

De Antwerpse Zwaarddans
An Bruloot & Renaat van Craenenbroeck
Lange Wapper, Antwerpen, 1985

Introduction

After the end of World War II, our regions were confronted with a number of cultural elements that were totally alien to us. In the flush of liberation, many people felt they had to adopt these customs and lifestyles. Anything that came from outside the borders was accepted as sound without criticism. Then the great miracle happened! Just in the days when many people thought they had to deny their own heritage, a healthy reaction occurred. Already after the First World War, the desire for the expression of one's own cultural past had manifested itself, but it was curbed by the outbreak of the new war violence. After 1945, a small core of people became aware of the importance of our cultural heritage. The search for the past was resumed with renewed vigour. Great attention was paid to the traditional dance repertoire of our regions. The folk dance groups and especially the guilds emphasised our traditional dances, which everyone can envy us.

Dancing is among the oldest expressions of civilisation, but what do we know about it? In our time, it is easy to preserve dancing for posterity through photographs, films and other modern auxiliary media. Is it possible to perform the ancient dances as they were originally done? This requires tracing in old yellowed folios. They brought us the certainty that e.g. sword dances were known in the Low Countries from the 14th century. At first, sword dancers preferred to perform during Lent and later in circumambulations and processions. The late Dr Eugene Verstraete did his utmost to trace the historical records of these chain dances. Armed with these documents and relying on the still existing Trawantel dance from the Kempen, the Lange Wappe dance group, under the driving force of Renaat van Craenenbroeck, has endeavoured to bring about a reconstruction of this play with swords. After 15 years of searching and adapting, the group succeeded in creating a dance that carries the cachet of Antwerp dance. The tradition is respected; the dance is practically only performed at Mid-Lent.

A picture book on the Anywerp sword dance is timely. The numerous photographs by An Bruloot transport us into the atmosphere in which this male dance should be performed to the obsessive rhythm of drums accompanied by fiddle, bagpipe or flute. Music and dance keep the spectators spellbound.

May this publication not only remain a sweet memory for all who have ever participated in the performance of this dance, but also allow all spectators to relive this sword dance in their imagination after the performance.

Dr. E. van Autenboer

Eugeen van Autenboer
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Born in Mechelen on 15 May 1920 and passed away at home in Turnhout. Passed away on 11 March 2008.

Source: <https://www.inmemoriam.be/nl/2008-03-11/eugeen-van-autenboer/>
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Our Antwerp sword dance is a *reizwaarddans*. This means that it belongs to that type of dance in which the participants hand their sword (sometimes replaced by sticks or hoops) to their neighbour, creating a closed circle. This circle is almost never broken in the course of the dance. The English name *hilt-and-point* is very characteristic of this type of dance: each dancer indeed holds the hilt of his own sword in one hand and the point of his neighbour's sword in the other.

That Flanders occupies a special place in historical research on *reizwaarddans* seems peculiar. Yet it is the case that our regions, Zeeland Flanders included, are considered the area where the densest concentration of sword-dancing societies can be found. We must then go back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Until 1566, town and church accounts, especially in West and East Flanders, contain numerous mentions of payments to sword dancers. These did not always come from their own congregation. Some towns, including Hulst and Axel, had an influx of dance teams from the surrounding area.

Why does 1566 act as a break year? The analysis of the texts yields the suspicion that initially *spielen met zweerden* was practised by small groups from the immediate urban area, who went to the city around Shrovetide to dance at several places. Apparently, in doing so, they always tried to give a performance before the magistracy, hoping to be rewarded in money or drink. Gradually, the sword dancers gained a place at other festivities: for example, at the patron saint's feast of the local patron saint. Thus, finally, we find them represented in the *ommegangen* (religious pageants).

But after the iconoclasm (1566), worldly elements were banned from the *ommegangen*. So were our sword dancers. Thus, for many of their groups, the *raison d'être* disappears. Of the groups that did continue to exist, however, we find few traces, because they were no longer paid by the church or the city, so that there are no longer any entries in the accounts.

The sword dancers were certainly not totally gone. As late as 1802, we read in the *Programma voer de Vieringe des Feest van Peys...binnen de stad Tongeren*:

Half of the gendarmerie, riding on horseback, will perform the superb cavalcade amid the noise of bells and carillon. Then the Machielen will follow with their music, designated in the statistical account of the town under the name 'les danseurs Germaines armés de lances et de boucliers; but it's a pity that this splendid column of German dancers have been disarmed of their weapons or swords, and so cannot fully complete their dance,

Do not be fooled, this is not about Germans, who came to Tongeren to dance, but about a performance of their dance by the Tongeren sword dancers' guild of the Michielen!

Mentioned as a relic are the various forms of stick dances, which have survived to this day in the Kempen region. They all use the hoop as an additional element and therefore occupy an almost unique place in the Western European dance heritage. The accompaniment by the drum alone gives them a strong dramatic character.

If we list all the data from 1389 (the text from the Bruges city account of that year is considered to be the oldest mention of a hilt and point sword dance in Western Europe) to the present day, we find about a hundred places in the Flemish part of the country, which can be associated with the hilt and point sword dance. Either, that the dancers came from this place itself or, that dancers from other places performed.

Antwerp was one of the hundred places. Dr E. van Autenboer found out that in the sixteenth century the Antwerp Young Archers and the Gunners' Guild were accompanied by *spiellids*, *guycheleers* *ende sweertdansers* during the circumambulations.

Translator's note: Renaat was instrumental in the establishment of sword dancing not only in Antwerp, with the Lange Wapper folk dance group, but also in Wallonia, with a group from Westerlo, and in French Flanders, with In de Kring of Dunkirk.

His rules for a successful sword dance team appeared in *Rattle Up, My Boys*, 10:2 (see below).

Rules for a successful sword dance team

In the last issue of *Rattle Up My Boys* Jack Ledger of Barnsley Longsword suggested that teams who had ideas which had been successful in boosting numbers of dance recruits and improving team morale should share these ideas with others through the pages of *Rattle Up My Boys*. Unfortunately there were no contributions, even though I know that a number of teams have recently seen an increase in numbers of dancers with Grenoside, Spen Valley and Kirkburton all repoting new dancers. However additional dancers do not always translate into a more stable team!

Coincidentally an article from Renaat Van Craenenbroeck arrived and I realised that in it Renaat had set out his ideas for a successful (and therefore a stable) team. Would such ideas work for UK teams? Your views would be welcome.

Renaat writes:

In July of last year I had the opportunity to present a paper at the 21st Symposium of the Study Group of Ethnochoreology of the International Council for Traditional Music, held on the Isle of Korcula in Croatia.

At the Conference I spoke about my experience with the Lange Wapper sword dance, pointing out that we have succeeded in creating an event with the feeling of something traditional for both our dancers and for the spectators. I stressed the importance of fixing a "special day" on which the dance will always be performed and I explained my view that the dance should not become a display piece nor be presented simply in order to attract people.

I explained that, once the Lange Wapper group accepted these rules we ceased to encounter problems in getting enough dancers, whereas in early years we even had to press musicians to dance in order to get the numbers we needed!

One of the people at the Conference was Manfred Stingel, the inspiration behind the Volkstanzgruppe Frommern, situated at Balingen in the region of Stuttgart in Germany. This group has been performing for many years but, since 1974, their repertoire has included 'the old German sword dance' as created by Richard Wolfram in 1957. After I had presented my paper Manfred Stingel contacted me and told me that he was impressed by the ideas I put forward and that he was going to discuss with his sword dancers the possibility of finding a special date on which to perform.



Photo shows Manfred Stingel (left) with Renaat Van Craenenbroeck at the Bagpipe Festival in Balingen which was organised by Herr Stingel and his team
Photo supplied by Renaat Van Craenenbroeck.

A German team adopts Renaat's suggestions

The following September I got from Herr Stingel an invitation to a Bagpipe Festival organised by the group. In his letter he told me that the Volkstanzgruppe Frommern sword dancers had decided to fix the date of their annual outing on the 3rd Saturday of October, the day of Balingen "Kilbe" (their local carnival). They decided to dance at 10.00 a.m. in front of the Zollernschloss: a beautiful spot against the town walls. Then, after drinking wine they march to the Marktplatz of Balingen, where the dance is repeated at 11.00 a.m.

But they went further. They set up statutes to create a code of behaviour and they also chose a new name for the group - Schwertanzkumpanei Frommern. Kumpanei is a dialect word which means something more complex than simply a company or group. The word invokes the spirit and commitment found in a brotherhood, as we Continentals would experience in a guild.

Documents which set out the regulations of sword dance guilds were known to exist in the 16th century in Flanders, where they were called 'caerten'. Here follows a free translation of the Volkstanzgruppe Frommern 'Statuten'.



The sword dance performed by Schwertanzkumpane! Frommern is descended from a dance created by Richard Wolfram in 1957.

Photo supplied by Renaat Van Craenebroeck.

Statutes of the Schwertanzkumpane! Frommern

1. Every year on Ascension Day there will be held a meeting and a rehearsal with the intention to improve the presentation. A "Gremium" consisting of 3 men, will be elected for 1 year. This "Gremium" is charged with the organisation and the line-up of the dancers.
2. It will be arranged that a good wine, coming from Überlingen or elsewhere on the shores of Lake Constance (or eventually from Baden or even from Mussbach) will be available in time and in sufficient quantity. If necessary a commission will be charged to choose the wine.
3. The rehearsals of the sword dance are held during the first weekend of October. The "Gremium" is to convene the dancers.
4. The sword dance will be performed annually in the centre of Balingen on the Saturday of "Kilbe" at 10.00 a.m. and at 11.00 a.m. Additional performances can take place on the Sunday of "Kilbe". A new sword dancer is only authorised to take part in the dance at 10.00 a.m. in front of the Zollemschloss. A baptism (taking care not to damage their costumes) may take place either in the fountain of the town (Stadtbrunnen) or later in the fountain at Duernwangen.
5. If necessary any wives or girl friends who are not committed to the involvement of their spouses will be visited by the "Gremium" in order to convince them and talk them into agreeing to release their sword dancer for such an important event. If necessary a bottle of wine (or for ladies who do not wish to drink alcohol: flowers) may be brought and left after the visit in order to comfort them.

6. Former and older sword dancers are responsible for the standards of the dance. They are also expected to support the sword dance with gifts and by collecting money.

7. Sword dancers who have danced for 25 years will be presented with a sword with an inscription.

8. Depending on the wishes of the dancer concerned the sword dance may be performed to mark the marriage or death of a dancer.

9. The reigning "Gremium" must keep a log book in which the names of the new sword dancers, as well as details of important events, will be noted.

Decided September 20th 2000 (followed by the signatures of the sword dancers)

The baptism of a new member of a corporation or guild in the town's fountain was a widespread custom in the south of Germany and in Switzerland.

The emphasis put on the origin of the wine is probably a kind of joke. The Überlingen sword dance is accepted as the only continuing original sword dance tradition in Germany. It's history can be traced back as far as 1646! I suppose that, by drinking the Überlingen wine, they hope to conserve their sword dance for at least 300 years! Anyway I hope that they will succeed and if I can help by drinking Überlingen wine with them, I'm willing to do so!



The Italian team from Bagnasco have also accepted Renaat's recommendation to dance on a "significant" day.

Photo from a leaflet supplied by the team in 1979

Would it work in the UK?

Trevor Stone comments: many UK teams already go part way towards this philosophy - for example Boxing Day has become the major outing for many teams but it is seldom (if ever) the sole outing in the team's locality. Also Boxing Day is associated with entertainment and sport - a far cry from Renaat's concept to avoid performing the dance simply for entertainment.

Would any UK team consider adopting Renaat's rules:

only to dance out in your home town once a year.

to perform on a "significant" day such as a Saint's Day or day usually connected with the Church calendar.

not to perform simply to attract people. This is the one which causes me the most problems as I assume that most English teams regard the audience as the most important element.

to end the day with a communal meal.

Additionally, from personal observation of Renaat's team, I would point out that:

- they discourage dancers from performing with two or more teams.

- the dancers are presented with a medal which encourages them to take pride in long service.

- the presentation of these medals is made as part of the main event.

- they restrict "first time dancers" to a performance with a small audience, usually the first early morning spot.

Lange Wapper develop other related customs such as -

- a rule which limits musicians to those who play "traditional" instruments.

- a custom has developed involving the method of entering the area where the dance is to be performed.

- they have rules governing dress - such as no glasses are to be worn by dancers.

Renaat also points out that it helps if the team are supported by local people. A number of overseas teams (including Bagnasco, Balingen, Sankt Martin, Traunstein, Überlingen and some of the Basque teams) also enjoy support and in many cases financial backing from their locality - apparently a significant number of these teams involve the local Mayor or their equivalent.

It is interesting to note that both Lange Wapper and Schwerttanzkumpaneel Frommern are part of a larger group which we in the UK would call "social dancers" English teams are seldom related in this way. And, perhaps most importantly, it helps to ensure that the team has a strong leader such as Renaat Van Craenenbroeck or Manfred Stingel.

It seems that it's not only UK football teams who would benefit an injection of foreign leadership and techniques!