

Manx Notes 70 (2006)

MANX BALLADS AND MUSIC (1896)

T. E. BROWN'S "PREFACE"

[ix] As regards the words and the music of the Manx Songs, one is constantly startled by their disparity. Many of the tunes seem fitted, if not intended, to express emotions which find no utterance in the words. And the question occurs—are these the original words? In the case of the best known among the tunes, "Mylecharaine," the subject of the song is of a very prosaic kind. A dowry, for the first time in the Isle of Man, is given to a daughter, and is condemned by the lieges as of evil precedent. But the tune suggests a depth of ineffable melancholy. In "Kirree fo Niaghtey" we have a tune, I should imagine, less trimmed to modern associations, a very noble, rugged product of conditions which it is hard to realize, even though we were to admit that a great snow-fall and the rescue of the buried flocks may possibly have occasioned this vehement and irregular outburst.

The Love-songs, for the most part, appeal to prudential considerations rather than passionate impulse. They affect the dialogue form, as in "Moir as Inneen," where the mother represents common sense, and the daughter betrays no consciousness of individual passion, but merely the general preference for the married as compared with the single life. In Scotch music we find a similar state of things. No one can for a moment pretend to be satisfied that the words of "Robin Adair" were originally written to that tune, still less to allow the superb madness of "Roslyn Castle" to be adequately mated with such rubbish as that with which it is fain to put up in books of Scottish Song. We cannot resist the conviction that these great old tunes have lost their partners in life, that both tunes and words were the outcome of a more primitive age. For some reason or other the words were forgotten, and the tunes, in their forlorn widowhood, descended to the [x] embrace of churls and varlets, or continued to exist in single blessedness, and became those "Songs without Words" which serve as the basis of popular dance music.

The next thing which strikes us in the survey of our little field is that the songs are so few in number, and, in quality, so trifling, so unromantic, so unpoetical, and so modern. The causes may be conjectured. In addition to those mentioned in Mr Moore's Introduction, I venture to suggest the following:

1. There has never been a Bardic class, nor have there been any royal or feudal traditions which could foster such a class. Hence the total lack of that stimulus which had so much to do with the literature of the Border Ballads. Of anything like the native literary instinct which has always obtained in Wales it is, in this connection, useless to speak.

2. The football position of the Island, kicked about from Celt to Norseman, from English to Scot. This must have affected the language as well as the temper and spirit of the people.

3. We fell under the dominion of a great English family, the Stanleys; but we were not thereby admitted even to the doubtful advantages of the Feudal system. We were practically serfs, and this serfdom continued for three hundred years, terminating only in the Act of Settlement.

4. This was a period of unhappiness, “benevolent despotism” if you will, but absolute ignorance—tyranny, in fact, with certain compensations. One of them does not appear to have been *culture* of any kind or sort. The pre-Reformation clergy did nothing; it was their interest to do nothing.

5. Out of this mediaeval darkness we were delivered by the Reformation. But there is no literary result: “who will sing us the songs of Zion?” We had none. I can imagine nothing more crushed and broken than the spirit of the Manx people as they passed under the Ecclesiastical tyranny which, indeed, had never, under any secular *régime*, ceased, vampire-like, but with the [xi] best intentions, to suck the blood of our forefathers. Feudalism was a fruitful source of poetry. But we never had Feudalism. What we had was Serfdom. The American slaves could sing; they are a light mercurial race and I would not give our poor old “Kirree” for all their facile gushes of sentimentalism. We were Celts, that never had fair play, we brooded, smouldered, did not come off. Even the dash of Norse blood failed to fire us; and, while the Russian serf has continued to sing or sob, through all the centuries, melodic miseries now available as “pick-me-ups” for Teutonic *dilettanti*, we have been silent.

6. It is impossible to over estimate the baleful effects upon our song literature of the Church discipline as maintained by Bishops Barrow and Wilson. They were both good and excellent men, themselves no mean scholars, and capable of ancient as well as contemporary literature. But it would never have occurred to them that the Manxmen were fitted for anything except abject obedience. Archdeacon Rutter might fling a spell of Cavalier sentiment across the sullen waters, might, even as Bishop, venture to imperil his dignity by singing the praises of Manx Ale; but how about the people? Lovesongs, satires, and so-forth, written by common men for common men! “Lewdness, superfluity of naughtiness”—let him “whistle o’er the lave o’ t” in St German’s dungeon. That would have been, in all probability, the fate of the Manx Burns.

7. The People went on to Methodism; that was another yoke. The naturally bright and clever creatures, even after the long period of suppression, were quite capable, upon their liberation from serfdom in 1703, of asserting themselves, however late, in verse. Methodism came just in the nick of time. The very springs of song were seized by the new movement. Psalmody, Carvals, and the like, occupied all serious minds. But these were comparatively modern. What fascinates and tantalises us is the *ignis fatuus* of a real relic of antiquity in the Fragment, “Fin as Oshin.” This may be an echo of an Epic, or a Saga, but our copy dates only from 1762, and, in its present form, it suggests no antiquity of origin, the Manx exhibiting no archaic [xii]

peculiarities. The subject, and interest would seem to be ancient; but the Manx cannot have enjoyed the unparalleled privilege of retaining an unchanged and unmodified language for a period of seven hundred years.

We submit, however, that after all is said and done, this collection is not without traces of a struggling utterance, and a real, if depressed, national genius. If our Love-songs, for instance, are sparse, and strike no thrilling note of passion or tenderness, I think we can point to "Songs connected with Customs and Superstitions" as being full of interest. I would direct special attention to "Berrey Dhone" (p.72); it is a witch-song of the ruggedest and the most fantastic type.

Still the absence of great Love-songs haunts me. I would fain accept "Yn Graihder Jouylagh" ("The Demon Lover," p.119) as an original Manx song. But this is impossible. It may be a *variant* of the Scotch song, but it is surely much more probable that it is an imperfect, vacillating translation of that magnificent ballad. Almost as lamentable, and even more total, is the absence of War-songs. Love and War—the two great strings of passionate vibration—no, it is no use, our lyre is a broken, perhaps an essentially defective thing.

Great care has been taken to get at the original Melodies. No preconceptions have been suffered to stand in the way of a faithful reproduction of the notes as proceeding from the lips of those who were most likely to have retained the genuine tradition. General Celtic affinities are not lacking; but I believe it, will be found that Mr Moore's musical colleagues in the preparation of this work have not, shrunk from resisting the influence of these affinities when the course of melodic transition seemed to diverge from recognised Celtic modes. Not that they would pretend to establish an independent Manx mode, though, in case of need, they might not be unwilling to risk such an audacity.

For the Harmonies I can only plead that they are grounded on analogy. Of course, the question of Harmony did not come within the range of the Manx [xiii] songsters. But to us the harmonic motive is irresistible, and, in most of the songs, flows naturally not to say inevitably, from the melodic phrase. I can see no objection to harmonies thus suggested and circumstanced. In case of superfluity, or unsympathetic colour, the melody is always there to correct a bias however modern, or a point of view however morbid. I believe that Miss Wood's harmonies will bear the test of the reference that I have indicated. They do not disguise the melodies. They facilitate the musical situation, and satisfy a legitimate desire, the desire for finality and completeness.

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Source: T.E. Brown, "Preface," *Manx Ballads and Music*, ed. A.W. Moore (Douglas: G. & R. Johnson, 1896) ix–xiii. [See "Manx Ballads," undated, MS draft of T.E. Brown's preface, Manx National Heritage Library, MS 1281 C.]

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VIENNA, 2006

