

Die Michielen: a Flemish story in three and a bit parts

By the North British Sword Dancers, with thanks to Mieke Mommen-Juveyns.

Prologue

Some of you might remember seeing a Flemish team called de Michielen at the 2004 International Sword Spectacular Festival in Whitby. Others will have happy memories of Easter visits to Tongeren, staying either at the town's Youth Hostel or, in later years, the inimitable Hotel Chemin de Fer.

De Mchielen were founded in Tongeren in the 1990s by Felix Mommen, and stopped dancing around 2009. Felix died in 2016. He and his wife, Mieke, were keen folk dancers, and Felix took a particular interest in Tongeren's place in the history of Flemish sword dancing. They were regular visitors to Whitby Folk week, where Felix attended the longsword workshops and became friends with Brian Tasker. Brian danced with Sallyport Swords and Castleford Longsword, and later founded White Star Sword Dancers and danced with North British.

At the time when Felix was trying to launch a sword dance group in Tongeren he invited White Star for an Easter visit, and this would prove to be the first of a series of visits by British teams. This article is about how that all came about. Some of this material appeared in a previous edition of RUMB but much more has now come to light.

1. Disarmed by the French

By the end of the fourteenth century there were two shooting or marksmen's guilds in Tongeren, one for longbow and one for crossbow. They were called 'de Michielen' and 'de Gulpen', and by the fifteenth century each had an associated sword dance. At the end of the sixteenth century they amalgamated as 'de Michielkens' (Michael's men), also known as 'de Gesellekens van Troye' (companions of Troy, from a legend, dating from the Roman occupation, that the town had been founded by Trojan exiles). In return for their privileges, members were required to bear arms in defence of the town - in this respect they have much in common with the Schwerttanzkompanie Überlingen, from southern Germany.

The dancers bore real swords and had a leader ('overste' = superior) who carried a baton decorated with multicoloured ribbons, with which he indicated the movements. The dance was strenuous, requiring strength and

For parallels here it might be worth considering figures from the Lange Wapper sword dance from Antwerp and also the Papa Stour 'drop-sword tunnel'. Note also that the Doctor in the Manx White Boys' Sword Dance dances through, round, and ahead of the sword dancers.

agility. They performed all kinds of complicated figures which finally led them into a ring. They then formed a 'vault', under which the leader performed a dance. After this the dancers then interlocked the swords to make the 'star' or 'rose', on which the leader was raised.

This description of the dance is taken from an article by Dr. Eugene Verstraete (1910-1982), a Flemish historian who is extensively cited in van Craenenbroek's *Speurtocht*. Verstraete grew up at a time when Walloon/Francophone culture dominated Belgium's political, economic, and educational life, and his desire to promote a specifically Flemish identity reflects this. He was active in a number of Flemish cultural organisations, and although he gained his doctorate in natural sciences, with an emphasis on physics, he continued to develop his interest in Flemish folk traditions, and especially in sword dancing, and published extensively on the subject.

Verstraete was a member of the *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond*, a nationalist party which gradually moved closer to the German Nazis and was quick to collaborate with the German occupation of Belgium in 1940. In 1942 Verstraete was a founding member of the *Germaansche Werkgemeenschap Vlaanderen*, which sought to establish and to promote an understanding of the germanic roots of Flemish culture, and his work on the history of Flemish sword dancing has to be read in this light. The article from which the information above has been taken ('De Zwaarddansers van Tongeren') was published in *Hamer*, the journal of the *GWV*, in 1943 or 1944 (we have only seen a photocopy which bears no date). Verstraete was strongly influenced by the theories of the Austrian folklorist Richard Wolfram, and particularly his ideas about sword dancing as an aspect of men's societies and initiation rites. He makes certain assumptions about the Tongeren dance on the basis of parallels with others, such as that from Nuremberg, and he also makes broad generalisations about sword and morris dancing.

As a result of his collaborationist activities Verstraete lost his academic post at the University of Ghent in 1945 and became director of a pharmaceutical company, but he continued to publish on the subject of Flemish folklore.

According to Mommen, the archives show that the Michielen are first mentioned as making an appearance at the entrance to the town of Prince-Bishop Cornelius van Zevenbergen in 1538. The dancers performed in 1565 at a celebration for Prince-Bishop Geraard van Groesbeeck. They also record that in 1581 there was tension between the two guilds, tension that was relieved by the merger described above. The new guild was named *De Troyanen* or *De Gesellikens van Troyen*, but in 1583 reverted to *De Michielen*, which might indicate who came out on top. At the time of the merger they published their regulations:

- 1) The society shall consist of 32 members and no more.
- 2) The members shall be citizens or freemen of Tongeren, chosen by the masters of the militia and by the city council.
- 3) St. Michael is their patron saint.
- 4) On the Sunday before Pentecost they shall have their shooting festival

- 5) Every member must possess a firearm, powder bottle, rapier, and poignard.
- 6) The sword dance has to be performed according to the old customs
- 7) They must swear allegiance to the city of Tongeren and be at its command to do military service.
- 8) Members will be paid 6 stuivers for each day or night watch they perform.
- 9) The guild may select members in order to maintain the membership.

Verstraete indicates that the guild was still active 'in its full glory' in 1787, but that the invasion of the *sans culottes* during the French Revolutionary wars (1792-95) led to the guild being



disarmed. His explanation is that, being French, the revolutionaries had no understanding of sword dancing. He also finds it remarkable that the dancers did not go down the path followed elsewhere and adopt wooden swords in order to be able to continue; this development might have been consistent with his (and Wolfram's) notion of the sword dance guild as being primarily a men's fellowship, but less so if it was linked to their conception of themselves as an active militia.

The guild was not formally disbanded at this point. It paraded on the 14th July, 1802, albeit without swords, to celebrate the recently concluded peace between Bonaparte and Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. Given the guild's treatment by the revolutionaries, Verstraete has his doubts as to the sincerity of this gesture. Seven of the swords

were, however, preserved and in recent times have been displayed in the town's Moerenpoort Museum. They are about 1.25m long and really quite heavy. The blade tapers from about 5cm to 2.5cm, the ribbed wooden grip measures 15cm, and the guard is 19cm across. (Photo: Brian Tasker).

At the Shrove Tuesday procession in 1871, a waggon bore a tableau which presented the sword dancers as a part of the town's folklore. In July 1904 they appeared once again in a historical procession. As Verstraete laments, the tradition had now been broken.

2. 1961 Film

Aangename Kennismaking Met... was a Belgian documentary/discussion television series which ran from the 1950s and into the 1960s. An episode from 1961 looks at Tongeren and includes film of a re-enactment of the sword dance. Sadly, this was a concoction of figures from Spain, England, and Germany. It does include a figure which might be described as a 'vault', and there is a leader waving batons decorated with ribbons who is raised on a platform of swords, although it is far from clear whether the swords were actually locked into anything recognisable as a 'rose' or 'star'. It seems that the dancers were a group who got together for the carnival, liked it, and carried on until about 1965. *This is interesting, because it raises the question of how things might have turned out if a Flemish Cecil Sharp had been passing that day. How many others of our 'traditional' dances were in fact just made up by people who knew no more than that something of the kind had once been done in their village/town?*

In the film, two tunes are played over the dance by a brass band, but it seems likely that this music was added later. The commentary suggests that the original dancers would have performed to the sound of a drum, as is the case with some of the German teams. However, this conflicts with Verstraete's account, which quotes a description of the final appearance of de Michielen in 1802 with 'their music'. It does, though, reflect continuing adherence to his insistence that the dance represented part of a specifically German tradition.

The film itself is owned by VRT (*Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie*), who have it available on Vimeo. They would normally charge about €50 for access, but in our case allowed us a short period free of charge when we explained that we were sword dancers and had no intention of making commercial use of it. If you want to try your luck, the contact is vrtarchief@vrt.be, and we cited the code AIM 00473658 to enable them to identify it. Please don't give our name if you decide to follow this up, though. Anyone wanting to take a notation by watching it should be aware that it has been edited in such a way that some elements are shown more than once and others are out of order.

3. Revival

Towards the end of the 1990s Felix Mommen launched a new revival of de Michielen. He was familiar with other Flemish revival teams such as Lange Wapper, and immensely proud that not only was much known about the Tongeren dance from archive material but that, uniquely for the

Flemish dance, some of the original swords survived. He gathered dancers and musicians from a number of sources including the local folk dance group, his own children, and even a student on a year's visit from Singapore. The figures were for six dancers and a captain, and were chosen to resemble as closely as possible those found by Felix's wife, Mieke, in the Tongeren archives, although the style showed clear influences from Trevor Stone's Whitby workshops. The team was fortunate enough to have a musician who wrote a tune especially for the dance, along with a calling-on song in the local dialect. Mieke lists the figures as follows:

- 1) Snake: curling/in a circle
- 2) Bridge: figure similar on the painting 'Fair of St. George'
- 3) Clash swords together
- 4) Rose or Star
- 5) The captain steps on the woven swords and is shown (turned) around



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, c. 1560:

St. George's Fair, showing sword dancers from the Antwerp area performing a vault or tunnel figure.

The team's personnel varied widely in age, but they always relied on the availability of their student members, who had varying commitments and travel arrangements. As well as dancing locally in Flanders, and especially in their home province of Limburg, they went abroad at least twice. The first occasion was the 2004 International Sword Spectacular Festival, in Whitby.

Rattle Up, My Boys: Autumn, 2020



De Michielen in Goathland during the 2004 International Sword Spectacular Festival, Whitby.

Photo: Sheila Kennedy

Another overseas visit came in 2009, when de Michielen were invited by North British to join them at the Jack in the Green Festival in Hastings. This was a very different kind of event from the ones to which they were more accustomed; instead of the slightly staid performance spaces to which sword dancers are so often allocated in Flanders, they found themselves fighting for space in the crowded, narrow streets of the Old Town, and they flourished, repeatedly creating their spot and holding an audience. This particularly appealed to the team because Felix had brought one of his youngest sets yet, with all that that implied - one young man forgot his passport and the team only made it into Britain because Felix, a natural and successful salesman, sweet-talked the immigration officer. And yet that was, sadly, almost the end of de Michielen. The following autumn many of the dancers went off to college or university, and the numbers were no longer there. The information is, however, and better documented than ever, so let's hope that in due course a sword team returns to Tongeren.

Footnote

This has been very much a team effort. It started when we were talking about happy visits to Tongeren and someone realised that they could find nothing about de Michielen on the internet, no website, nothing on YouTube. All went quiet until the Covid lockdown, when one of our musicians was looking for tunes to play, tried to remember the one for the Tongeren Sword Dance, and couldn't. From there it became something that drew many of us in during the quiet time, and enabled us to renew our friendship with Mieke.

You might have some luck with web searches if you combine the terms 'zwaardddans' and 'Tongeren'. It turns out that there is a de Michielen website, although it has not been updated in the last few years. Find it at <http://users.pandora.be/zwaardddans>.