

STEPHEN MILLER

THE CROSH CUIRN

A COMPILATION OF SOURCES

CHIOLLAGH BOOKS

FOR

CULTURE VANNIN

2018

## THE CROSH CUIRN



This compilation of source material for the Crosh Cuirn accompanies “*A Cross made of round tree.*” *May Day and the Crosh Cuirn* (Chiollagh Books for Culture Vannin, 2018).

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[1] **BOOK OF PRESENTMENTS FOR MICHAEL (1794)**

They also present John <sup>1</sup>ab. 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.—

MNHL, *Book of Presentments* for Michael (1794).

[2] **WILLIAM KENNISH, “OLD MAY EVE,” MONA’S ISLE (1844)**

And crosses of the *rowan* tree  
Were form’d by swains in homely glee,  
And tied to each cow’s tail,  
And round the lintels of the bire

“Old May Eve,” lines 69–72, in William Kennish, *Mona’s Isle, and Other Poems* (London: J. Bradley & Simpkin, Marshall & Co, 1844) 48–64.

[3] **J.W. THOMAS, “PROPITIATING THE FAIRIES,” NOTES & QUERIES (1853)**

[618a] A cross was tied in the tail of a cow “to keep her from *bad bodies*.” On May morning it was deemed of the greatest importance to avoid going to a neighbour’s house for fire; a turf was therefore kept burning all night at home. Flowers growing in a hedge, especially green or yellow ones, were good to keep off the fairies.

J.W. Thomas, “Propitiating the Fairies,” *Notes & Queries* viii (1853), 617b–18a.

[4] **J.M. JEFFCOTT, “MAY-FIRES, ISLE OF MAN,” NOTES & QUERIES (1867)**

[144a] The custom of making, on the night of May 11 (May eve, o.s.), large fires similar to the Irish fires referred to by MR J. HARRIS GIBSON in “N. & Q.” (3rd s. xii. 42), still obtains in the Isle of Man. On a fine evening these fires have a very beautiful appearance, as they blaze on the mountains and other elevations. While the fires are burning, horns are blown in all directions. It is customary, too, on the same

evening to place “May-flowers,” as they are termed by the peasantry, at the entrances of the cottages, and of the out-offices in which the domestic animals of the farm are kept. The flower used for the purpose is the marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*). Crosses made of sprays of the mountain ash—or *keirn*, as it is called in the Manx dialect—are worn on the same night.

Though the pretext for these customs is protection against witchcraft, there seems to be little faith now entertained as to their efficacy. The peasantry say that the fires are supposed to burn the wizards and witches; while the *keirn* cross, and the flowers and leaves of the *Caltha*, are supposed to possess a charm against the supernatural powers of enchanters and mountain hags.

J.M. Jeffcott, “May-Fires, Isle of Man,” *Notes & Queries* (3rd ser.), xii (1867), 144–45a.

[5] **KARL ROEDER, “FOLKLORE,” YN LIOAR MANNINAGH (1892)**

Every beginning of May, [...].

They take two twigs of Rowan tree and put them across, tied with an old piece of cassolley (old sheered wood), and stick them outside the door on the top to keep witches away.

Karl Roeder, “Folklore,” *Yn Lioar Manninagh* i.x (1892), 289–92.

[6] **WILLIAM CASHEN, “CUSTOMS OF THE MANX FISHERMEN,” MONA’S HERALD (1895)**

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.

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.

[7] **“[A SHORT WHILE AGO ...],” PEEL CITY GUARDIAN (8 OCTOBER 1898)**

Despite school boards and compulsory education, a belief in witches and fairies still holds considerable sway in the country districts, as exemplified by the following story: “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.”

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

[8] KARL ROEDER, “MANX NOTES & QUERIES,” ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (1901)

LAA BOALDYN (MAY DAY)

[...]

And branches of the rowan tree  
Were carefully in crosses made,  
And placed in holes where none could see,  
To keep away each witching jade.

[...]

Note: [...] The *Rowan* Tree, or mountain ash, plays an important part in the celebration of May Eve and its berries, when placed on cow byres, and tied in the tails of cows, or hung over the threshold of the house, or worn by the milk-maids and fastened to the pails and milk vats, *etc*, acted as powerful agencies against witchcraft and evil spirits and their dark work. [...]

I sent you above little composition from Edward Farquhar, descriptive of old Manx May-day, which will interest many of your Insular readers.

Karl Roeder, “Manx Notes & Queries: No. 18,” *Isle of Man Examiner*, 26 October 1901, 6a.

[9] DR JOHN CLAGUE, COOINAGHTYN MANNINAGH: MANX REMINISCENCES ([1911])

[47] Witches were thought to have full power on May Day (Old), and they used to try all the power they knew to do harm to other people. They have been seen standing outside of houses early on May Day morning, and working their arms to draw the good luck from other people.

On the eve of May Day the young boys would have a cross of mountain ash (*kern*) in their caps, and a cross would be tied on the tail of cattle, or any other animal that would be in the house.

The right way to make a *kern* cross is to split one stick and put the other stick (piece) through it, and thus bind them together.

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

[10] W.Y. EVANS WENTZ, *THE FAIRY FAITH IN CELTIC COUNTRIES* (1911)

[124] “On the 11th of May<sup>1</sup> we used to gather mountain-ash (*cuirn*) with red berries on it, and make crosses out of its sprigs, and put them over the doors, so that the fairies would not come in. My father always saw that this was done; he said we could have no luck during the year if we forgot to do it.”

<sup>1</sup> “May 11 = in Manx *Oie Voaldyn*, ‘May-day Eve.’ On this evening the fairies were supposed to be peculiarly active. To propitiate them and to ward off the influence of evil spirits, and witches, who were also active at this time, green leaves or boughs and *sumark* or primrose flowers were strewn on the threshold, and branches of the *cuirn* or mountain ash made into small crosses without the aid of a knife, which was on no account to be used (steel or iron in any form being taboo to fairies and spirits), and stuck over the doors of the dwelling-houses and cow-houses. Cows were further protected from the same influences by having the *Bollan-feaill-Eoin* (‘John’s feast wort’) placed in their stalls. This was also one of the occasions on which no one would give fire away, and on which fires were and are still lit on the hills to drive away the fairies.”—SOPHIA MORRISON.

W.Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1911). See “Testimony of a Ballasalla Manxwoman,” 123–24, in “The Taking of Evidence, iv: In the Isle of Man,” 117–34.

[0] WILLIAM CASHEN, † WILLIAM CASHEN’S MANX FOLK-LORE (1912)

[4] The *crosh cuirn*, a cross made of mountain ash, was always behind the door, and would be renewed every May Day Eve. No evil thing could pass in where the *crosh cuirn* was.

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

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