

WILLIAM BOYDE OF BALLAVOLLEY
AND THE GILL BROTHERS *



The Gill brothers, Deemster J.F. Gill and W.J. Gill, were folk song collectors active in the Island in the 1890s. They began their collecting in 1895 and in Ballaugh they visited William Boyde on 6 August, W.H. Gill being exact in recordings the dates of their meetings with singers. Three tunes (no words) were taken down from him: “Oh! Cre ta dooinney,” “The Five and Twentieth of December,” and “The Streams of Lovely Nancy.”¹ This did not reflect all that he knew, rather what could be comfortably taken down in a session with a singer at a time when pencil and paper was the recording medium in use.

Boyde was enumerated in the 1891 census as being 56 year sold, married, and living with his wife, Jane, 65, at Ballavolley, Ballaugh.² Both were born in the parish. The 1901 census shows the pair of them to be Manx speakers.³ The Gills were careful to note down the names and other details of their singers such as here: “W[illia]m Boyde (Mason) Curragh Ballaugh” and “W[illia]m Boyde (Mason) Ballaugh (æt 61)”.

He was more than a mason as he owned part of Ballavolley; the 1881 census had him as “Mason & Farmer of 16 acres.”⁴ He still in possession in 1896, as he was thereby qualified to vote.⁵ Directories of the period have him variously as mason and farmer: “Mason, Ballavolley: (Brown 1881);⁶ “Mason, Ballavolley” (Smith 1883);⁷ “Tenant farmer, Ballavolley” (Porter 1889);⁸ ‘Farmer, Ballavolley” (Brown 1894).⁹ An indication of his social standing in the community was his appointment on 20 April 1893 as a trustee of the Ballaugh Methodist Curragh Chapel.¹⁰

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “William Boyde of Ballavolley and the Gill Brothers,” *Ballaugh Heritage Trust Newsletter* 13 (2015), 29–30.

1 “THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION | of | MANX FOLK MUSIC | — | MADE BY | HIS HONOUR THE DEEMSTER GILL | MR W.H. GILL & DR. CLAGUE | COMPLETED IN 1895 & 1896.” Manx National Heritage Library, MS 09702, Box 2. See pp. 2–3 for the tunes collected from Boyde.

2 *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1891, RG 12/4684, fol. 30, sch. 33. He was baptised 7 April 1835, Ballaugh (1G1).

3 *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1901, RG 13/5300, fol. 58, sch. 20.

4 *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1881, RG 11/5598, fol. 90.

5 *Voters’ Lists for 1896*, MNHL, MS 09842; Ballaugh, GR–VL 8/6c, see entry 7.

6 *Brown’s Isle of Man Directory*, (Douglas: James Brown & Son, 1881).

7 *Smith’s Commercial Directory of the Isle of Man*, (Morley: S. Stead, 1883).

8 *Porter’s Directory for the Isle of Man*, (Liverpool: Rockliff Brothers, 1889).

9 *Brown’s Directory for the Isle of Man*, (Douglas: Brown and Son, 1894).

10 Anon, “Peeps into the Past: Centenary of Ballaugh Curragh Chapel,” *Ramsey Courier and Northern Advertiser* 25 April 1953.

That the Gills found just the one singer in Ballaugh reflects nothing other than the limited time they had in the field. Deemster Gill could not note music, his brother could, but he worked in London, and so had to use his holiday allowance for fieldwork. The pair were keen to collect from each parish in the Island so once found Boyde ticked the box for Ballaugh.

Returning to the tunes collected from Boyde what do they tell us of Boyde the singer? “Oh! Cre ta dooinney” is a *carval*, locally-composed Christmas songs in Manx to be sung at the *Oie'l Verrey* on the Christmas Eve. “The Five and Twentieth of December” is a hymn from *A Good Christmas Box*, published in 1847. “The Streams of Lovely Nancy” is a broadside ballad dating from at least the early nineteenth century and versions of which have been collected in the south and west of England, Ireland, the United States of America, and Newfoundland in Canada.¹¹

Here we have conveniently summarised for us with just these three titles how at least one Manx singer acquired his stock of songs: the *carval* from the Insular vernacular tradition of composing Christmas songs for the *Oei'l Verrey*; the hymn from a collection printed in English and sung in Boyde’s case in the setting of the Methodist Chapel; the ballad from a broadside in English and found both sides of the Atlantic and sung in the farmhouse. The Gills may have visited just the once but from William Boyde of Ballavolley in Ballaugh much can now be learnt from his singing on that day in August 1895.

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REFERENCES

- Anon. “Peeps into the Past: Centenary of Ballaugh Curragh Chapel.” *Ramsey Courier and Northern Advertiser* 25 April 1953: 3a–d.
Brown’s Directory for the Isle of Man. Douglas: Brown and Son, 1894.
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¹¹ Traditonal Ballads Index: www.fresnostate.edu/folklore/ballads/VWLo98.html.