

Manx Notes 134 (2012)

“PHILLIE THE DESERT”

PHILIP CAINE OF RENSAULT, EAST BALDWIN *

On the 20 November 1896, the Rev. Robert W. Watson wrote to Deemster J.F. Gill that “[w]ith reference to our Conversation of yesterday I find that Philip Cain died on Sunday July 26 & was buried the following Tuesday.”¹ Of all the singers found by Manx song collectors in the 1890s, none seem to have had a greater reputation than Philip Cain of Rensault, East Baldwin, Braddan. For instance, he was recalled as late as 1962, in an interview from the Manx Museum Folk-Life Survey:

They were great for fiddlers in them days. “Phillie the Desert” would play for the dancing—he was one that was going round to play, and he would be telling stories about the fairies. Another fiddler was the blacksmith, he was playing too. These old men were awful for telling stories, and the children would be that frightened. I’d be going along the road at night saying gospels.²

Besides the evidence here for dancing in the countryside it is interesting to see that “Phillie the Desert” was not only a fiddler but also a narrator of fairy legends and we would like to know more of the performance context of such recountings. He earned his nickname (so it is said) on account of the poor ground that he had once farmed.

The 1891 census has him aged 70 years and living in Braddan at Rensault, East Baldwin. His occupation was given as a “Retired farmer and shoemaker” and he lived there with his wife, Jane aged 73, and Robert Collister, his grandson, 19 years old, and a farmer.³ In 1881, he was recorded as being a shoemaker only and living at Ballagraue Cottage in Marown.⁴

James Edward Cowell, in his memories of Baldwin, describes his cottage:

He got the Desert owing to living once at a place in East Baldwin of that name. The cottage in the village where he lived was a very low one with only a cockloft reached by a small ladder for a bedroom, up against the thatched roof. The gable came close to the road, only a pigsty between. Anyone standing on the sty could reach the chimly [*sic*]. One night some youngsters put a live hen down the chimly, they hadn’t a clean house at any time, and wouldn’t be improved by that.⁵

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘Phillie the Desert’: Philip Caine of Rensault, East Baldwin,” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu*, November (2011), [5]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Rev. Robert W. Watson to Deemster J.F. Gill, 20 November 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

² Mrs Lace, Cronk-y-Voddy, Michael, interviewed in 1962. MNHL, MXMUS FLS L/15 B, 4–5.

³ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Braddan 1891, PRO, RG 12/4690, fol. 47, sch. 36.

⁴ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Marown 1881, PRO, RG 11/5598, fol. 18, sch. 3. It is likely that he worked a croft there as well, hence the mention in the 1891 census that he was a “Retired farmer [...]”

⁵ James Edward. Cowell, “My Reminiscences of Baldwin, 1874–1957 (Part 2),” *Journal of the Isle of Man Family History Society* xxviii.3 (2006): 100.

He also remembers the man himself:

A lot of people looked upon Philly as an oddity, in some respects he might have been, but I thought differently. He was to me both witty, humorous, and wise, all he needed was a little education and an outlet for his genius. He could play the fiddle, sing, dance, and drink beer to further orders.⁶

When the Gill brothers began their collecting in 1895, they meet with him on 18 April 1895, and this encounter was recounted by W.H. Gill in *Manx National Music* so: “We were sitting in the cart-shed, and a horse-cloth spread over heaps of dried bracken afforded a homely couch in perfect keeping with the rustic surroundings.”⁷ This must have been a remarkable sight, a Deemster and a senior Civil Servant sitting on a heap of bracken awaiting Philip Cain to come and sing to them. The next day they were to meet Thomas Cain, his brother, who was aged 79, and lived in Douglas working still as an agricultural labourer.⁸ This is the only case we have of a pair of siblings who were singers.

Philip Cain certainly had an established the reputation as a letter from John Callow in Laxey written in 1895 to the Deemster shows:

When with you on Tuesday I omitted mentioning the name of a man living in Baldwin Village who is a likely person to give you some Manx tunes, named Philip Caine better known as Phillie the Desert.⁹

Recorded from Philip Cain were eight tunes: “Yn Bollan Bane,” “Carol for Four,” [Untitled carval], “Yn Colbagh Breck er Sthrap,” “The Loss of the Herring Fleet,” “Thurot and Elliot,” [Untitled jig], and “Oh! cre ta dooinney.”¹⁰ Cain had first been found by (likely) Harry Bridson who acted along with others as collectors for A.W. Moore. Four tunes, were recorded from him: “Yn Bollan Bane,” (2nd version), “Car-y-Phoosee,” (1st version), “Hop-tu-naa,” and “Thurot as Elliot.”¹¹

Returning to the letter written by the Rev. Watson to Deemster Gill, what exactly is its context? The content entirely consists, it must be said, of the line quoted at the start which provides no help. Nevertheless, it does show an interest in Cain after he had been collected from in 1895, one left for us to guess at now.

⁶ Cowell, “My Reminiscences of Baldwin, 1874–1957 (Part 2),” 101.

⁷ W.H. Gill, “Manx Music: A Sketch,” *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) v.

⁸ *Census Enumerators’ Book for Douglas 1891*, PRO, RG 12/4689, fol. 95, sch. 68.

⁹ John Callow to Deemster J.F. Gill, 11 April 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁰ THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION | OF | MANX FOLK MUSIC | [RULE] | MADE BY | HIS HONOUR THE DEEMSTER GILL | MR W.H. GILL & DR. CLAGUE | COMPLETED IN 1895 & 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹¹ A.W. Moore, “Introduction to Music,” *Manx Ballads and Music* (Douglas: G. & R. Johnson, 1896) xxxiii.

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- Cowell, James Edward. “My Reminiscences of Baldwin, 1874–1957 (Part 2).” *Journal of the Isle of Man Family History Society* xxviii.3 (2006): 97–104.
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