

Manx Notes 65 (2006)

MANX NATIONAL SONGS WITH ENGLISH WORDS (1896)

“PREFACE”

[iii] The following Songs are the first practical outcome of a project formed many years ago, and since often discussed by The Deemster Gill and his friend Dr Clague, to collect and preserve from the oblivion into which it was rapidly passing all that remained of the National Music of the Isle of Man.

That the Island had possessed and still possesses a distinctive national music of its own, is a fact as interesting as it is now little known, even by those best versed in its history and the customs of its people.

With the exception of thirteen tunes very imperfectly written down and arranged—published in 1820 under the title of *The Mona Melodies*, and of two or three others which exist in manuscript, Manx music has remained oral and traditional, and although at one time well known and in every sense popular, it has of late years, with the declining national language, almost entirely disappeared.

Fortunately there are still in the remote parts of the Island a few old people who possess a knowledge of this ancient music, but who with characteristic modesty keep it to themselves, reluctant to sing the songs of their forefathers lest the rising generation should, as indeed they often do, receive them with a lack of that reverence which they inspire in themselves. Unless, therefore, preserved by writing, this knowledge must inevitably die within a very few years.

The object of the collectors was twofold—first, to record and hand down the melodies as they are now known, with the variations and imperfections due to oral transmission, and secondly to put some of these melodies into a form adapted for modern performance, vocal and instrumental.

In order to carry out these objects the original projectors were, last year, joined by Mr W.H. Gill, and a systematic search for Manx music was commenced.

With the exception of two songs included in the present selection (Nos. 23 and 44), music known to be not older than the present century was ignored; of that which is older, none was found to have been printed except the thirteen tunes contained in *Mona Melodies*—a few of which have since been reprinted in various forms; and of manuscript music two or three tunes only were discovered.

The task was then undertaken of writing down the remaining mass of traditional melodies from the singing of those who still retained a knowledge of them, and who were found scattered over the whole of the Island. Tunes were obtained from every town, and every parish except one, in which a thorough search has not yet been made.

It is interesting to note that the contributors were chiefly men; that except in the case of the carols, which are more generally known, and of a few other melodies, the various tunes were known only by the individuals from whom they were obtained;

that more than half of the tunes which had been published in 1820 were entirely unknown, and that copies of the publication are extremely rare.

The result of the search, both as regards quantity and quality, far exceeded what was expected; and a large manuscript collection has been secured of songs, carols, dance music, &c.

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

For the most part the original songs were sung to Manx words, and it may be thought that these ought to be given in this Volume. The following among other reasons have led to their omission, and to the substitution of English words:

1. The primary object of this section of the work is popular rather than antiquarian—to make some of the best Manx songs generally known, and once more heard.

2. The language being practically dead, songs with Manx words would not be generally sung. [iv]

3. In many cases the original words possess little literary merit, or historic interest, and in many others they are unfit for publication.

4. Those interested in the Manx words will find a larger collection of them in Mr A.W. Moore's Book, now in the press, with which it is desired that this work should not in anywise interfere.

The English words here given, whilst in some cases referring to the subject of the originals are in no sense translations, and in the majority of instances, though possessing local coloring, have no connection with the original themes: like the accompaniments, they are used merely as vehicles for the melodies, and to ensure their being sung.

Grateful acknowledgments are tendered to those who have contributed the words for the deep interest which they have evinced in this work, and for their help in maintaining its national character.

The harmonies, the accompaniments, the symphonies, and the arrangements generally are the work exclusively of Mr W.H. Gill, who has added to this Preface a copy of a paper read by him before the Musical Association in London, on the 14th May, 1895, and who has also prepared for publication a largely extended selection of the melodies arranged for the pianoforte.

The title, *Manx National Song*, is used in the sense only that the melodies, with many others now lost, are known to have been, in put days, popular and in general use in the Isle of Man, most of them associated with Manx words.

In the general collection and in this selection from it, tunes will be found which have evidently been imported, others which although probably native have a foreign complexion, and others again, of great beauty and of undoubted antiquity, which

appear, to exist in this Island only and possess characteristics distinctly local—especially those in the so-called “Dorian Mode,” on the lines of which a strikingly large proportion of the Manx music is constructed.

The work of discriminating between what is native and what imported, of deciding when and whence importation came, of determining whether or not the more ancient Sacred music was introduced by the Church, and if so, whether before or since the Reformation, and of solving many other problems to which the general collection naturally gives rise, is one full of interest and of difficulty.

It involves more research than the compilers have at present time to devote to it; but, being convinced that if adequately performed it would result in a valuable chapter in the history of national music, and knowing, as they do, that by far the greatest number of the tunes have never before been published or even reduced to writing, and come from a source which is rapidly being lost, the compilers consider they are doing a useful and patriotic work in rescuing these tunes and placing them on record for future use.

It cannot be claimed that all the sources of information have been exhausted, but considerable trouble has been taken to find persons who possess any knowledge of the subject, and a collection of over 260 local melodies has been recorded. Of these some are complete, some are fragments only, and some are variations of other tunes.

In many cases it is as difficult, if indeed it is not impossible, to ascertain the original form of any given melody, as it is to discover its nationality; both must, in the large majority of cases, remain a matter of conjecture. The tunes in the general collection are recorded as they have been actually found to exist. That other forms also exist there can be no doubt, and it is hoped that this new field of inquiry having now been opened, other gleaners may be found to gather what still remains unrescued.

J. FRED. GILL.

J. CLAGUE.

W.H. GILL.

Douglas, Isle of Man.

July, 1896.

Source: “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–iv.

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Vienna, 2006