

Professor T. M. Flett

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PATRICK SHULDHAM-SHAW

The death of Thomas Muirhead Flett is a grievous loss as much to the world of folk dance as to the world of mathematics. Much has been written elsewhere about his professional work as a mathematician and suffice it to say here that during his eight years as Professor of Pure Mathematics at Sheffield University, he made a very considerable impact not only on his own department, but on others as well. He brought to his researches in the field of folk dance not only the meticulous accuracy one would expect of a professional mathematician but also a warm human insight, his interest being as much in the social background which produced the dances and against which they were danced as in the dances themselves. Nor was his interest merely academic. He enjoyed dancing himself, and with his wife, Joan, was always a frequent visitor at English and Scottish dance functions in the various areas in which they lived.

At the age of seven he was made to attend, somewhat unwillingly, Scottish dancing classes (given by David Taylor, an ex-pipe major of the Scots Guards). Here he soon became keen on Scottish dance in its various forms, and his enthusiasm was later further stimulated by the work done on the history of the Country Dance by Hugh Thurston, a Cambridge Ph.D. student in mathematics who preceded him there. While at Cambridge in 1948 he married Joan F. Ayers, another Scottish dance enthusiast with whom he subsequently worked on most of his published material. Before tackling the job of collecting, they steeped themselves in all that they could find to read on the subject of the dances and their historical and social background. On holiday in the Outer Hebrides in 1953 they discovered Gaelic dances considered lost by most of the experts on the mainland: although the area had been fairly well covered by folk song collectors, no-one had bothered to look for dances there. He also visited the Border Country where the only systematic work on folk dance collection had been done by I. C. B. Jameson. He tried to get in touch with Jameson and unfortunately was too late (but he met his widow, whom he found extremely helpful, not very long after Jameson's death). However he did manage to rescue a short piece of film that Jameson had made of his own group performing some of the dances he had collected contrasted with performances by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

Later he visited many other parts of the Scottish mainland and the islands both western and northern. He would talk with the old people, the over-eighties where possible, about dancing in general and when it took place, later going on to inquire

about the details of the various dances. In this way he discovered that most districts at one time had had their own dancing masters itinerant or resident and contact with these or their families yielded an enormous amount of valuable information relative to the whole picture of the social dance in Scotland. All this work culminated in a series of articles, several of them published in *Scottish Studies*, and finally the book written jointly with Joan, his wife, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London 1964).

This should remain a model for all such books on traditional dance for a long time to come. All facts are carefully checked and sources of information given, and though certain speculative theories may be offered, conjecture is never confused with fact. Dances are noted clearly and accurately and particularly interesting is the way in which intricate stepping is notated—a way he devised for himself and which he adapted to include clog and other hard-shoe dance steps which he first learnt while collecting in Fife. He was an adept learner and became very quick at noting down steps, a fact which stood him in good stead when he widened his researches to include the step and clog dance traditions of England, especially of the north-west and the Yorkshire Dales. Of even greater importance in the book, however, is the human warmth that is to be found in every chapter. This is a book about people who danced and enjoyed dancing, not a mere abstract analysis of steps and figures, and we are given a very clear picture of the part that dance played in the social life of the community.

Another important contribution to the study of Scottish dance was the pair of articles on *The Scottish Country Dance: its Origins and Development* (published in *Scottish Studies* II: I-II; 125-47), the outcome of his analysing a number of collections of country dances from various periods, of which some were well known, others discovered by him in libraries and private manuscript collections.

Tom Flett was not content with publishing all his findings in printed form. While working in the Mathematics Department at Liverpool University, he got together a group of adult dancers to perform much of the material he had collected. This group, *The Marlowe Scottish Dancers*, were much more successful than most other Scottish teams at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod (where they competed fairly regularly) on account of their concern with authenticity of dance and style, as well as their high standard of presentation. He was undoubtedly an able and inspiring teacher, and some of his pupils have gone on to form their own groups which keep alive the dances he collected and taught.

His lectures were, like his book, scrupulously accurate, superbly prepared, informative in their matter, informal in their manner and always full of human interest and gentle humour, in short, typical of the man himself. Always willing to share his knowledge with others, always grateful to others for sharing their knowledge with him, he was a marvellous friend, a generous host and a very entertaining companion with many other interests quite apart from mathematics and folk dance. He will be missed by many organisations, as well as individuals, not least by the School of Scottish Studies, who relied on his willing help and vast fund of knowledge in answering some of the many

and various queries they are presented with in the course of their work. Fortunately his notes still exist and, since Joan shared his enthusiasm and high standards for accurate collecting and their two daughters have inherited much of their parents' ability and knowledge, his work will develop and continue to be effective for many years to come. But we no longer have the man himself with us and we shall sorely miss him for his kindness, wisdom and humanity.