Obituary

Thomas Muirhead Flett 1923-1976

As a boy of seven, Tom Flett objected to being sent to Scottish dancing lessons. However, his first teacher was David Taylor, an ex-Pipe Major of the Scots Guards, who soon caused Tom to change his mind. The work on the Highland solo dances, as well as on social dances, inspired him to a life-long dedication to the dance. He became a superb teacher himself, and introduced many people to the joys of dancing. The demonstrations which he and his exhibition teams gave always captivated their audiences, while the dances which he ran were happy social occasions into which he fitted any necessary instruction with consummate ease.

Though many people saw him dance and M.C. dances, many more dancers knew him through his writings and lectures on traditional dance in Scotland and England. He made major contributions to our knowledge through his literary researches and his systematic collecting throughout Scotland and in parts of the north of England.

Tom's interest in the history of the dance was stimulated by Hugh Thurston who preceded him as a Ph.D. student in mathematics at Cambridge. While he was there, Tom married Joan F. Ayers, who shared his interest in Scottish dancing. They both read all they could about traditional dances and the occasions for dancing. So by the time that they started collecting in Scotland they had a thorough knowledge of the dances and their background.

They went to the Outer Hebrides on holiday in 1953, and were astonished to discover that while the islands had been visited by folk-song collectors, no one had done any work on dance there. In fact, Gaelic dances which were "thought to be lost" by authors on Scottish dance at the time, were known to old people on the islands. Later that same year they visited the border country where I. C. B. Jameson had collected earlier. This was the only part of Scotland in which Tom found that there had been any previous systematic collecting of dance.

Thereafter, Tom embarked on a series of journeys throughout the mainland of Scotland, the Hebrides, the Orkneys and Shetland, first by bicycle and later by car, while Joan stayed at home looking after their first daughter and continuing with the literary researches. His main method of collecting in villages and glens was to try to see everyone above 80, or above 70 if there was a dearth of older people. He would get them to talk first about occasions on which people danced, perhaps about weddings, and then to go on to details of the dances themselves. He found that most districts had had their own resident or itinerant dancing masters. His talks with dancing masters and with the families of old dancing masters were a considerable help in unfolding the story of the development of traditional dance in Scotland.

Tom's study of dancing was confined mainly to Scotland until 1959 when he turned his attention also to England. He prepared for a series of collecting trips with characteristic thoroughness, reading all that was available, and talking with other collectors. He was helped particularly by Dan Howison who introduced him to his first contacts in England. Tom had learned clog dancing earlier while collecting in Fife, and had adapted his system for noting intricate Scottish solo-dance steps to accommodate clog-dance steps.

He had always been quick at learning steps, and had become adept at writing them down, so that even on the first of his many visits to the Lake District he was able to learn and make notes of most of the substantial repertoire of the step-dancer Norman Robinson. Subsequently he collected in Westmorland and the Yorkshire Dales.

Throughout all this time he continued to investigate the history of the dance. He made the results of his studies available through the book *Traditional Dancing in Scotland*, and through a series of papers which he wrote with his wife. He applied the same high degree of scholarship to his work on dance as to his mathematical research. He invariably checked all references back to their original sources, and went to great lengths to ensure the accuracy of his own published work, carefully separating facts from conjectures. His work is distinguished by being based on thorough systematic investigation in the field and throughout the literature. It is a great joy to read, being beautifully written and completely reliable in detail as well as in broad outline.

One of his great interests was the analysis of old collections of country dances. Some of the collections were well-known, and others he had brought to light himself in libraries and in private collections of manuscripts. He was particularly concerned with the Scottish contribution to the country-dance form. The results of his studies on this are contained in two articles on " *The Scottish Country Dance: its origins and developments* " in the journal *Scottish Studies*. They are as indispensable to the student of English as to the student of Scottish dance.

From 1950 to 1967, while he was a member of the mathematics department of the University of Liverpool, Tom ran his own exhibition team, the Marlowe Scottish Dancers. It was a team of adults which had a wide repertoire of dances, including the Gaelic dances, Scottish solo-dances, and Westmorland clog dances which Tom had collected.

After being appointed Professor of Pure Mathematics at the University of Sheffield, he continued to teach and demonstrate the solo and clog dances. He had a remarkable ability to show the style of the tradition as well as the steps of the dances. He lectured on many occasions, both on traditional dance and its history. The presentation of his lectures was delightfully easy and relaxed, though they were prepared with the same scrupulous care as were his papers.

In his mathematical career he had an international reputation. The outstanding quality of his research was acknowledged by the award of a Cambridge Sc.D. in 1961. His output of research papers never abated, and in recent years he started to write on the history of mathematics also. He was the author of an excellent undergraduate textbook, and had almost completed a second mathematics book when he died. He gave immaculate, clear lectures. As a tutor he was understanding and encouraging while guiding his students towards his own high standards of work. He was an experienced administrator, making major contributions at many levels in the University of Sheffield and also in the London Mathematical Society.

Tom was a wonderful companion with a great range of interests. His untimely death has made many of us realise how much we relied on his scholarship and his prodigious memory, and above all on the kind way in which he shared his knowledge. He will be sorely missed in many fields, not least in the E.F.D.S.S. which had come to look forward to each new contribution from him to its work.

FRANK RHODES