

Manx Notes 28 (2004)

“MOLLY CHARANE IS THE ONLY MANX SONG MUCH KNOWN”

HENRY JENNER’S SURVEY (1874–75)

[Q6 can you tell me of any songs, poems, ballads, stories &c still current among your parishioners in Manx?]

PATRICK

“No.”

FOXDALE (PATRICK)

“Molly Charane is the only Manx Song much known.”

ST JOHNS (PATRICK)

“‘Molly Charane,’ a Song—Also one on the loss of the Herring Fleet—and sundry legends which are to be found in Waldron.”

GERMAN

“Bessy Lee | Macmillan.”*

CRONK-Y-VODDY (GERMAN)

“No—.”

MICHAEL

“If any very few of the old Mx songs be now remembered now excepting here & there. Viz the afsd The present generation appear to know or care very little about them—Cregeen’s Dictry is full of Proverbs.”

BALLAUGH

“There are at present very few of songs or stories in Manx.”

ANDREAS

“I cannot—but the Rev. T.E. Brown—Vice Principal of Clifton College near Bristol & formaly (*sic.*) Fellow of Oriel, Oxford: took a great interest in this subject some years ago.”

ST JUDES (ANDREAS)

“There are some, but I do not know them.”

LEZAYRE

* This is entered in pencil and is in Jenner’s hand.

“None peculiar within Parish,—except a few versions of carvals.”

ST STEPHEN (SULBY)

“They sing a few Manx Songs at times.”

RAMSEY

“There are a few old songs—the Proverbs used in Manx are published in one of the Manx Society’s Publications. No 21, none peculiar this District—Many fanciful Stories of Fairies.”

MAUGHOLD

“I do not know of Any—there are a few old Manx Carols still sometimes sung at Christmas.”

ST BARNABAS (DOUGLAS)

“There are such I believe—but I cannot tell of them—.”

ST GEORGES (DOUGLAS)

“Molly charain is a ballad in Manx and I have been told there are Carols in Manx. Mr George Borrow found some Manx Poem I believe.”

ST THOMAS (DOUGLAS)

“I have postponed sending this paper off in the hope of gathering some information for you from a dear old Manx Lady who is full of Manx lore—but she now tells me that her strength will not allow of her with writing or dictating anything.”

MAROWN

“I know of none peculiar to this Parish.”

ARBORY

“I believe there are 2 or 3 Manx Songs in existence—the copies of which are exceedingly rare—but I know of no one in this parish conversant with either of these songs.”

MALEW

“No.”

RUSHEN

“No I cannot.”

Source: Henry Jenner, *Information respecting the State of the Manx Language in the years 1874–5 obtained from the Clergy of the Diocese of Sodor & Man*, British Library, Add. MS 29894.



Henry Jenner (1848–1934) worked in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum and later was the chief architect of the Cornish Language Revival.¹ He was the author of a pair of articles on Cornish and Manx, both published in the *Transactions of the Philological Society* in 1874² and 1877.³ Jenner informed himself of the linguistic situation on Man as regarded Manx and English by sending a circular questionnaire in November 1874 to all the incumbents in the parishes of the Island. He then turned up in person on the Island in April 1875. He also literally turned up in person in various homes in an attempt to gain information at first hand:

During the whole of my tour I only met with one person who could not speak English, though I went into a good many cottages on various pretexts of resting, asking the way, etc., so as to find some such person if possible.⁴

The material from the returns to his circular were used to write up the piece for the *Transactions* in 1877.⁵ Fortunately, this manuscript material survives and can be found deposited in the British Library. It also contains material supplementary to the returned circulars, namely letters from many of the incumbents themselves. Not all of the data from the returns was used in Jenner’s article. He concentrated solely on the linguistic aspects of Manx and the answers as regard cultural traditions were not covered by him. The specific question in the circular addressing this topic was “Q6

¹ For a biographical sketch see J.H. Rowe and R.M. Nance, “Henry Jenner, MA, FSA,” *Annual Report of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society* 101 (1935 [for 1934]). See also R. Morton Nance, “Gwas Myghal’ and the Cornish Revival,” *Old Cornwall* ii.8 (1934). Gwas Myghal was Jenner’s bardic name chosen when he became a member of the Breton Gorseth in 1903. Henry Jenner, *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* (London: David Nutt, 1904) is his best known work. The same year the Pan-Celtic Congress at Caernarfon recognised Cornwall as one of the six Celtic Nations due to his efforts, his best known contribution. With the founding of the Cornish Gorseth in 1928 Jenner became its first Grand Bard.

² Henry Jenner, “The Cornish Language,” *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1873–74 (1874).

³ Henry Jenner, “The Manx Language: Its Grammar, Literature, and Present State,” *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1875–76 (1877). Reprinted 1906–07. Henry Jenner, “The Manx Language,” *Peel City Guardian* 3 November 1906, Jenner, “The Manx Language,” Henry Jenner, “The Manx Language,” *Peel City Guardian* 12 January 1907.

⁴ Jenner, “The Manx Language: Its Grammar, Literature, and Present State,” 26.

⁵ Jenner, “The Manx Language: Its Grammar, Literature, and Present State.”

can you tell me of any songs, poems, ballads, stories &c still current among your parishioners in Manx?" In brief, the answers were not encouraging.⁶

The answers reflect more the clergy's lack of knowledge of Manx traditional culture than the lack of that culture itself. But it is more than the issue that they were unlikely to be present on occasions when storytelling or singing was taking place. Many other members of the clergy in others parts of the British Isles were present at times on such occasions.⁷ The Reverend Walter Gregor in the northeast of Scotland was the most industrious of nineteenth century folklorists, producing the now classic *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland* in 1881 and continuing with a stream of books and articles until his death in 1897.⁸ Within the Gaelic-speaking parts of Scotland, the Reverend John Gregorson Campbell, minister of Tiree, collected material from there for both his comprehensive works, *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1900), and *Witchcraft & Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland* (1902).⁹ In fact, he even collected comparative material from Manx fishermen stopping off at Tiree.

So what little did they know, the Manx clergy? Very little indeed. The responses ranged from a simple "No" (Patrick), through "There are some, but I do not know them" (St Judes, Andreas), to "Molly Charane, 'a Song—Also one on the loss of the Herring Fleet" (St Johns, Patrick).¹⁰ The stock of song titles is a mere two, "Mylecharaine," mentioned three times, and "The Loss of the Herring Fleet," just once. And then from St Thomas in Douglas:

I have postponed sending this paper off in the hope of gathering some information for you from a dear old Manx Lady who is full of Manx lore—but she now tells me that her strength will not allow of her with writing or dictating anything.

This is a classic response, folklore belongs now only to the old and to the female, and soon to be lost, truly a feeble body of knowledge.

*

Jenner was not the only Cornish antiquarian to be interested in the parallel experience of Manx and Cornish, the vicar of Newlyn, the Rev. W.S. Lach-Szyrma, contributed a query about Wendish and Manx to *Notes & Queries* in 1882 which

⁶ Material is missing from three of the Island's seventeen parishes, namely Jurby, Onchan, and Santan.

⁷ See in this context, Deborah Davis, "Contexts of Ambivalence: The Folkloristic Activities of Nineteenth Century Scottish Highland Ministers," *Folklore* 103 (1992).

⁸ For a bibliography and introduction see Stephen Miller, "A Bibliography of the Reverend Walter Gregor's Publications," *Northern Scotland* 20 (2000).

⁹ See Davis, "Contexts of Ambivalence: The Folkloristic Activities of Nineteenth Century Scottish Highland Ministers," for further on folklore collecting in the Highlands and Islands.

¹⁰ "Mylecharaine" and "The Loss of the Herring Fleet."

brought forth in response valuable material about the contemporary state of the Manx language.¹¹

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¹¹ W.S. Lach-Szyrma, “Wendish and Manx,” *Notes & Queries* (6th ser.) vi (1882). The responses to his note have been gathered together in Stephen Miller, “The State of Manx Gaelic from *Notes & Queries*, 1882, 1883, and 1884,” *Manx Notes: Folkways and Language* 14 (1994). Lach-Szyrma submitted one further note in 1887, W.S. Lach-Szyrma, “The Manx Language,” *Notes & Queries* (7th ser.) iv (1887), and the following year authored an article with a rather definite title that seemed to sum it all up for many: W.S. Lach-Szyrma, “Manx and Cornish: The Dying and the Dead,” *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* xlv (1888). For further on Lach-Szyrma, see Simon Naylor, “Collecting Quois: Field Cultures in the History of Cornish Antiquarianism,” *Cultural Geographies* 10 (2003): *passim*.

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