

Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland.

The orthodox history of the documentation of the Papa Stour Sword Dance tradition from Shetland records that the geologist, Dr. Samuel Hibbert (later Hibbert-Ware) (1782-1848), was the first to publish a report and text of the dance in his *Description of the Shetland Islands...* (1822). He tells us that the information was “taken from an official prompt-book...” supplied by “a lady of the island”¹. This was possibly during one of his two visits to the islands (13th August to 3rd October 1817 and 6th April to 5th October 1818)² when he was aided by William Henderson (1756-1824) of Bardister in the Parish of Northmaven³.

Quite coincidentally, in the same year, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) included a fictional account of the dance in his novel *The Pirate* (1822). In December 1831, as part of the notes to the *Magnum Opus* revised edition of *The Pirate*, Sir Walter included a description of the dance which he acknowledged as having been “procured for my use by Dr. James Scott [1785-1859]...” who had added the note:

“The Manuscript from which the above was copied was transcribed from a very old one, by Mr. Wm. Henderson, Junr, of Papa Stour, in Shetland (see Map). Mr. Henderson’s Copy is not dated, but bears his own signature, and, from various circumstances, it is known to have been written about the year 1788”⁴.

The dance has been seen as an isolated example of a circular sword dance with no other examples being recorded in Shetland, or for that matter Scotland⁵. Its nearest neighbours are a group of similar dances to be found in North Yorkshire in such locations as Ampleforth, Escrick, Bellerby, Sowerby, North Skelton, Greatham and Ricall⁶. This isolation from other related dance traditions creates rather a strange distribution pattern as, the expectation would be that, over time a tradition would diffuse outward from an epicenter through adjacent areas, as opposed to a pattern of migration where it skips intervening locations⁷. Neither does the Papa Stour dance fit in with other dance traditions in Shetland⁸ or with the local guising traditions⁹, each being a distinct practice in Shetland. As Hibbert observed, “When the frolics and dances, the prophecy of St. George has been fulfilled... it is not unusual to hear of the announcements of the guisards”¹⁰.

In his discussion of the sword dance from Papa Stour, D.H. MacClennan provides a brief unattributed note to research in Shetland conducted by Reverend George Low (1747-1795), when he observes that; “The earliest record of it [the sword dance from Papa Stour] would be about 1770, when Mr. Low visited Shetland...”¹¹ - an assertion guardedly repeated by Ivor

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

Allsop¹². It would perhaps seem reasonable to suppose that McClennan's source for this observation was probably the posthumously published account of Low's *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland. Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient Modern and Natural History Collected in 1774*, which appeared over one hundred years after Low had compiled it¹³. This work is essentially Low's journal describing the itinerary of his travels round the islands. Organized geographically by parish, it also incorporates contributions from individuals in a number of communities. In that respect it appears to be modelled on such works as Thomas Pennant's "Tours...."¹⁴, which, as we shall see, is probably not altogether coincidental. While the published version of Low's *Tour...* includes a section on "Papa Stour"¹⁵, neither there, nor anywhere else, does it contain a text or reference to sword dancing in Shetland.¹⁶

Low's published *Tour...* (1879) does, however, present us with two brief observations on dance traditions in Shetland. The first is contained in a contribution by Andrew Bruce (1724-1803) of Urie, a small island off the north-east coast¹⁷, which concludes that; "The ordinary sports here are dancing, playing at football, and other diversions common to Scotland".¹⁸ The second came from the Reverend William Archibald (1702-1785), Minister of Unst, the most northern of the Shetland islands (see Map)¹⁹, who gives a more detailed account of the local tradition:

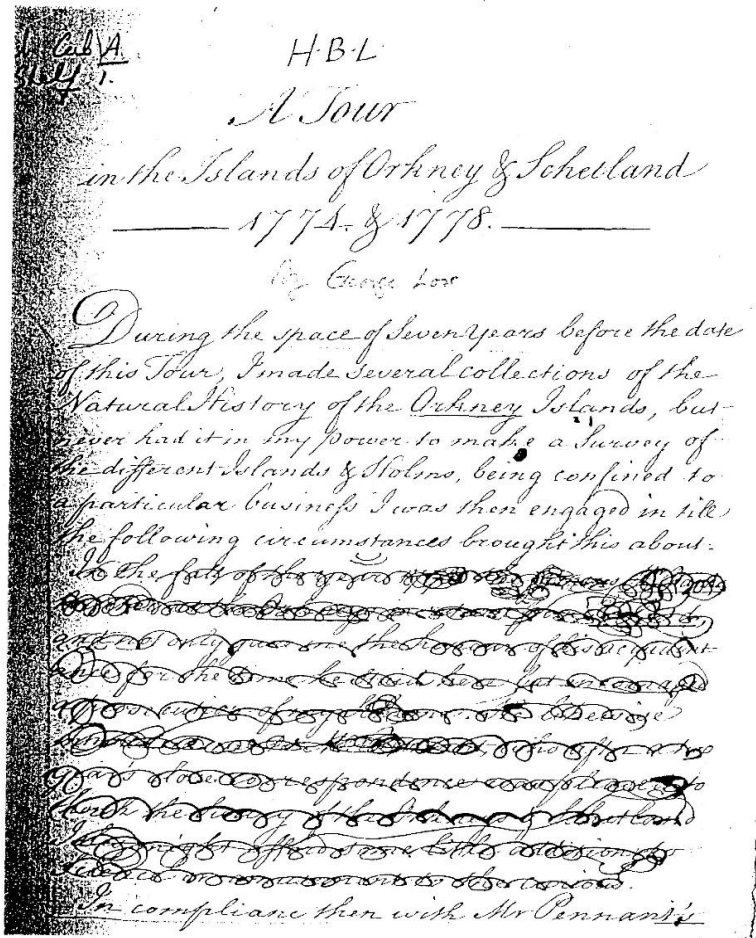
"There is one species of dance which seems peculiar to themselves, in which they do not proceed from one end of the floor to the other in a figure, nor is it after the manner of a Scotch reel; but a dozen or so form themselves into a circle, and taking each other by the hand, perform a sort of circular dance, one of the company all the while singing a Norn Visick".²⁰

The focus of this current paper is to explore Low's role in documenting the sword dance tradition in Shetland and to examine how his editing masked his true contribution. To aid us in this task we have examined two manuscripts by Low relating to his visits to Shetland. The first looks to be a rough draft titled by Low *A Tour in the Islands of Orkney & Schetland 1774 & 1778* (see Illus. 1)²¹. The second, *A Tour thro' the Islands of Orkney & Schetland: Containing hints relative to the Ancient, Modern, and Natural History of these Isles. Collected in Summer 1774* (see Illus. 2)²², appears to be an edited fair copy of the rough draft, or of another as yet unlocated manuscript.

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummings Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.



Map of Shetland Showing the Key Locations Discussed in this Paper



Illus.

Illustration 1: Reverend George Low. A Tour in the Islands of Orkney & Schetland 1774 & 1778, Title Page (Low 1774/1778)

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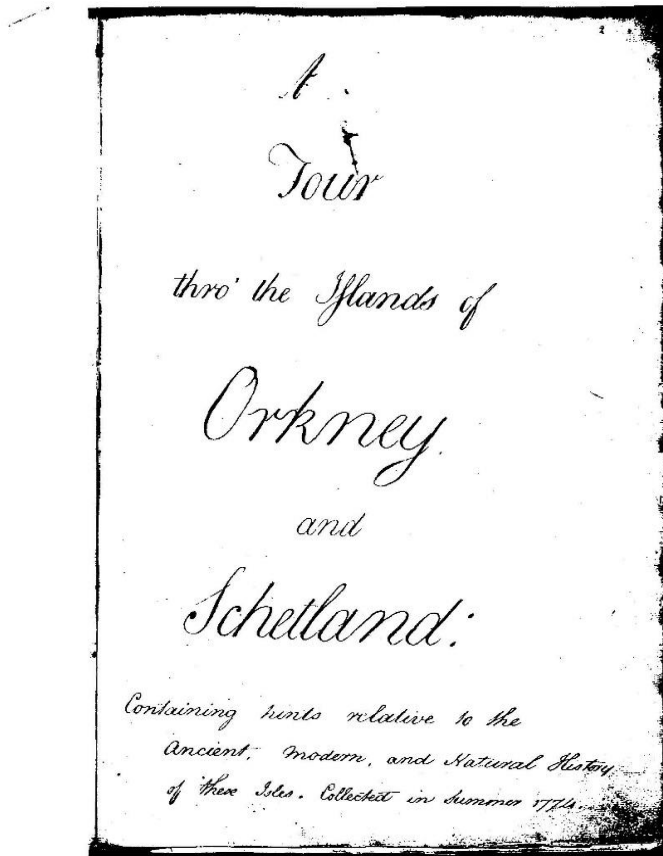


Illustration. 2: Reverend George Low, A Tour thro' the Islands of Orkney & Schetland: Containing hints relative to the Ancient, Modern, and Natural History of these Isles. Collected in Summer 1774, Title Page (Low 1774).

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

George Low²³ was born in March 1747 at his father's farm of Meikle Tullo, near Edzell, Forfarshire. His father, a tenant farmer and church officer, died when George was about 13 years old. His mother did her best to give him a liberal education and he was sent to the Marischal College in Aberdeen and then to St. Salvador's College in St. Andrews where he was a student of Divinity²⁴. He was brought to Orkney in the spring of 1766 by the Reverend James Alison to be a private tutor for the family of Robert Graham, Justice of the Peace in Stromness, where he stayed until the spring of 1773. About 1770 he was licensed as a preacher and, through the patronage of Sir Lawrence Dundas, on the 14th December 1774 he was appointed Minister of the United Parishes of Birsay and Harray in Orkney. On the 25th August 1775 he married Helen Tyrie, the daughter of Reverend James Tyrie, Minister of Sandwich and Stromness; she died in childbirth on the 2nd December 1776²⁵. He was elected a corresponding member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1781 and contributed the entry for the "United Parishes of Birsay and Harray..." to John Sinclair's Statistical Account of Scotland Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes (1791-1799)²⁶. Low was following guidelines set out by Sinclair which included a request for information on antiquities, manners and customs²⁷.

While on his return voyage from Iceland in October 1772, Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1829), traveller, philanthropist, man of science, antiquarian and the owner of the Revesby estate in Lincolnshire, met the Reverend George Low for the first time. Banks, "soon becoming acquainted with his skill in Botany, Mineralogy and as a searcher out of natural curiosities..."²⁸, was sufficiently impressed with Low's abilities that he made him the director of his Orkney tour²⁹. Banks and George Paton (1721-1807), the antiquarian book collector who worked in the Customs House in Edinburgh³⁰, also recommended Low to Thomas Pennant (1726-1798), the naturalist and travel writer, who saw Low's surveys as an extension of his own Tour in Scotland, 1769³¹:

"In the Reverend Mr. George Low, minister of Birsta in the Orknies, I met with a gentleman willing to undertake the visitation of those islands, and the Schetlands, and to communicate to me his observations of everything he imagined would be of use to the kingdom, or afford me pleasure. His surveys were made in the years 1774 and 1778, and he favored me with a most instructive journal, and several drawings".³²

Pennant had published guidelines for "Gentlemen and Clergy of North Britain Respecting the Antiquities and Natural History of their Respective Parishes..."³³ It is therefore possible that he provided Low with similar "guidelines," indicating the sorts of things he hoped he would explore, for a manuscript copy of "Queries from Pennants Circular Letter" exists in Low's

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

papers³⁴. Queries 17 and 18 are of particular interest to us, as the reader is directed to consider:

17. Do the people retain any remarkable superstitions or customs?

18. What are their sports and plays? Have they any annual festivals or commemorations?

A number of books were also recommended by Pennant to Low, the choice of which demonstrated Pennant's leanings towards Scandinavian and Icelandic connections to Scotland³⁵. Amongst these was an edition of Olaus Magnus's *A Compendious History of the Goths, Swedes, & Vandals and other Northern Nations...*³⁶.

It is not known with certainty if Low toured both Orkney and Shetland in both 1774 and 1778. Pennant refers to Low's tours as being to Orkney and Shetland in 1774 and 1778³⁷ and this is also indicated in the title of Low's rough draft (see *Illus. 1*)³⁸, but these may simply be all embracing titles. It is certain that Low toured part of Orkney in 1774 and visited Shetland from 19th June until sometime in September 1774³⁹; similarly, it is certain that in 1778 he toured the north island of Orkney. However, so far nothing positive has come to light to indicate that he returned to Shetland at that time.

Pennant had also offered to assist Low with publishing the account of his observations in Orkney and Shetland:

“It was my wish to publish his voyages, as I had the travels of Mr. Cordiner [1780], but certain reasons discouraged me. This ought not to be considered as any reflection on the performance. Mr. Low gives a good account of the natural history and antiquities of the several Islands; enters deeply into their fisheries and commercial concerns; and on the whole is highly worthy the attention of the public.”⁴⁰

Those “certain reasons” appear to have been a general downturn in the economy and consequently an unwillingness on the part of publishers to invest in the volume⁴¹. The situation was further compounded by the antiquarian Richard Gough (1735-1809) who appears to have held on to the manuscript for a number of years⁴². Regardless, upon receiving the manuscript of *A Tour in the Islands of Orkney & Schetland...*, Pennant, while on the one hand vainly attempting to find a publisher for it, was extracting material to use in his own books such as his *Arctic Zoology* of 1784.

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

As the years passed much of Low's Tour..., and a number of his other manuscripts, were used with little or no acknowledgement by Pennant and others. All this left Low despondent and bitter, and in a letter to Paton at the end of 1788 he vents his anger.

"But stay, what is to be published? Is it not all published already! One has taken a leg, another an arm, some a toe, some a finger, and MR. PENNANT THE VERY HEART'S BLOOD OUT OF IT".⁴³

Low's sight was progressively deteriorating and by 1793 he was almost blind. His general health was poor and in March 1795 he died. Upon Low's death many of his manuscripts went to George Paton, but were subsequently dispersed when he died in 1807⁴⁴.

The use of Low's manuscripts continued for many years, often without acknowledgement. Possibly the worst case was the plagiarism of Low's History of the Orkney Islands by George Barry (1748-1805). Barry acquired the manuscript but then published it under his own name⁴⁵ although he does make mention of Low's manuscript in Appendix X⁴⁶. Other writers did, however, acknowledge his contributions (see for example Low 1821 and Laing 1861).

Samuel Hibbert, as background for the non-geological sections of his Description of the Shetland Islands... (1822), identifies a number of printed and manuscript works which he had consulted, specifically singling out Low's manuscript of his tours to Shetland for special mention:

"I shall lastly observe, that a volume of Mr Low's MS. Tour having fallen into my possession, it will be found that I have frequently adverted to it. The work was drawn up with great care, but from some unexplained cause, was never published, while the most important observations were selected from it,... After poor Low's MSS. had been thus freely drawn upon, little more remained meriting a distinct publication, and the Tour, along with the author's Fauna Orcadensis, eventually fell into the hands of his friend Mr PATON,... On the occasion of Mr PATON's decease, Mr LOW's MSS. were brought to the hammer, when the Fauna Orcadensis fortunately came into the possession of Dr LEACH, who published it, with a well deserved tribute to the author's memory. The Tour afterwards appeared in the sale catalogue of Mr Laing of Edinburgh, when it was purchased by myself; but there was little matter left that had not, in some shape or other, been long before the public, the drawings being the most valuable part of the whole. Some information, however, respecting the earlier customs of Shetland, still remained that had escaped the notice of those who had seen the work, and it is now, for the first time, presented to the public; and if I have been more particular in referring to any one individual that has been consulted than to another, it has been to this excellent yet unfortunate author, having indeed no other wish than to render every tribute in my power to departed merit". [My emphasis]⁴⁷

Low's rough draft (Low 1774/1778), containing scribbled out passages and amendments, is devoid of illustrations and the like, and it was possibly the basis for his edited fair copy (Low 1774). The fair copy may have been created to circulate to prospective publishers as it

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

includes illustrations, diagrams, a map, tables and footnotes. Regardless, it passed through various hands including, as we have noted, Samuel Hibbert⁴⁸. After Hibbert's death the manuscript was presented in January 1850 by his youngest son, Titus, to David Laing⁴⁹. Subsequently Laing made it available to Joseph Anderson (1832-1916), Keeper of the National Museum of the Antiquities of Scotland (1869-1913), antiquarian, and author of *The Orkneyinga Saga* (1873) and numerous other works, to edit for publication as *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland. Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient Modern and Natural History Collected in 1774 by George Low* (1879)⁵⁰.

Even a cursory comparison of Low's rough draft of his *Tour*.... (1774/1778) with his fair copy (1774) reveals he made numerous editorial changes of varying magnitudes. In some cases these were minor, perhaps for stylistic reasons. In other instances Low rearranged material. For example, the rough draft entry for "Fetlar"⁵¹ incorporates a contribution by Andrew Bruce of Urie⁵². In the fair copy this was moved and inserted after entries for "Lunasting" and "Nesting"⁵³. Furthermore, within Bruce's paper, Mr Gordon's observations on the 1768 marine disruption was turned into a footnote⁵⁴. Overall, however, the content of Bruce's contribution was not affected.

One of the major edits made by Low when preparing the fair copy, and so subsequently carried forward to the 1879 edition, relates to the very focus of our research, sword dancing in Shetland. This is to be found in the "Substance of a paper concerning Unst put into my [Low's] hands by Mr. [William] Archibald Minister there" which is contained in the entry for "Unst"⁵⁵. Archibald (1702-1785) came from near Kelso, Scotland, and was educated at Edinburgh University. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Earlston, Berwickshire, in 1734, ordained in May 1735 in Baliasta on Unst, Shetland, and in the same year appointed Minister of Unst. He lived in Norwick on Unst until he died in 1785 (see Map)⁵⁶.

Comparison of Archibald's letter, as contained in Low's rough draft and his fair copy, highlights that Low made several editorial changes (see Illus. 3):

Firstly, several of the twenty-four paragraphs in Archibald's paper in the rough draft⁵⁷ were combined to produce fifteen paragraphs in the fair copy⁵⁸ and so in the published version⁵⁹.

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

Secondly, paragraphs eighteen and nineteen in the rough draft (see Illus. 3)⁶⁰ were combined as paragraph eleven in the fair copy, with the sentence sequence changed and some of the wording altered⁶¹.

Thirdly, paragraph twenty in the rough draft was deleted, which of course just happens to be the one containing details of what appears to be a sword dance from the Parish of Northmaven (see Map and Illus. 3)⁶².

Illus. 3: Transcription from Reverend George Low, A Tour in the Islands of Orkney & Schetland 1774 & 1778 [Rough Draft]. (Low 1774/1778).

“Substance of a paper concerning Unst put into my hands by Mr. [William] Archibald Minister there” [p. 299-307].

[Para. 18] Diversions are only practiced about Christmas and consist in dancing, when they meet on some stated days in considerable Numbers, They likewise play cards at these times, and comfort themselves with a social Dram of Gin, or Hamburgh waters; which is their sole entertainment if it can be had, if not they part with dry lips, but this is not the case often [p.305].

[Para. 19] There is one species of dance which seems peculiar to this island, in which they do not proceed from one end of the floor to the other in a figure, nor is it after the manner of a Scottish Reel; but a dozen or so form themselves into a circle, and taking each other by the hand, perform a sort of circular dance, one of the company all the while singing a Norn Visick. This was formerly their only dance, but has now almost given way to the reel [p.305-306].

[Para. 20: Deleted in the fair copy and published edition]

The above is called the Helta Dance. In the parish of Northmaven they have likewise one called the Sword dance which is performed by men armed with swords and consists of many flourishes with their weapons, locking them into a regular knot, laying them thus down on the Earth dancing round them, taking them up again without dissengaging them, and ending with several new flourishes, nor is it without a good deal of art” [my emphasis] [p.306].

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

Low's geographical organization of his fair copy perhaps dictated that Archibald's note on the sword dance in Northmaven be omitted from the "Unst" entry, although nothing explains why Low did not then insert it into the "Northmaven" entry⁶³. Regardless, it appears that a sword dance was being performed in the Parish of Northmaven around forty-four years before the earliest known surviving account of the sword dance from Papa Stour in 1818⁶⁴. This indicates that perhaps the Papa Stour dance is not a unique, isolated tradition, but rather that at one time it was possibly part of a wider Shetland tradition. Having said that, typically when conducting this type of research, things are not always as straight forward as one may wish and there may be an alternative interpretation of the described scenario.

William Henderson, junior, of North Haa, Papa Stour (1769-1795), the transcriber of the "very old" manuscript "about the year 1788"⁶⁵, was born in Papa Stour in 1769, the eldest of eight children of Elizabeth and William Henderson⁶⁶. A brief account of his life by a later family member tells that:

"William... went to Liverpool in the mercantile trade. More inclined to literature than business, he was unsuccessful and died in Liverpool at an early age in 1795."⁶⁷

William Henderson, the father of William Henderson, junior, was born in Ollaberry in the Parish of Northmaven (see Map) in 1736 and sometime prior to 1769 moved to Papa Stour where he died in 1799⁶⁸. In turn, William Henderson, the grandfather of William Henderson, junior, was born at Midgarth on Unst (see Map) in 1705 but sometime prior to 1732 moved to Ollaberry in the Parish of Northmaven where he eventually died in 1766⁶⁹.

Because the father and grandfather of William Henderson, junior, both had connections with the Parish of Northmaven and, because William Henderson, junior, and his father both ended up in Papa Stour, it is feasible to consider that the sword dance tradition may have been brought by members of the Henderson family at some point in time from Northmaven, or even Unst, to Papa Stour, where, as James Scott put it, it was "preserved"⁷⁰.

The question remains as to how Archibald learned about the sword dance in Northmaven. Did he know of the dance because of the Henderson's original connection with Unst? Archibald arrived in the Parish in 1735, at least three years after Grandfather Henderson moved to Ollaberry. Was it then perhaps through family links and return visits to Unst that Archibald learned of the dance? If the dance was known about in Unst, surely he would have passed that information on to Low.

Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

A valuable lesson has been reinforced here. One should always search out primary research material and not rely solely on secondary sources. In this case Low's own editing hid a very useful part of the puzzle regarding the sword dance from Papa Stour and, while we are not yet in a position to make a definitive statement about this tradition, we gained insight into this custom. That, in itself, will help focus future research.

All-in-all, the Reverend George Low writing in the 1770s, in one way or another, unintentionally led us in a merry sword dance, a dance which continues to-day.

An Update:

At the conference, over and above the issue of the 1774 reference to sword dancing in Shetland, I speculated on two issues neither of which, in the light of further research, appears to be correct; hence the need to de-speculate.

Firstly, I speculated about the "various circumstances" used to date the Papa Stour manuscript to 1788. Did something occur in that year which acted as an aide memoir for dating the manuscript, or was it perhaps a confusion on someone's part, miss-remembering 1788 for 1778, when Low visited and asked about manners and customs? However, now we find that Low does not appear to have returned to Shetland in 1778, so that speculation is discounted.

Secondly, I speculated about the possibility that the Dundas family from Aske Hall near Richmond in North Yorkshire (an area where sword dancing is found), who also had political connections to Shetland, may have brought workers to Shetland, who in turn may have brought the dance with them. This, however, appears not to be the case as "no members of the Dundas family ever lived in Shetland, and few of them ever visited" (Email from Brian Smith, Archivist, Shetland Archive).

Acknowledgements:

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Paul Smith, Reverend George Low and the sword dance in Shetland, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

Notes.

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- ² Flinn, Derek. *Travellers in a Bygone Shetland: An Anthology*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989. pp 90-91.
- ³ Hibbert 1822: x-xi
- ⁴ Scott, James, *The Sword Dance: a Danish or Norwegian Ballet, &c, as Performed in the Island of Papa Stour, Zetland [1829]*, National Library of Scotland, MS 907, fols 1-6, enclosed with James Scott's "Letter to Walter Scott, 11th December 1829." p10 [f.6v]
- ⁵ Boyes, Georgina. "Excellent Examples: The Influence of Exemplar Texts on Traditional Drama Scholarship." *Traditional Drama Studies*. 1 (1985): 21-30. [See pp. 27-28].
- ⁶ Ivor Allsop, *The Sword Dance of Papa Stour – Shetland*, *Folk Music Journal* vol. 3. No. 4. Pp 324 – 342, 1978, p 331)
- ⁷ Smith, Paul. "Chaos, Cluster and Coefficients: An Analytical Approach to Traditional Play Texts." In Martin Lovelace, Peter Narváez and Diane Tye. Eds. *Bean Blossom to Bannerman, Odyssey of a Folklorist: A Festschrift for Neil V. Rosenberg*. St. John's: MUN Folklore and Language Publications, 2005. 427-472.
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- ¹⁰ Hibbert op cit p560.
- ¹¹ MacClennan, D.H. *Highland and Traditional Scottish Dances*, Edinburgh: W.T. McDougall and Co., 1950, pp. 15-15, 68-73, [94]. p68.
- ¹² Allsop op cit p 324)
- ¹³ Low, George (With an "Introduction" by John Hunter). *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland. Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient Modern and Natural History Collected in 1774*. Inverness: Melven Press, 1978. Facsimile reprint of the 1879 edition.
- ¹⁴ Pennant, Thomas. *A Tour in Scotland, and Voyage to the Hebrides, 1772*. Chester: John Monk, Part 1: 1771; Part 2: 1776.
- ¹⁵ Low, George (With an "Introduction" by Joseph Anderson). *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland. Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient Modern and Natural History Collected in 1774*. Kirkwall: William Peace & Son, 1879. [Based on Low 1774]. pp122-125)
- ¹⁶ Corrsin, Stephen. "More from America...." *Rattle Up My Boys*. 2/3 (Summer 1991): 8.
- ¹⁷ Low 1879 pp 174-175.
- ¹⁸ Low 1879 pp 175.
- ¹⁹ Low 1879 pp 158-164.
- ²⁰ Low 1879p 163.
- ²¹ Low, George. *A Tour in the Islands of Orkney & Schetland 1774 & 1778 [Rough copy]*. National Museum of Scotland, Mss. Acc. 18222.
- ²² Low, George. *A Tour thro' the Islands of Orkney & Schetland Containing hints relative to the Ancient, Modern, and Natural History of these Isles. Collected in summer 1774 [Fair copy]*. Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections. La.III.580.
- ²³ For details of Low's life see Anderson, Joseph. "Preface." In George Low, *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland. Containing Hints Relative to their Ancient Modern and Natural History Collected in 1774*. Kirkwall: William Peace & Son, 1879. vii-viii. xiii-lxxiv; Cuthbert, Olaf D. "Preface." In George Low, *The Life and Letters of an Orkney Naturalist: Reverend George Low 1747-95*. Kirkwall: The Orkney Press, 1995. 13-15. Cuthbert, Olaf D. "Preface." *A History of The Orkneys introduced by A Description of the Islands and their*

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- ²⁴ Goodfellow, Rev. Alexander. *Birsay Church History....* Kirkwall: W.R. Mackintosh, 1903. 71-76.
- ²⁵ Louttit op cit.
- ²⁶ Low George. "United Parishes of Brisay and Harry (County and Synod of Orkney, Presbytery of Cairston) By the Rev. Mr. George Low." In John Sinclair. *The Statistical Account of Scotland Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes.* Edinburgh: William Creech, Vol. 14 (1795) pp 311-333.
- ²⁷ Sinclair, John. *The Statistical Account of Scotland Drawn up from the Communications of the Ministers of the Different Parishes.* Edinburgh: William Creech, 21 vols. 1791-1799. Vol. 1: viii-x.
- ²⁸ Louttit op cit.
- ²⁹ Low, George. "Extract of a Letter from the Reverend Mr. George Low, to Mr. Paton, of Edinburgh. Communicated by Mr. Gough. Read at the Society of Antiquaries, March 12, 19, 1773." *Archaeologia: or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity.* 3 (1775): 276-277 p276.
- ³⁰ Lysaght, Averil. "Joseph Banks at Skara Brae and Stennis, Orkney, 1772." *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London.* 28.2 (April 1974) 221-234.p223.
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