

THE EXUBERANT BOYS OF BALLAUGH
(1913) *



MARRIAGE CELEBRATIONS EXUBERANT BOYS FINED

William Boyd, Edward Sayle, and William Shimmin were charged at the Magistrates' Court, on Saturday, with disturbing the peace in Ballaugh village on the previous Tuesday.

Sargt. Faragher deposed that at nine o'clock defendants were blowing horns in the village, and that he had had complaints that the noise started at six o'clock. He cautioned defendants to stop. Half an hour afterwards he had to caution them a second time; while an hour later he cautioned them again. At this time they were outside Mr Kermode's shop. Witness walked off, and came back suddenly upon them at five minutes past eleven. He seized the nearest boy—William Boyd—who had the horn in his possession; and the other two ran off up the Glen-road for home.

A young man was to be married the day after, witness explained (laughter).

Captain Kitto: Isn't that an old custom?

Witness: It is a custom, but I have never heard the like of this. The whole village was disturbed, and I had no end of complaints from the neighbours.

Inspector Shimmin thought the law ought not to be set at defiance.

The bench, in inflicting a fine of 1s each case, and costs, said they would not have looked on the matter seriously if the boys had gone away when warned: but they would not get off so easily next time.

“[Peel] Marriage Celebrations. Exuberant Boys Fined.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 3 May 1913: 5h.

DISCOURAGING OLD CUSTOMS

The magistrates who occupied the bench at the Peel Court of Petty Sessions, last Saturday, proved sufficiently iconoclastic to “put a spoke” in a custom which has prevailed in the Isle of Man from time immemorial. This custom consists in the serenading of men who are upon the verge of matrimony, by the sounding of mournfully excruciating blasts upon horns removed from deceased cows. What the significance of the custom is, no man knoweth, but it has obtained from the remote ages and yet flourishes in certain of the rural districts. Usually the gentleman this saluted may, by judicious distribution of largess, secure immunity from the doleful ordeal, but in the event of him remaining obdurate he must put up with a concert

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “The Exuberant Boys of Ballaugh (1913),” *Ballaugh Heritage Trust Newsletter* 16 (2018), 21–26.

compared with which the fog signal on Douglas head is but poor stuff. It appears that a Ballaugh swain contemplated exchanging his single blessedness for the bonds of Hymen, and accordingly the lads of the village last week “horned” him to such purpose as to disturb the whole neighbourhood. The vigilant police sergeant, who is the embodiment of the law so far as this particular district of the Island is concerned, came on the scene and was sufficiently unappreciative of the serenade to caution the youths that they must desist. They ignored the caution, and the result was that the officer, returning to the scene, vindicated the law’s majesty by apprehending one of the serenaders—he in fact captured the principal horn blower in flagrante delicto. In due course the captured one and his companions in trouble were haled before the Peel magistrates on a charge of having disturbed the peace, and tale of their discordant delinquency having been related to the bench, the offenders were each mulcted in a fine of one shilling, and were warned that in the event of a repetition of the offence they would not get off so easily. Old customs are doubtless good—some of them are at any rate—but in this instance there was evidently too much of a good thing, and the offenders were very properly punished. Perhaps householders may now look forward to a partial suppression of the Christmas waits and callers, and of the “Hunt the Wren” boys, all of whom overdo in Douglas a custom which is, in reason, far from unpleasant.

“Discouraging Old Customs.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 3 May 1913: 4c.

Dr John Clague (1842–1908), in his *Manx Reminiscences* (1911) recalls this custom, though in a more neutral and passing fashion than in the editorial in the *Examiner*: “The night before a wedding horns were blown during the night.”¹ It was the subject of a letter to the *Manx Sun*, much earlier in 1851, when someone writing as “Amicus” to the editor of the paper, saw his letter appear under the title of “The Horn Nuisance.” It opened so:

It is a custom in this town,—which I must say it “would be much more honoured in the breach than the observance,”—for persons to assemble about the house of persons who get married, and there astound with blowing horns, and making other uproarious noises.²

“Amicus” had been to see a sick neighbour residing at the bottom of Well Street in Douglas, “when I found the invalid in a state of great nervous excitement, owing to the noise occasioned by a number of ruthless boys, who were celebrating a wedding close by, ‘according to custom.’”³ Evidently, no such “largess” had been dispensed. Not just horns were causing a disturbance as “these youths made such hideous

¹ Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]) 93.

² Pseud [signed as “Amicus”], “The Horn Nuisance,” *Manx Sun* 17 May 1851.

³ Pseud [signed as “Amicus”], “The Horn Nuisance.”

vociferations that would not have disgraced an Indian *kraal*.”⁴ Warming to his theme, he admitted surprise that they had not been dispersed “by a liberal use of the horse-whip.”⁵ He, though, sought a legal remedy and asked, “whether our insular bye-laws contain a clause that has a tendency to remedy this very disreputable annoyance.” Finally, he concluded in somewhat modern fashion:

I frequently observe our policemen congregate about the market-place, I would suggest that it would tend to benefit their health if they would take an occasional ramble through the streets, in order to preserve the quiet of peaceable householders.⁶

In 1913, the law this time was right there on the spot in Ballaugh as the *Examiner* reported:

The vigilant police sergeant, who is the embodiment of the law so far as this particular district of the Island is concerned, came on the scene and was sufficiently unappreciative of the serenade to caution the youths that they must desist.⁷

An account of the trial (in the same issue of the *Examiner*) filled in the detail.⁸ Involved were three farm labourers, William Boyd of Ballaclague,⁹ Edward Sayle of Glendhoo,¹⁰ and William Shimmin of Ravensdale.¹¹ They had started blowing their horns at six in the evening (it was a Tuesday, 21 April) and at nine p.m., the law in the form of Police Sergeant John Faragher¹² had cautioned them to desist. He came across them again at half past nine and issued a further warning. After another encounter an hour later, they were again order to stop when they were “outside Mr Kermodé’s shop.” Faragher returned at five minutes past eleven, to find Boyd was

⁴ Pseud [signed as “Amicus”], “The Horn Nuisance.” South African is surely meant in this context. Nevertheless, the racist tone is evident.

⁵ Pseud [signed as “Amicus”], “The Horn Nuisance.”

⁶ Pseud [signed as “Amicus”], “The Horn Nuisance.”

⁷ Anon, “Discouraging Old Customs,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 3 May 1913.

⁸ Anon, “[Peel] Marriage Celebrations. Exuberant Boys Fined,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 3 May 1913.

⁹ In 1911, William Ernest Boyde, born in Ballaugh, was aged 27 and a farm servant working as a horseman and living then on Ballaneddin. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1911, RGI4 PN34636 RD635 SD2 EDI2/1 SN9.

¹⁰ An Edward Sayle is not to be found living in Ballaugh in the 1911 census.

¹¹ In 1911, William Shimmin, born in Ballaugh, was aged 14, a schoolboy, and living with his parents (more likely grandparents) at Glenshoggie. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ballaugh 1911, RGI4 PN34636 RD635 SD2 EDI2/1 SN50.

¹² However, it is spelt *Fargher* in the court record. Case of William Shimmin, Inspector of Police, Complainant v William Boyde, William Shimmin & Edward Sayle, Defendants, *Justices Order Book, Peel and Magistrates Court Book*, 26 April 1913. MNHL General Manuscript Collection. Anon, “[Peel] Marriage Celebrations. Exuberant Boys Fined.” contains more information and detail than the court record. In 1911, John Faragher was aged 39, born in Rushen, and living at “Palm Villa,” Station Road, in Michael Village, with his wife and daughter. RGI4 PN34728 RD635 SD2 EDI5/2 SN26.

blowing on the horn that was then seized by Faragher together with Boyd himself. The other two “ran off up the Glen-road for home.”

To the sound of laughter in the court, Faragher explained, “[a] young man was to be married the day after.” Captain Kitto, one of the bench, asked him, “Isn’t that an old custom?” He agreed—“It is a custom, but I have never heard the like of this. The whole village was disturbed, and I had no end of complaints from the neighbours.” The *Examiner* then reported, “Inspector Shimmin thought the law ought not to be set at defiance.” The bench agreed, and all three were found guilty of breach of the peace, all fined one shilling each with costs and warned them that they had had their chance to leave after being warned, “but they would not get off so easily next time.”

The editorial comment raised the problem now of traditional customs as highlighted by this case:

Old customs are doubtless good—some of them are at any rate—but in this instance there was evidently too much of a good thing, and the offenders were very properly punished.¹³

Horn blowing was an evening of rough music by the unmarried youths of the village, signaling one and all that a marriage was about to take place, and alerting the bridegroom that he was now on the cusp of marriage and a changed status with the parish. He who once had been out horn blowing himself was now on the receiving end himself. But one can now see a notion of civility now being applied to folk customs—indeed, in 1911, the *Peel City Guardian* reported on “Hop-tu-naa” (31 October) that:

The old custom of celebrating All Hallows Eve still lingers, though in a subdued and more decorous form, consisting principally in masquerading in grotesque makes-up. On Tuesday evening last, when it was celebrated, quite a number of youths kept up the old traditions in this manner, causing much amusement.¹⁴

These are the new watchwords for the observance—and allowed—continuance of folk customs in the Island: that they be subdued, decorous, and offer amusement. Moreover, the Isle of Man Police Force would watch over them. Maybe William Boyd, Edward Sayle, and William Shimmin should have reminded the bench of the old Manx proverb in a language now fast fading: “*Mannagh vow cliaghtey, cliaghtey, nee cliaghtey coe.*” In other words, ‘If custom is not indulged with custom, custom will weep.’¹⁵

¹³ Anon, “Discouraging Old Customs.”

¹⁴ Anon, “Peel Junior Guild,” *Peel City Guardian* 4 November 1911.

¹⁵ William Harrison, *Mona Miscellany: A Selection of Proverbs, Sayings, Ballads, Customs, Superstitions, and Legends Peculiar to the Isle of Man*, Manx Society, vol. xvi (Douglas: Manx Society, 1869) 30.

POSTSCRIPT

There are only two other such cases reported in the newspapers, one from 1896 and the other from 1899. The latter seems to have taken place in Ramsey:

Before His Worship the High-Bailiff Mr J.M. Cruickshank), on Saturday morning, the police summoned William Moore and George Kneale, for disturbing the peace on September 20th, at half-past nine in the evening. | According to PC Kinvig's evidence, the two young men were blowing horns previous to a wedding. | His Workship said it was a very old custom, but it was time it was done away with. A fine of 5s and costs was imposed in each case.¹⁶

Kinvig is enumerated in the 1901 census as living in Ramsey.¹⁷ The former involves, interestingly, Ballaugh, and is given here in full:

The last two or three nights have been made hideous by horn blowing, gun firing, &c., with the object of signaling a village wedding. Some people like the old Manx custom, some do not; but the wishes of neither are consulted. This occasion is remarkable for two reasons—the first being that the serenaders, or whatever name they call themselves, mistook the house, and treated unoffending people to their night searing din. The second reason is that, on being acquainted with their mistake on the second night, and that neither bride nor bridegroom were in the house in question, or under the circumstances likely to be, the serenaders (?) [*sic*] continued their performances, but with what object I don't think they themselves could tell; only, perhaps, if it was defined for them, it would be—they had come out for the job, and a little mistake like that wasn't going to stop them.¹⁸

As horn blowing in itself was too much for Sergeant Faragher in 1913, it is a good job then that the “exuberant boys” of Ballaugh did not add gun firing into the mix....

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

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¹⁶ Anon, “Horn Blowing at Weddings,” *Ramsey Courier* 3 October 1899.

¹⁷ In 1901, Henry Kinvig was aged 45, a Police Constable living at 45 Waterloo Road in Ramsey with his wife and family. *Census Enumerators' Book* for Ramsey 1901, RG 13/5307, fol. 115, sch. 81.

¹⁸ Anon, “Ballaugh,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 31 October 1896.

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