

Manx Notes 37 (2005)

“AN’ WIZEER WAS THE SIN?”

W.W. GILL AND “THE OUL’ TIMES”

THE OUL’ TIMES

Theer’s no times now like the oul’ times
When the singin’ an’ dancin’ was in;
Aw, wonderful times, them oul’ times!
An’ *wizeer* was the sin?
When the boys an’ gels were meetin’
In the houses when work was done,
Comin’ in with a joke an’ a greetin’,
An’ the oul’ folks watchin’ the fun.

With the table pushed in the corner
An’ the fiddler perched on high,
An’ as long as his han’s would fiddle
The feet of the gels would fly,
Till the last dance finished in daylight
An’ the last oul’ song was sung.
In the gay times, in the houl’ times—
The times when I was young!

Source: [William] Walter Gill. “The Oul’ Times.” *Mannin* 5 (1915): 287.



Walter William Gill remains a frustrating figure, in the sense that so little is known about him and that there is little likelihood that anything will emerge to change this. There are no obituaries for him at all in any of the Manx newspapers, merely notices of his death.¹ Gill was responsible for a series of books under the running title of “Manx Scrapbooks,” published by Arrowsmith of London and Bristol.² And even then, the third in the series provides an issue of bibliographical control.³

¹ Traced to date are Anon., “Manx Author Dies: Mr W.W. Gill,” *The Courier* 3 January 1964, “Death of Manx Author,” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 3 January 1964.

² W.W. Gill, *A Manx Scrapbook* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1929), *A Second Manx Scrapbook* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1932), *A Third Manx Scrapbook* (Douglas: Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, 1963).

³ W.W. Gill, *Manx Dialect: Words and Phrases* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1934) appears as No. 4 in the series of “Manx Scrapbooks.” For some reason, it is advanced here,

Gill's importance is as a "bridge collector," one who was active between the World Wars, a bridge between those collectors who emerged in late-Victorian and Edwardian times and the establishment of institutional collecting programmes such as the Manx Museum's own *Folk Life Survey*.⁴ As regards the former, Gill even met Karl Roeder, the most important collector of Manx folklore to emerge in the nineteenth century. Active in the same period as Gill was of course Mona Douglas, a figure of some complexity to say the least.⁵

Turning to the poem here under consideration, it is a little difficult to apply Dorson's tests as to the accuracy of description given the lack of biographical detail.⁶ This is not Gill looking back to a Manx childhood, he seems never to have experienced that. Nevertheless, the level of detail is persuasive that Gill gathered memories of those who did experience such sessions: the indoor setting of the dancing session, the presence of a fiddler, him playing on a table pushed into the corner, mixed age groups, the elderly watching and keeping order, sessions lasting until daybreak.

"An' *wizeer* was the sin?" The assault by Methodism on traditional song and dance culture had long been underway as Agnes Wicksey recorded in the Baaregarrow school logbook for 1874:

Singing not so good; one boy, who has been converted at the "revival meetings" held in this Chapel at the present time, refused to sing school songs, as he thought it wrong to do so.⁷

As temperance placed the ale-houses of the countryside under pressure, it is possible that the singing and dancing culture moved into the farmhouses, sponsored by sympathetic farmers, and recalled by W.W. Gill.

and as yet unascertained, that No. 3 failed to appear in 1933. The titlepage for the 1963 edition is tipped in, the blue binding is perfunctory and workman-like, suggesting that what appeared that year was a binding-up of previously printed sheets acquired somehow by the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society.

⁴ See Grace Mary Quilliam, "The Manx Museum Folk Life Survey," *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* v.iv (1954), "'A Simple Cottage Home-Place': Glimpses of the Folk Life Survey," *Journal of the Manx Museum* vi.75 (1958).

⁵ Explored in Stephen Miller, ed., *"Completed and Restored to Use": Revival and Dissemination of Manx Folklore and Tradition during the 20th Century*, (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004).

⁶ Richard Dorson proposed a series of biographical, internal, and collaborative tests to ascertain the accuracy of description of traditional culture in various literary genres. Richard Dorson, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," *Journal of American Folklore* 70.275 (1957).

⁷ Entry for 9–13 March 1874, Baaregarrow School logbook, Kirk German (1873–74), kept by Agnes Wicksey, Manx National Heritage Library, MD 10025.

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