

“COLLECTING IN ANY REAL SENSE WAS NOT POSSIBLE”

THE GILL BROTHERS AND MANX FOLK SONG

In the autumn of 2000, the Manx National Heritage Library released the personal papers of Deemster John Frederick Gill (1842–99).¹ This deposit consists of material sufficient in extent to fill two large archive boxes, the first containing various family papers and photographs, the second materials relating to the folk song collecting activities of the Deemster and his brother, William Henry Gill (1839–1924).²

The papers in the second box consist of (1) a bound transcript of one hundred and one tunes collected in the field by W.H. Gill, accompanied by his brother, in 1895 and 1898,³ (2) forty-eight letters from W.H. Gill, dating between 1894 to 1898, concerning the editing and production of *Manx National Songs* (1896)⁴ and (less so) *Manx National Music* (1898),⁵ together with a number of enclosures, (3) a draft of the introduction to *Manx National Songs* and (4) a draft of the introduction to the (aborted) work *Manx National Melodies*, (5) fourteen letters from Dr John Clague, their collaborator, (6) thirteen letters to Deemster J.F. Gill from various correspondents, who formed his circle of helpers in the search for singers, (7) various field and interview notes taken down by the Deemster, song texts collected by helpers, and similar material passed on by Clague, and finally, (8) miscellaneous material.

The survival of the material is uneven, especially the letters between the brothers. There are five letters from 1894,⁶ then thirty-seven during 1895, but only two from 1896, the year *Manx National Songs* appeared, followed by just three for 1897, and finally a solitary letter from 1898, when *Manx National Music* was published. It is evident too, that a great number of enclosures passed between the brothers, some not always being returned as requested. Clague’s letters are few, given that he was their collaborator, and from mentions in them, it is clear that at times he was writing directly to W.H. Gill rather than passing on his comments and opinions through the

¹ The Manx judiciary consisted of a pair of high court judges, called Deemsters, one responsible for the Northside of the Island, the other for the Southside.

² The papers are to be found at Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL) MD 09702. There is no finding aid to the papers so one had little idea of what to expect with this deposit.

³ “THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION | OF | MANX FOLK MUSIC | — | MADE BY | HIS HONOUR THE DEEMSTER GILL | MR W.H. GILL & DR. CLAGUE | COMPLETED IN 1895 & 1896.”

⁴ W.H. Gill, *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr. J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1896).

⁵ W.H. Gill, *Manx National Music: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster J.F. Gill, Dr J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1898).

⁶ The correspondence begins with a letter dated 25 October 1895.

other brother. The letters and material from the Deemster's network of helpers likewise was once fuller than what is now present.

That W.H. Gill letters survive at all is surprising. Deemster Gill died in 1899 and his brother received, supposedly, all the letters sent between the pair over the past thirty years:

These letters—such was his affection for me—he had carefully preserved and at his death came into my possession, and I shall never forget reading them. I could not realize that the writer was myself!⁷

Interestingly, the letters held back all relate specifically to their folk song collecting activities.

The whereabouts of W.H. Gill's own personal papers are unknown (assuming that they have survived); if they were to be located, then the gaps in the correspondence from his side could potentially be filled in through the existence of copy letters. Also, there would be the letters written to him by his brother.

Some copy letters of the Deemster's correspondence, as well as drafts (both complete and fragmentary), are to hand, but not many, just four letters and three drafts survive.⁸ Only one autograph letter by the Deemster was known in a public collection before the recent release of his papers, and that is, curiously, a letter to his own brother.⁹ The remainder were presumably destroyed after his death as was then routine practice.¹⁰

In 1937, J.E. Quayle published an article titled "Manx Music" in the *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, where he wrote the following about the activities of the Gill brothers:

He [ie, W.H. Gill] had all the qualities of the ideal collector, but opportunity was lacking. His work lay in London, and out of twelve months he spent perhaps two weeks in the Island, so collecting in any real sense was not possible. [...] Deemster's Gill's part in the matter, was, I think, negligible. It was not given him to "unlock the treasure of the Island heart." Different in almost every way to his

⁷ W.H. Gill to Dora Radcliffe Brown (*née* Gill), 26 October 1911, MNHL, MS 1059 C (a). Typescript file, unpagged, see Letter 7.

⁸ As regards the letters, there are two for 1894 and one each for 1895 and 1896. The letter from 1896 also exists in draft form; the remaining two drafts date from 1897 and this pair is incomplete.

⁹ Deemster J.F. Gill to W.H. Gill, 6 December 1895, MNHL, MD 719.

¹⁰ The Deemster's papers contain a number of other, more miscellaneous letters. In the case of Mrs Laughton, who Gill was involved with through the Manx Music Festival, a letter to her exists in both draft and copy form. The content is routine and its recording in both forms shows Gill must have regularly drafted and maintained copies of his own correspondence. Deemster J.F. Gill to Mrs Laughton, 3 November 1898, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

brother, he combined with an austere and somewhat solemn aspect, an aloofness of manner which invited no confidences, and opened no closed doors.¹¹

An anonymous newspaper reviewer, earlier in 1926, had commented “Mr Gill might occasionally be given credit for unearthing an air for himself, instead of relying every step on his way upon the researches of Dr Clague.”¹² Under review was the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, whose issue number 30 was the third and final part of a selection of material from the collection of Dr John Clague, as selected and edited by A.G. Gilchrist.¹³ For three consecutive years, the entire contents of the *Journal* had been given over to selections from Clague’s material.¹⁴

It is now clear from the contents of the Music Book that the Gills and Clague exchanged between themselves the tunes they were collecting in the field. Gilchrist was not to be aware of how much of what she was editing was drawn from the collecting of the Gill brothers, nor, for that matter, could she as the Clague Collection is in general poorly annotated.¹⁵ This has led to the view, as spelt out by Quayle, that Clague was *the* collector and the Gills, especially W.H. Gill, in effect did nothing other than “help themselves” to his collection and produced *Manx National Songs* (1896) and *Manx National Music* (1898) on the strength of it.¹⁶ It was to be expressed by Quayle in his piece from 1937:

While W.H. Gill arranged the tunes and edited the book [ie, *Manx National Songs*], neither he nor his brother the Deemster had much to do with the actual

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- ¹¹ J.E. Quayle, “Manx Music,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* iv.ii (1937): 240–41.
- ¹² Anon. [but P.W. Caine?], “The Manx Fishermen’s Evening Hymn,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 3 September 1926: 2 col. d.
- ¹³ For an account of her life and an appreciation of her work, see Margaret Dean-Smith, “The Work of Anne Geddes Gilchrist, OBE, FSA, 1863–1954,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 84 (1958).
- ¹⁴ A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part i),” *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* vii.28 (1924), “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii),” *JFSS* vii.29 (1925), “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part iii),” *JFSS* vii.30 (1926). For a facsimile reprint, see Stephen Miller, ed., *Dr John Clague: Manx Traditional Song*, 3 vols. (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2000).
- ¹⁵ Gilchrist used as source a transcript of the Clague Collection made by Edmund Goodwin on behalf of Sophia Morrison. For the background to this, see Robert Corteen Carswell, “Music Collected in the Isle of Man in the late Nineteenth Century: ‘Rescue Archaeology’ and the Published Results,” MA dissertation, University of Liverpool, 2001, 75–82.
- ¹⁶ This view was last advanced by myself, see Stephen Miller, “Introduction,” *Dr John Clague: Manx Traditional Song*, vol. i (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2000). It is somewhat ironic that the reprint appeared in the year when the papers of Deemster J.F. Gill were released for study. Whereas Gilchrist’s edition had appeared under the title “Songs from the Isle of Man,” the title chosen for the reprint was “Dr John Clague: Manx Traditional Song,” and with his photograph on the cover. For more on this branding of the Clague Collection by myself and others, see Carswell, “Music Collected in the Isle of Man in the late Nineteenth Century: ‘Rescue Archaeology’ and the Published Results,” 10–12, 86.

collecting of the tunes. Of all the tunes in that book those not of the Doctor's collecting may be counted on the fingers of one hand.¹⁷

Moreover, further, on that very point of collecting:

The only references to the subject that I have been able to find are in some reminiscences that appeared in a magazine called "The Choir,"¹⁸ and where he speaks about taking down some tunes from the singing of "Phillie the Desert," otherwise Philip Cain, of Baldwin Choir. He does not state what these were, nor have I have been able to find any trace of them in MS., which leads to the assumption that they were either duplicates or variants of tunes already in the Doctor's collection.¹⁹

Clague never collected from Philip Cain—the tunes in his collection credited to Cain were obtained by W.H. Gill from Cain and passed on by Gill himself.

The irony here is that the Gill brothers, hitherto marginalised figures, have now left more material for study than any of the other folk song collectors active in this and later periods. That they worked together but lived apart, J.F. Gill living in the Island, W.H. Gill residing at various places in the Home Counties in England, meant that there had to be a flow of letters. "Our separation places us all at a disadvantage—More could be done in a single interview than by 20 letters,"²⁰ J.F. Gill wrote in October 1894. "Yes, a talk would do so much; while letters can do so little," W.H. Gill from May the following year.²¹ In one of the letters there is a hint of the modernity that was to send out figures such as the Gill brothers into the Manx countryside to rescue folk songs before they were overwhelmed: "I will carry out your suggestions as closely as I can but I feel terribly handicapped working at a distance, not even a telephone intervening."²²

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¹⁷ Quayle, "Manx Music," 240.

¹⁸ A reference to C.T. C—, "Mr W.H. Gill and the 'Manx Fisherman's Hymn,'" *The Choir* vi (1915).

¹⁹ Quayle, "Manx Music," 240–41.

²⁰ Deemster J.F. Gill to W.H. Gill, 29 October 1894, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²¹ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 May 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²² W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 8 March 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

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