

Manx Notes 62 (2006)

THE GILL BROTHERS AS COLLECTORS:

(12) *MANX NATIONAL MELODIES*

[273] I shall conclude by a short reference to the work accomplished in connection with folklore. Miss Crellin has contributed an interesting paper on "Some Manx Idioms and Expressions"; Mr Roeder, although not a Manxman, has given us the results of his extensive gleanings in the Island in a paper which occupies the whole of the last number of our Magazine, and which not only embodies and preserves a large mass of valuable information, but serves as an excellent lesson in the methods of collecting and recording folk-lore, which all who are engaged in similar work will do well to lay to heart.

Another addition to our knowledge of local folklore in a new direction has lately been supplied by Mr A.W. Moore's long expected collection of Manx ballads and Manx tunes. Many of the items in both collections have hitherto been unpublished, and, together with the prefatory remarks of Mr Moore and of the Rev T.E. Brown, they are an important and interesting contribution to Manx antiquarian literature. These collections are specially interesting to me from the fact that I have been, concurrently with Mr Moore, and before him, working in the same field, together with Dr. Clague and my brother, Mr W.H. Gill, with this difference, however, that we have given greater prominence than Mr Moore has to the musical side of the subject. Like the rest of our folk-lore, our folk-ballads and folk-music are rapidly disappearing, and what remains of them ought without delay to be committed to writing and recorded. The subject is an important one and my experience leads me to believe that it goes considerably [274] further than Mr Moore has for the present carried it. In this belief my co-workers and I have abstained from publishing the results of our labours, beyond a few tunes, modernised in so far that, like Mr Moore, we have given harmonies to tunes which in their ancient form possessed none. In neither case, of course, do the published harmonies belong to the melodies—they are in both cases conjectural, and I think, in both cases, but from different points of view, justified and appropriate. No two musicians would harmonise a given melody in precisely the same manner. Limited by certain canons of harmony, which all must observe, each would follow his own taste and his own notion of what is appropriate. What we have received from the folk who possess the traditional knowledge of them are certain hitherto unwritten melodies, most of which have suffered by oral transmission through a long series of generations, and which originated as melodies pure and simple without any idea of harmony. These ought, I think, to be recorded as they were found, and in that form it has been our intention from the first to record them. The large and increasing amount of our material causes us still to pause, but we hope ere long to be in a position to publish the third section of our work (which in antiquarian importance is the first), consisting of all the melodies we have

collected, with suitable notes, explanatory of their character, peculiarities, probable origin and so on, indicating too the localities in which they were found, and the names, ages, occupations, &c., of those from whom they were obtained, and whose knowledge of them was traditional.

It is impossible in the time now left me to discuss the characteristics of this music. That much of it is ancient, that it is unknown elsewhere, and that it has a character and flavour peculiar to itself, and that it has been sung for generations with Manx words are facts beyond dispute. That some of it has been imported there can be no doubt, but which, and whence, and when are interesting problems still unsolved. The fact that, whether imported or original, it has found acceptance here, and has been adopted by the Manx folk as their own, and sung to their own national words, is surely sufficient to justify its being regarded as national and being preserved as Manx folk music. When a larger body of it has been recorded in its simple and unaltered form, I have no doubt it will give rise to much interesting speculation and criticism, and that its local peculiarities will become more and more apparent.

Source: Deemster J.F. Gill, “Address of the Retiring President,” *Yn Lioar Manninagh* iii.v (1897): 268–74. [Extract]



Deemster J.F. Gill was at one time the President of the *Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society*. His Retiring Address, delivered in 1897, was printed up in the Society’s journal, *Yn Lioar Manninagh*. While relatively brief in length, its content largely dealing with the topic of the necessity for an Insular museum to be established, he did make a point of commenting on the collecting and publishing of Manx folk song by himself with his brother and Dr Clague. He outlined the plans they had for their intended third publication after that of *Manx National Songs* (1896) and what was to be *Manx National Music* (1898):

The large and increasing amount of our material causes us still to pause, but we hope ere long to be in a position to publish the third section of our work (which in antiquarian importance is the first), consisting of all the melodies we have collected, with suitable notes, explanatory of their character, peculiarities, probable origin and so on, indicating too the localities in which they were found, and the names, ages, occupations, &c., of those from whom they were obtained, and whose knowledge of them was traditional.¹

The Preface to *Manx National Songs* had already stated this intention in brief terms:

It is hoped ere long to publish the whole of this collection, with or without historical and critical notes, for the use and information of those interested in the subject; meantime,

¹ J.F. Gill, “Address of the Retiring President,” *Yn Lioar Manninagh* iii.v (1897): 274.

the songs in this Volume are given as showing one form into which the originals may be developed.²

W.H. Gill, in October 1895, had by then already mocked up a title page for what then was to be Book iii in a series with the running title *The Music of the Isle of Man*, with that volume appearing as “Manx Melodies (Unaccompanied).”³ If the projected third volume had ever appeared, its title would no doubt in turn have been elevated to that of *Manx National Melodies*, along the lines of *Manx National Songs* and *Manx National Music*, and so making up a trilogy of publications.

The copies of the tunes bound up in the “Music Book”⁴ have been annotated with variously with the date of collecting, the name of each singer, their place of residence, and their age.⁵ Missing, however, is any note of occupation, save for one singer. These details cannot be what were going to be relied upon to generate the commentaries and inevitably points to yet further material missing from amongst the Deemster’s personal papers. It is difficult to know to what stage work on *Manx National Melodies* had reached by 1897, but the Deemster’s death in 1899 was obviously the end of his involvement.

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VIENNA, 2006

² W.H. Gill, “Preface,” *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) iii. It was to be repeated, although slightly altered, in the preface to *Manx National Music*: “It is hoped ere long to publish the whole of this collection, with or without explanatory and other notes, for the use and information of those interested in the subject; meanwhile a selection of the melodies is given in this volume arranged for the Pianoforte by Mr W.H. Gill.” W.H. Gill, “Preface,” *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) iii.

³ Loose sheet with sketch of suggested title pages for the proposed series, “The Music of the I. of Man,” Books i–iii. Annotated top left-hand corner, “Suggested by W.H.G 10. Oct 95.” Deemster J.F. Gill Papers, Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL), MS 09702, Box 2.

⁴ A shorthand reference to “THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION | OF | MANX FOLK MUSIC | — | MADE BY | HIS HONOUR THE DEEMSTER GILL | MR W.H. GILL & DR. CLAGUE | COMPLETED IN 1895 & 1896,” MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

⁵ Not necessarily in all cases accurate.

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