description of the Highland "Kissing Reel".

⁵ "Pease Straw" is also mentioned by Wight (7), 1818, as the last dance at a "widow's merry night" in Northumberland.

⁶ Miss Ethel Bassin has very kindly pointed out that there is a misprint in this tune as given in HFD. The first note in the second bar should be F natural and not F sharp.

⁷ The question of the tune for this hunkering dance was left open in HFD.

⁸ I take this opportunity of adding to the account of "Dannsa Mòr" given in HFD the suggestion that this dance is possibly the last relic in Britain of the *carole*.

⁹ I discovered later that "Marbhadh na Béiste Duibhe" was performed in Moidart up to twenty years ago, but I have not yet obtained full details.

¹⁰ Indeed, I first heard of "Ruidhleadh Mòr" from Charles Mathieson of Torrin, who told me it was this form of the Foursome Reel, a remark which puzzled me until I obtained Mr. MacKinnon's description.

They then set to each other with ordinary reel setting steps. The circle and setting (each of which occupies eight bars of the music) are then repeated as often as the dancers please, the men exchanging places after each circle. My wife and I recorded this form of the Foursome Reel in Benbecula and Eigg on our last visit to the Isles, and I can now add Barra, Torrin, Arisaig and Moidart to this list. In all these places it was last performed fifty or sixty years ago, and even then was known as "the old style" (Eigg), "the old-fashioned way" (Moidart), or "the old women's old round-about reel" (Barra). It has also found its way into the literature. In a MS. dated 1818 in the National Library of Scotland we find that "it was introduced from England two or three years ago under the name of 'fashionable,' most probably because in England this reel was never properly understood or valued". But in view of the fact that it is known as "the old style" in places noted for preserving old customs, I find this remark rather difficult to credit. Atkinson (1), 1900, simply mentions it as an alternative form of the reel.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- (1) J. G. Atkinson. *Scottish National Dances*, Edinburgh, 1900.
- (2) J. Brockett. *A Glossary of North Country Words*, Newcastle, 1829.
- (3) A. G. Gilchrist. "Some English and Scottish Folk Dances surviving amongst children," *J.E.F.D.S.* 2nd series, No. 4 (1931), 22-36.
- (4) Gleniffer. "Bab in the Bowster," *Notes and Queries*, 3 (1851), 45.
- (5) A. MacIntosh. "English and Gaelic Words to Strathspeys and Reels," *Trans. Gaelic Soc.*, Inverness, 28 (1912-14), 287-305.
- (6) R. C. MacLagan. *The Games and Diversions of Argyllshire*, London, 1901.
- (7) A. Wight, *The Life of James Allan*, Newcastle, 1818.