

Manx Notes 21 (2004)

“I HOPE TO BRING OUT A VOLUME OF MANX TUNES”

JAMES LYON (1872–1949)

46, Princes Road, | Liverpool | Dec.13th, 1907.

Dear Sir,

Pray forgive my apparent rudeness in not replying earlier to your note of Oct.22nd, in reference to my lectures on Manx Folk tunes—and Manx music generally. I had hoped to have been able to have arranged my notes on the subject in such a way as to have made interesting reading for the ordinary mortal. I find, however, that when I take away my illustrations, it would be very dry indeed, as a newspaper article.

Later on I hope to bring out a volume of Manx tunes, and I propose to use a good deal of my lecture by way of preface. Several of them I shall publish separately—e.g. “Ny Kirree fo Niaghtey”—with Manx and English words, so as to be of use to choirs—male-voice and S.a.t.b. I hope one day to wake up the people of Mann to the fact that they have a real, beautiful, national music all to themselves!

Many thanks for the book of poems. I hope to set some o[f] [bottom right hand corner missing]

Believe me, Faithfully yours [carbon mark obscures punctuation] [bottom right hand corner missing]

W.Cubbon Esq.

Source: Letter from [James Lyon] to William Cubbon, 13 December 1907, Douglas Borough Public Library, unaccessioned. Carbon copy of typescript letter, creased, missing bottom right hand corner, bottom edge crumpled.



James Lyon was born in Manchester, self-taught as a musician (although he did gain a MusDoc from Oxford in 1905), and later taught in the Midlands and at Trinity College London.¹ He was an adjudicator at the 1909 Manx Music Festival and as a result of a request from its Secretary, Mrs Laughton, he agreed to deliver a short thirty minute lecture on Manx folk song, the text of which duly appeared together

¹ This potted précis is taken from Philip Scowcroft, “James Lyon 1872–1949” [online source] where more detail can be found on Lyon’s life and times.

with the results of the adjudications in print.² What was revealed of interest in the lecture was that:

[...] it is 25 years since I paid my first visit to the Island, and, with about two exceptions, I have been here every year since. Each time I have been, my object has been to “sneak” one or two of your fine old songs for my collection. In my early days I did it because it was my hobby; now I do it because to me it is absolutely necessary.³

Given though that he was born in 1872, some of those years must have been spent visiting the Island while a schoolboy but a collection of some sort was evidently formed. He also had sufficient in number to contemplate publication of them. Evidently, he had lectured as well on the topic, delivering what seems to be a number of talks in 1907 and giving rise to William Cubbon’s suggestion for a newspaper article.⁴

The “volume of Manx tunes” never appeared. All that was ever published was *Arrane Sooree*, in a choral arrangement with English words supplied by “Cushag” (the pen name of Josephine Kermode).⁵ Lyon himself appeared again. This time it was in October 1926, once again to adjudicate music, this time at the Third Cruinnaght festival. He also gave another lecture, held in Douglas Town Hall,⁶ and from the report of it that appeared it was as equally uninspiring as the one in 1909.⁷ The theme was the same, the need to collect Manx folk songs, but it was now akin to a spiritual quest. “It was a sacred trust committed to them, and they were not doing much with it.”⁸ Lyon continued with this point and specifically referred back to the 1909 lecture:

² James Lyon, “Manx Folk Song,” *List of Awards with Judges’s Remarks* (Manx Music Festival, 1909).

³ Lyon, “Manx Folk Song,” 15 col. b.

⁴ Cubbon was joint-proprietor of the *Manx Sun* newspaper which was taken over by the *Isle of Man Times* in 1906. He later became the Douglas Borough Librarian and subsequently the Director and Librarian of the Manx Museum.

⁵ James Lyon, *Arrane Sooree: Courting Song*, Stainer & Bell’s Choral Library, vol. 104 (London: Stainer and Bell, 1913).

⁶ “Dr Lyon will lecture on Manx Folk Songs in the Town Hall, on the evening prior to the Cruinnaght.” “The Third Cruinnaght,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 8 October 1926: 9 col. d.

⁷ P.W. Caine, “Manx Folk Songs,” *Ellan Vannin Magazine* ii (1927).

⁸ Lyon was silent this time on his own collecting and the fate of the proposed publication of some or all of the material. Although he was certain that “It would be foolish [...] to publish a book of folk-tunes which contained the melodies only. Such a book would have purely an academic interest. There must be some kind of accompaniment, either for voices or instrument.” Caine, “Manx Folk Songs,” 285.

Nearly twenty years ago he had advocated the use of the phonograph as a means of recording the folk-songs of the Island, and he wondered whether that idea had been carried into effect.⁹

Lyon had called for the creation of a Folk Song Committee, “with representatives in various parts of the Island,” who would be “constantly on the lookout for any person likely to be able to sing an old song.” Once this folk song militia had located a singer, “the rest is easy,” namely:

All you want then is a little tact—and a phonograph, and when you have finished, your cylinder will contain a faithful reproduction. This cylinder could then be sent up to the committee, who would, no doubt, submit it to a musical expert, who, in his turn, would say whether it was worthy of a place in the collection or not.¹⁰

This is a splendid irony in all of this. The Manx Music Festival had a class for “Traditional Music (Hitherto Unpublished)” which Lyon also adjudicated. In 1909 he, along with the other judges, disqualified the winner and withheld the prize. It is not clear just who was the winner among the three entrants but it seems to have been W.H. Gill. Sophia Morrison won second prize, worth incidentally ten shillings to her.

This was the same Sophia Morrison as the one who had organised the purchase of a phonograph for the Manx Language Society and who had instigated a recording programme in 1905 of native speakers of Manx Gaelic that included the collecting of folk songs. She had also split the Island up into four regions and set up groups in each area responsible for the care and use of the phonograph. What Lyon was recommending was already in place, a state of affairs to which he was oblivious then as well as later. He had not been too impressed with Morrison’s entry, describing it as “only a fair thing.” So not only did the collectors themselves disappoint, but so too did the singers.

Lyon died in 1949 in Australia. No personal papers have yet surfaced and so all we have to mark his role in the collecting of Manx folk song (besides the 1909 lecture) is a carbon copy of a letter, one that is creased, crumbled, and torn. Even then, it was only found in summer 2003 as the result of an unsuccessful search for another item. It appears that there are two accounts to be written of song collecting on Man: one that is based on the presence of documents and a shadow history based on their absence.¹¹

⁹ Caine, “Manx Folk Songs,” 285.

¹⁰ Lyon, “Manx Folk Song,” 18 col. a.

¹¹ “An archive can be anyplace, but for the archive to be, there should be too much of it, too many papers to sift through. And there must also be pieces missing, something left to find.” Alice Yaeger Kaplan, “Working in the Archives,” *Yale French Studies* 77 (1990): 103.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2004

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