'The Dirk Dance of the Kings of Man': genuine tradition or cultural invention?

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ABSTRACT:

There has been much speculation over the decades as to the veracity or otherwise of what might be regarded as the most spectacular and charismatic dance in the Manx traditional dance repertoire. This article seeks to answer that question.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. 'The Dirk Dance of the Kings of Man', or simply 'The Dirk Dance' or 'The Sword Dance', as it has come to be known, has held a certain mystique among Manx dancers in the Isle of Man since its "discovery" some 100 years or so ago from a fisherman of Port Mooar, Kirk Maughold. Also equally as much scepticism about its authenticity has languished long among its detractors. The story goes that it was a ritual dance allegedly performed originally within the royal circles of the former Kings of Man of the Scandinavian period (10th-13th centuries), later continued into modern times within the Kermode family of Maughold. The purveyor and promoter of this dance manifested itself in the personage of Manx folkdance / folksong collector and revivalist the late Ms. Mona Douglas (1898-1987), Ballaragh, Lonan.[1] Descriptions of the dance and its performance along with details of informants and performers lie mainly in the hand of Mona Douglas herself. In order to set the Dirk Dance in context comments made by Mona Douglas on the dance, from the earliest in 1928 to the latest in 1983, have been noted by Stephen Miller (MILLER 2004: 99) who introduces his presentation on the Dirk Dance as follows:

> What began as a "Manx sword dance (solo)" in 1928 (and merited only one line of description) became the "Dirk Dance" in 1937, the "Dirk Dance of the Kings of Man" in 1949, "The Kirk Maughold Sword Dance of the Kings" in 1957, and finally, pulling everything together, "The Kirk Maughold Sword Dance of the Kings of Man" in 1973 (MILLER 2004: 99/1).

1.2. It was apparently this ritualistic dance that inspired Mona Douglas (DOUGLAS 1981: 5) to collect further:

> Another great stimulus - really the one which started my serious collecting and noting - was being taken by my own Irish grandfather to see Jackie Kermode of Port Mooar, Maughold, perform the famous "Sword Dance of the Kings of Mann",[2] of which he was the last traditional dancer (DOUGLAS 1981: 5).

1.3. Stephen Miller (MILLER 2004: 99) then adds:

> In 1973 it is still her grandfather, a change from that of 1958, when it was Mrs. Callow of Cardle Veg [Maughold], who "having first prepared me by telling me the old traditions about it." In 1949 Mona

1 For details of Mona Douglas's life and times, see Fenella Bazin (2004), for her writings, see Stephen Miller (2004: i-xiii Introduction). For an assessemnt of MD's collection and 'restoring to use' of Manx traditional dances, see Bob Carswell (2004: 15-28), for her songs, see George Broderick (2004: 117-155 and 2019).

2 The spelling 'Mann', with double final *n*, is antiquarian in form; normally written with a single *n,* viz. 'Man'.

> Douglas wrote, "I noted this dance some years ago from a Maughold fisherman named Kermode, and the air to which it is performed from the singing of his wife, who always acted as his accompanist". Kermode's son, who would have carried on the tradition, was unable to do so due to an accident[3] (MILLER 2004: 99/2).

2. THE INFORMANT

2.1. Mona Douglas tells us that her informant for the Dirk Dance was a certain John (Jack) Kermode of Port Mooar, Kirk Maughold. When I visited Mona Douglas on Saturday 22 September 1979 I brought with me a list of twenty-five Manx dances which I had prepared with help from Manx dance expert Bob Carswell. With regard to the Dirk Dance, about which there was much speculation at the time as to its authenticity, I asked Mona Douglas specifically when did she first visit Jack Kermode. She said 1909-10, and on two or three occasions thereafter. Mona Douglas, who was born on 18 September 1898 (BAZIN 1998: 129), would therefore have been a child of 11 or 12 years on her first visit.

2.2. *John Kermode appears in the following Isle of Man Census registers*:

1851: John Kermode, 10, 1841, scholar, of Maughold, f. William Kermode, 39, 1812, "Proprietor Farming 105 Acres, Employs 5 Lab.", m. Eleanor, 36, 1815, of Maughold, living in Ballajora, Maughold (HO107 2524 9 39).
Nothing more is heard of John until the 1881 census, probably because he was away at the fishing.

1881: John Kermode, 38, 1843, married, fisherman, of Maughold (vessels *White Star*, moored at Douglas) (RG11 5605 53 2).

1891: John J. Kermode, 49, 1842, fisherman, of Maughold, living with his wife Margaret A., 48, 1843, of Ramsey, at Port Moar (*sic*), Maughold, along with their children John T., 17, 1874, fisherman, of Ramsey, Edward, 13, 1878, scholar, of Ramsey, George, 7, 1884, of Ramsey, and Julia J., 7, 1884, granddaughter, also of Ramsey (RG12 4684 F? 42).

1901: John Thomas Kermode (thus entered), 57, 1844, fisherman, of Maughold, living at Port Moar with his wife Margaret A., 55, 1846, and their son Edward, 23, 1878, fishmonger, all of Maughold (RG13 5302 9 54).
Only John is entered as "Both", i.e. a speaker of both Manx and English, his wife and son Edward as English only.

1911: John S. Kermode (thus entered), 69, 1842, mar. 48 yrs. [1863], fisherman, living with his wife Margret (*sic*), 69, 1843, mar. 48 yrs., along with their son George, 28, 1883, "Son Working at Fishing", at Port Moar, Maughold. The birthplaces of John and Margret are entered as "Isle of Man" only, while that of son George is entered as "Ramsey, Isle of Man". As with the 1901 census only John is entered as a Manx speaker, his wife Margret and son George, English only (UK Census Online).

John James Kermode died, aged 76, and was buried in Maughold on 25 April 1918 (Lawson Index of Burials, IMFHS online, Manx BMD).

3. NOTING THE DIRK DANCE

3.1. As can be seen from her articles (1928-1983; see Bibliography), Mona Douglas is somewhat variable in the detail she gives of this first visit to Kermode and of Kermode's interpretation of the history of the dance. My own view is that the most reliable description of that first visit is that made

3 Resulting, according to MD, in his becoming a cripple. See DOUGLAS (1957a: 32), also below §3.3.

in 1973 where Mona Douglas tells us what happened without allowing herself time to insert speculative detail. This version is particularly telling in its description of the performance that unfolded:

> From very early days I had heard quite a lot about what was called "The Kirk Maughold sword dance of the Kings of Mann", but I had never actually seen it performed until "Pat" [MD's Irish grandfather] gave me the opportunity of collecting it. He used to make business calls on a number of people in Maughold, one of whom was Jacky Kermode, the dancer from whom I learnt it. One day "Pat" took me with him to Kermode's cottage on Port Mooar beach and asked the old fisherman if he would "Let the child (me) see his sword dance." Without much demur Kermode took off his sea-boots, reached down a short, thin old sword from hooks above the chiollagh [open fire-place], and made ready to start. His wife poured out and brought to him a pewter beaker of whisky,[4] which he drained and handed back to her, and then she crouched down beside the turf fire and began to sing. He stood perfectly still through the first phase of the air, holding the sword upright before his face, and then he began to dance, at first slowly, then gradually quickening and moving with more vigour as the sword flashed about his body and was slashed over his head, and on to the thrilling final leap and salute, for which he knelt in the open doorway as though saluting the sun - as he said the young princes of the Manx royal line used to do when they took arms.
>
> That was my first and greatest experience of true traditional art which was an evocation of sheer beauty, and it will be remembered as long as I live: the low-beamed white-walled kitchen where the fireglow from the chiollagh mingled with sunlight coming in through the open door, the old woman crouched by the hearth crooning the noble air in a vivid and continuous rhythm, and the tall old dancer, vigorous and graceful despite his years, so utterly absorbed in the dance of which he carried on the tradition from far mists of antiquity (DOUGLAS 1973: 39-40).

Note that in the last paragraph there is no mention of a text, only that the wife was "crooning the noble air in a vivid continuous rhythm:"

3.2. With regard to the origins of the dance itself Mona Douglas first treats of it as follows (DOUGLAS 1937: 113):

> I noted the dance some years ago from a Maughold fisherman named Kermode and the air from the singing of his wife, who always used to sing it as the accompaniment to his dancing. Kermode told me that he had learnt it from his father, who said it was "the dance the old Kings of Mann was using to do before now, when they would come to be King"; and that he believed none but members of his own family had danced it in the old days, and not all of them, but that one to whom it was taught had to have "the build and making of a dancer." Other fishermen of the district, though able to dance the usual reels and stepdances, never attempted the Dirk Dance [...] (DOUGLAS 1937: 113, also 1949: 54).

3.3. Kermode presents his own alleged view of the history and tradition of the Dirk Dance as follows (DOUGLAS 1957a: 32):

> It used to be said that "Only one man in the Island can dance the Kirk Maughold Sword Dance" - and that was probably true, at any rate by the time I came to note it down, for Jack Kermode, its last traditional performer, was the last man of his family able to dance. He had a son, and would normally, I suppose, have taught him the dance as his father had taught it to him, but owing to an accident the boy was a cripple. Kermode claimed that his family had been the only performers of the dance for generations back, but until now there had always been one or two Kermode boys who knew it, and he was

4 As already noted by Bob Carswell (2004: 19), the two accoutrements of the dance, the sword and the pewter beaker, are no longer extant, which, along with the dance notes allegedly belonging to Mona Douglas's great-grandfather, Philip Quayle of Glentramman, Lezayre, and perhaps MD's own copies of them, appear to have been destroyed when on loan to Cecil Sharp House, London (CARSWELL 2004: 20).

> very sad about the break in the tradition, but gave his whole hearted approval when I proposed to teach it to some other Manx boy. He accepted the transition from his own family philosophically, saying: "Well, first it was done at the Kings, and then they gave it to the Kermodes, to be King's Dancers, and now it must go to some person else - but see ever that the one you teach it to has the build and making of a dancer, for that was the day it was taught from the beginning, not just to every boy of the house. The Sword Dance of the Kings is not for every person to do" (DOUGLAS 1957a: 32).

3.4. With regard to the dance movements themselves, evidently learned from Kermode, Mona Douglas (1937: 114) notes:

> Dancer carries dirk round in a circle at arms' length forward, point upward, then lays it down, salutes it, and dances round it. Then he picks it up and does side-steps and leaps, kicking dirk at head level. Then lays it down again, dances round it, and salutes four times. Then he lifts it and makes slashes over his head and about his body, passing dirk between his legs. Finally, he carries it around again, and finishes kneeling to the dirk (DOUGLAS 1937: 114).[5]

3.5. With respect to the sword itself Mona Douglas (1957a: 31) supplies the following details:

> In the popular mind there is a deeply-rooted feeling that this dance has something to do with the bearing of the Sword of State before the representative of the Ruler of Mann[6] [*sic*] in the annual Tynwald Ceremony. The weapon used by Kermode in the dance was 21 inches long. It was narrow-bladed, very thin and flexible, and sharpened on both edges. The hilt was of silver, or a metal closely resembling it, the cross-pieces were curved back from the blade, and at the conjunction of blade and cross-piece on each side was a small raised boss, one of these bearing the Three Legs device and the other what seemed to be a representation of the sun with rays; but both carvings were very much worn down (DOUGLAS 1957a: 31).

3.6. Kermode makes conditions for performing the Dirk Dance (DOUGLAS 1957a: 33):

> When I learnt it from Kermode, he would never allow me to go right through it, saying it would be "unlucky mighty"; and he made me promise that if I taught it to any boys I would only show them a bit at a time. Apparently, it was only the complete dance which formed the ritual - to practise sections of it was innocuous. He also said the dance must never be performed to any other tune; and as a matter of fact this would hardly be possible, so closely are movements and music welded together (DOUGLAS 1957a: 33).

3.7. However, in an undated notebook containing material collected by her concerning Manx folklore, dances, tunes, and the like (MILLER 2016:1), Mona Douglas candidly notes the following:

> Sword Dance [MD's underlining]. Danced by J. Kermode, Port Mooar: tune sung by Mrs Kermode, & noted. Have not found any corresponding air in Gill or Clague. K. said it was "the dance the old Kings of Mann" were using to do before now", & he had learnt it from his father. He thought there would be a number of men in the Island that could do it, but it had never been a well-known dance as far as he knew. I got the impression that there was something ceremonial about it, but could not find out by questioning that it was concerned with any special season, or custom, or that it was anything but just a dance executed for its own sake. The sword that he used, which he called simply a skynn [Mx. 'knife'], was quite a small thing, very short & light, & it looked fairly old. He said it had been in his family a long time (DOUGLAS n.d. quoted in MILLER 2016: 1).

5 For a fuller description of the dance movements see Mona Douglas's "Undated notebook" (cf. MILLER 2016: 1-2), as well as *Rinkaghyn Vannin* n.d. [1983]: 37-38.

6 The form 'Mann' is often found in Manx cultural and revivalist circles, otherwise 'Man' (G *Manu*, g. *Manann*, d. *Manainn*). For a discussion of the name and its origins, see BRODERICK (2017: 136-137)

3.8. Douglas then goes into considerable detail as to how the dance was performed, step for step (*ibid*. 1-2).

4. THE TUNE

4.1 In the 1937 exposé of the Dirk Dance (DOUGLAS 1937: 113) Mona Douglas in fact mentions the tune, adding that she had heard variants of it elsewhere (DOUGLAS 1957a: 33):

> It is curious that the air to which our Dirk Dance is done was previously noted in Skye *as a lullaby* [MD's italics] (DOUGLAS 1937: 113).
>
> However, I have also heard that air played, without the dance, by a traditional fiddler in the west of the island, and when Arthur Darley,[7] the Irish fiddler and folk song collector, visited the island some years ago he told me he had found an air of somewhat similar character in Galway - in the guise of a love-song (DOUGLAS 1957a: 33).

4.2. A note at the bottom of p. 113 (above) indicates that the "lullaby" can be found in the Frances Tolmie Collection printed in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* IV/16 (1911): 160. On looking up the tune it turns out to be *Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge* ('the lullaby of the water-horse'), sung by Mary Ross, Killmaluag, Isle of Skye, 1897, one of three songs concerning the *each-uisge*, either as a lullaby or as a lament. The tune is provided here for comparison with that of the Dirk Dance, which reveals that in both cases we have mainly the same tune. The text to the Skye song runs as follows (trans. GB):

O-hó! bà a leinibh, hó!	('O-hó! sleep, child, hó
O-hó bà a leinibh, ha!	O-hó! sleep, child, ha!
Ba, a leinibh, hó-bha-hó!	Sleep, child, hó-bha-hó!
Hó-bà a leinibh hao-i ha!	Sleep, child, hao-i ha!
Refrain:	
Hi hó! hó-bha-hó!	Hi hó! hó-bha-hó
Hi hó! hao-i ha!	Hi hó! hao-i ha!
S'luath dha d'chois tha, hó-bha-hó!	Swift of foot are you, hó-bha-hó
'S mór 'nad each thu, hao-i ha!	and much are you of horse, hao-i ha!
O-hó! m'fheudail am mac, hó!	O-hó, my darling son, hó
O-hó, m'eachan sgèimheach, ha!	O-hó, my comely wee horse, há
'S fhad o'n bhail' thu, hó-bha-hó!	far from home are you, hó-bha-hó
Nitear d'iarraidh, hao-i ha!	you will be looked for, hao-i ha!').

4.3. I personally heard this song discussed and sung by Ailean Dòmhnallach (Allan Macdonald) at a lecture he was giving at the *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* Conference (21-24 June 2016) in Sabhal Mór Ostaig, Isle of Skye, on Tuesday evening 21 June 2016. I recognised the tune and spoke to him the following day about it and its use for a Manx ritual dance.

4.4. The reference to the *each-uisge* in this and two succeeding Scottish Gaelic songs from Skye in the Frances Tolmie Collection (JFSS IV/16 (1911): 160-162) is discussed in detail by Annie G. Gil-

7 Arthur Warren Darley (1873-1929), Irish fiddle player, composer, music teacher and examiner, as well as a traditional music archivist. Co-composer with Patrick Joseph McCall of the "Wexford Ballads", viz. *The Boys of Wexford*, *Boolavogue* & *Kelly the Boy from Killaane* (Arthur Warren Darley, wikipedia, accessed 09.08.2016).

christ,[8] one of the four editors of and commentators on the Tolmie Collection (JFSS IV/16 (1911): 163):

> These three "Water-Kelpie" tunes all appear to be Norse in origin. Rhythmically, they are closely akin to two tunes attached to the folk-ballad of "Agnes and the Merman" (Agnete og Havmanden) in *Danmarks Melodier* [below], and even in the probably modernised form in which those tunes are there given, there are at several points close correspondences in phrase and melody. [...].We may have here, in these Water-Kelpie songs, a very interesting Norse survival, and it seems possible to trace the particular form of water-spirit known as a "kelpie" to an origin in that huge uncouth creature of artic waters, the walrus (literally whale-horse), *rosmer* (i.e. sea-horse) in Danish - a sea beast of whom strange reports would, as we may suppose, be brought home by voyaging Norsemen. The Scandinavian mermen may also, I think, be supposed, on the naturalistic side, to be decended from the walrus genus, just as the Hebridean and north of Scotland mer-men and mermaids claim kinship with the "sea-folk" (who also seem to be mixed up with human wearers of seal clothing - Lapps or Finns). It is significant that one of the mermen of the "*Rosmer* Hafmand" (*hafmand* = merman), and he carries the casket containing the heroine of the story in his mouth - as the most convenient way - and the hero on his back, to the surface of the sea. The walrus, it may be interpolated, when full grown, attains the length of 18 or 20 feet [c.6-7m]) [...].
>
> The legendary pony of the Faroe Isles, which draws whoever touches it down into the sea and drowns him, and possibly also the magic horse of the malevolent "water man" (in another Danish ballad), which is formed out of "clear water" (a misunderstanding of "water-horse"?) seem to be other forms assumed by the spirit-horse of the sea, after its original embodiment, the walrus, (if here rightly guessed) had become a mere symbol of oil and ivory to its hardy hunters. But both the Water-Kelpie and Agnete's husband are gentler and more lovable forms of *Nyker*[9] than most of the Danish mermen - AGG (JFSS IV/16: 163).
>
> Tales of the sea-man ("bodach mara") are still told in Sutherland - GH (JFSS IV/16 (1911): 163).

The thesis here is that the three aforementioned Scottish Gaelic songs from Skye show Scandinavian origins, both in their references to the *each-uisge* 'water-horse' and to the tunes used for them.

5. THE MANX TEXT

The Manx text to the Dirk Dance, as provided by Mona Douglas (1949), runs as follows:

Purt y beayll

O hi-o y varriaght O	['O hi-o the victory O
O hi-o, my skian gial (x2)	O hi-o, my shiney dirk
She mish [*ta*] *cur ooashley, o*[*o*]*ashley diu*	It is I (who) worships you
O hi-o, my skian gial (x2)	O hi-o, my shiney dirk
Hi-o, y varriaght O	Hi-o the victory O
Hi-o, my skian gial	Hi-o, my shiney dirk
Reeaghyn dy Vannin O	kings of Man O
O hi-o, my skian gial	O hi-o, my shiney dirk

8 Ann(ie) Geddes Gilchrist was also the editor of and commentator on the Clague Collection of Manx songs / tunes, as well as some collected by Mona Douglas herself, in JFSS VII/28-30 (1924-26) (qv). For further on A. G. Gilchrist see MILLER (2013, 2015).

9 In a Manx context it might be mentioned here that the Lonan place-name "Nikkesen's Pool" (or just plain "Nikkesen") (on the Glen Roy river) refers to the Old Norse sea-goblin *nykr*, OE *nicor* 'the nick', a fabulous water-goblin, mostly appearing in the shape of a grey water-horse (Mx. *cabbyl-ushtey*, ScG. *each-uisge*), emerging from lakes to be recognised by its inverted hoofs (cf. PNIM/IV: 340).

O hi-o y varriaght O	O hi-o the victory O
O hi-o my skian gial	O hi-o, my shiney dirk
Reeaghyn dy Vannin O	kings of Man O
O hi-o, o hi o ho.	O hi-o, o ho o ho'] (GB).

Mona Douglas classes the Manx text as "port-y-beayll" ('mouth music', 'diddling', 'lilting'). So far as is known, she first uses this term in 1958 when referring to a photograph of fisherman John Kelly of Baldrine taken from an Isle of Man Tourist Board film of 1936 "dancing to the *port-y-beayll* [MD's italics] of a traditional singer, Robert Kewley." (DOUGLAS 1958: 157).[10] However, the concept of "port-y-beayll" is otherwise unknown in the Manx language and literature, even in the Manx song tradition, so far as I am aware. Mouth music is, however, known in Scotland where it is termed *port-a-beul* ('mouth-music'; DWELLY 732) and in Ireland as *port-béil* ('lilt'; Ó DÓNAILL 965), or simply *port* 'a tune or air, sung or played' (DINNEEN 854). The term "port-y-beayll" here and elsewhere almost certainly derives from Mona Douglas herself, culling it seemingly from the Irish/Scottish Gaelic song/dance tradition. There is no known term in Manx Gaelic for *port-a-beul*.

5.1. *Comments on the text*:

5.1.1. The text used for the dance does not seem to be original. There is no evidence that Kermode's wife sung any text at all, as she was not a Manx speaker (§2.2), but that she apparently only provided the tune accompaniment - i.e. lilting; MD's 'crooning' (§3.1.).
5.1.2. The vocables bear close similarity to those in the Skye song *Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge*.
5.1.3. The earliest attestation of (part of) the Manx text, if genuine, appears in 1949[11] (DOUGLAS 1949: 56) in the sentence "while the old woman crouching by the hearth, sang swaying and beating her foot to the throb of the air: *O-hi-io y varrey ho! O-hi-io, my skian giall* [my italics - GB]" (DOUGLAS 1949: 56). Here the text is used merely to identify the tune.
5.1.4. The form *O hi-io y varrey ho!* (DOUGLAS 1949: 56) contains the word *varrey*, not *varriaght*, and, if genuine, may therefore perhaps echo ScG. *bodagh mara* 'sea-man'? (cf. §4).

The idiosyncratic Manx formulations above bear similarity to those found in Mona Douglas's songs (cf. BRODERICK 2004). In such circumstances it is my view that the so-called "port-y-beayll" text to the Dirk Dance is not original, but rather created afterwards by Mona Douglas modelled, it seems, on the ScG. song *Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge.*

6. SOCIAL AND RITUAL DANCES

6.1. As we are told that the Dirk Dance was a ritual dance, it might perhaps be pertinent at this point to outline the differences between social and ritual dances. Robert (Bob) Carswell, an acknowledged authority on Manx dances and the Manx dance tradition, tells us (CARSWELL 2004: 16):

> Social dances, by their nature, are easier to do, and their setting does not generally require special steps, being danced in circumstances where steps do not matter, and enjoyment, and perhaps drink, are part of the social scene. This suggests that ritual dances with distinctive steps and movements may have a better chance of transmission and survival because they are considered to be special in some way, even if later perpetrators do it simply to keep up a custom - *Mannagh vow cliaghtey cliaghtey, nee cliaghtey coe* ['if custom does not beget custom, then custom will weep' - Manx proverb]

10 Referred to also by Bob Carswell (2004: 20). Unfortunately neither the film nor the photograph taken from it has to date been traced. The latter may yet appear, as Carswell hopes (2004: 20), among MD's effects in the thirty or so boxes containing her *Nachlass* housed with Manx National Heritage.
11 No text appears in the first known published version of the tune and dance in 1936 (cf. DOUGLAS 1936: 6-7).

(CARSWELL 2004: 16).

6.2. Carswell (ibid.) adds here that Morris dancing has survived probably because it is distinctive and ritualistic. He then continues (CARSWELL 2004b: 21):

> Looking at the dances, accepting that dancers may have taken the trouble to learn more complicated steps for ritual dances, the overall conclusion is that very few of them [i.e. Manx dances] are genuinely social dances. Whilst Mona makes play of the fact that they were learned first by the Albert Road School team, the point is that they had to be learned. They are generally so complicated as to require special training (CARSWELL 2004: 21).

6.3. Carswell (ibid.) notes that of the twenty-nine dances recorded by Mona Douglas, nine can be regarded as ritual dances, including the Dirk Dance. Of the twenty remaining dances, three contain figures which are repeated, possibly with progression to dance with another partner or with another set of people, while a further four may be repeated *ad infinitum*, making seven social dances in all. Ritual dances have to be learned and, as Carswell tells us (*ibid*.), require special training. For this reason a ritual dance of this sort is likely to survive and come down through the generations, more so than social dances.

7. AUTHENTICITY OF THE DIRK DANCE

7.1. Because of the import and circumstances of the dance its authenticity and credibility have seemingly been challenged more or less from the very start. Mona Douglas was only 11-12 years' old when she was first taken to see Jack Kermode, fisherman, of Port Mooar, Maughold. In this regard, the late Constance Radcliffe, Ramsey, co-author along with her husband, the late William Radcliffe also of Ramsey, of *A History of Kirk Maughold* (RADCLIFFE 1979) and who knew of the Kermodes of Port Mooar (but do not mention them in their book), told me c. 1980 that Jack Kermode was well known as a local character of acknowledged powers of persuasion and exaggeration who could captivate people with his exotic dancing, and they took the view that children, especially, could be easily taken in by such performances.[12] In this respect, Mona Douglas herself (DOUGLAS 1958: 158) admits that she could be so captivated through her "childish eyes", as she put it, in regarding Mrs. Callow of Cardle Veg, Maughold, as "an ancient Druidess translated into my own day."

7.2. Nevertheless, it was not until 1937 that Mona Douglas herself expressed some doubt as to the authenticity of the dance, since she could find no official record of it either associated with Tynwald or at all:

> Of the dance itself, however, I can find no trace in the records of Tynwald, so that if it ever was actually performed as part of the Ceremony, it must have been discontinued at an early date. I think it possible, however, that the performance of the dance as ritual may have passed long ago from the King to some officer of State who would pass on the hereditary privilege to his descendants, and that later the actual dance may have passed out of State usage but remained as a tradition in a certain family or families. This is pure surmise, of course, and I do not know of any similar traditional "privilege" dance (DOUGLAS 1937: 113-114).

7.3. However, Bob Carswell (2004: 19) takes the view that there may in fact be a grain of truth in

12 Along with many other people in Man at the time; the Radcliffes were particularly sceptical about the authenticity of the Dirk Dance, regarding it as pure invention on Mona Douglas's part; primarily to serve the interests of the Manx cultural revival of the 1920s and 1930s, etc.

the validity of the dance for the following reasons:

> Mona appears definitely to have witnessed something, and that was corroborated by Jackie Kermode's daughter, who saw him dance it, something that comes anecdotally from the Bradford family of Ramsey. Paul Bradford, the great-grandson of Jackie Kermode, was encouraged by Mona to learn the dance, which he did from Mr. Jimmy Druggan[13] of Ramsey, who went up to Ballaragh [where Mona Douglas lived] to learn it from Mona. Mona herself, speaking in 1979, says that Jackie Kermode came to Ramsey to teach the dance to Philip Leighton Stowell [1897-1978][14] (BAZIN 1998: 98) but here she is evidently mistaken as Jackie Kermode died in 1918, whilst Mona's collaboration with Leighton Stowell did not come until about 1928 (though there is perhaps some suggestion that this may have come a little earlier in about 1924-25) (BAZIN 1998: 97, CARSWELL 2004: 19).

7.4. In this latter context Stephen Miller (MILLER 2004: 100) notes that among Leighton Stowell's papers there is a note[15] that Mona Douglas also recorded a version of the dance in 1925 from an Eleanor Garrett of Ramsey:

> Miss Bella Garrett of Ramsey told me that she had seen the dance performed when she was a girl, but its ritual was different. The young Celt or Norseman was dedicating the dirk to the service of a god of whom he knew nothing but whom by his agility and skill he wished to honour [...] (MILLER 2004: 100).

Miller (*ibid*.) then adds:

> This is the first [known] reference to the 'Dirk Dance' by anyone but Mona Douglas herself. Although here we are dealing not with Kings, but with the Old Gods (MILLER 2004: 100).

8. CONCLUSION

8.1. The Dirk Dance, with its ritual and symbolism, has come to epitomise the special position it holds within the Manx dance tradition and the spell it exercises over many of its adherents, deriving, as it is maintained, from the period of the Kings of Man who ruled in Man and the Hebrides during the Scandinavian era. At the same time, and probably because of its alleged origins, its detractors challenge its authenticity as an exercise in deception to serve the interests of Manx cultural aspirations. The main architect of all this, as we have seen, is the Manx traditional song and dance collector and revivalist, the late Ms. Mona Douglas. The promotion of the Dirk Dance owes much to her charisma and dynamism in teaching Manx dances to generations of Manx children over the years (c.1928 - c.1976).

8.2. The informant for the dance, we are told, was Jack Kermode (1842-1918), a fisherman of Port Mooar, Kirk Maughold, who danced it for Mona Douglas when she was taken to see him 1909/10 as a child of 11-12 years. He tells her of the dance and its history, how it came down to the Kermodes of Port Mooar (earlier of Ballajora) and that it is to be danced to only one tune.

8.3. Jack Kermode, the dancer, is given a pewter beaker of whisky by his wife to drink to get him in the mood. He begins to dance slowly, then works up into a quasi-frenzy towards the end. His wife crouches by the turf-fire and croons the melody as he dances.

13 Jimmy Druggan and his wife Shirley ran ballroom dancing evenings in Ramsey during the 1960s and after - GB.

14 Dance teacher at Albert Road School, Ramsey (1918-1937) and Victoria Road School, Castletown (1937-1967) (Culture Vannin).

15 Miller expresses gratitude to Wendy Thirkettle, Deputy Archivist, Manx National Heritage Library, for drawing this note to his attention following a general enquiry of his about the papers of Leighton-Stowell (Email: 04.12.2004).

8.4. Mona Douglas tells us that the tune to which the Dirk Dance is danced was previously noted in Skye as a lullaby (§3.1). In fact, it is the same tune as that used for the Scottish Gaelic Skye lullaby *Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge*, as found in the Frances Tolmie Collection (JFSS IV/16 (1911): 160). Mona Douglas also tells us (*ibid.*) that she had also heard the tune played by a traditional fiddler "in the west of the island" (i.e. of Man) and also from the Irish traditional fiddler Arthur Darley (1873-1929) when he visited Man "some years ago" (i.e. pre-1929; possibly in 1921 when the Celtic Congress was held in Man?).[16]

8.5. The commentator on the lullaby and the two following "water-kelpie" songs, Anne G. Gilchrist, demonstrates that these songs and their melodies are probably Scandinavian in origin. That is to say, that the melody associated with the Dirk Dance is probably also of the same provenance.[17] In this regard Mona Douglas herself (1941: 6) had previously mooted that the Dirk Dance may be a variant of a sword-dance of the sort found in Scotland which had survived in Man, and that it is of possible Scandinavian origin:

> [...] and there is nothing else in these islands just like our 'Dirk Dance' with its ancient and virile symbolism - though both in that and in the 'White Boys Dance' some of the steps danced over and around the dirk or the crossed swords on the ground are slightly reminiscent of the Scottish Sword Dance. To my own mind, however, the chief influence shown in these two dances is Scandinavian [...] (DOUGLAS 1941: 6).

8.6. The association of the dance with the Kings of Man may seem far-fetched, given that there is no known record of it at all associated with that period or even with Tynwald, the Manx parliament, as from that period onwards. On the other hand, it is not impossible that both dance and tune could have remained alive in Manx tradition over a prolonged period without any written attestation. In this regard Dr. Virginia Blankenhorn, ethnomusicologist in the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, draws my attention to the case of the Scottish Gaelic song *Griogal Cridhe* which was known to have been composed in or shortly after 1570, but which did not surface in print until 1813 in the Turner Collection. It had clearly circulated in oral tradition all of that time, and apparently continued to do so down to the twentieth century (BLANKENHORN 2014). In the case of the Dirk Dance such a survival is theoretically possible, though, as with *Griogal Cridhe*, we would need to postulate a period of several hundred years of non-attestation before it eventually surfaced in the early twentieth century.

8.7. Whether the tune came into Man early or later on is not known. However, we must also bear in mind that Mona Douglas, in her capacity as secretary of the Manx branch of the Celtic Congress (1917-1952), would visit the other Celtic areas, including Ireland and Scotland, where she would come into contact with the song and dance traditions of those countries. She said as much to me when we were talking about all this at her home in Ballaragh in 1975. She told me then that songs and tunes "can go two ways," as she put it.

8.8. Mona Douglas intimated to me that on one visit to the Isle of Skye she sang the Manx traditional lullaby *Ushag Veg Ruy ny Moaney Dhoo* 'little red bird of the black turf-ground'.[18] Her Skye

16 The Dirk Dance tune must have been equated with the Skye lullaby (*Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge*) before Darley came to Man, suggesting that Mona Douglas had heard it in Skye beforehand, perhaps some time during the 1920s, or even on a date between her becoming secretary of the Manx branch of the Celtic Congress (1917) and the 1921 Celtic Congress in Man?

17 For other tunes of alleged Scandinavian origin in Manx tradition see JFSS VII 28-30 (1924-26).

18 For the full text see MOORE (1896: 42-43).

listeners were apparently so enthralled with the song (probably because it was easy to understand)[19] that a Gaelic version came out some years later. In fact, it was translated from the original Manx text by Annie Mackenzie (Anna Sheumais), an aunt to Margaret Macleod of the Scottish Gaelic traditional music group *Na h-Òganaich.*[20] I well remember Anne Lorne Gillies herself singing it one time on the Scottish TV programme '*S e ur Beatha* ('you're welcome') in 1975.[21] Mona Douglas could well have returned to Man with the melody to *Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge* and applied it to the Dirk Dance? We have no sound-recording of the tune crooned by Kermode's wife, only Mona Douglas's testimony that she in fact had crooned a tune to the dance, and that this tune was similar to "a Skye lullaby." In this regard, in a series of comments on Manx traditional songs and dance-tunes made by Anne Gilchrist in 1931 (quoted in MILLER 2013: 10-13),[22] Gilchrist has the following to say about the tune used for the Dirk Dance:

> I have found the Sword (Dirk?) Dance tune, almost note for note, as the "Lullaby of the Water Horse" in the Tolmie collection which I helped to edit for the F[olk] S[ong] Journal in 1910-11. It would be of considerable interest to know whether Miss Douglas obtained this tune from a traditional source, and from a person who had learnt it traditionally. The Gaelic song about the water horse is obviously old, and Miss Tolmie took it down from her maid, Mary Ross, a native of Skye, in 1887. It is very curious to find it practically note for note [Gilchrist's underlining] as a sword dance tune in the Isle of Man, without words or, apparently, a title, as one would not expect it to have been introduced into the Island from Skye at any recent period. Perhaps Miss Douglas can throw some light upon it (GILCHRIST "typescript comments" 19.02.1931, quoted in MILLER 2013: 12).

As can be seen, Gilchrist casts serious doubt on the authenticity of this tune being traditional in Man. There is to date no known reply to this letter from Mona Douglas or from her papers.

8.9. The dance has its detractors who are sceptical of its authenticity and believe it was created to serve the interests of Manx cultural aspirations. Foremost in this scepticism, as noted above (§7.1), were authors William and Constance Radcliffe of Ramsey who told me c.1980 that Jack Kermode had the reputation as being a "bit of a character" who, they believe, misled (deliberately or otherwise) the 11/12-year-old child Mona Douglas in the matter of the Dirk Dance when she first came to visit him 1909/10. According to the Radcliffes, he was apparently known for dancing while holding a whisky bottle in one hand and brandishing a sword in the other. Along with others the Radcliffes believed that the Dirk Dance was a product of Mona Douglas's imagination designed to serve the Manx cultural revival. In support of this belief is the evidence that Mona Douglas also passed off songs she had composed in Manx for the revival as genuine material (BRODERICK 2004 (2008)).

8.10. The testimony of Jack Kermode's daughter (§6.3) combined with that of Eleanor Garrett, Ramsey (§6.4), could perhaps be seen as supporting the case for a genuine tradition of the Dirk

19 This was also my own personal experience when I sang this same song in a private cèilidh among female Scottish Gaelic native speakers one evening during the annual Mòd of 1973 held in Ayr, Scotland. The Scottish ladies were clearly captivated by the Manx song.

20 I am grateful to the Scottish Gaelic singer Anne Lorne Gillies, Glasgow, for this information (pc. 07.08.2017).

21 For the Scottish Gaelic version cf. CSCD01 Jenna Cumming *Tàladh,* also Màiri MacInnes *Uiseag Bheag Dhearg*, http://www.celticlyricscorner.net/macinnes/uiseag. htm. For an Irish version, cf. Gráinne Holland *Uiseag Bheag Ruaidh* https://www.you tube.com/watch?v=aoMHBaz47 NM).

22 cf. "Remarks and comments by Miss Gilchrist", a typescript comment forwarded with letter from Douglas Kennedy to Mona Douglas, 19.02.1931 (MNHL MS. 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15 (MILLER 2013: 10-13). Miller (2013: 13-14) notes: "This must relate to Mona Douglas, 'Manx Folk Dances: their Notation and Revival,' *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* iii.2 (1937): 110--16. Evidently, the article was published much later after the correspondence that it entailed; for those letters, see Douglas Kennedy to Mona Douglas, 19 February 1931, W. D. Croft to Mona Douglas, 23 February [1931], 22 March [1931]."

Dance. But, in the first case, the evidence may be regarded at best as circumstantial, relayed "anecdotally," as we are told (CARSWELL 2004: 19), by the Bradford family of Ramsey. In the second case, we only have Mona Douglas's word for this testimony (albeit transmitted by Leighton Stowell). In addition, as we have seen, Mona Douglas herself (DOUGLAS 1937: 113-114) had doubts about the authenticity of the dance (§7.2.). These "doubts" must now be seen in the light of Gilchrist's comments of 1931 (§8.7.).

8.11. Nevertheless, she saw the potential of such a dance in terms of the Revival and, as Bob Carswell (CARSWELL 2004: 23) points out, rather than indulge in an exercise in scientific collection of a dead or moribund piece of folklore, Mona Douglas sought to use the Dirk Dance (and other dances for that matter) in an ongoing process to establish a new Manx dance tradition based on the foundations of the old (recorded just in time), and to encourage dance groups to consolidate and stabilise the new tradition and carry it on into the future.

8.12. On the evidence at our disposal I am inclined to agree with Bob Carswell (2004: 19) that "Mona appears definitely to have witnessed something." But if so, she has seemingly embellished that "something" with a history going back to the Kings of Man, supplying a *port-a-beul* text seemingly modelled on the Skye lullaby *Òran Tàlaidh an Eich-Uisge*, providing ritualistic dance movements, etc., in order to serve the interests of the Manx cultural revival. In this regard, as with her songs, Mona Douglas felt it was important to show that the Isle of Man had something to offer culturally at a time when English traditional songs and dances were in the ascendant, as witnessed by the English Folk Dance Society Easter Vacation School held in Douglas in 1929. In so doing, Mona Douglas, in the Dirk Dance, has provided a symbolism and background that is very striking from a nationalistic perspective, encouraging a willingness to believe, and a ritual dance regarded by many today as one of the most spectacular and charismatic[23] of such dances in the Manx cultural repertoire, but patently possessing no traditional pedigree.

9. ABBREVIATIONS

AGG - Annie G. Gilchrist.
BMD - Births, Marriages, Deaths.
EFDS - English Folk Dance Society.
f. - father.
GB - George Broderick.
GH - George Henderson (editor / commentator, Tolmie Coll. JFSS IV/16 (1911)).
IMFHS - Isle of Man Family History Society.
JFSS - Journal of the Folk-Song Society.
L - left (hand / foot).
m. - mother.
MD - Mona Douglas.
Mx. - Manx.
OE - Old English.
PNIM - Place-Names of the Isle of Man.
R - right (hand / foot).
ScG. - Scottish Gaelic.

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23 So spectacular and charismatic that its performance by Manx schoolboy Billy Cain to an arrangement of the tune played by the London Symphony Orchester in the Royal Albert Hall, London, in January 1930 was apparently rapturously received, as Mona Douglas (DOUGLAS 1981: 4-5) tells us.

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