

Manx Notes 112 (2009)

“ASKING FOR ANY OLD SONGS OR SAYINGS”

JOHN NELSON WRITES TO DR JOHN CLAGUE (1908)

Waterloo Rd | Ramsey | March 28/08

Dear Mr Clague

I did hope to have the pleasure of seeing you at the manx meeting on Tuesday last to have a talk about things manx, I saw your friends the Rev^d John Kewley & ‘Mr’ Thomas Moore Brookfield who were asking for any old Songs or Sayings, so I said I had a few & the both wished ‘me’ to send you one or two, so on their invitation I take the liberty of submitting along with them a verse each of my translations which have not been published for your perusal just to test the music foot to see if they can be made more complete I only intended to send one sheet but being a wet day yesterday I kept on writing until I filled 3 sheets, just to shew the different Meters some don’t lend themselves very nicely for translations, I have Sankey’s first book about 160 od hymn’s done, also a lot from ancient & Modern & others. I do wish this new dictionary was published. I am at a great loss to find the correct spelling of Manx words I am told there is a slight difference between Kelly & Cregeen in this matter.

You had better re-write any thing you may think worth writing I am afraid you will ‘find’ some errors in the spelling. I hope to be at port Erin about Easter & shall be pleased to have your opinion on the translation of Manx wedding some of the other verses perhaps would be more interesting to you. such as. Haink Karran lesh Claasagh sheese huc veih Malew, Lesh fiddler Ballag-Chashtal shenn Archie Cuckoo. As Phillee yn Desert lesh Tommee yn Mate, V’an Kiaulliaght va ocsyn t’ad gra jeh’n chied rate, &c

I intend to get it printed some time soon when you^l have an opportunity of seeing the whole of it.

Faithfully Yours | John Nelson.

Dr Clague | Castletown.

Source: Letter from John Nelson to Dr John Clague, 28 March 1908, MNHL, MS 428 A.



Clague had retired from his medical duties in 1901, although he still saw patients on a private basis. Thomas Moore of “Brookfield,” in Port Erin was a personal friend to Clague and he was later to work with him on what to become *Manx Reminiscences*

published posthumously in 1911, as a memorial to Clague's memory by *Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh*.¹ The Rev. John Kewley, was also a close personal friend and the one who inherited Clague's personal library and mss. including the four tune books of material collected by Clague in the south of the Island now in the Manx National Heritage Library.²

John Nelson was an enthusiast for the Manx language, he had his own column in the *Ramsey Courier* that had started in 1906.³ He was also the Methodist teetotal proprietor of the Albion Family and Commercial Hotel in Ramsey.⁴ While Kewley and Moore were interested in traditional Manx song, Nelson was more interested as seen here in translating Methodist hymns into Manx. This had earlier been commented on by Sophia Morrison in a letter to Kneen in 1905, after having failed to encourage Nelson to produce some learning materials for the YCG:

I have done my best to persuade Nelson to give us some every day jig-jog yarns in homely Manx—but he looks upon that kind of work as just so much “boghtynid” (Mx. ‘rubbish’)—his one ambition being to translate Moody & Sankey. It is such a pity as we have so much of that wishy washy stuff in Manx—& of no real value.”⁵

Nelson was also translating “The Manx Wedding,” a poem by W.H. Gill and published in 1900.⁶

¹ Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]). For an enlarged edition, see Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh / Manx Reminiscences*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2005).

² They were deposited in 1935 as MS 448/1–3 A, and MS 449 B. On their gifting see, Anon. [but William Cubbon], “Dr John Clague’s Collection of Folk-tunes,” *Journal of the Manx Museum* iii.44 (1935).

³ For his first contribution see, John Nelson, “Manx Column,” *Ramsey Courier* 3 August 1906.

⁴ John Nelson was aged 61 in the 1901 census, living at the Albion Hotel, 73 Waterloo Road, Ramsey. His wife, Eliza, 50, was born in England but their four children, aged from 9 to 21, were all born in Ramsey. Only their father was bilingual. Living with them, besides a female servant from England, was Catherine McAlen, Nelson’s widowed aunt, 74, who was a Manx and English speaker. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ramsey 1901, RG 13/5300, fol. 170, sch. 30. For an obituary notice, see Anon, “[Memorial Notices] John Nelson. Died Aug 8th, 1910,” *Manx Quarterly* 9 (1910).

⁵ Letter from Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, 22 November 1905, MNHL, MS 1086/13 C. This erosion of traditional Manx song culture had begun in the 1870s during the Methodist Revival as an entry in the school logbook for Baaregarroo School, Michael, shows: “Singing not so good; one boy, who has been converted at the ‘revival meetings’ held in this Chapel at the present time, refused to sing school songs, as he thought it wrong to do so.” Entry for the week 9–13 March 1874, Baaregarroo School logbook, MNHL, MD 10025.

⁶ W.H. Gill, *A Manx Wedding and Other Songs* (Abingdon-on-Thames: William H. Hooke, n.d. [but 1900]).

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2009

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MD 10025 Logbook for Baaregarroo School, Michael, 1873-74. Kept by Agnes Wicksey.

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