

“IN THE MATTER OF NASAL VOWELS”
JOHN RHYS IN BALLAUGH *



The Welsh Celticist John Rhys (later Sir John Rhys) visited the Isle of Man between 1886 and 1893 in order to learn Manx.¹ This must be qualified to say that it was a reading knowledge of the language that Rhys sought rather than spoken fluency though he must have been able to make him understood if he had occasion to use Manx. Two inhabitants of Ballaugh helped him out with the language, namely Thomas Callister and John Stephen, Rhys spending time with both of them during his visits in 1892 and 1893.

Stephen appears to have been of lesser importance to Rhys than Callister, writing of him simply that “I had readings [...] with Mr John Stephen of Ballaugh [...]”² As to John Stephen, he was 84 years old, the Coroner of Michael Sheading, widowed and living in the Village in “Laburnum House” with his housekeeper, Elizabeth Corlett, aged 56.³

Callister came in for greater praise; when Rhys was in the Island in 1892, from 28 July to the 16 August, “most of which time I devoted to reading at Ramsey with Mr Thomas Callister, a native of the parish of Ballaugh, whose pronunciation I found particularly helpful in the matter of nasal vowels.”⁴ The next year, 1893, he turned up again in July, this time from 10 to 22 July, when “my constant teacher was Mr Callister, whom I visited daily at Pooldooie, his native place in the parish of Ballaugh.”⁵

The Pool Dhooie, however, was recorded in both the 1891 and 1901 censuses as being uninhabited;⁶ Callister, a joiner, was instead living closeby at “Blackwood Cottage.”⁷ Aged 52, he lived there with his wife, Elizabeth, 42, and their two children, Thomas (5) and Edith (4). They were still there in 1901, and Elizabeth was recorded as a Manx speaker, his children not.⁸ Why Rhys read with him in Ramsey

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¹ The exact years were 1886, 1888, 1890–93. Detailed in Rhys, “Preface [to *The Phonology of Manx Gaelic*].”

² Rhys, “Preface [to *The Phonology of Manx Gaelic*],” vii.

³ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1891, RG 12/4684, fol. 7, sch. 35.

⁴ Rhys, “Preface [to *The Phonology of Manx Gaelic*],” vii.

⁵ Rhys, “Preface [to *The Phonology of Manx Gaelic*],” vii.

⁶ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1891, RG 12/4864, fol. 20, sch. [no number; between 10/11]; — 1901, RG 13/5300, fol. 50, sch. [no number; between 9/10].

⁷ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1891, RG 12/4864, fol. 20, sch. 12.

⁸ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1901, RG 13/5300, fol. 50, sch. 12.

rather than in Ballaugh during his 1892 visit is unclear when it was but a short train ride away.

REFERENCES

Rhys, John. “Preface [to *The Phonology of Manx Gaelic*].” *The Book of Common Prayer in Manx Gaelic*. Ed. A.W. Moore. Vol. ii. 2 vols. Manx Society, vol. xxxii. Douglas: Manx Society, 1895. iii–xi.

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