

BOOIL BACCAGH:
A Traditional Manx dance

GEORGE BRODERICK
Universität Mannheim

ABSTRACT:

In 2006 Cinzia Curtis produced a detailed MA-thesis for the then Centre for Manx Studies, University of Liverpool, on the Manx traditional dance revival. One of the dances she discusses is Booil Baccagh, a traditional dance involving sequels of knife-throwing. The origin and meaning of the name has to date remained uncertain. This short note seeks to elucidate matters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Entitled ‘...while the others did some capers’: *the Manx Traditional Dance Revival 1929 to 1960*, the thesis first of all outlines in brief the Manx dancing tradition during the nineteenth century before discussing in detail the circumstances of the revival and those involved in it during the twentieth century. In this regard two names come to the fore: Mona Douglas (1898-1987) and Philip Leighton Stowell (1897-1978). In the second part of her thesis Cinzia Curtis discusses the known forty-four existing dances, whether traditional or composed.¹ The dance *Booil Baccagh* (here *Bwoaill Baccagh*) features as Dance 1.26 in CURTIS (2006: 38-39).

2. THE DANCE BOOIL / BWOAILL BACCAGH

This dance features both in *Rinkaghyn Vannin* (n.d. [1983]: 45-46) and in CURTIS (2006: 38-39). In order to demonstrate the various sequences involving the knives, we tabulate the various movements of the dance in detail, as provided in *Rinkaghyn Vannin* [n.d. 1983]: 45-46:

A dance for six men noted by Mona Douglas from various persons but a most complete description and demonstration of steps and figures were from Ceasar [Caesar] Cashen, James Quine and William Quane, Peel.

[There then follows the tune to the dance in staff notation].

Music Movements

- A1 Bars 1-8 Men dance round on a circular track and form two lines facing each other. The step is R.L.R. Flick forward instead of a hop. Each man carries a short fisherman's knife tucked into his belt.
B1 Bars 1-8 1st man (top left) draws his knife and throws it down in front of him so that its point is embedded in the ground and it is upright. Opposite man, who should be about two feet down the line, does the same immediately after him. This is continued down the line, does the same immediately after him. This is continued down the line. Positions should then be:

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|--------|
| | 2 | 4 | 6 | | | | |
| TOP | * | * | * | * | * | * | knives |
| | 1 | 3 | 5 | | | | |

Dancers step back on R foot, close up Line and spring high on both feet, coming down on R foot with L stretched out behind and arms flung out to salute the knives [...]. Then all drop into squatting position.

¹ For this see CURTIS (2006: i -liv). The known dances today can be found in two publications: *Rinkaghyn Vannin* ([1983] contains details of 27 dances), CURTIS (2006: i-x1): *The Leighton Stowell Book of Manx Dances* (1981, contains details of 9 dances) (CURTIS 2006: xlvi-lix).

- C1 Bars 1-8 In squatting position men perform the difficult 'frog' step, i.e. kicking feet forward. All spring to upright position on the last beat.
- A2 Bars 1-4 Men dance to opposite places, each man passing his own knife by the right, using step with flicks, on the last beat spring high, turning to face knives.
Repeat as in bars 1-4- back to place. On the last beat spring high, turn and drop into squatting positions.
- C2 bars 1-8 All dance squatting step but with side kicks instead of forward kicks, spring upright on last beat.
- A3 Bars 1-4 1st man takes up his knife in R hand and faces down the line. 2nd man takes up his knife and faces up the line to 1st man. 1st man dances down the line in 1-2-3-flick step tapping the other's knives passing R and L shoulders alternately, others stepping in and picking up their knives in turn. On the last beat, when No. 1 should be at the bottom of the line, all spring high and turn to face No. 1.
5-8 1st man dances back up the line tapping knives as before. All dancing 1-2-3-flick step. No. 1 travelling, others on the spot, falling back into two lines at the end.
- C3 Bars 1-8 All with knives tucked into their belts dance the 'frog' step on the spot with arms folded, springing upright on the last beat.
- A4 Bars 1-4 All arm R crossing over into opposite places in 1-2-3-flick step.
5-8 All arm L back to place.
- B2 Bars 1-8 Each dancer draws his knife in the same order as for the first throw down, but this time on the last three beats they spring down, take their knives to their R hands and spring upright in a line and hold their knives above their heads and shout 'hogh'.

3. CINZIA CURTIS (2006: 38-39) 1.25. *Bwoaill Baccagh*²

Here Curtis comments in detail on the dance, its contents and its circumstances:

3.1. This is an unusual dance involving the use of short knives. Modern dancers have been heard to say that it is the most ancient of all the Manx dances, by way of explaining its peculiar nature, but also that the dance was created in the later twentieth century based on a very vague description: popular opinion today on the provenance of this dance is widely varied.

3.2. As seen previously in the notes on *Chyndaa yn Bwoailley* [1.6, ix] a tune names the Frog Dance is confused with the tune for the couples dance in the 1924 edition of the JFSS [28: 171-72] and the tune is then also identified as called 'Bouill Backer' in Clague's original notes [...]. In Douglas' *Folklore Notebook: Dances* [...] the dance appears as complete dance for six men under the title Frog Dance. Here states the tune 'Hi Juan Jiggison'³ is given as the correct tune to the dance but *Chyndaa yn Bwoailley* and *Creg Willy Syl* are offered as alternatives. The 'squatting' figure was still performed at the time of the collection from Mr Corlett [...], a grocer from Ramsey, and Kelly Baldwin (possibly John Kelly from Baldrine in accordance with Douglas' paper of 1958) gave further descriptions, if a little vague, of other movements. Seemingly the squatting figure was seen just as a solo performance of a repeated step, now commonly known as the 'Frog Step', similar to the Cossack step⁴ in which the dancer crouches out [and] throws his feet out to each side alternately.

² Here with minor adjustments in line with current practice.

³ As featured in a fourth version of the dawn-song *The Hunts Up*, viz. *Yn Unnysup*, sung by and collected from Tom Kermode, Bradda (JFSS VII/28: 193-94).

⁴ The reference to „the„Cossack step“ may suggest contact with Russian sailors, or sailors from the eastern Baltic region? In the memoirs of a Mr. Martin Woods of „Arnside“, Athol Street, Port St. Mary, dated January 1957 (MNHL MS: W/16-A), in which it is noted that „Mrs. Wood's father [...] sailed on the schooner called the Kate, to the Baltic. The skipper was Captain Kinley.“ That Manx sailors often sailed to the Baltic Sea region seemingly gave its name to the Baltic, a nickname given to Upper Lhergyvreck farm just up from Kirk Michael village. It apparently received this nickname from a certain „Willie Corlett, an old sailor who used to live up at Upper Lhergyvreck, when coming home full [i.e. inebriated] from the Mitre [Hotel bar, Kirk Michael], would say, 'I'm going to sail the Baltic now [i.e. set out up to the road home]“ 1994 (cf. PNIM/II: 45). According to OT, many Manx sailors and fishermen traded and fished in the Baltic Sea area during the 19th century.

3.3. The notes are expanded later with descriptions offered by James Quine of Peel and Mrs Bridson of Glen Maye, the latter of whom provided the tune, and these are given below in a dance notation format [...], unlike the prose of previous notes. The date of this addition is not known, but is likely to be post 1937. In *Manx Dances: Their notation and revival* [Douglas 1937] Douglas notes that although many people were asked and could lilt the tune, twice as Chyndaa yn Bwoailley, no demonstration or description other than the single Frog Step has been obtained. It is also suggested that the dance used sticks, although the finished dance uses knives. This is possibly due to descriptions and recollections being muddled with Mylecharane's March which is also for six men and has some movements in common. This seems even more likely as the dance is associated with the Boat Suppers according to Douglas' paper of 1957 in the *Folklorist* [...]. It is possible that this was the dance Mylecharane's March took the place of when it ceased to be regularly performed. The Frog Step is compared with steps from the Cobbler's Jig, Lancashire.

3.4. The dance is then published in *Rinkaghyn Vannin* in 1983 [pp. 43-44] alongside a tune with a different rhythmic structure to Chyndaa yn Bwoailley, but with some similarities in melodic patterns. A full notation of the dance is given although the accompanying notes cite Caesar Cashen, James Quine and William Quane of Peel as the informants.

4. THE DANCE NAME: *BOOIL / BWOAILL BACCAGH*

As noted above (§3.1), Cinzia CURTIS (2006:38) preludes the following:

This is an unusual dance involving the use of short knives. Modern dancers have been heard to say that it is the most ancient of all the Manx dances, by way of explaining its peculiar nature, but also that the dance was created in the later twentieth century based on a very vague description: popular opinion today on the provenance of this dance is widely varied (CURTIS 2006: 38).

On the face of it, the form may suggest 'a strike' (Mx. *bwoaill*) + 'lame' (Mx. *baccagh*), viz. 'a lame strike', Ir. *bacach* 'lame, halt; defective, imperfect' (Dinneen 67), ScG. *bacach* 'lame, crippled, maimed; rugged, hilly' (Dwelly 56), OIr. *baccach* 'lame; lame person; name of a disease' (DIL/B: 2). But the throwing of the knives down into the ground, twice, (moves [2] and [4]) and the upspring „Cossack Step“ style would not suggest anything 'lame', but something more dynamic.

The crux of the issue, to my mind, lies in Mx. *baccagh* 'lame', In this regard, perhaps we ought to be looking at something like Mx. *baccal*, *baccan* 'crutch, crook' (Kelly 17), cf. ScG *bacal* 'obstacle, stop, hindrance', *bacan* 'crook, crooked staff, hook' (Dwelly 56), Ir. *bachall* 'crook, staff', *bacán* 'hook, handle, hinge-hook' (Dinneen 67), OIr *bachall* 'staff, crozier, pastoral staff' (DIL/B: 3-4). To PIE *bak* 'Stab als Stütze (staff to lean on)', auch 'stechen (prick), stoßen (shove), schlagen (beat)'; air. *bacc* (nir. *bac*) 'Haken (hook), Krummstab' (crook), cymr. *bach* 'ecke (corner), Haken (hook)', bret. *bac'h* 'Hacke (heel), Stab (staff)', sind im Inselkeltischen oder schon im Latein erfolgte Rückbildungen aus *baculum* (*stick*) (are in Insular Celtic or even in Latin an ensuing back-formation from *baculum* (*stick*))(IEW/93).

In the context of the dance, *Booil Baccal / Baccan* would mean something like 'stick strike', with 'sticks' referring to the knives being thrown into the ground, i.e. 'knife strike'. If so, then 'Dance of the Knife-Strikes', i.e. *Booil / Bwoaill Baccal*?

The 'cossack-like' movement in the dance may either derive from contact with eastern European dancers in the Baltic area, or from traditions closer to home (e.g. Lancashire), or is a separate development within the Manx dance tradition altogether?

ABBREVIATIONS

air. - altirisch (Old Irish).

bret. - bretonisch (Breton).

| | |
|---|--|
| cymr. -cymrisch (Welsh). | n.d. - no date. |
| DIL – Dictionary of the Irish Language (1912-1976). | nir. - nordirisch (Northern Irish). |
| IEW – Indogermanschen Etymologisches Wörterbuch (Pokorny 1959, 2005). | OIr. Old Irish. |
| Ir. - Irish. | OT – Oral Tradition. |
| JFSS - Journal of the Folksong Society. | PIE – Proto-Indo-European. |
| MNHL – Manx National Heritage Library. | PNIM – Place-Names of the Isle of Man. |
| | ScG – Scottish Gaelic. |

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BRODERICK, George (1994-2005): *Place-Names of the Isle of Man*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. 7 vols.
- CREGEEN, Archibald (1835): *A Dictionary of the Manks Language*. Douglas: Quiggin.
- CURTIS, Cinzia (2006): *...while the others did some capers': the Manx Traditional Dance revival 1929 to 1960*. MA-thesis, Centre for Manx Studies, University of Liverpool, September 2006.
- DIL: *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy (1912-1976).
- DOUGLAS, Mona (1937): 'Manx Folk Dances: their notations and revival'. In: *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* III/2 (1937): 110-116.
- DOUGLAS, Mona (1957): 'Some Ritual Dances of Mann'. In: *The Folklorist* 4/3 (autumn): 75-77.
- DOUGLAS, Mona (1958) 'A Chiel' Amang 'em': Memories of a collector on the Isle of Man'. *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 3 (1958): 156-159.
- DWELLY, Edward (1911): *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*. Glasgow: Gairm Publications. Reprint 1994.
- KELLY, Juan (1866): *Fockleyr Gailckagh as Baarlagh*. Douglas: Manx Society.
- POKORNY, Julius (2005): *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Tübingen u. Basel: A. Francke Verlag. First published 1959. 2 vols.
- SLEIH GYN THIE. *Rinkaghyn Vannin*, dances of Man published by Sleih Gyn Thie [n.d. (1983)].
