

Manx Notes 27 (2004)

“I SHALL DO MY BEST TO GET THE AIRS”

JOHN CALLOW AND THE SEARCH FOR SINGERS (1895)

Mines Laxey | 11th April 95 | Deemster Gill

Sir,

When with you on Tuesday I omitted mentioning the name of a man living in Baldwin Village who is a likely person to give you some manx tunes, named Philip Caine better known as Phillie the Desert. I have hold of a man here who can sing a few manx songs, I shall do my best to get the airs & send them on to you.

If you could give me a list of what you have it might facilitate matters—

I have a wire from M^r Wood that he is not crossing this Easter.

It is M^r W might materially assist your brother should they get into contact.

I am sir | Yours Obdt^{ly} | Jno Callow

Source: Letter from John Callow to Deemster J.F. Gill, 11 April 1895. Manx National Heritage Library, MS 09702, Deemster J.F. Gill Papers, Box 2, unlisted.



John Callow was one of the circle of intermediaries that Deemster J.F. Gill formed to help him and his brother, W.H. Gill, in their collecting of folk song in 1895 and 1898. This letter is dated 11 April and the Gill brothers began collecting the next day, starting in Douglas with Edward Corteen, the Surveyor-General of Highways.¹ The letter was written on the Thursday and mentions a meeting between Callow and the Deemster earlier that same week on Tuesday. Gill was evidently out preparing the ground; in fact, he had interviewed Corteen the previous Saturday and took down notes that fortunately survive.²

Callow was a clerk at the Great Laxey Mines named after the village above where they were situated. They produced lead and zinc ore although by this date their profitability was declining. How Callow came to know Gill is not clear. It is obvious that he was connected for he mentions to Gill that “M^r Wood” was not now visiting

¹ “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, Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL), MS 09702, Box 2. See pp. 101–02. This will be referred to simply as the “Music Book,” abbreviated hereafter as “MusBk.”

² See “Interview with Ed Corteen (of B.Corteen Maughold) aged 65 Surveyor Genl: of Highways. 6 Ap 1895,” MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

the Island this coming Easter. This must be G.W. Wood, a noted Manx bibliophile living in London. His wife was Manx, born in Lonan parish of which Laxey is the prime settlement.³

Callow came up with the name of Philip Caine, a retired farmer and shoemaker living at Renscault in West Baldwin in the parish of Braddan.⁴ His nickname of “Phillie the Desert” was acquired from the poor nature of the ground he farmed there. His name was already known to Gill, passed to him the previous October by Dr John Clague.⁵ The Gill brothers were to turn up at Renscault the following Thursday to collect from him.⁶

“I have hold of a man here who can sing a few manx songs,” writes Callow, promising “I shall do my best to get the airs & send them on to you.” The Gills were in Laxey the day after visiting Philip Cain. They sought out William Corlett in the part of the village known as Minorca.⁷ *Brown’s Directory* for 1894 lists Corlett as a miner and this must be the person Callow had in mind.⁸ The Gills recorded 4 tunes from Corlett: “Thurot,” “Mee walkal mish magh moghrey,” “Marrinys yn Tiger,” “Ec Ollic Ball ny Fiddleryn.”⁹

Corlett cannot be found in the 1891 census at present, but for certain he was not in Minorca. He was however there in 1881, living at 41 Minorca, aged 50, with his wife, Elizabeth, 51, and John J. Kewley, aged 2, described as a stepson. Robert Christrey, 34, lead ore dresser, was a boarder in the household. All bar Kewley were born in the parish of Jurby.¹⁰ In 1889 Corlett was in New Road¹¹ and earlier in 1881 living at the Pinfold showing a degree of mobility in residence although not in occupation.¹²

But without John Callow in the first place, William Corlett might never have been found in 1898 by the Gill brothers.

³ Quite why Callow should be a conduit for information over his movements is again not clear unless there is a family connection of some nature.

⁴ The spelling of his family name varies, Cain(e). He was “Cain” and aged 70 in 1891, born in Braddan and living with his wife, Jane, 73, also born in Braddan. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Braddan, 1891, RG 12/4690, f.47. He died 26 July 1896. Robert W. Watson to Deemster J.F. Gill, 20 November 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. He is perhaps the best-remembered singer from this period as his name crops up in a variety of contexts. This material deserves to be gathered together.

⁵ Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 29 October 1894, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

⁶ Entered as “P. Caine — W. Baldwin — (Phillie the Desert),” MusBk, pp. 107–08.

⁷ Entered as “W^m Cor[.]ett Minorca Laxey,” MusBk, pp. 108–09.

⁸ *Brown’s Directory for the Isle of Man*, (Douglas: Brown and Son, 1894).

⁹ MusBk, p.108, tune O.33; p.108, tune O.34; p.109, O.35; p.109, tune O.36.

¹⁰ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Lonan, 1891, RG 11/5601, f.82.

¹¹ *Porter’s Directory for the Isle of Man* (Liverpool: Rockliff Brothers, 1889).

¹² *Brown’s Isle of Man Directory*, (Douglas: James Brown & Son, 1881). Evidently, by the time of the census he had moved to Minorca.

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VIENNA, 2004

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Letter from Robert W. Watson to Deemster J.F. Gill, 20 November 1896.

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