

The revival of the White Boys, 1975

by

Robert Corteen Carswell RBV

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It was decided to revive another dance for six men, each with a long sword, associated with the White Boys play. Ross Jellicoe was librarian and lecturer at the Isle of Man College of Further Education. A fellow lecturer at the College, Eric Lockett, who taught technical skills, made a set of metal swords with wooden handles to be used by the dancers... practices took place in the kipper yards in Peel.

Leading up to Christmas 1975, Bock Yuan Fannee members decided that the best way to show off the dance would be to perform the White Boys' play, making it a piece of street theatre. However, some of the members, particularly Stewart Bennett, saw this as an opportunity to produce a modern version of the play, satirical of the politics of the day. It was possibly Phil Gorry and Ian Coulson who suggested some changes to the version then widely known, the version collected by William Harrison near Poortown in 1845, published first in *Mona Miscellany* (1869) and reproduced in A W Moore's *The Folk-Lore of the Isle of Man* (1891), whilst retaining the overall structure of the play. Stewart Bennett, however, produced a completely new script which included a pompous English former colonial who had come to live in the Isle of Man, whose name also reflected Stewart's interest in old vehicles: Sir Sidney Alvis Rootes Windily Blowhard. Such people did not endear themselves to the Manx population, often talking about the advantages enjoyed in their previous life in the British colonies (gold on the cushags!). They were referred to as *tea planters* and *When-I's* – 'When I was in Kenya...'

As the White Boys play was performed at Christmas time, another character with a pantomimic ring was proposed, possibly between Ian Coulson and Stewart Bennett. This was *The Dubious Beanstalk*, a reference to Judah Binstock, a solicitor and businessman involved in a lot of property sales in the Isle of Man in the early 1970s, and considered by many to be a shady character. In the later 1970s the British authorities started to investigate his affairs and he left Britain. Whilst apparently based in Buenos Aires and Paris, much of his later business involved property in Spain. In 2003, his dealings in and around Marbella became the subject of investigation, amidst allegations of fraud, bribery and corruption.

Discussions about performing the White Boys play had been taking place in Colin Jerry's house where rehearsals were also to be held. However, it became evident that as soon as discussions moved towards making the play a political satire, Colin would leave the room and go down to his workshop in the cellar. After this had happened several times, it was Ross Jellicoe who recognised the problem. Ross was Librarian and Lecturer at the Isle of Man College, and was employed by the Board of Education, which was part of rather an authoritarian and conservative establishment. He said that he felt personally that he could not afford to be seen taking part publicly in something overtly political. Ross pointed out that Colin was in the same situation, employed by the Board of Education as a primary school teacher, which was why he was removing himself from the situation when a new satirical play was being proposed. It was decided, therefore, to revert to the script as collected – and, sure enough, Colin returned to take part.

Ian Coulson's wife, Marion, worked in the library at the Manx Museum, and a different form of the play was found in a copy of the Manx Sun from 1832. Rather than St George, the patron saint of England, being the hero (and his servant being called Sambo), the hero of this version was St Patrick of Ireland, who proceeds to kill St Denis of France and St George of England. They are then miraculously revived by the Doctor. However, the part of the Doctor was significantly poorer than in the 1845 Castletown version, so that part was imported into the 1832 play.

Using this amalgamated script, the roles were: St Patrick – Ross Jellicoe; St Denis – Colin Jerry; St George – Bob Carswell; the Doctor – David Fisher.



It was found that there had been small variants from different parts of the Island, including a coda in which two characters called *Big Head* (George Broderick) and *Little Devil Doubt* (Mark Shimmin). After they fight, *Little Devil Doubt* knocks *Big Head* down, and declaims,

*Here lies the body of old [. . .]
When he dies,
The Devil cries,
'Come, [. . .], come!'*

As well as distrust of Judah Binstock's affairs, there were two Manx politicians who were particularly disliked by nationalists. One was the MHK for South Douglas (1964–66 and 1968–76), John J Bell. Amongst other business dealings, he was a nominated official for certain companies owned by Judah Binstock. However, the main figure of dislike for nationalists was John B Bolton, who had been Member of the House of Keys for North Douglas (1946–56) and for West Douglas (1956–62) and was a Member of the Legislative Council (1962–79). He was a Member of Executive Council (1951–62 and 1966–79) and was also Chairman of the Finance Board (1966–76). As a chartered accountant, he was seen by nationalists as focusing on financial matters with little or no consideration for the effects of Government policy on people and aspects of Manx culture and identity.

The opportunity was taken to give the short end piece of the White Boys play a token satirical edge by inserting the initials, J. B. The final line was sometimes rendered 'Come, Judah, come!,' but more often it closed –

*Here lies the body of old J B.
When he dies,
The Devil cries,
'Come, John, come!'*

A tour was organised to take this new version of the White Boys play round the Island on the Saturday before Christmas, 20th December 1975, including performing at the Central Hotel (the Farmers' Arms) in St John's, where Eric Lockett's wife was the licensee.

As the performers processed in costume up Michael Street in Peel, a lady was walking hand in hand with her granddaughter down the street. The little girl was tugging at her grandmother's hand to draw her attention to these strangely-clad figures. The lady looked round and said to the girl, 'Oh, it's only the White Boys,' which suggests that it had been maintained as a tradition into her lifetime for her to have been quite matter-of-fact about it.



*Performing in St Paul's Square, 20th December 1975
L-R : David Fisher, Ross Jellicoe, Bob Carswell, Ian Shimmin (?), Colin Jerry*



Advertising poster for a performance of 1978