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“A CROSS MADE
OF ROUND TREE”

MAY DAY AND THE CROSH CUINN



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MAY DAY AND THE *CROSH CUIRN*



In 1794, in Kirk Michael in the Isle of Man, the Chapter Quest of the parish met to charge those who it deemed had offended against church discipline. One of those arraigned was John Corjeage:

[...] concerning whom it has been reported, that on May morning last past, he had laid hold of a woman in this parish, who declared to him, that if he would not let her go, she would bewitch him,—and that upon his suggesting to her, That it was not in her powers, she replied and confessed, it was not in her power, knowing him to have in his pocket A Cross made of Round Tree.¹

By “[r]ound [t]ree” is meant the rowan tree or mountain ash, *cuirn* in Manx, farmhouses and crofts in the Island more often than not having one growing nearby to safeguard the household against witchcraft. Its wood when made into a cross (‘crosht’ Mx) was effective against evil intent towards its possessor.

There was a particular and set way to make such a cross as described by Dr John Clague in his posthumous reminiscences published in 1911: “The right way to make a kern cross is to split one stick and put the other piece through it, and thus bind them together.”² This must be done without using steel or iron (*ie*, no knife can be used) and the cross is bound with wool from a sheep’s fleece found free on a fence or hedgerow.³

May Day was the most dangerous day in the Celtic folklore calendar when the community entered a liminal zone where, as Clague wrote, “[w]itches were thought to have full power on May Day, and they used to try all the power they knew to do harm to other people.”⁴ All had to be protected—the household and its members, as well as its livestock. The *crosht cuirn* played a role here: “On the eve of May Day the young boys would have a cross of mountain ash in their caps, and a cross would be tied on the tail of cattle, or any other animal that would be in the house.”⁵ Crosses were also nailed up on the inside of doors, especially that of the cow house. As William Cashen recalled: “The crosht cuirn, a cross made of mountain ash, was always behind the door, and would be renewed every May Day Eve. No evil thing

¹ Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL) *Book of Presentments* for Michael, 1794.

² Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]) 47.

³ This practise is still carried on today in many Manx homes.

⁴ Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* 47.

⁵ Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* 47.

could pass in where the crosh cuirn was.”⁶ The power of the crosh cuirn was limited to the following May Day Eve and so the community had to make them anew in order to ensure its safeguarding property.

It was not just on land that the crosh cuirn was used; Cashen, himself a former fisherman and blue seas mariner, mentions that:

On May Eve, the crosh cuirn (rowan cross) would be put into every boat. They would travel for miles into the country to get this, and would then deposit it in some secret place in the boat, and it had to remain there until the following May Eve.⁷

What was visible on land was hidden at sea.

A newspaper report from 1898, gives another insight into the usage of the crosh cuirn:

A short while ago, a farmer bought a cow at a fair. After he had completed his purchase, and sealed the bargain with the customary pint, he took the idea into his head that the beast was “witched” and at once proceeded to work off the evil influence. The cow was driven from the fair, back to the farmhouse to which it had previously belonged, and there a “cross-kern” (a cross made of twigs of the rowan tree) was fixed on to its tail. The buyer then slowly drove his purchase to St Johns, secure in the thought that his “coo” [*ie*, cow] was bound to turn out a satisfactory animal. It turned out well, and the man’s belief in the efficiency of the “charm” is stronger than ever.⁸

Returning to John Corjeage and the unnamed woman in the charge against him, were the pair simply out on the morning of May Day going about their business in all innocence or was there more to it? As seen, the day was one of liminality, in pastoral societies that day was the pivot of the year. Other cases in the record of the church courts show some of the magical activities on that day. In Ballaugh in 1736, “Daniel Cowl told us that he saw a woman on the first day of May 1735 gathering of Dew [...]”⁹ This was a practice to transfer the “goodness” of a farmer’s crops to oneself—the notion here of the “limited good” in society.¹⁰ As Patrick Cry

⁶ William Cashen, *William Cashen’s Manx Folk-Lore*, ed. Sophia Morrison (Douglas: Manx Language Society, 1912) 4.

⁷ William Cashen, “Customs of the Manx Fishermen,” *Mona’s Herald* 25 December 1895: [?]. Known only from a dated clipping in MNHL, L8, *Frowde’s Miscellaneous Cuttings Book*; the relevant issue is missing from the MNHL newspaper collection. This text later appeared as the opening pages (pp. 27–30) of Chapter iii, “Fishing,” of *William Cashen’s Manx Folk-Lore*, with a slight alteration to the final sentence. (“The place was pointed out to me when a child, more than forty years ago, by old men who were then about seventy, with the warning that I was never to fish on Sunday night”). I am grateful to Pat Griffiths formerly of the MNHL for this information.

⁸ “[A short while ago ...],” *Peel City Guardian* 8 October 1898, [2]d.

⁹ MNHL, *Book of Presentments* for Ballaugh, 1736. The surname properly Cowell.

¹⁰ This concept introduced in George M. Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” *American Anthropologist* 67.2 (1965).

complained to John Kinread in 1732, “the Devil had taken the *Tarra* out of his Barley last year whatever he would do next Year.”¹¹ This word is spelt as *tharrey* in Cregeen’s *Dictionary*, and is glossed as “the essence or best part, the pith or juice.”¹² R.L. Thomson writes that “this definition does not quite catch the sense in these contexts; the etymology is no doubt *tairbhe* ‘benefit, profit, virtue,’ *ie*, the quality which makes something prosper or thrive.”¹³

Caesar Teare in Jurby in 1742, “used Witchcraft & Charms, he being seen walking through Philip Cristy’s Corn early on May day in y^e morning after an unbecomeing manner.”¹⁴ His daughter, Catherine, was also presented, being “seen on Mayday in the Morning at Mollineux Bittles Cow house door, sweeping & pulling down some of y^e Thatch from of & above y^e s^d Door. &c”.¹⁵ The doorway is another liminal zone in folk culture and the gathering of dust and wisps of thatch an attempt to again transfer the prosperity of one farming household to another.

It is likely then that John Corjeage was out safeguarding his farm and accosted the woman he suspecting her of being up to no good on his land. And so to safeguard himself he had “in his pocket A Cross made of Round Tree,” a *crosh cuirn* made on May Day Eve.

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¹¹ MNHL, *Book of Presentments* for Ballaugh, 1732.

¹² Archibald Cregeen, *A Dictionary of the Manks Language* (Douglas & London & Liverpool: 1835 [but 1837]) 167a.

¹³ Letter to the author, 1 April 1991.

¹⁴ MNHL, *Book of Presentments* for Jurby, 1742. The surname properly Christy. “[U]nbecomeing manner,” *ie*, suspiciously.

¹⁵ MNHL, *Book of Presentments* for Jurby, 1742.