

Manx Notes 24 (2004)

“THE PRACTICE WAS CONDEMNED BY ALL PRESENT” METHODISM AND THE OIE’L VOIRREY

(1)

Peel, 13 October 1781

Q. 26. What shall we do for Festival Hymns in Manx?

A. 26. Let care be taken to translate some from y^e English Festival Hymn Book, that they may always be ready ‘for use’ on all proper occasions; & lay aside as soon as possible all Carrols on Christmas days, because most of them are really unfit to sing in a Religious Assembly. But let y^e Translators always bring their translations to y^e Conference next ensuring, that they may pass thro’ an examination there, before they are committed to public use: You see little dependance can be given to y^e people’s bare promises, so as to print any more; but by this method y^e public wants may in some degree be supplied by Manuscript Copies.

(2)

Peel, 1 January 1817

The principal conversation which ~~to~~ took place at this Meeting (after the Ordinary Business of the Day) was on the impropriety of the Local Preacher encouraging and holding (what they term) Ill-Veries. The practice was condemned by all present, But I fear some of them will not give it up.

(3)

Ballakaneen, 13 October 1817

Secondly. Another long conversation took place respecting the evils of holding Ill-Veries, And they were again condemned by all present except two or three who pleaded for them. They were condemned, first as being contrary to our Lord’s words, G John chap. 4th and verse 24th where it is declared that “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in Truth But in these Meetings an Individual will start up and sing a Corral twenty or thirty verses long, some of it sense, and some of it Nonsense, and one after another continuing this practice for several hours, and ~~that~~ the worst of Characters for Miles round the places where they are held.

Secondly. They were condemned on the ground of the disorderly work which is carried on at them.

Source: *The Manx Conference Book of Minutes Commencing March 25th 1780* (1780–1838), Manx National Heritage Library, MD 10097.



The *Oie'l Voirrey* (Eve of Mary) was the occasion late on the evening of 24 December when the parish church was vacated by the minister and given over to the congregation for the occasion of singing *carvals*, locally composed carols in Manx Gaelic:

At Christmas Eve, called “Eel Varrey,” the church presented an extraordinary appearance. Crowds came with candles stuck in hollow turnips and holly boughs which they held before them. They sung carols of their own composition and kept watch until midnight.¹

This was the reminiscence of Archdeacon Philpott at some date between 1827–38 when he held the living at Kirk Andreas in the north of the Island. Hugh Stowell Brown had a less fond memory of the Oie'l Voirrey as held in Braddan in the same period:

During the whole year there was but one evening service. It was on the evening of Christmas Day, and it bore the name of *Ill-vary*; I do not know how to spell the word; it is Manx, and I believe has reference to the Virgin Mary. The service concluded with one or two Christmas carols, sung by some rustics who had got them up for the occasion. What those in Manx were I cannot tell; but I remember one in English in which the singers spoke of Mary in such horrible fashion that my father could bear it no longer; he stood up in the reading-desk, angrily rebuked them for their abominable indecency, and brought the service to a hasty close. Such was Kirk Braddan when my father went to it in 1832, and such, or worse, were almost all the parish churches in the Island.²

William Kinnish's poem “The Manx Ilvary” is well-known and is a finely grained description of the Oie'l Voirrey.³ A line from his poem, “The wags around the door,” introduces one of the themes that the Methodist Conference found troublesome, namely the attraction of “the worst of Characters for Miles round the places where they are held” as it was expressed in 1817. There was an element of license about the Oie'l Voirrey. William Fry and John Caine went a little too far in 1705 in Kirk Michael parish church and were presented by the Chapter Quest as a result:

¹ Arthur Granville Bradley, *Our Centenarian Grandfather, 1790–1890* (London: John Bale, Sons, & Danielsson, n.d. [1922]) 199.

² W.S. Caine, ed., *Hugh Stowell Brown: A Memorial Volume*, 3rd ed., (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1888) 14.

³ William Kennish, *Mona's Isle, and Other Poems* (London: J. Bradley & Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1844). It is hoped to reproduce this piece on another occasion. Kennish's poem passes the biographical, internal, and collaborative tests proposed by Richard Dorson for accuracy. See Richard Dorson, “The Identification of Folklore in American Literature,” *Journal of American Folklore* 70.275 (1957).

W^m Fry and Jo: Caine p^resented by Rob^t Caineon one of y^e Questmen for y^r misbehaviour in y^e Ch: on Xstmas day in y^e morning by Striking others with bushes of holling⁴ to y^e disturbance of y^e people⁵

They were sentenced to a day’s confinement in the crypt of St German’s cathedral on Saint Patrick’s Isle. Thanks are due to the pair as their presentment provides the earliest mention to date of the Oie’l Voirrey.⁶

The Oie’l Voirrey was an issue on two occasions for the Manx Conference of Methodist preachers. At the meeting held at Peel on 13 October 1781 their thoughts were on the coming Christmas, hence Question 26, “What shall we do for Festival Hymns in Manx?” The answer was straightforward, translate a number from English into Manx and then “lay aside as soon as possible all Carrols on Christmas days, because most of them are really unfit to sing in a Religious Assembly.” There matters rested until 1817 when the issue arose once more. Again it was at a meeting at Peel, but this time held after Christmas on New Year’s Day. The concern was over “the impropriety of the Local Preacher encouraging and holding (what they term) Ill-Veries.” The response was predictable, “The practice was condemned by all present” but it was accompanied by a resigned note, “But I fear some of them will not give it up.” Pressure was to be brought to bear before Christmas 1817. Meeting at Ballakaneen in Andreas on 13 October, “Another long conversation took place respecting the evils of holding Ill-Veries, And they were again condemned by all present except two or three who pleaded for them.” The ground was two-fold:

They were condemned, first as being contrary to our Lord’s words [...]. They were condemned on the ground of the disorderly work which is carried on at them.

The Oie’l Voirrey represented disorder, doubly so, in both the sacred and the profane sphere. It also represented excess, carvals “twenty or thirty verses long” and their singers “one after another continuing this practice for several hours.” Even with these brief extracts one can see the beginning of the engagement between Methodism and the traditional song culture of the Island.

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⁴ *Hollin* (Manx), holly.

⁵ *Book of Presentments* for Kirk Michael, 1705, Manx National Heritage Library, General Manuscript Collection.

⁶ See J. Fisher, “Two Welsh-Manx Christmas Customs,” *Archaeologia Cambrensis* lxxxiv (1929) for a comparative view.

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