

STEPHEN MILLER

THE QUAAALTAGH

THE EARLY
NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS
(1852–1900)

There was an old custom among the Manx people called the “queltagh,”—a person came to wish them a happy new year, and of course they could not do it well without a glass of rum.

(1852)

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THE QUAALTAGH



QUAALTAGH or QUALTAGH, *s. m.* one who meets; *pl.* 71. *Pro.* xvii. 12. *Hos.* xiii. 8. The first person met on New Year's Day, or on going on some new work, &c. A company of young lads or men, generally went in old times on what they termed the *Qualtagh*, at Christmas or New Year's Day to the house of their more wealthy neighbours; some of the company repeating in an audible voice the following rhyme:

“Ollick ghennal erriu as bleïn feer vie,
Seihll as slaynt da'n slane lught thie;
Bea as gennallys eu bio ry-cheilley,
Shee as graih eddyr mraane as deiney;
Coid as cowryn, stock as stoyr.
Palchey phuddase, as skaddan dy-liooar;
Arran as caashey, eeym as roayrt;
Baase, myr lugh, ayns uhllin ny soalt;
Cadley sauchey tra vees shiu ny lhie,
As feeackle y jargan, nagh bee dy mie.”

When this was repeated, they were then invited in to partake of the best thing that the house could afford.

Entry for headword “Quaaltagh or Qualtagh,” in Archibald Cregeen, *A Dictionary of the Manks Language* (Douglas & London & Liverpool, 1835 [but 1837]), 132b.

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1859

[N1859/1] [4e] There was an old custom among the Manx people called the “queltagh,”—a person came to wish them a happy new year, and of course they could not do it well without a glass of rum. Why, some people would think it a sin if they had not a bottle of rum in their house at Christmas—they must have a drop for the “queltagh.” (Laughter.) He heard of a woman whose husband was a teetotaller, but she was not, and she was sorely vexed because they should have no blessing next year, as they hadn't a drop to give the “queltagh.” So they saw the ladies did not like to give it up. (Laughter.) He thought there were many men who would be teetotallers but for their wives. Well, this lady in question was determined to get a drop for the queltagh unknown to her husband; and when the queltagh came she gave him some spirits, which had such an effect ou him that he went to a public house, and did not return to his work for a couple of days. It was a most superstitious custom, and he hoped it would be abolished. He was told that a person

THE QUAALTAGH

went to the chairman's house one night as a queltagh. He was asked in, and the bible was read and expounded to him. He thought this was the best way to treat a queltagh.

“Temperance Festival.” *Manx Sun* 8 January 1859: 4d–5b.

1864

[NI864/I] Immediately after midnight the streets were thronged by the usual number of noisy queltaaghs rushing from house to house, “taking the New Year in” wherever they could obtain admittance, and seeking the gratuity generally bestowed upon “the first foot.” The amount of that gratuity—in the case of not a few old-fashioned people—being regulated by the darkness of the queltaagh's hair, as indicating the degree of good luck which his visit was likely to bring to the house and its inmates during the ensuing year.

“[Local News] New Year's Eve.” *Manx Sun* 2 January 1864: 4c.

1866

[NI866/I] The morning being fine and moonlight an unusual number of queltagh seekers were roaming about the town, indiscriminately wishing “A happy New Year” to everybody likely to be cajoled into returning the compliment in the shape of a gratuity.

“[Local News] Inauguration of the New Year.” *Manx Sun* 6 January 1866: 4c.

1868

[NI868/I] [Ib] The Rev. T. Caine, Vicar of Lonan, then addressed the meeting. After wishing the audience a happy new year, he said that this was the time of the year that persons were in the habit of keeping a wee drop in the house for the purpose of giving it to the first person who might come into the house on the morning of the new year. Foolish people thought they would have bad luck If they did not do so. King Alcohol was the chief god in many houses that day. He was very sorry to see people so eager to keep up this bad custom, a custom which had come down to them from heathenish times, and which like all other heathenish customs ought to be done away with. That morning, when on his way to Douglas, he had seen a sight which had truly grieved him. He had seen one of his own parishioners—a young man—dragged along towards his home by two men. He had on neither hat nor coat, and his poor mother was following at a little distance with a dirty mud-bespattered coat. That day King Alcohol had had [Ic] many worshippers in Douglas and elsewhere owing to the "qualtaghs." Many a man had been made drunk that day through that self-same custom, and it was one which he would very much like to see abolished. He had been at the trouble of making some inquiries about this young man, and

found that on the previous night he had been to the watch night service—to see the new year in—and when he left there he was quite sober. But after that time he had gone round from one house to another as a qualtegh, and the result was that he was taken home in the state which he had described. He was very sorry for this young man, and for his poor mother—ashamed and mortified by following a drunken son along the road. How was this to be avoided?

“[Isle of Man] Manx Temperance Union: Annual Tea Festival & Concert.” *Manx Sun* 4 January 1868: 1a–d.

[N1868/2] The night passed off with more than usual quiet considering that it was the eve of the New Year, when it is customary for young people to go about on the queltagh, or for the purpose of wishing their friends a happy new year, and receiving in return a trifling gratuity. Not the slightest alarm was felt by the public at large, though it is probable that some of the more timid of the fair sex may have been needlessly frightened.

“[Local News] A Fenian Alarm in Douglas.” *Manx Sun* 4 January 1868: 4d.

[N1868/3] Mrs Ann Pilkington was summoned at the suit of the Committee of Highways, charged with having her house open for the sale of drink between the hours of eleven o’clock on the 31st December and six o’clock on the morning of the 1st January.

Mr Beckwith prosecuted on behalf of the Committee of Highways, and Mr Craigie defended. Mr Craigie said he appeared on behalf of Mrs Pilkington, the defendant, a most respectable lady, who, during the whole time she had kept this public house had never had a complaint preferred against her. There was a custom in vogue in the Isle of Man called “queltags” on New Year’s morning, and on this occasion Mrs Pilkington had certainly given some parties who had come to her house drink, but not a single penny had been paid for drink by any person who came to the house.—In reply to Mr Bennett Mr Craigie said that the first person who entered the house after twelve o’clock on New Year’s Eve was entitled to a glass of something to drink.

Mr Bennett remarked that it seemed in this case more than one had been admitted.

Mr Craigie replied that he believed it was so, but no money had been paid for the drink which had been supplied. He had evidence in court to prove that Mrs Pilkington kept one of the most regular houses in Laxey. He would do this with his friend who appeared on behalf of the Committee of Highways. He would admit that an offence had been committed, if offence it could be called, and was quite willing to submit to a nominal fine being inflicted, but without costs.

Mr Beckwith: I am willing that a nominal fine should be inflicted with costs.

Mr Craigie: I object to the costs. Costs are discretionary with the Bench.

Mr Beckwith: The defendant must pay the costs. I will consent to the nominal fine of 1s. and costs being inflicted.

Mr Craigie: The costs will be heavy; you have brought no less than eight witnesses to prove what could be as easily proved by two.

Mr Beckwith: Every one knows it is impossible to get a conviction in Kirk Lonan without a large number of witnesses.

Mr Bennett said it was impossible that the Committee of Highways should lie saddled with the expense of this prosecution. The defendant was fined 1s. and costs.

“Magistrates’ Court. Douglas, Saturday, Jan. 25th. (Before J.G. Bennett and W.F. Moore, Esqs.) Queltaghs on New Year’s Eve.” *Manx Sun* 2 January 1868: 5b.

[N1868/4] Ann Pilkington, of the Commercial Hotel, Laxey, was charged, at the suit of the Committee of Highways, with not keeping her house closed from 11 o’clock at night to 6 o’clock in the morning, contrary to the provisions of the Taverns’ Act. The offence was committed on New-Year’s Eve, and arose out of the custom of “Quaaltaghs,” or “First-Foot,” as it is called in Scotland.

Mr Beckwith was for the plaintiff, and Mr Craigie for the defendant.

Mr Craigie said that the defendant is one of the most respectable publicans in the Isle of Man, one who would not on any account break the law. On the night in question she had, in accordance with the prevalent custom, on the first day of the New-Year, admitted into her house what were called “Quaaltaghs.” These people had not paid anything whatever for what they had to drink, and were perfectly well-conducted. Notwithstanding that, however, Constable Cowell, of Laxey, had actually laid an information against the defendant, although she kept one of the best conducted houses in the parish. It would have been better for him, and he would have shown more judgment, had he laid an information against the keepers of some houses which were not so well conducted as hers is.

Mr Bennett asked what was this custom to which reference had been made?

Mr Craigie replied that the custom was as follows: The first person admitted into a house on New-Year’s Day was called “A Quaaltagh” in the Isle of Man, or “The First-Foot” in Scotland; this person was well-treated by the inmates of the house to which he went.

Mr Bennett That only applies to one, then?

Mr Craigie said that he did not know as to that, but he had evidence in Court to show that the defendant kept one of the best conducted houses in the parish.

Mr Beckwith then proceeded to call his witnesses, when Mr Craigie said that he had authority from Mrs Pilkington, his client, to admit that she had unintentionally committed an offence, if it might be so called, and she was willing to submit to a nominal fine, providing it was without costs. He appealed to his friend, on behalf of the Committee of Highways, not to proceed with such a case as this.

Mr Beckwith said that he would accept this offer, providing the defendant paid costs.

Mr Bennett said that under the peculiar circumstances of the case, and as the costs were heavy, they would only inflict a nominal fine of one shilling and costs.

Mr Craigie complained that so many as eight witnesses were summoned in this case. He was sure there was no occasion to have such a number. It bore heavily on his client, and he felt confident that, had the case been gone into, the bench would not have given costs.

“Petty Sessions. Douglas, Saturday, January 25, 1868. (Before Messrs Bennett and W.F. Moore.) Breaches of the Taverns’ Act.—‘Quaaltaghs’.”
Isle of Man Times 2 January 1868: 8e.

[N1868/5] The charge in this case was the same as that in the previous suit, and arose under precisely similar circumstances. Mr Beckwith again appeared for the Committee of Highways and Mr Craigie for the defendant.

[...]

The Magistrates said that they were inclined to deal with this case as with the last, namely, inflict a nominal fine of 1s and costs. It would never do to allow this custom of having “Quaaltaghs” to degenerate into a state of things so bad as was the case at this house, drunken people having been in the house one-half the night.

“Petty Sessions. Douglas, Saturday, January 25, 1868. (Before Messrs Bennett and W.F. Moore.) The Committee of Highways *v.* William Cleator.” *Isle of Man Times* 2 January 1868: 8e–f. Notes: (1) Charged was William Cleator, the landlord of the Volunteer Inn in Laxey.

1871

[N1871/1] There was also a sharp run from house to house by youths for the “Quaaltagh,” and many were fortunate enough to obtain the coveted gift presented to the “first foot” over the threshold in the New Year.

“[Ramsey and District] New Year’s Morn.” *Manx Sun* 7 January 1871: 4d.

1873

[N1873/1] The birth of the new year was ushered in on Wednesday morning with the usual time-honoured ceremonies. Immediately after the clock struck twelve, groups of youths might be seen running from house to house, rapping at the doors, bidding the inmates a happy new year, and soliciting the customary quaaltagh.

“[Ramsey and District] The New Year.” *Manx Sun* 4 January 1873: 4e.

THE QUAALTAGH

1882

[NI882/I] There were large numbers of persons knocking about in pursuance of the old custom of being the “first foot,” or queltagh.

“The New Year.” *Isle of Man Times* 7 January 1882: 4e.

1883

[NI883/I] On New Year’s Day, the ancient custom of bidding adieu to the old and welcoming the new year was observed here as on previous occasions, with the exception that there appeared to be fewer people travelling round on the queltagh.

“[Port St Mary] On New Year’s Day.” *Manx Sun* 6 January 1883: 4f.

1887

[NI887/I] At 12 o’clock there was a general ringing of bells and blowing of for horns, and the town was alive and noisy from that time till morning with people on “the queltagh,” or going about wishing one another A Happy New Year!

“Watch Night Services” *Manx Sun* 1 January 1887: 4e.

1888

[NI888/I] Choirs paraded the streets singing, whilst others visited their friends as Quaaltagh.

“[Peel and District] Watch Night Services.” *Manx Sun* 7 January 1888: 5g.

1891

[NI891/I] After service good wishes were plentiful, and the roads were busy for an hour or two after midnight; but there was no disorder, the quaaltaghs going on their way very quietly.

“[Laxey] Conversazione.” *Isle of Man Times* 3 January 1891: 5d.

1893

[NI893/I] Another peculiar institution is the queltaagh, at least we think it is peculiar to Scotland and the Isle of Man. The first person who crosses the threshold on New Year’s Day brings luck; if he be a dark man he brings good luck. Hence, of course, dark men are in much request, and make a good thing out of it, for the householder would be considered a very sorry fellow who would not produce for the luckbringer a piece of the New Year cake, and a particularly stiff glass of that which cheers and also inebriates. In Douglas, at any rate, and throughout the Island too, could we get a glimpse behind the close-drawn blind at this witching hour, when the clock is tolling, we should see many a queltaagh party, laughing, joking and talking, and

speculating, half serious and half merry, on what 1893, the new year just born, may bring forth.

“New Year’s Day.” *Isle of Man Times* 3 January 1893: 2g.

1894

[N1894/1] Many of the young men after the service visited their friends to play the part of “Quaaltagh,” thus keeping up the old Manx Custom.

“[Port St Mary] Watchnight Services.” *Mona’s Herald* 3 January 1894: 4f.

[N1894/2] On New Year’s morning, the neighbourhood of Peel was not only patronised by the “waits” of the various religious denominations, and the habitual “quaaltagh” seekers, but a strong coating of frost also heralded the advent of January in the waterways.

“[Peel and District] On New Year’s” *Mona’s Herald* 3 January 1894: 4f.

[N1894/3] With the pealing of the bells, and screams of the steam whiles which rose on the air to welcome of the New Year, came the pattering of feet, thumping of doors, and ringing of house bells, which warned that a new set of marauders were afoot, to the dread of all peaceful house holders who dared to show a light within. These were the Quaaltaghs (or first foot) who, to be true to the present-day character of their calling, once they gain a foothold in any domicile, and invoke the blessing of the New Year on the dwellers therein, do not quit till they have pocketed your money and drank your health. The latter kindness they prefer to do for you “in something hot.” These are the professional quaaltaghs, and a nice lot they are! Yet no one would grieve if they suddenly became extinct, or, to be plainer, were extinguished. The friendly quaaltagh, whom householders are glad to welcome and enter in keeping with the old custom, is quite a different gentleman, and is too often supplanted by one of the marauder type, who gets his first foot between the door which the unthinking householder has incautiously opened without having first made sure whether the voice was the voice of Esan or of Jacob.

“The New Year.” *Mona’s Herald* 3 January 1894: 5a.

[N1894/4] New Year’s Eve and Day were observed as usual in Douglas and the Island generally. There were the usual watchnight services, the usual quaaltaghs, the usual bands, the usual alleged choirs, the usual blowing of foghorns, the usual drunks, and alas! the usual deprivation of sleep.

“New Year’s Eve.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 6 January 1894: 4d.

[N1894/5] Out of doors, there was considerable mirth and noise in the streets on the part of that section of the community who delight in making a noise. The “Quaaltagh,” an ancient Manx institution, was much in vogue. The householder desires to see a man—preferably a dark man—enter his doors first on New Year’s morning. The “Quaaltagh” ought to bring some gift, however small, with him, and he should be well treated when he crosses the threshold. The “Quaaltagh” brings the luck for the year. He wishes all sorts of good wishes to the members of the household, individually and collectively, and if these good wishes do not come to pass a heavy responsibility lies at the door of the “Quaaltagh.”

“[The New Year] In the Streets: ‘The Quaaltagh’.” *Isle of Man Times* 6 January 1894: 5c.

[N1894/6] Many of the young men after the service visited their friends to play the part of “Quaaltagh,” thus keeping up the old Manx custom.

“Port St Mary and Neighbourhood.” *Isle of Man Times* 6 January 1894: 5d.

[N1894/7] At the ushering in of the New Year the old custom of the qualtagh was kept up [...].

“The New Year.” *Manx Sun* 6 January 1894: [4]f.

1896

[N1896/1] At the Douglas High-Bailiffs Court, on Saturday, seven young men—Thomas James Patterson, John Henry Bridson, Wm. Kneale, George Shimmin, Henry Cowin, Philip Lynch, and Robert Knealewere charged with having been onlicensed premises at an illegal hour; and Mary Ann Holden, the landlady of the Trafalgar Inn, South-quay, was charged with a breach of her licence in having served them with liquor after closing time. Supt. Boyd prosecuted, and Mr Creer appeared for Mrs Holden. All the seven young men admitted the charge. Mr Creersaid he was not going, on behalf of his client, to say that the offence was not committed, but he would like the facts to go before his Worship, in order that he might appreciate the circumstances, and, no doubt, as he was a lover of old Manx customs, his sympathy would be excited. The fact was that the charge against his client arose out of the circumstances of her admitting the “Qualtagh” into her house with the opening of the New Year Supt. Boyd, interposing, said he would have thought nothing of it if one “Qualtagh” was let into her house, but in this case seven were let in (Laughter.) Mr Creer said seven was a lucky number. It was an ancient and laudable custom to treat the “first foot” on New Year’s morning, but, in this case, there happened to be more than one.—Mr Creer then called Elizabeth Holden, daughter of his client, who said the house was shut at the proper time on Tuesday night. They sat up to let the New Year in. She was in the parlour along with her mother, and there was a great

deal of whistling and noise along the Quay-side when 12 o'clock struck. She expected a "Qualtagh." His Worship here remarked that he had some lines very appropriate to the case, and he wished he had brought them with him.—Mr Creer: Are they your Worship's own composition?—His Worship: Oh dear no. I don't do anything in that way.

(Laughter.) If the Press will take them as read, I will supply them with a copy afterwards.—The witness, continuing her evidence, said she let in seven men, and then shut the door. She gave each of them a drink, but took no money from them.—His Worship: I believe that the first that goes in has a privilege in regard to the young lady herself—merely a kiss. (Laughter.)—Witness (continuing her evidence) said the men did not have a second drink. The men were all old customers, and were only in about ten minutes.—His Worship said it was an old custom, but he could not think it desirable that people should go about disturbing others in the middle of the night or in the early morning.—Mr Creer: It is only once a year.—His Worship: If they would go quietly at night and knock at the door; but they made the noise at night and, coming in the morning, ask to be paid.—Mr Creer: Yes: but my clients were not these blood suckers. (Laughter.)—His Worship said it was the first time such a case had been brought before him, and, under the circumstances, he was inclined to be lenient, and would fine the defendants each a shilling and costs. He did not wish to encourage the practice, but the fines would show that there was no wish on his part to deal harshly with the defendants when they were only keeping up an old custom. His Worship added, jocosely, All of you must remember that you must not do it again, or you will be fined each in a penalty of £5, or go to prison for a year.

The following are the lines which his Worship took as read:

Again we assemble, a merry New Year
 To wish to each one of the family here,
 Whether man, woman, girl, or boy,
 That long life and happiness all may enjoy,
 May they of potatoes and herrings have plenty,
 With butter and cheese, and each other dainty,
 And may their sleep never, by night or by day,
 Disturbed be by even the tooth of a flea,
 Until at the Qualtagh again we appear
 To wish you, as now, a Happy New Year.

"A Visit from the 'Qualtagh': Amusing Suit." *Isle of Man Times* 21 January 1896: 2e.

[N1896/2] At the Douglas High-Bailiffs Court, on Saturday, seven young men—Thomas James Patterson, John Henry Bridson, Wm. Kneale, George Shimmin, Henry Cowin, Philip Lynch, and Robert Kneale—were charged with having been on

licensed premises at an illegal hour; and Mary Ann Holden, the landlady of the Trafalgar Inn, South-qaay, was charged with a breach of her licence in having served them with liquor after closing time. Supt. Boyd prosecuted, and Mr Creer appeared for Mrs Holden. All the seven young men admitted the charge. Mr Creer said “he was not going, on behalf of his client, to say that the evidence was not committed, but he would like the facts to go before his Worship in order that he might appreciate the circumstances, and, no doubt, as he was a lover of old Manx customs, his sympathy would be excited. The fact was that the charge against his client arose out of the circumstances of her admitting the “qualtagh” into her house with the opening of the New Year.—Evidence was given to show that the gentry above named were a “qualtagh.” Mrs Holden gave each of them a drink, but took no money.—His Worship took a light view of the case, and all the defendants were dismissed with a caution.

“[Local News] A Big Qualtagh.” *Manx Sun* 25 January 1898: 8c.

1897

[NI897/1] At the Douglas Police Court yesterday (New Year’s Day), before the High-Bailiff of Douglas, Wilson Holmes and George Chapman, labourers, were charged with having committed burglary at the Athol Hotel, Douglas, and with having stolen a case containing one dozen reputed quart bottles, each bottle being filled with champagne of the St Marceaux brand. The value of the champagne was £3 10s.

“Robbery from Licensed Premises: An Unwelcome ‘Queltagh’ Party.” *Isle of Man Times* 2 January 1897: 4a.

[NI897/2] [6e] [...] and the “Happy New Year to You” of the Qualtagh will soon be heard, announcing the arrival of the Year of Grace One Thousand Eight Hundred and Ninety Eight.

“1898.” *Mona’s Herald* 29 December 1897: 6d–e.

1898

[NI898/1] We shall, therefore, take “Old Father Time” by the forelock and make our “Qualtagh” ready to enter your threshold on the last stroke of twelve on Saturday evening next.

“1899.” *Mona’s Herald* 28 December 1898: 6c.

[NI898/2] Last week we printed in this column the “Imbagh Boggoil” entirely in Manx. We now give it as it was commonly rendered about thirty or forty years ago in some parts of the Island. Many people have heard old Manxmen express themselves similarly in their attempts to speak English:

We wish you a Merry Nolllick,

As dy Blean Noe Feer Vie,
Your pocket lane dty argid,
And your cellar lane lhune mie.

Feil vart as feil vohlt turkeyn as gioee,
As eadley sauchey tra shue ne lhie,
Shee as graih sthoc as dy stoyr,
Banney as eeym as caashey dy lhioore.

Foddey vod shiu bio, and happy may you be,
Bannit lesh content from drough—haggart free;
Until at the qualtagh reesh myr vees bio,
Wish you as now Maynrey Blean Noe.

“[The Manx Language Column] Imbagh Boggoil.” *Isle of Man Examiner*
31 December 1898: [6]a.

1899

[N1899/1] Certain enthusiasts, too, kept up the custom of “quaaltagh,” or first foot, and dark men were as welcome first visitors of the year as ever.

“New Year.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 7 January 1899: 2f.

[N1899/2] In responding, the Chairman urged the signing of the pledge; it was such a safeguard in social life. He told of a young man who last New Years Day, after attending watchnight service and presumably taking the usual vows, went round on the quaaltagh. The hospitality of the neighbours resulted in the young fellow partaking too freely of “the cup.” He arrived at his home during the morning. On the street a number of barndoor fowls were strutting about. The young fellow fell helpless at the cottage door, and his mother came out in alarm to see what was the matter. There she saw her erring boy, and all he had to say was “The cock fell me, mother!” The inimitable way in which Mr Kerruish told this incident left a doubt as to whether the pathos or the comicality of the affair were the stronger point.

“Wesleyan Temperance Meeting.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 2 December 1899:
2d.

1900

[N1900/1] I must congratulate the town on the general good conduct that prevailed during the Christmas and New Year’s festivities. This may have been due, no doubt, in some small degree to the fact that the eves of the two feasts fell on Sunday. I noticed, how ever, a few “drunks,” and one in particular, disgracefully intoxicated, a lad of fourteen years of age. I regret to have to chronicle this, but it is still lamentably true.

I am sorry that the old custom of supplying the “quaaltagh” with spirituous liquors is not on the wane. Those who seek the first-foot are generally young men; and being given given intoxicants at one house, then another, the result is that the young fellow makes a bad start on the New Year, possibly for life.

“The Man on the Prom.” *Peel City Guardian* 6 January 1900: 2g.

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THE EARLY NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS (1852–1900)

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- . “Watch Night Services . . .” *Manx Sun* 1 January 1887: 4e.
- . “Wesleyan Temperance Meeting.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 2 December 1899: 2d.

