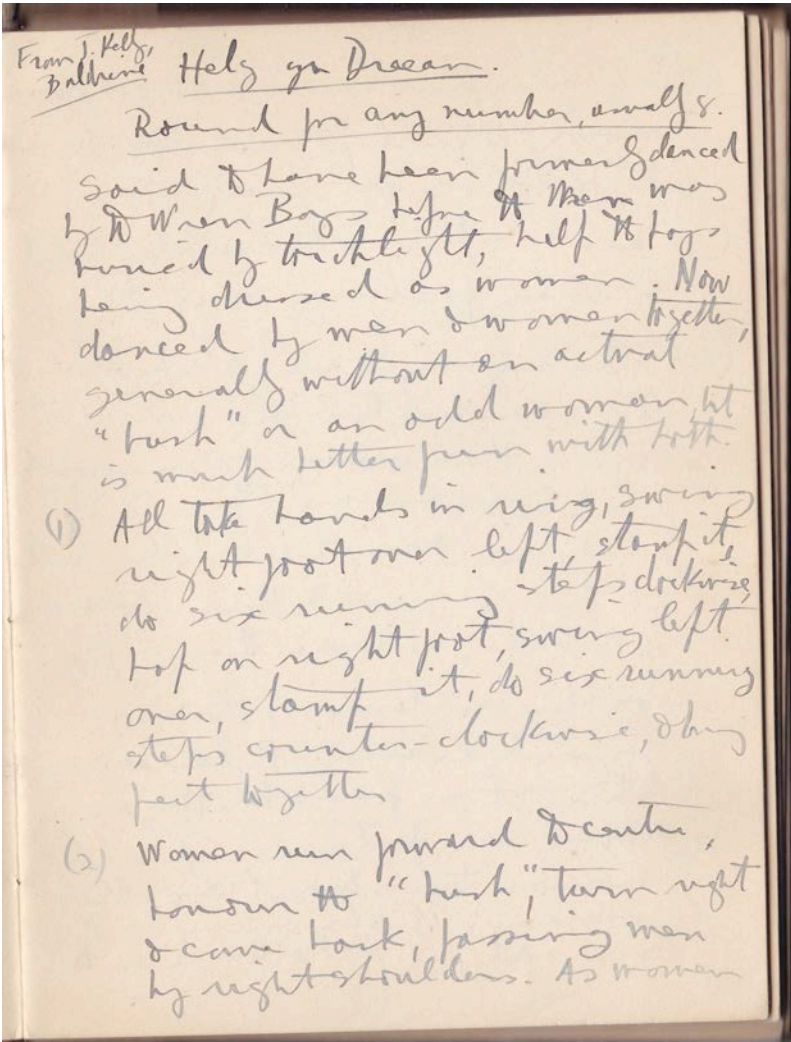


MONA DOUGLAS

HELG YN DRECAN



MONA DOUGLAS
HELG YN DREEAN



In October 1933, the St Aubyn School of Dancing together with the Manx Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society presented two plays by Mona Douglas, “Kebeg” and “The Widow’s House,” at Sulby in Lezayre. As part of the evening there was a display of Manx folk dances, eight in number, one of which was Hunt the Wren. As the *Mona’s Herald* reported, Douglas had “made research of some of the dances.” Amongst her personal papers now in the MNHL, there is a notebook containing her description and notes on her “research” (*ie*, collecting) of folk dances in the Island, one of which is Hunt the Wren, but under the Manx title of Helg yn Dreean. It was collected from John James Kelly of Baldrine, Lonan, a key informant for Douglas. The notebook is undated but clear that it was in or before 1933 for it to have been displayed at Sulby. In 1935, it was danced in Liverpool when a party travelled from the Island to give a demonstration of Manx folk dances to the Mersey and Deeside Branch of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. In an article from 1937, published in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, there is the first published description of the dance itself, and a letter from Douglas later in 1959 has a brief passing mention to it. A published notation for the dance first appears in 1953, as part of *Seven Manx Folk Dances, Set II*.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

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HUNT THE WREN

HUNT THE WREN

1933 On Tuesday last, Sulby Hall was the venue of an entertainment given by the St Aubyn School of Dancing, assisted by members of the Manx Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society. Two Manx plays, “Kebeg” and “The Widow’s House,” were presented, along with a number of Manx folk dances. Both plays are by Miss Mona Douglas, who also made research of some of the dances. The dances included: “Processional,” “The Ploughman,” “Jimmy and Nancy,” “Dirk Dance” (A. Adams), “Manx Jig” (Hilda Fayle), “Courting Dance,” “Fairy Reel,” and “Hunt the Wren.”

“Manx Plays at Sulby.” *Mona’s Herald* 24 October 1933: 1d.

1935 Hunt the Wren!

English Folk Dance and Song Society. A Demonstration of Manx Dances, Songs and the White Boys’ Mumming Play, at Picton Hall, William Brown Street, Liverpool, Saturday, May 25th, at 3 p.m. n.p. [Liverpool]: n.pub. [Mersey and Deeside Branch, EFDS], n.d. [1935].

1937 [Completed and restored to use] (12) “Hunt the Wren.” Now a dance-game for four couples, an odd woman, and the bearer of the “Bush,” or decorated pole, who is also himself called “The Bush.” The ceremonially killed wren was formerly slung between crossed hoops on top of this pole, but now the hoops are used minus the dead bird. The object of the game, as now played, is for the odd woman to capture someone else’s partner, and whoever is left without a partner at the end has to spin round and round with “The Bush.” Formerly this dance is said to have been performed by boys only, but half of them had their faces blackened and the rest were dressed in girls’ clothing and whitened their faces with chalkwater, or with chalk stone of the kind used to make the threshold designs on house and dairy doors.

Mona Douglas, “Manx Folk Dances: their Notation and Revival,” *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, iii.2 (1937), 110–16.

1953 Helg yn Dreean

Hunt the Wren

Seven Manx Folk Dances, Set II: Dances and Airs collected from Traditional Sources by Mona Douglas, Pianoforte Arrangements by Arnold Foster. London: Stainer & Bell, 1953.

HUNT THE WREN

1959 We are practising the Manx dances in the following order: [...] 2. Helg yn Dreean (Hunt the Wren) [...] Hunt the Wren used to be danced round the “bush,” and can be used as a game, with an extra woman who finishes up dancing with the “bush.”

Letter from Mona Douglas to “Billy” [William Cain], 23 May 1959, MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15.

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HELG YN DREEAN

Mona Douglas, "Folklore Notebook, | Dances. | Tunes, descriptions & notes".
Undated notebook. MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 9.

[77] From P. Kelly,
Baldrine

Helg yn Dreean.
Round for any number, usually 8.

Said to have been formerly danced
by the Wren Boys before the Wren was
buried by torchlight, half the boys
being dressed as women. Now
danced by men & women together,
generally without an actual
"bush" or an odd woman but
is much better fun with both.

(1) All take hands in ring, swing
right foot over left, stamp it,
do six running steps clockwise,
hop on right foot, swing left
over, stamp it, do six running
steps counter-clockwise, & bring
feet together.

(2) Women run forward to centre,
honour the "bush," turn right
& come back, passing men
by right shoulders. As women
turn away from centre, men go forward,
honour, turn left, come back, &
take partners for spin.

[78]

(3) Reel spin all couples, odd
woman fooling around.

(4) Changing to reel step, partners
cross each other holding right
hands. Then ~~woman go on round~~

~~circle to right~~ & men 'pass' to right, taking hands right & left alternatively with the person next to them. At end of the tune, if more than four couples are dancing, then the ring is formed again & the dancers go straight on from where they are, taking new partners. The odd women tries to oust another woman, & if she succeeds, the new odd one fools around in the spin next time. Last time through the odd woman seizes the "bush" for the spin, & often this they lead off in reel step, the other couples following.

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HELG YN DRECAN

From J. Kelly,
Baltimore

Helg yn Drecan.

Round for any number, usually 8.

Said to have been formerly danced by the Women Boys before there was round by torchlight, half the boys being dressed as women. Now danced by men & women together, generally without an actual "hush" or an odd woman, but is much better fun with both.

(1) All take hands in ring, swing right foot over left, stamp it, do six running steps clockwise, hop on right foot, swing left over, stamp it, do six running steps counter-clockwise, bring feet together.

(2) Women run forward to center, known as "hush", turn right & come back, passing men by right shoulders. As women

turn away from centre, men go forward, honour, turn left, come back, & take partners for spin.

- (3) Reel - spin all couples, odd women fooling round.
- (4) Changing reel step, partners cross each other holding right hands. Then ~~women go on round~~ ~~circle to left of men~~ ^{to right}, taking hands right & left alternately with the person next to them. At end of the time, if more than four couples are dancing, the ring is pinched again & the dancers go straight on from where they are, taking new partners. The odd woman tries to court another woman, & if she succeeds, the new odd one fools round in the

spin next time. Last time though
odd woman seizes to "back"
in the spin, & after this, they lead
off in reel step, the other couple
following.

JOHN JAMES KELLY (1860–1938)

Informant for Mona Douglas at some date for (1) Car Juan Noa [‘but Kelly says’], [‘J.P.Kelly, Lonan.’]; (2) Car y Phoosee [‘J. Kelly, Lonan’]; (3) Cum yn Shenn Oaney Cheh [‘Kelly “Pat,” Baldrine’]; (4) The Frog Dance [‘Kelly Baldrine’]; (5) Yn Guilley-Hesherene [‘P. Kelly, Baldrine’]; (6) Helg yn Dreean [‘P. Kelly, Baldrine’]; (7) [‘From J. Kelly, Baldrine’]; (8) Jemmy as Nancy [‘P. Kelly, Baldrine’]; (9) The Salmon Leap [‘Kelly the fisherman of Baldrine, Lonan’]; (10) Stick Dance [‘Kelly “Pat,” Baldrine’].

[1911] Age 51. Married. Born Lonan. Occupation: Builder Contractor. Residence: Baldrine Cottage, Baldrine, Lonan. Household: Hannah, wife, 54. Children: Joshua, son, 18, mason; Ruth, daughter, 14; Caroline, daughter, 12. All born in Lonan. Also present, Mary Ann Hogg, boarder, 60, born Lonan; Albert Cowley, boarder, 8, born Douglas. [*Census Enumerators’ Book* for Lonan 1911, RG14 PN34708 RD635 SD2 ED13/4 SN13.]

[1901] Age 41. Married. Born Lonan. Occupation: General Labourer. Residence: Ballig, Lonan. Household: Hannah, wife, 43. Children: Jacob, son, 14; Benjamin, son, 13; David, son, 11; Joshua, son, 9; Annie, daughter, 7; Ruth, daughter, 4; Car[ol]ine, daughter, 2. All born in Lonan. [*Census Enumerators’ Book* for Lonan 1901, RG 13/5307, fol. 48, sch. 4.]

LANGUAGE Manx and English (1901 and 1911). Hannah Kelly, Manx and English (1901), but English only (1911).

BMD For obituary notices, see “Death of Mr John Kelly, Garwick.” *Isle of Man Times* 29 October 1938, 8d; “Baldrine.” *Isle of Man Times* 5 November 1938, 8b–c.

NOTES (1) “[...] I got to know another man who proved a rich source of material, especially dance material—John Kelly the Fisherman, of Baldrine.” [Extract too long to reproduce here]. [Mona Douglas, “‘A Chiel’ Amang ’Em’: Memories of a Collector on the Isle of Man [1958].” In *Restoring to use our almost-forgotten dances’: Writings on the Collection and Revival of Manx Folk Dance and Song* by Mona Douglas, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004) 57–60, see 58.]

COMMENT With Kelly, the clue as to who he was comes from a car accident in 1931, with the resultant claim for damages against him decided in court in 1932 (“Boy Awarded £300 Damages. Sequel to Accident at Onchan,” *Mona’s Herald* 1 March 1932, 1a). A “John James Kelly, of Baldrine” had knocked down, and badly injured, a member of the Boys’ Brigade when three of them were out for a run early in the morning. It was recorded that “[t]he driver of the car [...] said on the morning of the accident he was returning from a boat run to Garwick.” Kelly died in 1938 at the age of 78; his wife, Hannah, had died in 1936 and it was mentioned in a brief notice of her husband’s death that “[s]he was a much-loved old lady, and was a well-known figure for many years, driving a little pony and cart into Douglas to deliver the catch of the fishing boat manned by the ‘old salt’ and his sons” (“Baldrine,” *Isle of Man Times* 5 November 1938, 8b–c).