

Manx Notes 139 (2012)

“THE TIPSY FIDDLER; ‘MOLLY CHARANE’” GEORGE BORROW IN THE ISLE OF MAN (1855) *

Part of the entry for 31 August 1855, in George Borrow’s diary reads engagingly so: “[...] the public house fire; the dinner; the seat by the kitchen fire at evening; the tipsy fiddler; ‘Molly Charane’; [...]”.¹ This was in Port Erin. Borrow (1803–81), together with his wife and step-daughter, were visiting the Isle of Man in 1855, as part of a number of walking tours they undertook in the British Isles.² His planned book on his trip here never appeared though advertised in 1857 and 1858 under the title, *Bayr Jairgey and Glio Doo: The Red Path and the Black Valley, Wanderings in Quest of Manx Literature*.³ Borrow, once a well-known figure, is now a neglected one outside of the circle of the George Borrow Society itself.⁴ His notebooks *cum* diary of his visit ended up in the hands of two Borrow biographers, Clement Shorter and William Knapp, who published only extracts from them and they to date still remain to be fully transcribed and edited.⁵

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘The tipsy fiddler; Molly Charane’: George Borrow in the Isle of Man (1855),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* June (2012), [1]–[7]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ George Borrow, “An Expedition to the Isle of Man in the Year 1855,” *Miscellanies*, ed. Clement Shorter, vol. xvi, *The Works of George Barrow: Norwich Edition* (London: Constable, 1924) 487.

² For background to his 1855 visit, see Angus M. Fraser, “George Borrow’s Wanderings in Quest of Manx Literature,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* viii.3 (1980). Also, George Borrow Society, *Bayr Jairgey and Glio Doo: The Red Path and the Black Valley, Wanderings in Quest of Manx Literature* (George Borrow Society, 2004).

³ George Borrow, “In One Volume, | BAYR JAIRGEY AND GLION DOO: | The Red Path and The Black Valley | Wanderings In Quest of Manx Literature,” *The Romany Rye*, vol. ii (London: John Murray, 1858), George Borrow, “In One Volume, | BAYR JAIRGEY AND GLION DOO: | The Red Path and The Black Valley | Wanderings In Quest of Manx Literature,” *The Romany Rye*, vol. ii (London: John Murray, 1857). The MNHL possess a draft of the advertisement under the title “An Essay on the Manx Language, literature and names,” undated [but 1856]. The shelf mark for the ms. is MS 5199 c. A published transcript is William I. Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow*, vol. ii, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1899) 126–28.

⁴ A recent reappraisal is Ian Duncan, “Wild England: George Borrow’s Nomadology,” *Victorian Studies* 41.3 (1998).

⁵ There is a set of three notebooks, one was held was Shorter, the other two by Knapp. “Typically, Shorter did not understand what this notebook was. It was in fact the first in a series of three; Knapp had acquired the second and third, and these are now in the library of the Hispanic Society of America.” Michael Collie and Angus Fraser, *George Borrow: A Bibliographical Study* (Winchester, Hants.: St Paul’s Bibliographies, 1984) 159. The Shorter notebook was published (as extracts) in *Mannin: George Borrow, “Expedition to the Isle of Man. A Hitherto Unpublished Diary by George Borrow (Part 1),” Mannin* 4 (1914),

When in the Island, Borrow seemingly had two passions: the finding and recording of runic stones⁶ and that of vernacular music and song as seen in the diary entry above.⁷ That same day in August he had walked from Port St Mary where he had overtaken a “sailor with whom I enter into discourse; [...] said he was acquainted with a great many Manx songs; found, however, that he was unable to give the name of any of them, with the exception of ‘Molly Charane’ [‘Mylecharaine’].”⁸ The next day, still in Port Erin, “[...] the old fisherman; held discourse with him; asked if he knew Manx songs; said that he had heard hundreds in his youth; asked him what they were about; said that they were about drowned seamen and matters of love, and that some were from the English; [...]”⁹

Here we have here three insights into Insular vernacular song repertoire from this “old fisherman.” The comment about “drowned seamen” a reference to locally-composed songs about losses of loved ones at sea, generically known in Manx as a *bardoon*, glossed by Cregeen as “a doleful song.”¹⁰ Songs about “matters of love” requires little in the nature of explanation for their popularity.... “[S]ome were from the English,” showing that as the Island’s language was shifting towards a greater accommodation of English usage so too did vernacular song.

When in Onchan, Borrow had “discourse with a man who spoke almost unintelligible English; [...] that there were songs in it [*ie*, Manx], one of which he mentioned, and which he said he had seen in print, but of which he could give me no intelligible account; that it was for twenty years against the parlour wall of a farmhouse, over the hill.”¹¹ As to what this song was, he was soon to discover when still in the village and coming across a woman in St Peters churchyard. On the strength of many passages in his diary, Borrow hectored information out of those he

George Borrow, “Expedition to the Isle of Man. A Hitherto Unpublished Diary by George Borrow (Part 2),” *Mannin* 5 (1915) and reproduced as Borrow, “An Expedition to the Isle of Man in the Year 1855.” The Knapp notebooks had appeared earlier in 1899, but here too as extracts. See Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow*. For the Manx material, see: Chapter xlix, “(1855.) A Visit to the Isle of Man in Quest of Manx Literature—Extracts from the mss. and Note Books—The Folk-Lore of Ellan Vannin,” 125–33; Chapter l, “(1855.) Continuation of the Notes on the Isle of Man,” 134–42; Chapter li, “(1855.) Continuation of the Notes on the Isle of Man,” 143–52; Chapter lii, “(1855.) Continuation of the Notes on the Isle of Man,” 153–62.

⁶ George Borrow, “Ancient Runic Stone, Recently Found in the Isle of Man,” *Illustrated London News* 8 December 1855. Reproduced as 301–03 in Clement Shorter, *George Borrow and his Circle* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).

⁷ See too, George Borrow, “Ballads of the Isle of Man,” *Once a Week* vi (1862).

⁸ Borrow, “An Expedition to the Isle of Man in the Year 1855,” 484–85.

⁹ Borrow, “An Expedition to the Isle of Man in the Year 1855,” 488.

¹⁰ Archibald Cregeen, *A Dictionary of the Manks Language* (Douglas & London & Liverpool: J. Quiggin & Whittaker, Treacher, and Arnot & Evans, Chegwin, and Hall, 1835 [but 1837]) 23 col. b.

¹¹ Borrow, “An Expedition to the Isle of Man in the Year 1855,” 459–60.

met rather than drew it out. Nevertheless, after asking her if she knew of “Illiam Dhone” he was told:

“Oh, yes,” said she, “I know that. Ah! that is a song indeed. Whenever it comes to my mind, my eyes fill with tears. Ah, that’s a song indeed! About him who was shot at Hangoe the old Chapel at Castletown. And yet they say there is something wrong about that song; great folks don’t like us to sing it, or have it hung up in print on our cottage walls.” “There is nothing wrong in it,” said I, “it only breeds hatred against butchery and tyranny.”¹²

Possibly there is a certain license at play here in recounting her words but evidently, this pasting of the ballad on farmhouse and cottage walls, and equally its singing, was a widespread practise. It is a further insight into the reception of the ballad and its place in a Manx consciousness (also, a remainder that print culture is present from an early date in Manx vernacular culture).¹³

But what of “Mylecharaine”? As Borrow recounts:

Two families bearing the name of the miser, and descended from him, still reside upon the curragh, at the distance of about half-a-mile from each other. The name of the head of the principal family is John Mollie Charane; that of the other Billy Mollie Charane.¹⁴

Off he duly went to see the former. Invited into the croft by his wife, she asked him what was the reason for his calling and one feels that Borrow had been waiting all day to say, “Merely to see Mollie Charane.” Taken in by this, she replied, “that he was not at home, but that she was his wife and any business I had with her husband I might communicate to her.” When informed by the real reason for his visit, she said “that there was indeed a song about a member of the family, but that he had been dead and gone many a long year, and she wondered I should give myself the trouble, merely because one of their forebears was mentioned in a song.”¹⁵ Upon entering the croft he had been given a dish of buttermilk to drink and “[a]fter conversing with the respectable old lady for about half an hour, I got up, shook her by the hand, and departed for Balla Giberagh. [...] However miserly the Mollie Charane of the song may have been, I experienced no lack of hospitality.”¹⁶

¹² Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 138.

¹³ We certainly know it was sung in this manner as was remarked upon in 1818, likely too the first account to date that we have of a singing session in the Island: “The people in general regard this unfortunate transaction with horror, for they still, (though certainly not a poetical people) delight in reciting an Elegy composed on the occasion [...]” “Cursory Remarks, made during a residence of some months in the Isle of Mann, by an officer of the 95th Regiment in the year 1818,” 21 June 1819, MNHL, Atholl Papers, AP 147 (1st)–9.

¹⁴ Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 151. These passages are not taken from the notebook but from Borrow, “Ballads of the Isle of Man.”

¹⁵ Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 151.

¹⁶ Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 151.

There were three songs that Borrow inevitably sought out information on: “Mylecharaine,”¹⁷ “Illiam Dhone,”¹⁸ and “The Sheep under the Snow.”¹⁹ These appear to have been a core set to anyone who had knowledge at all of Manx song and they were to be translated into English by Borrow and published in 1862.²⁰ This work is mentioned in the notebooks. “In the afternoon, feeling rather unwell, I remained within and translated the Manx song ‘Mollie Charane.’”²¹ “Mr Goldsmith the night before left me a scrapbook in which was an elegy in Manx on the Death, or rather Murder, of William Christian in 1662. Endeavoured in the afternoon to translate it.”²² “At night sat up late studying ‘William Doo.’”²³ It was with the Goldsmiths that Borrow and family were lodging and clearly, he had manuscript copies of “Mylecharaine” and “The Sheep under the Snow” for Borrow to work on. Incidentally, Mrs Goldsmith narrated two fairy legends that Borrow took down.²⁴

Borrow was also interested in *carvals* and sought to acquire carval books and being successful in obtaining two of them. They came from two individuals: James Skillicorn of Laxey and John Boyde of Ballaugh. As regards the present whereabouts of these books, one is known and the other suspected.²⁵

The former was a lead miner and was likely recruited as a guide by Rowe, the proprietor of the Commercial Inn where Borrow was staying overnight as he was evidently forewarned that he was to visit as will be seen. Setting off to climb Snaefell they passed the Laxey Wheel, Skillicorn proving himself also a guide to the folklore of the Island even recounting a folktale about Fin McCooil for Borrow. Before they had finally made their way to the summit, Skillicorn presented Borrow with one of his carval books showing he must have been informed as to what his guest was seeking on his travels around the Island. Borrow duly inserted an inscription in the

¹⁷ For discussion, see Cyril I. Paton, “Mylecharaine: A Few Notes on an Old Poem,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* ii.3 (1924). and later, Constance Radcliffe, “Mylecharaine: The Tune and the Treasure,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Antiquarian and Natural History Society* x.1 (1992) and Fenella Bazin, “‘Mylecharaine’: A Forgotten Call to Nationhood,” *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, eds. Ian Russell and David Atkinson (Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2004).

¹⁸ For discussion, see George Broderick, “Baase Illiam Dhone,” *Celtica* xiv (1981).

¹⁹ For discussion, see George Broderick, “Ny Kirree fo Niaghtey,” *Celtica* xvi (1984).

²⁰ Borrow, “Ballads of the Isle of Man.”

²¹ Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 131.

²² Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 132.

²³ Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 133.

²⁴ Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 154–57.

²⁵ That belonging to Skillicorn is now in the National Library of Wales, MS 409–A. Personally, I suspect the one was from Boyd is now with Knapp’s papers in the hands of the Hispanic Society of America. This book is described in detail by him in a footnote and so must have been acquired together with the two notebooks. See fn. 1 on 160 in Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow*.

book reading: “CAROLS | In the Manx Language: | some of them composed | By | James Skillicorn | a Miner of Laxey | Presented By Him | on the Side of Snaefell | To | George Borrow | 1855.”²⁶

Acquiring the second book of carvals was not as easy. He had turned up at Glen Dhoo in Ballaugh to find just Mrs Boyde at home, her husband off cutting turf at some distance. The Boydes had three carvals books in their possession and she was certain that her husband would allow Borrow to take one away. He was staying at Kirk Michael (one assumes the Mitre Inn there) and asked if John Boyde could come with it that evening as he was due to leave the next morning. The answer from Mrs Boyde was her husband would be too tired to walk there and back after returning home from turf cutting. This is when Borrow shows a somewhat petulant side to his character: “I am going to walk it,” said I, “and I am wet through and have been wandering about the mountains for hours.” She gave as good as she got pointing out that he had not had to work all day as her husband had done so. Borrow appeared to calm down a little and asked if he could visit him early the next day. This she should she would raise it with him when he returned. He was shown one of the books and then “[t]he old lady made sit down on a stool by the hearth, and told me to put my wet feet ‘into the fire,’” evidently taking pity on the wet condition of his clothing and possibly on him as well.

Borrow duly turned up the next morning to find John Boyde had now gone off to Ballaugh to dig potatoes but would give him a book of carvals when he was at home and Borrow replied that he would return the next day. He then set off for Ramsey via Sulby and Kirk Andreas and put up at the Mitre Inn there in the town. This was a period in which people walked and walked far without qualms.

He returned the next day and was accompanied on the highway from Ramsey with someone on the way to Ballaugh, one Daniel Kelly, “[f]ound him a first rate walker.” Finally making his way to the Boyde croft, Mrs Boyde appeared surprised that he had returned. Seemingly no longer as free with the offer of a carval book, “[a]fter some hesitation I was allowed to have it.” Borrow now made them a present of three shillings but this soon unsettled Mrs Boyde as it “was not lawful to take money for anything on the Sabbath day, and that it was not right to accept money for carvals at any time, which ought always to be given.”

There was something now of a standoff, Borrow refusing to take the carval book unless he was allowed to leave the money now as a present and not payment and if not, then he would not take the book. This seemed to work and now Mrs Boyde offered to make him broth (which he refused), to boil him some eggs (again refused), a drink of milk (refused), Borrow finally settling on a jug of water. Again, a petulance in refusing to accept hospitality as a visiting stranger, an important part of Manx countryside life. Water duly drunk, he shook hands with the family, placed the carval

²⁶ To avoid a blizzard of footnotes this section all draws upon Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 146–49.

book in his hat and departed. Again, the book had been inscribed: “Parted with this Book to an English gentleman.—John Boyde for John Boyde.—Glen Doo, Ballaugh, October 28th, 1855.”²⁷

It was in going over the mountains to Douglas that Borrow had a “terrible journey” in the words of Knapp without defining what it was though one assumes an encounter with the Manx weather at its worst given that it is the end of the month of October. This suggested to him the title of the book though one as seen he did not unfortunately write though this sketch here of him in the Island shows some of the material he had gathered and we possibly would have heard more of the “tipsy fiddler” and his playing of “Mylecharaine” in Mrs Clugston’s public house at Port Erin.

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²⁷ As with the above footnote (and for the same reason) this section draws upon Knapp, *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow* 157–60.

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