Papa Stour Comes to Aberdeen

A once-in-a-generation opportunity to see the Papa Stour Sword Dancers in mainland Britain came when they visited the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention, in Aberdeen, from the 16-18th July, 2010. They last came to Scotland in 1977, when they visited Edinburgh. Since then they have been to Denmark (1985) and Norway (1992), so this was a truly special event.

I was fortunate to be able to have a number of conversations with George Peterson, the team's moving spirit for over fifty years. George is a Shetlander, having left Papa Stour for secondary school, university, and National Service, before returning to Brae, on Mainland, in 1958 to work as a schoolteacher. Still resident in Brae, he continues to work a croft on Papa Stour.

Many people are familiar with the story of the notation coming into the hands of Sir Walter Scott and included in his novel, 'the Pirate'. This was taken from a 'very old manuscript' which was given to him by William Henderson, from Papa Stour. George thinks that the Henderson document might have originated in the period 1710-1720. He describes it as 'indecipherable' and 'vague' and notes that it does not tally with what is known of the dance from elsewhere: for example, it describes eight saints.

What he does note is that, contrary to much speculation, there is no evidence of any Scandinavian influence, such as a Norse saint among the Seven Champions of Christendom (St. Olaf might have been a fair bet). The leader of the dancers is in fact St. George of England, as found in both Scott's version and the eye-witness account recorded by the Reverend George Low in 1774. One possible explanation is that in the eighteenth century there was an influx of gentry to Shetland from Aberdeen, Fife, and the Lothians, and they brought their own servants and entertainers with them. George's theory is that one of these entertainers knew about the sword dances of northern England.

Between 1870 and 1880 around a hundred people left the island; there was a shortage of fuel and the laird was threatening to evict the whole population, but the settlement was saved by the arrival of coal around 1900. The dance had been in abeyance since mid-century and was revived in the 1890s, ceased during the First World War, and was revived again in 1922 by Alec Johnstone, the Postmaster. It was not danced during the Second World War but continued afterwards, usually at Christmas concerts, and if any tourists came to the island then the Postmaster would send a note round and summon a team. He, his family, and four other families left Papa Stour in 1962, at which point it ceased to have a viable community.

It was at this time that George recruited some schoolboys from Brae Secondary School to learn the sword dance. In this he had the support of the Headmaster and the benchwork master. He is very firm that this is a dignified dance and not a jolly one in the way that he feels that some of the English dances are. He and the team have seen various versions of the Papa Stour dance on the internet, and tend towards a tolerant view that if other teams want to dance briskly then all well and good: George describes such performances as 'high-speed' and 'impressive' and

wishes them all good luck. He maintains that the Shetland team do it ‘properly’ and ‘with dignity’: ‘we are genuine’. He is absolutely clear, by the way, that this is not a fisherman’s dance.

From the outset George’s teaching reflected this combination of tolerance with a very strong sense of just how far he was prepared to let things go. He accepted that, boys being boys, there would be giggling in the practices, but would not tolerate it in performance - even smiling detracts from the seriousness. He omitted some words from St. George’s speech to make it easier for the young performers to learn. The original swords he used were straightened barrel-hoops, with no hilts, but he subsequently added hilts painted to match the different dancers’ sashes. He also changed the way in which the swords were picked up so as to make the performance slicker (he objected to the ‘ring of backsides’ presented in the earlier version).

The current team continues to train schoolboys and is strong in numbers - a party of ten came to Aberdeen. Family ties remain strong, too: George seldom plays for them now, having handed the job of Minstrel to Claire Balfour, a cousin, and the team includes his sons Matt and Peter, his son-in-law George Lawrenson, and his grandson Danny. There is no fixed time of year associated with the dance - they perform it at weddings, Christmas parties, and care homes, as well as turning out for the tourists.

The performance begins with the team marching on to the Minstrel playing ‘McPherson’s Farewell’ (according to George - I have also seen them use ‘The Tripp’. George is aware that some performers use ‘Da day dawn’ but does not favour it, feeling that it is difficult to dance to. The sword dance tune itself exists in more than one version; a fiddler named Jimmy Coates played a plain version, whilst a more ornamented version originated with the Frasers of Kirkwall (relatives of George’s).

There are seven figures, two of which are identical; George thinks that there were differences which have now been lost. The culmination of the dance is the star, which should be made speedily and held by just one point. The latest swords have been designed so as to enable a tidier star to be formed.

The team’s visit to Aberdeen included both formal and informal performances. Following a concert on the Friday evening they danced in the streets of Aberdeen on Saturday, ably escorted by Gaorsach, the local rapper team. On Saturday evening they danced at a ceilidh in the nearby village of Garlogie, and finally, on Sunday morning, they appeared at a meet-the-team conversation, hosted by Derek Schofield.

It just remains for me to thank George Peterson and all the Papa Stour Sword Dancers for the friendly welcome with which they answered all my questions and for including me in their weekend excursions. I very much hope we will not have to wait another generation for their next visit.

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