

Manx Notes 42 (2005)

“PROPITIATING THE FAIRIES”

J.W. THOMAS IN *NOTES & QUERIES* (1853)

Several years after, when in the Isle of Man, I had the opportunity of hearing an elderly person relate several pieces of folk lore respecting the witches and fairies in that island. It had been customary, within his recollection, for a woman, when carrying a child to be christened, to take with her a piece of bread and cheese, to give to the first person she met, for the purpose of saving the child from witchcraft or the fairies. Another custom was that of the “Queeltah,” or salt put under the churn to keep off bad people. Stale water was thrown on the plough “to keep it from the little [618a] folks.” A cross was tied in the tail of a cow “to keep her from bad bodies.” On May morning it was deemed of the greatest importance to avoid going to a neighbour’s house for fire; a turf was therefore kept burning all night at home. Flowers growing in a hedge, especially green or yellow ones, were good to keep off the fairies. And finally, the last cake was left behind the turf-flag for the little people.

J.W. Thomas | Dewsbury

Source: J.W. Thomas. “Propitiating the Fairies.” *Notes & Queries* viii (1853): 617 col. b–618 col. a.



This follows on from the previous note, another singular piece by its author on Manx folklore. While confused over the *Qualtagh* custom, which is first-footing at New Year, it is interesting that it notes the use of the *croish cuirn* for preventing the effect of the evil eye on livestock. Similar usage of the croish curn is recorded in a piece in the *Peel City Guardian* for 1898:

A short while ago, a farmer bought a cow at a fair. After he had completed his purchase, and sealed the bargain with the customary pint, he took the idea into his head that the beast was “witched” and at once proceeded to work off the evil influence. The cow was driven from the fair, back to the farmhouse to which it had previously belonged, and there a “cross-kern” (a cross made of twigs of the rowan tree) was fixed on to its tail. The buyer then slowly drove his purchase to St Johns, secure in the thought that his ‘coo’ was bound to turn out a satisfactory animal. It turned out well, and the man’s belief in the efficiency of the “charm” is stronger than ever.¹

Dr John Clague recalled the use of the croish curn in *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh*:

¹ “[Untitled],” *Peel City Guardian* 8 October 1898.

On the eve of May Day the young boys would have a cross of mountain ash (kern) in their caps, and a cross would be tied on the tail of cattle, or any other animal that would be in the house.

The right way to make a kern cross is to split one stick and put the other stick through it, and thus bind them together.²

*

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2005

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRINTED SOURCES

- Anon. “[Untitled].” *Peel City Guardian* 8 October 1898: [2] col. d.
Clague, Dr John. *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh / Manx Reminiscences*. Ed. Stephen Miller. Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2005.



² Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh / Manx Reminiscences*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2005).