

Manx Notes 93 (2007)

“VERBALLY TO ME, 1882”

KARL ROEDER'S FIRST PUBLICATION
ON MANX FOLKLORE (1892)

FOLKLORE

The following notes have been collected by Mr. C.R. Roeder, of Manchester:

CUSTOMS.—It had been customary 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 door to keep off bad people*. *Stale water was thrown on the plough* to keep it from the little folk. 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 the hedge, especially green or yellow ones, were good to keep off the fairies*. The last cake was left being the turf flag for the little people.—London N. & Q, 618, viii, No. 2.

A WHITE LADY.—A white lady was seen every night after dark, and one night when all were in bed, a servant heard a knock at the door, put her head out of the window, and saw a little doll pop round the house and knock three times. She was so frightened she could not get her head in, till others pulled her. The house was suddenly illuminated, and when quite dark again, the bedclothes pulled off.—London N. & Q, v, 341, 1852. (From Castletown.)

BLACK DOGS.—*People are pulled off horses by black dogs*.

Three stone coffins were lately dug up, and the place not since haunted.

Our woman servant told me her father and other *chased a black dog*, which kept howling and screaming, round the town, *up as far as the gallows post*, but did not dare to go beyond, and came back as fast as they could.—London N. & Q, v, 341, 1852. (From Castletown.)

TWO FAIRY ARMIES.—A woman walking over *Barrule*, met two fairy armies going to battle, which was to begin on the ringing of a bell. She pulled the bell, and, in consequence, both armies attacked her and kept her prisoner for three years, when she escaped.—London N & Q, V, 341, 1852.

THREE LITTLE MEN.—A little girl walking over a bridge was *offered by three little men (one after the other) a farthing*, which she persevered in refusing, knowing that, if accepted, she would have been carried off.—London N & Q, V, 341, 1882. (From Castletown)

A WITCH.—At Peel, a Witch *with a basin of water* said that the herring fleet would never return. Every ship was lost, and she was put in a barrel with spikes and

rolled down the hill. The grass never having grown since, and “I saw the mark all down.”—London, N. & Q, v. 34I, 1852.

BALL OF FIRE.—A labouring man, passing by a house which is said to be haunted by soldiers, saw a soldier from *Castletown* (Isle of Man) sitting on a stile, and on going up to tell him that the bugle had sounded, *he vanished into air*, and the man *saw a ball of fire before him all the way home*.—London, N. & Q, v. 34I, 1852.

EVIL EYE.—There is still the prevalent belief in the effect of the *Evil Eye*, and when a person wishes to purchase an animal, but will not give the price demanded, the owner of the beast lifts the earth or dust from the footprint of the person trying to make the bargain, and rubs the creature all over to prevent the ill effects of “*overlooking*.”

If the beast die from the supposed effect of the Evil Eye, the Carcass is publicly burnt at four crossways, and the first person who passes that way after the fire is kindled is fixed upon as the author.—(Rev. J.G. Cumming, January 1867; quoted *Ward and Locke’s Guide*, 15.[])

WREN FEATHERS.—Hunting the Wren was a favourite amusement on St. Stephen’s Day, and when the poor bird was captured, *its feathers were distributed as guards against witchcraft*.—15, *Ward and Locke’s Isle of Man*.

ASHES.—Even now, in many cottages in the more secluded districts, the housewife, before going to bed on *New Year’s Eve*, *spreads* the ashes of the grate smoothly on the floor, and on awaking next morn, *looks for the track of a foot*. Should it be found with the *toes* towards the doors, it is believed a member of the family will die within a year; but should the *heel* of the fairy foot point in that direction, then it is firmly believed the family will be augmented within the same period.—*Ward and Locke’s Guide to Isle of Man*.

CHANGE INTO A HARE.—I was told by a mason, whose brother had a farm near *Ballacain*, near Jurby, N, that *an old witch of a woman used to milk the cows*, and do all kind of hard to the cows and cattle out of evil disposition and spite, and that she never could be caught, as she *changed into a hare*, but he hoped yet, some day, to shoot her with a silver sixpenny piece.—Verbally to me, 1882.

MERMAID.—Near *Niarbyl Bay*, not far from Peel, lives an old fisherman, who told the people that he used to convene with a *mermaid, who sang to him most beautiful* and came to visit him, and that she had married a man she had taken a fancy to.

WATER BULL.—Where there is now the *Promenade* in Ramsey there used to be in former times a *large pool*, which was inhabited by a *Taroo Ushtie* (Water Bull), and people never dared to go near for fear of harm and mischief.

BIBLES AND HORSESHOES.—I have often seen *horseshoes* on desolated upland barns nailed to the door, and also *old Manx Bibles* in *deserted cottages* left behind in the wall niches—to keep evil spirits away, as near Sulby and on the Curragh flats, as I was informed.

THE FAIRY DOCTOR TEARE.—When he was sent for, the messenger was strictly charged nether to eat nor drink by the way, nor to tell any person his mission. Farmers delayed sowing their crops till he could come to bless the seed. On one occasion, when the chief magistrate of Castletown introduced a visitor to him, he first called upon him to swear that he never called evil spirits to his assistance, at the same time saying: “I know that by probing the secret springs of nature you can accelerate, return, or turn aside, at pleasure the natural course of events.”—*Ward and Locke’s Isle of Man.*

He once told *me* he had *cut the fish off*, because the fisher lads of Peel showed, rudeness and ill-nature towards him.—Verbally told to me in Cregneish by him, 1883.

(AUGUST 20TH, 1883, ALL FROM LEZAYRE, FROM AN OLD COTTAGER)

RUNNING WATER.—A *Lady in Silk* walks in the Mountain Pass in evening time, as soon as you go after her, and she comes to the *water* or *running brook*, she changes, she does not go on, as she cannot pass. Fairies cannot pass running water.

The *Spirit Horse* travels on the roads and takes up belated travellers, and puts them down at their door, but people they don’t care for, she tosses off.

The *Water Horse*, *Night Horse*.—You see it in the evening time. People who want to get across, she takes over, but some it takes down with them. Her father never allowed them to go down the river in moonlight.

Man without head walks about, you have to keep off.

LITTLE FOLKS.—The old Clerk of the parish met a *whole lot of little men on horseback*, dressed in green jackets and scarlet cap, ride down the hill and pass Mrs. X.’s cottage and disappear.

CHANGELING.—A poor man had two sons. After they had been put to bed, one began to grow fearfully thin; they were sleeping near the floor, so she changed them and stayed up to watch, and found a *lot of fairies* came into the room and took him out of bed, and began to *ride* him like a horse, and after, when they day began to dawn, put him back to bed again, and thus he grew thin. So she found out it *was* the fairies; she gave him an herb, and so the fairies did not come again.

WITCHING.—A *Pig witched*. A woman came in, she saw by the look she was not good, a dark woman she was; after she went, she found the pig in a fit on the floor, so she got the *Divine* (herb) [no doubt, “Vervain”—ED.], and put it over it three times and said: “Evil spirit, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, rise and come out of the pig,” and she had scarcely said it, the pig stood on its legs and ate its meat quite right.

A *Child witched*. A woman took her child into the country to stay for some time with friends. The woman next door had no children and envied it, and when the child went home it fell sick, and would not eat, and like vomiting. Its tongue hung out of its mouth, and the mother who had seen often the woman look at the child

with an envious look (evil eye), instantly knew it had been witched, and took some of the herb and put water on it, and gave it to the child, and it got all right.

A *Horse witched*. When they kept their farm they had two beautiful plough horses, and a horse dealer came by and stood on the road side admiring them, and them came up, patted them, asked the price. He passed on his way after the farmer said they were not for sale. He went to his dinner. When he went to take them out of the stable again he found them lying down, and they would not move. He hurried his daughter up to go to the herb-doctor and ask how it was, and he said they had been witched, and gave an herb, which put them right again.

Every beginning of May, *buttercups* are gathered and strewn on the door steps, and a little child brought a bunch to put on the door step to keep *witches away*.

They take two twigs of *Rowan tree* and put them across, tied with an old piece of *cassolley* (old sheered wood), and stick them outside the door on the top to keep *witches away*.

WARTS. (FROM CREGNEISH, AUGUST, 1883.)

When full moon take a dish, put *no water* in it, take it outside the door, and go through the motion of washing, look to the moon, and say: "In the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, I wash this wart away."

Source: Charles Roeder, "Folklore," *Yn Lioar Manninagh* i.x (1892): 289–92.



This is Karl Roeder's first known published piece on Manx folklore.¹ Roeder was a German national resident in Manchester who, on the strength of the dates here, visited Man in 1882 for the first time and again in 1883 and noted a number of folklore items. Whether he came to explicitly collect is not evident, but it is clear from the places mentioned that he was touring the Island from north to south. This first article of his is a mixture of published material, gleaned as ever from *Notes & Queries* and guidebooks, with original items collected by himself.

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VIENNA, 2007

¹ For a checklist of his writings on Manx folklore, see Stephen Miller, "Karl Roeder: An Updated Checklist of Writings on Manx Folklore," *Manx Notes* 16 (2004), updating "Charles Roeder: An Interim Checklist of Writings on Manx Folkways," *Manx Notes: Folkways and Language* 1 (1993).

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- Miller, Stephen. "Charles Roeder: An Interim Checklist of Writings on Manx Folkways." *Manx Notes: Folkways and Language* 1 (1993): 1.
- . "Karl Roeder: An Updated Checklist of Writings on Manx Folklore." *Manx Notes* 16 (2004): 1–2.