

Manx Notes 18 (2004)

“MRS W.J. CORLETT HAS PICKED UP A FINE AIR”

FRANCES CORLETT AS COLLECTOR

“Mrs W.J. Corlett has picked up a fine air—possibly Miss Wood will kindly arrange it for us.”¹ So wrote Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen in October 1914. With this single line in a letter, Mrs W.J. Corlett joins the company of song collectors who first appeared in the middle of the 1890s. However, she disappears as soon as she appears, for this is the sole reference to her as a collector.

She was in her own right Frances P. Corlett, enumerated in the 1901 census as living at 35 Derby Square in Douglas and at that time aged 40. Earlier as “Miss Fanny Proctor” she had been a member of a singing quartet founded by William Kewley in 1884 that lasted nearly a decade.² Her husband, William John Corlett, was the same age as her and ran an ironmongers business in the capital of some considerable size.³ The household consisted of three others, all relatives. Youngest was their niece Frances, aged 11. Agnes S. Thorburn, aged 59, and a half-sister followed her. Then came William Proctor, aged 72, a retired shoemaker, and the father of Frances. All were born in Douglas and none spoke Manx Gaelic.⁴

William Proctor is of as much interest as his daughter. In 1895, Harry Wood, on behalf of the Gill brothers, noted down a tune from a person in Douglas named Proctor.⁵ The surname is uncommon, there are only a handful of other candidates, and given his daughter’s later enthusiasm for song collecting this must be the same individual. He also has a common occupational background as a shoemaker with many of the singers found by the Gill brothers themselves.

Frances Corlett was evidently sufficiently interested to be out in the field in 1914, nearly two decades after the Gills themselves first went out collecting in 1895, the

¹ Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, 25 October 1914, Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL), MS 1086/43 c. Mary L. Wood has been described as the “Mother of Music in the Isle of Man.” See “An Appreciation of Miss M.L. Wood,” *Manx Quarterly* 9 (1910). She wrote two short pieces of reminiscence about her musical activities, “Music in the Isle of Mann,” *Mannin* 1 (1913), and “Music in the Isle of Man,” *Ellan Vannin* 1 (1924).

² [P.W. Caine], “A Veteran Vocalist: The Reminiscences of Mr William Kewley,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 28 January 1927: 4 col. b. She sang the part of contralto.

³ “Memorial Notices: William John Corlett, Died October 16th, 1915,” *Manx Quarterly* 16 (1916).

⁴ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Douglas, 1901, RG 13/5304, f.47. (This is the latest census to which there is access.) The 1901 census asked about ability to speak English and Manx.

⁵ “THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION | OF | MANX FOLK MUSIC | [rule] | MADE BY | HIS HONOUR THE DEEMSTER GILL | MR W.H. GILL & DR. CLAGUE | COMPLETED IN 1895 & 1896,” bound up by Mrs J.F. Gill in 1912, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. See p.12, “Manx Tune (Dorian),” annotated “M^r Harry Wood (Douglas) from M^r Proctors’ singing. Dec. 1895.” Harry Wood was enumerated in 1891 living at 17 Albert Street, aged 22 and entered as a teacher of music. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Douglas, 1891.

same year her father was recorded. Moreover, there was someone able and likely to have enthused her. The key figure here is of course Sophia Morrison (1859–1917).⁶ Celtic activist *par excellence*, she gathered around herself a circle of like-minded enthusiasts.⁷ Her surviving personal papers, filling eight boxes, adding to material already deposited by others, gives us a wide-ranging insight into this circle.

But how ever fleeting any personal involvement such as that made by Frances Corlett was in practice, nevertheless it in some small way contributed to this particular intellectual moment when the peasantries of Europe came to be seen as repositories of a cultural heritage and where there was, as a result, many “a fine air” to be found.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2004

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⁶ For an introduction to this engaging figure see Breesha Maddrell, “Speaking from the Shadows: Sophia Morrison and the Manx Cultural Revival,” *Folklore* 113.2 (2002).

⁷ And Frances Corlett is not the only collector who is known only through a single reference. “Is Bertie Corlett, or young Tonkins to see him about tunes?” P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 24 February 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

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