

EXILE
“MEMORIES OF THE OLD TIMES” *
(1950)



To the Editor

At the outset I would just like to say how Manxmen abroad appreciate the *Courier* because it brings the Isle of Man very near to us. I have just been reading “A Manxman Laments,” and also the article you published about Manx farms. When I was a boy going to school in the Curragh, and afterwards farming at Close Taggart, close to Ellan Rhenney, I can recall that mostly all the farms in the Island belonged to Manx people, and their forebears, for centuries, and that they very very proud of the fact. But now things have changed and we have people coming over from the mainland and Manx people have in some cases sold their farms for good prices. Another thing I regret is that the old customs are dying out. I remember when I was a boy the Manx fairs on the Claddagh, the Dollagh, Ballaugh, even on Ramsey Market Place. The churches in those days were well attended even on week-nights. The Manx people were always very religious and showed much zeal, time and labour, in building the little Churches and Chapels. I can well remember when water was drawn from the well to carry them over Sunday. All that is, alas, gone. What enjoyment we had blowing horns on the eve of someone’s wedding day, Hop-tu-naa celebrations, skating on the ice, those ‘tay’ fights, Oiel Verries, and what an array of talents we had! There were Manx carvals, Welsh songs, recitations, and the programme often was equal to any high class concert. A band of singers used to come out from Ramsey and sing songs such as “Rocked in the cradle of the deep,” “Anchors aweigh,” “Excelsior,” and others. They were grand days. They tell me that people only think of pictures these days. We young folk dressed up and made our own fun. The young folk dressed up as “White Boys” and sang “Hunt the Wren.” The country people told me when I was over that all this has disappeared, much to their regret. What a pride we took in decorating the Churches for Harvest Home and Christmas, all one happy family. I can well remember how generous and homely were the Manx farmers, one towards another, helping at the mill and carting in the hay harvest, and many farmers too were good “vets” and were always willing to come out at all hours of the day or night to see a sick animal. I notice, too, that the old farm kitchens in many places have been renovated. I remember the days when the bacon hung up the chimney and there was always a store of herrings.

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The entertainments in those days were grand. How I used to love the Manx plays such as “Purrin’ a sight on Grannie,” etc. Then the Mhelliiah was a great event held in a loft specially decorated for the occasion. I am delighted to learn that the Manx dialect is being revived and that more attention is being given to the works of T.E. Brown.

My opinion is that in due course the English people who have bought the Manx farms will sell out and will not stick to like the Manx, and environments are so different. Looking back over the last half century I can well remember a supplement to the *Courier* published in connection with the Snaefell mine disaster, the Dumbell’s Bank crash, the Big Snowstorm, and the Ellan Vannin disaster; I also remember turf-cutting in the Curraghs.

“EXILE.”

“[Letter to the Editor] Memories of the Old Times.” *Ramsey Courier* 24 February 1950: 7c.

The author of the letter lies behind a pseudonym but it is clear that the letter was not sent from somewhere in the Island when signed as “Exile” as such. The letter is written with nostalgia for the Ballaugh of his youth and the events that he describes in his final paragraph can be dated: the Big Snow was 1895, the Snaefell Mining Disaster was in 1897, Dumbell’s Bank crashed in 1900, and the *Ellan Vannin* sank in 1909. This would place the writer likely in his seventies and so he was a young man at the turn of the century.

Nostalgia is always concerned with the present and never with the past: it is a feeling that as opposed to the flux of the present the past offered stability and fixed points of reference. Such accounts by their nature never describe the back breaking labour of agricultural life and its sheer drudgery at times, nor the thin margins by which most Manx farms barely survived. But regardless of that, such an account as here is valuable to read. And as a sign of the changed times, the chances of ice skating in Ballaugh in the winter is something over which one can be truly nostalgic.

STEPHEN MILLER

