



Eliza Carthy and George Peterson

George P.S. Peterson received his Gold Badge on 5 May 2012, during the Traditional Sword Dance Weekend, hosted by the Goathland Plough Stots. The citation was written by Ian Russell and the presentation was made by EFDSS Vice President, Eliza Carthy.

For half a century George P.S. Peterson has led, taught, and been the musician for the Papa Stour Sword Dancers, and without his inspirational stewardship and unflinching dedication this truly remarkable ceremonial dance tradition of Britain's most northerly isles might so easily have been lost and forgotten. The Papa Stour dance 'drama' is Britain's oldest-documented longsword tradition, with records dating back to 1774, including accounts by Sir Walter Scott, who visited Shetland in 1814, and later gave a detailed account of the dance in his notes to the novel, *The Pirate*.

George was born on 7 October 1932 in Shetland's capital Lerwick. His father, Geordie Peterson, was a merchant seaman from Sandness and his mother, Martha Ann Fraser, was a native of the island of Papa Stour, a largely volcanic landmass of some three square miles lying off Shetland's west coast in St Magnus Bay. The family moved to Papa Stour in 1935 when a croft, known as Wirlie, became available. When he started school, there were just eight pupils and, besides doing their schoolwork, each was expected to contribute by helping with the daily and seasonal chores on the crofts, from lambing to milking, fetching water and tending the crops. George had a very fulfilling childhood and was fascinated by all the stories and traditions associated with his island that he heard from his mother's family and neighbours.

At 14, George was obliged to move to the high school in Lerwick, where he stayed in a hostel as a weekly boarder. Known as 'George P.S.', his middle initials conveniently indicated his island origin and helped his teachers distinguish him from his namesakes, although the 'P.S.' actually stands for 'Peter Scott'. Here he acquired his first violin and took lessons from the

Gold Badge Citation George Peterson

legendary Shetland fiddler, Gideon Stove (1874-1954), enjoying above all else playing for dancing.

His first outing with the Papa Stour Sword Dancers was in 1950 when, at 17, he took the part of St Anthony and danced for an international youth gathering called the Viking Congress. By far the youngest, he was so enchanted by the dance and its mystery that he taught it to a group of his school friends, who improvised swords with 'dockens' (dock stalks). His source for the Papa tunes was a relative of his mother, Johnnie Fraser.

The next few years saw George leaving for the UK mainland, first to study for an MA at Aberdeen University, then to undertake teacher training, and thirdly to do his National Service as a sergeant in the Educational Corps. When he returned to Shetland in the early 1960s to take up a position as a teacher, it became obvious to him that the sword dance was in danger of dying out, both because of the advancing age of the dancers and the relentless depopulation of the island, which had fewer than sixty inhabitants by that time (and now stands at about ten). George persuaded Norman Sutherland, the headmaster of Brae School, to allow him to teach the boys the sword dance. The boys rose to the challenge and with George's expert help and enthusiasm made an excellent show, capturing the dance's essential dignity. Over the next few years, under George's leadership, the dance became firmly established at the school and was regularly performed, reinforced in 1969 by his appointment to Brae as a teacher with an extensive brief – English, History, Geography, Scripture and Games, a post he held for the next twenty years.

During the 1960s, George met his wife, Frances, built a house at Brae (distinguished by a model croft house in the garden), and started a family. Since the 1970s, Shetland has been transformed by the coming of the oil industry and numbers at Brae School steadily increased such that he was never short of volunteers to do the dance. As more and more boys passed through the school and became members of the local community, George was able to call on them to make an adult team. This led to the formation of the current team, which has a strong Peterson family presence, with George's two sons, three grandsons, and a son-in-law among the dancers. Moreover, his eldest son, Martin, has recently taken over the leadership.

Throughout all his years at Brae,

George has never lost touch with his native Papa Stour, having taken over the family croft at Bragaster on the death of his father in 1976. Barely a week goes by without George and his family making a visit to the island to ensure that the croft is kept in good heart – looking after the sheep, planting and tending the crops, from oats to kale, and maintaining the buildings and the land.

George P.S. Peterson's achievements are many – an accomplished writer of short stories, a poet, a broadcaster, an authority on local place names, genealogy and dialect, a folklorist, a diarist, a wildlife expert, and an inspirational teacher. His views are always well informed and carefully considered. For example, he disagrees with the many pundits who assume that the sword dance has Scandinavian roots, pointing out that the names of the seven characters in the dance represent 'The Seven Champions of Christendom' of English folk tradition, none of them being associated with Norse tradition. Hence he believes that the most likely explanation is that the dance was originally brought from the north of England, possibly in the early eighteenth century.

Unlike Goathland, Handsworth or Grenoside, the Papa Stour dance was not associated with a particular festival day, but rather performed at any time during the Christmas and New Year holidays when the men were at home; though nowadays it could be at any time of year, especially at a wedding or a party by special invitation. In his eightieth year, George still turns out to perform with the team as the 'Minstrel', a role with which he is ably helped by younger fiddler, Claire Balfour.

A remarkable tradition bearer, George P.S. Peterson provides a living bridge between two worlds – the old world of oral memories of shipwrecks and fairy beliefs – and the new world of digital communication and the oil industry. Throughout he has fostered, presented, and upheld the sword dance of his native Papa Stour in all its magic and mystery.

I am grateful to Danny and Martin Peterson, Mary Blance, and Angus Johnstone of the Shetland Archives for help and advice in preparing this tribute. I have also drawn on the writings of Trevor Stone, Ivor Allsop and Derek Schofield.

Ian Russell is Director of The Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen.