

Manx Notes 36 (2005)

“TH’ ILVARY CHEER”

“THE MANX ILVARY” BY WILLIAM KENNISH

THE MANX ILVARY

When dark December’s dismal gloom
Came louring o’er the sky,
And snow-storms gather’d drear around,
And Christmas-feast was nigh,
With all its merry-making time
Of festival and glee,
Beginning with the good old rule,
The Parish Ilvary,

When each young rustic with his lass,
Dress’d in their best attire,
Trudged onwards to the Parish Church,
Oft o’er their shoes in mire;
But it was good old Christmas Eve,
At which time of the year
They pass’d each glen and haunted road
Without a spark of fear,

For many a merry-making laugh
Was heard along the moor,
Where meet in groups the neighb’ring swains
Around some cottage door,
Selected by majority
To be the starting post,
Through the good nature of the dame,
And drollery of the host;

And daughters smart perchance they had,
Attractive too and fair,
While none seem’d happier than the dame
To see them, pair and pair,
Start off in all the pride of youth,
As she had done before,
On many a merry Christmas Eve,
From the same cottage door,

The parish bell rung merrily,
 Indeed as well it might,
 For through the year, save at that time
 It never rung at night.
 Group after group now fast arrived
 From all the parish round,
 While mirth and rural jollity
 Did 'mongst the whole abound.

Some came across the mountain's side,
 Some many weary miles
 O'er hills, and lowland marshy fields,
 O'er hedges, gates, and stiles;
 But it was good old Christmas Eve,
 Which comes but once a year,
 Hail, rain, or snow, could not detain
 Them from th' Ilvary cheer.

The lasses with their gowns tuck'd up,
 And strongly pinn'd behind,
 Were led by lads along the aisle,
 Their landlord's seat to find,¹
 With candles formed in many a branch,²
 The pew t' illuminate,
 Fused in the crescit³ by young Peg,
 And dipp'd by thrifty Kate.

Along the gallery and nave
 Of the old church were seen
 Festoons of many a holly-branch,
 Relieved with heben⁴ green.
 When in full light the sacred pile
 Of many a year appear'd,
 And the selected prayers were read,

¹ As but few of the better-thinking sort of the community visited the church on this night, the rustics had free access to each of their landlord's.

² It was customary for the females to manufacture candles formed into branches for this occasion.

³ A piece of a broken iron pot, commonly made use of for melting tallow for tile purpose of dipping half-peeled rushes in the grease, and so making "rush-lights" of them.

⁴ Ivy.

The pastor homeward steer’d,

Leaving the delegated clerk
To rule the rustic train,
While each in turn his carol⁵ sang,
Celebrity to gain.
A veteran old, of many years
Experience in song,
Was still the first each Ilvary
Amongst the rustic throng,

To draw the time-worn sheet from out
His leathern breeches’ fob,
In creases deep by dint of years,
But plain enough for Rob,
For he had learnt it all by heart,
As the old saying goes,
But to be thought he could not read
In writing, rhyme or prose,

Was a dishonour to his fame,
Such as he could not brook,
Tho’ he had never learn’d the use
Of letters or a book;
But, to be candid, perhaps he might,
If educated well,
Have been a Milton, or a Pope,
A Johnson, or Boswell;

But here we had him as he was,
An honest Manxman bred,
With all the marvels yet extant
Well hammer’d in his head;
And with self-consequential air
He’d lean out o’er the pew,
And tune his quav’ring annual note
As if each year ’t were new;

⁵ The custom was for one or two men to stand up at a time, and sing their carols to the audience, after the church service was over; and the church door was kept open until a late hour for that purpose.

While at the end of every verse
 The wags around the door
 Would loudly cry, with mock applause,
 “Well done, Rob-Jack!—encore!”
 But he was proof alike to scorn,
 And flattery’s magic spell,
 His own so oft-tried power of song
 He knew himself full well,

And that he could his voice command
 O’er all their “hems” and “haws,”
 Knew where to lay the emphasis
 On words, and where to pause;
 Yet notwithstanding all his powers,
 Few did appreciate
 His music or his eloquence,
 Saving his old wife, Kate,

Who would, with great pretension too
 To St. Cecelia’s art,
 Chime in to help him through each verse
 Towards the latter part.
 The next whose customary turn
 Was to perform, stood up,—
 And being stimulated well
 By famed old Nelly’s cup,—

Commenced his diatribe against
 The cassock and the gown —
 Each bishoprick and vicarage
 He would that night cry down;⁶
 The curate too came ’neath his lash
 As did the easy clerk,
 Whom he would view with look askance
 At every shrewd remark;

⁶ This person, whose farm lay next to the glebeland of the parsonage conceiving that the parson had encroached on his forefather’s land-mark, or boundary, composed a Christmas carol from that part of the Apocrypha which treats on the priests of Baal, who robbed the Temple each night of the food that was supposed to be devoured by the Idol, and thus he gave vent to his supposed injured feelings each Christmas eve in song.

For many a home-directed stroke
Was drawn in metaphor,
In this his yearly tilt against
The episcopal lore.
When those two yearly champions
Had finish’d each his song,
The one so fraught with satire keen,
The other dry and long,

The youthful band the moment hail’d
With many a smiling face,
For now the time for shutting up
Was drawing on apace,
Now went each joke, and shrewd remark,
Around from pew to pew,
And maids their stock of parched pease
Amongst the rustics threw:

By custom taught for ages back,
The lasses brought their pease,
In pockets full each Ilvary,
The bachelors to tease,
By taking opportunity
When they were least aware,
To throw their pulse artillery
And make the rustics stare.

Now when each chanting candidate
Had done his best to please,⁷
And lasses tired of the sport
Created by the pease,
They’d all agree with one accord
To take the dreary road,
Re-passing through each haunted glen
Ere all reach’d their abode;
But on that merry-making eve
There is no cause to fear
Nor ghosts, nor witches, for ’tis said
They dare not then appear:

⁷ There was considerable rivalry on these occasions, in displaying their vocal abilities.

Upon each road a half-way house
 Was ready to receive
 Each courting pair, on their return
 From church on Christmas Eve:

A noted one amongst the rest,
 The far-famed Brumish Veg,⁸
 Well stock'd with home-brew'd beverage
 Fresh frothing from the keg;
 And blithely on that jovial night
 Each toast and jest went round,
 And with their rustic merriment
 Did Brumish Veg resound!

The ale was season'd to the taste
 In each full foaming pot,
 Not with ground ginger mix'd with spice,
 But good black-pepper hot;
 And junks of wheaten-flour bread,
 So seldom used in Man,
 After being toasted on the turf,
 Would hiss within the can.

Such was the fare at Brumish Veg
 As flow'd the mirthful tide,
 And many a youthful pair, whose home
 Was on the mountain's side,
 Sat down to quaff the barleycorn's
 Most stimulating juice,
 And in their turn another sort
 Of songs would introduce

From those which they had sung at church
 An hour or two before,
 While they would pass the jug about,
 Regardless of the score,
 Until each lass, persuasively,
 Would hint the way was long
 They had to go, which would give rise

⁸ A well-known public house, situate on the banks of the river Corna, in Kirk Maughold.

Unto the parting song.⁹

The parting verse they sang that night
I well remember yet,
It aye reminds me of those scenes
I never can forget;
Though many years have pass’d away
Since last I heard that strain,
Its tones oft o’er my memory steal,
And bring home back again.

After the parting verse was sung,
And *jough yer dorrys*¹⁰ drank,
And the large Christmas candle had
Within the socket sank,
They of the host of Brumish Veg
Then took a parting leave,
And thus the merry rustics all
Closed that auspicious eve.
Each lad would see his lass safe home,
Whose parents would invite
Him in, and sanction his request
To stop with her the night,
While they would go unto their bed
And leave them by themselves,
With a good fire upon the hearth
And plenty on the shelves.

Thus they would pass the happy night,
Still daring not to stride

⁹ The “Parting verse”

Te traa goll thie da goll da lhie
Te tarn dys traay ny lhiabbagh,
Ta’en stoyl ta foin grainagh shin roin
Te’er signal dooin da gleasagh

Which may be rendered thus:

Now we all to our homes, lads,
'Tis time to go to bed;
Each rocking-stool a warning gives—
The fire’s flame hath fled!

¹⁰ The stirrup-cup.

O'er Hymen's bound'ry, or attempt
 What virtue has denied,
 Observing the old adage still
 Which they were wont to say,—
 “To keep the feast strictly preserved
 until the festal day.”

Source: “The Manx Ilvary,” 76–85. William Kennish. *Mona's Isle, and Other Poems*. London: J. Bradley & Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1844.



Kennish's poem, “The Manx Ilvary,” a description in verse of the *Oie'l Voirrey*, appeared in 1844, in a collection of the author's poems.¹¹ Of the author himself, as written by himself,

[...] he passed his early years as ploughboy, and in other simple rustic occupations. At the age of twenty-two years he entered the British Navy as a common seaman, and learned of his messmates to converse in English, being scarcely able to express himself intelligibly except in his native language, the Manx.¹²

He later rose in the Royal Navy to attain the rank of Master Carpenter to the Mediterranean fleet and after leaving the service led a rather unsettled life, returning to the Island and then later moving to America.¹³ “The Manx Ilvary” is not the only poem in the volume that deals with folklore, “Old May Eve” is an account of the customs and superstitions of May Eve, although it is less keenly observed than that of the *Oie'l Voirrey*.¹⁴ Kennish had earlier written what was essentially a lament for the decline of the Manx language, “Mourning Over the Mother Tongue of Man,” which had appeared at some date during the 1840s in the *Mona's Herald*, a newspaper which from time to time had featured items in Manx.¹⁵

Kennish was writing not from a position of nostalgia for a now-vanished past, but rather with an awareness that the Manx countryside was undergoing change before his very eyes. In the title poem in *Mona's Isle*, he was to write:

Oh! where is now thy happy rural band,

¹¹ For further on the *Oie'l Voirrey*, see Stephen Miller, “The practice was condemned by all present: Methodism and the *Oie'l Voirrey*,” *Manx Notes* 24 (2004).

¹² William Kennish, *Mona's Isle, and Other Poems* (London: J. Bradley & Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1844) xv.

¹³ G.E. (Mrs) Quayle, “William Kennish, Poet, Inventor, Engineer, Explorer,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* vi.2 (1961) is an excellent account of his life.

¹⁴ “Old May Eve,” Kennish, *Mona's Isle, and Other Poems* 48–64.

¹⁵ Reproduced in Stephen Miller, “William Kennish, *Mourning Over the Mother Tongue of Man* (circa 1840s),” *Manx Notes: Folkways and Language* 13 (1994).

“TH’ ILVARY CHEER”

That was the pride of all the country side?
Alas, drove out by barter’s iron hand
To other shores their pittance to provide.¹⁶

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¹⁶ “Mona’s Isle,” Kennish, *Mona’s Isle, and Other Poems* 21.