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“AN INQUIRY INTO MANX FOLK MUSIC”

A.P. GRAVES AND MANX NATIONAL SONGS *

Manx National Songs was published in 1896,¹ and whilst W.H. Gill was the principal architect of its form and contents, an important role was played by A.P. Graves.² He may now be better known as the father of Robert Graves, of *I, Claudius* fame as well as *The White Goddess*, but in his own time he was a populariser of Irish song, most notably producing “Father O’Flynn.”

In 1875, Graves found himself appointed as an assistant Schools Inspector in Manchester and that for the purposes of inspection the Isle of Man was curiously attached to that district, rather than to Liverpool as might have been expected. As inspector, he visited the Island twice, the first time in June 1875,³ and then later in 1878.⁴ In 1875, “[a]t Cronk y Voddy I first heard Manx songs sung in Manx by the school children, and that set me upon an inquiry into Manx Folk Music.”⁵

As part of his enquiry, “I was informed that Dr Clague of Castletown had made a collection of it and to him I went, but without much satisfaction.”⁶ Apparently, Clague had earlier lent part of his collection to Thomas *ap* Thomas (1829–1913), a Welsh harper, who had subsequently lost them, “much to Dr Clague’s disgust, and the Doctor politely declined to venture another consignment of his country’s airs into the hands of a foreigner.”⁷ Clague then evidently had a collection of some sort

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¹ W.H. Gill, *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1896).

² Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, *Graves, Alfred Perceval (1846–1931)*, 2004, Oxford University Press.

³ A.P. Graves, *To Return to All That: An Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930) 180.

⁴ Graves, *To Return to All That: An Autobiography* 183.

⁵ Graves, *To Return to All That: An Autobiography* 183. “The annual Government Inspection took place this morning under H.M. Inspector Alfred. P. Graves assisted by H.M. Inspector Mr Kaye.” Entry for 28 July 1875, 25, Cronk-y-Voddy Board School logbook, 1873–92, MNHL, General Manuscript Collection. Also, “Inspectors Report for 1875: Under A.P. Graves Esq. H.M.I.,” 30–31, Cronk-y-Voddy Board School logbook, 1873–92, MNHL, General Manuscript Collection. He did not visit the school in 1878: “School visited. H.E. Oakely.” Entry for 25 July 1878, 73, Cronk-y-Voddy Board School logbook, 1873–92, MNHL, General Manuscript Collection.

⁶ A.P. Graves, “Folk Song,” *Irish Literary and Musical Studies* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1913) 92.

⁷ Graves, “Folk Song,” 92.

although its size at that date is unknown.⁸ Without Graves' comment this early collecting by Clague would be unknown—the date places Clague in the forefront of song collecting not just in the Island but also in the British Isles. He was to gain something of a “second wind” with Deemster J.F. Gill's proposal in October 1894 that he work together with him and his brother on what was later to be *Manx National Songs* (1896).⁹

After initial fieldwork in 1895, W.H. Gill began work on what was to emerge as *Manx National Songs* the year after. The initial publisher was to be Joseph Williams of London but a meeting with Graves that year was to change the project in more ways than one. That summer Gill had made the acquaintance of Graves, who was then the Secretary of the Irish Literary Society.¹⁰ Invited to visit him at his house in Wimbledon in London, Gill discovered of Graves that “[h]e was closely connected with the Island and some of our people notably Hugh's and Amelia's family.”¹¹ “He confessed to me that he had entertained an ambition to write words for Manx tunes, that when in the Island he had projected collecting Manx Music, and that he had hoped to get the Doctor's Collection from him!”¹²

Gill's idea had been to issue a series of song books with Williams, the original Manx airs harmonised for the pianoforte and so a parlour room songster in effect, but with the Manx colour coming in the form of new texts essentially composed afresh by the Rev. T.E. Brown. That same letter mentioning his meeting with Graves (the exact date is unknown but must be close to the composition of the letter) mentioned two crucial matters: his date that same day with Williams and a recent letter received from Brown.

What of the meeting with Williams? Gill was now having second thoughts about publishing with Williams (he sent with the letter a lengthy memo that the Deemster did not fortunately return and so it is amongst his papers) and sought a delay in deciding what to do with him. And what of Brown? This was more the crucial issue:

⁸ For an overview of Clague's life, see Stephen Miller, “Introduction,” *Dr John Clague: Cooinaghtyn Manninagh / Manx Reminiscences* (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2005).

⁹ Gill, *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill*.

¹⁰ Formerly the Southwark Irish Literary Club. See Peter van de Kamp, “Whose Revival? Yeats and the Southwark Irish Literary Club,” *Tumult of Images: Essays on W.B. Yeats and Politics*, eds. Peter Liebrechts and Peter van de Kamp (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995).

¹¹ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 30 September 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. Graves' mother and father were married in Kirk Malew in 1840 by the Rev. William Gill, the uncle of the Gill brothers. A.P. Graves, “Manx Folk Song,” *Mannin* 2 (1913): 91.

¹² W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 30 September 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

I wrote to Brown appealing for help in the matter of words. For 3 weeks no reply. Then I wrote again making a still stronger appeal which drew from him the enclosed letter. (which please return as well as the Williams memo)¹³

The letter was not returned and so we have Brown's answer. He replied to Gill on the 19 September 1895, having just returned from Ireland, "absorbed in Keltodom, oblivious, lost," as he put it.¹⁴ He was, however, straight to the point in his letter. "But the more I think of your request the more I see the impossibility. Look here! This is the way it is."¹⁵ He was to continue:

An adequate libretto for the dear old melodies? I cannot, I dare not. I can imagine no mood or [*unreadable*] the conditions. Tom Moore and his prettinesses, his prettinesses, simply terrify me. The Atmosphere of the Drawing-room? No, no! it won't do.¹⁶

Incidentally, A.W. Moore had also once badgered Brown in the same manner; it was Brown's refusal to work with either of the pair that was to effect the format of both *Manx National Songs* and Moore's *Manx Ballads and Music* issued that same year.

There was a solution: the upshot of the meeting with Graves was that he agreed to supply words for six songs, making up one part of the songbook.¹⁷ But Graves was to have a more lasting effect than Gill could ever have foreseen, as it was due to him that he was to become involved (and, moreover, entangled) with the Boosey brothers for as long as he was to live.

Gill wrote again to his brother again mentioning his second thoughts about publishing with Williams:

When I reflected on the amount of midnight oil and the absolute surrender of all other employments to this one for twelve months continuously & the work still only in the rough; when I thought of the intrinsic worth of the material and of the inherent profit in the market to be got by others I began to think myself a great patriot but also a great fool."¹⁸

He then came across Graves again and "when I told him of what we proposed he was utterly amazed and asked if I was mad."¹⁹ Gill continued:

¹³ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 30 September 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. J.F. Gill returned neither of the enclosures.

¹⁴ Rev. T.E. Brown to W.H. Gill, 19 September 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁵ Rev. T.E. Brown to W.H. Gill, 19 September 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁶ Rev. T.E. Brown to W.H. Gill, 19 September 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁷ "So once more we have salvage of a corpus of Celtic folklore conducted in several separate operations and once more the enthusiastic figure, though less scholarly than he believed, of Alfred Perceval Graves writing substitute verses—this as late as his *Celtic Song Book of 1928*." Frank Howes, *Folk Music of Britain—and Beyond* (London: Methuen, 1969) 256.

¹⁸ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 1 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁹ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 1 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

Then he argued (very likely wide awake to his own interest & the chances of sharing in the plunder) what a splendid “find” it was and how foolish to give it away when one might honestly sell it, and to give it away too all at once.²⁰

He pointed Gill towards Boosey who “commanded the market by means of his Ballad concerts, and so on.”²¹ The upshot of this meeting with Graves was that Gill “went home quite convinced that I was a fool.”²²

Due to the influence of Graves, Gill met with the Boosey brothers on 18 October 1895. Discussing the likely market for what Gill had on offer, Boosey reasoned “by analogy putting the case in the form of a Proportion sum.”²³ Boosey’s English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh collections sold in the ratio of 10 to 5 to 2 to 1, “and [he] inferred from this what might be the expected numerical result representing the I[sle] of Man!”²⁴ Nevertheless, they were interested, “[t]he principal interest from his point of view is centered in the Songs and their success will depend on the words. This greatly surprised me but we must defer to his opinion on this point.”²⁵

At the end of the month, Boosey had made an offer, one that Clague agreed ought to be accepted as soon as possible:

I have just got home at 2. a.m. this morning and consequently cannot enter much into detail. I think you have done exceedingly well, and I should accept Boosey Bros terms at once. I am quite sure we can never do better. The “Committee” is unanimous.²⁶

Gill was to mislead both his brother and Clague about what had been agreed with the Boosey brothers. The latter two thought that the format for their plan of publication was three-part: what was to become *Manx National Songs* (1896), essentially, as seen, a songster; *Manx National Music* (1898), a series of pianoforte arrangements only; and *Manx National Airs*, the tunes as originally collected in the field with extensive notes and commentary. The pair were to later find the first two were the subject of formal contracts, the third a verbal promise only and one that

²⁰ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 1 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²¹ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 1 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²² W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 1 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²³ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 18 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²⁴ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 18 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. In fact, *Manx National Songs* sold and sold well: “That the book has been a success is amply proved by the frankly undisguised appreciation it has received from professional singers and their audiences, not only in London but in the provinces, as well as by the fact that within some three or four months of its publication a second issue of a thousand copies was called for.” 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) x col. a.

²⁵ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 18 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²⁶ Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 30 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

Boosey was later not willing to uphold. This was to divide both the Gill Brothers as well as Clague with W.H. Gill.

In October 1895, Gill wrote to the Deemster, “Inexorable Fate has brought me into contact with Graves & his Crew. Now you seem to regard this as a regrettable or at least a dangerous experience.”²⁷ At the time, neither of them knew just how “regrettable” this would become but this “dangerous experience” started with one Alfred Perceval Graves.

STEPHEN MILLER

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²⁷ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 4 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. According to Graves himself, it was, unsurprisingly, somewhat simpler than that: “Mr William H. Gill, co-collector with Dr Clague of Manx Airs, came to consult me as to the supposed Irish origin of some of them.” Graves, “Manx Folk Song,” 92.