

Manx Notes 145 (2013)

MANX NATIONAL AIRS THE LOST WORK OF DEEMSTER J.F. GILL AND DOCTOR JOHN CLAGUE *

Many will be familiar with *Manx National Songs* (1896)¹ and maybe, less so, with *Manx National Music* (1898),² both the outcome of the collecting activities in the 1890s of the Gill Brothers, W.H. Gill and Deemster J.F. Gill, as well as Dr John Clague. Planned from the start, however, was a trilogy of publications, and the one that did not appear was *Manx National Airs*. Deemster Gill, when President of the *Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* in his retiring address from 1897 outlined the aims of this publication:

The large and increasing amount of our material causes us still to pause, but we hope ere long to be in a position to publish the third section of our work (which in antiquarian importance is the first), consisting of all the melodies we have collected, with suitable notes, explanatory of their character, peculiarities, probable origin and so on, indicating too the localities in which they were found, and the names, ages, occupations, &c., of those from whom they were obtained, and whose knowledge of them was traditional.³

Manx National Music (1898) contained an essay by W.H. Gill titled “Manx Music: A Sketch,”⁴ where he mentioned “[t]he propriety of these restorations, or the contrary, can be tested when, in accordance with our original plan, THE ACTUAL MELODIES AS WE FOUND THEM shall have been published in a separate volume.”⁵ This line must have galled his brother and Clague as they were both then well aware that Boosey’s promise to publish *Manx National Airs* was a verbal one only and not the subject of a contract as was *Manx National Songs* and *Manx National Music*, and further, he was not going to follow up on it. In addition, Gill himself did not particularly wish to see it appear and here was paying lip service to the idea. The line quoted contains the

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “*Manx National Airs: The Lost Work of Deemster J.F. Gill and Doctor John Clague*,” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu*, November (2012): [7]–[9]. Reproduced here with sources.

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 W.H. Gill, *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).

³ Deemster J.F. Gill, “Address of the Retiring President,” *Yn Lioar Manninagh* iii.v (1897): 274.

⁴ 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).

⁵ Gill, “Manx Music: A Sketch,” ix col. b.

problem that he had with the intention to publish “the actual melodies,” namely that people would then see the nature and extent of his so-called “restorations.”

W.H. Gill produced the test pieces for the Manx Music classes at The Guild, drawing on the material that both he and Clague had collected. However, as Clague wrote to Morrison in 1908, about one of Gill’s arrangements:

He is a life long friend though I dislike too much ‘Anglicanizing’ as much as you do[.] But what can we do?

Mr A.W. Moores collection is less altered than Mr Gill.⁶

On the reverse, she had written, “From Dr Clague—his last letter he died in Aug. 1908.”⁷ One feels maybe a judgement being passed here on Gill, Clague’s despair present in his last letter to her. There is, however, a later letter from Clague to her and again we can see his thoughts:

I beg leave to return Mr Gills ‘Leaves’[.] I am glad he is helping you on the choice of pieces, Although I think there is some truth in what he writes I wish he would leave the Manx Music as it has come down to us. At least you and I should like it much better.⁸

Edmund Goodwin was an even more trenchant critic, writing of one of Gill’s test pieces, “The ‘restoration’ is so different from Clague’s version as to be practically another tune.”⁹ Gill later found out about Clague’s opinion, writing in 1912, that “Dr Clague’s ‘gibe’ about this or that being ‘not Manx Music but Mr Gill’s Music’ is merely an echo of one of my hypercritical audience at one of my London lectures.”¹⁰

Returning to Boosey, his argument against publication of the melodies was stated at length in a letter from W.H. Gill to his brother written on Christmas Day, 1895:

As to the “M.S. Collection” itself, Boosey is exceedingly strong in his opinion that its publication ~~either~~ ‘even’ later on is a grave mistake. Not only will it show our

⁶ Dr John Clague to Sophia Morrison, 3 May 1908, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

⁷ Dr John Clague to Sophia Morrison, 3 May 1908, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

⁸ Dr John Clague to Sophia Morrison, 14 June 1908, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

⁹ Edmund Goodwin to Sophia Morrison, 17 February 1912, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 3.

¹⁰ W.H. Gill to Sophia Morrison, 20 November 1912, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 2. Gill is referring here to the reaction to his paper read before the Musical Association on the 14 May 1895, with H.C. Banister in the chair who commented that “[o]ne of the melodies played to us had been altered in rhythm. Now I should have liked to have it in the original version, and I think arrangements of this sort have many disadvantages.” See, “Discussion,” p.131, to W.H. Gill, “Manx Music,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* xxi (1895). Gill responded with a letter to the *Musical Times* in August of that year, the editorial comment, however, gave him short shrift: “[We shall be glad if a few ‘unprejudiced musicians’ will favour us with opinions on the value of Mr Gill’s ‘restoration.’ We naturally reserve our own comments.—ED., *M.T.*].” W.H. Gill, “Manx Music: To the Editor of ‘The Musical Times’,” *The Musical Times* 1 August 1895.

hand as to the amount of our material but it will give hostile critics much opportunity of condemning our work—my “restorations” would be condemned just like Tom Moores have been and even Stanford’s as Boosey knows—and it would be open to rival publishers and arrangements[rs] to evade infringement of copyright. With[ou]t the “material” nobody knows what is copyright & what is n’t. This argument is to my mind irresistible & convincing.¹¹

There are two arguments here against publication: the issue of “restoration” and that of economic advantage; one feels that the first suited Gill, the second Boosey. Indeed, Gill was even more trenchant in a letter to his brother from January 1896:

Melodies D^o D^o and I sincerely hope I may not live to see it out for it will damn my musical reputation as Tom Moore’s work damned his! T.M. did only what Villier’s Stanford has just done—but Moore was only a poet and an Amateur—Stanford is the Cambridge Professor—I am nobody.¹²

There is an irony that on that same Christmas Day in 1895, Clague was to write to the Deemster that:

I have discovered a new “mine” at Bradda.

An old blind man—Tom Kermode by name, has given me three splendid old songs, and I think I shall be able to get three more yet. I have had three from old Fargher who gave me “Shannon Rea,” and he has another which I shall probably get this week.¹³

This situation was passed on to W.H. Gill by the Deemster, he mentioning in a letter from 28 January 1896, that:

His [*ie*, Clague] back is to the Wall & he was in his pocket some 30 or 40 new tunes principally from a blind man, w[hi]ch he says beat anything previously found. But pending this difference of opinion he will not let me see them. [...] The situation is critical So please try to devise something—or your work & ours will both suffer [...].¹⁴

That Clague by the end of January had between thirty and forty tunes shows how fast he worked after discovering Kermode. On another tack, it is interesting that the few copy letters preserved amongst Deemster Gill’s papers deal with this dispute between the brothers.

There is a further irony here: Kermode was likely the only Manx folk singer whose entire repertoire has been recorded; Clague’s comment of collecting “three splendid old songs” shows the constraint of collecting in an time when pencil and paper was

¹¹ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 December 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹² W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 5 January 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹³ Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 December 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. This letter reproduced with commentary in Stephen Miller, “I have discovered a new ‘mine’ at Bradda”: Dr John Clague and Thomas Kermode,” *Manx Notes* 20 (2004).

¹⁴ Draft letter (uncompleted) from Deemster J.F. Gill to W.H. Gill, 28 January 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

the medium of recording. Clague thereby worked with vigour with the aim of publication of this material at a time when Gill was (along with Boosey) spiking the very idea itself. That same letter from the Deemster contains the statement that “we on this side cannot consent to abandon the Melodies—they are peculiarly our part of the Work & when it was a question of Cost we agreed if necessary to pay for it—but both Mr Williams & Mr Boosey were willing to include it in the total Scheme. The difficulty must be faced & overcome.”¹⁵ We must now see Deemster Gill as a more active figure than has been assumed (see the phrase, “our part of the Work”); in other words, no mere bystander to the activities of his brother. Secondly, Clague as more than a song collector, being interested in the publication of the material he (and W.H. Gill) collected in a new editorial framework than before.

The question now arises as to how far to completion was *Manx National Airs*? With the loss of the Deemster’s letters to his brother, as well as the disappearance of the Clague archive (once held by the Reverend John Kewley), we have only the references in the letters from W.H. Gill to his brother to go on. Before the “showdown” between the brothers, a letter from October of 1895 shows that it was well advanced: “It seems to me you have the material already (I mean in the way of notes critical, histor[ica]l & topograp[hica]l[.] As regards musical notes (beyond mere crotchets & quavers) I w[oul]d contribute my little quota; and there you are!”¹⁶

Gill seemingly relaxed his attitude to *Manx National Airs* appearing, writing in 1897:

I wonder what is the latent phase of your cogitations and the Doctor’s as to the “Melodies.” I sometimes dream about it and think what a fine opportunity Moore missed of making a really interesting book. Even the folk lore of the book is disappointing to say nothing of the poverty of the musical subject matter.¹⁷

There is still an edge here, the so-called “poverty of the musical subject matter” in A.W. Moore’s *Manx Music and Ballads* (1896) allowing the voice of “restoration” to be heard. However, there was a note of compromise:

As to my old objection of its showing up my “restorations” & other frauds there ‘are’ theoretical rather than real for I doubt whether any one would ever take the trouble of collating the raw material with the finished article. For all practical purposes the Piano Book [*ie, Manx National Music*] (whether it be good bad or indifferent) is certainly ~~cert~~ a clear and handy statement of the tunes such as those who may read and steal and hash up and do whatever they like with, and as few people like trouble the book will probably be adopted as the standard without question.¹⁸

¹⁵ Draft letter (uncompleted) from Deemster J.F. Gill to W.H. Gill, 28 January 1896, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁶ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 4 October 1895, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁷ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

¹⁸ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

Later on though in the letter appears this assertion:

Then a question which greatly exercises my conscience both moral and musical is this. To what extent, if at all, may the melodies as we have them in M.S. be altered. They certainly will want musical editing and after our Editor's experience in "restoration" he will probably have to challenge the orthography of some of the tunes not excepting those of his own noting. This is a serious question considering the enormous difficulty (if not impossibility) of getting an absolutely true first record.¹⁹

This is one of many statements he made on the topic which led Edmund Goodwin to refer to Gill's own "craze for restoration."²⁰

The final question is, of course, the inevitable one—what happened to the manuscript of *Manx National Airs*? And not just the manuscript as such, but what about the field notes, the letters, the notes, and so on; in other words, the working papers behind the project itself. We simply do not know is the answer at present. One reasonable scenario is that the manuscript at least was given to Clague (or he asked for it); after all, he was the co-editor and compiler of the material that lay behind the manuscript. It is of course possible, and maybe more likely, that he was the principal one of the pair working on it and not the Deemster, as he could read and notate music, unlike Deemster Gill. As a result, the manuscript was already in his hands.

If so, then in that case it passed into the hands of the Rev. John Kewley, who acquired both Clague's library and manuscripts on his widow's death in 1911.²¹ Clague had no orderly system for his personal papers and Kewley found a state of chaos at "Crofton," Clague's residence in Castletown when he went to see them in 1908.²² Later, when A.G. Gilchrist was editing the Clague folk song collection for the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* (1924–26), Kewley on two occasions fished out what

¹⁹ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²⁰ "Most of his arrangements were made by him before he took the craze for restoration which grew on him of late years." Edmund Goodwin to Sophia Morrison, 7 December 1913, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 3.

²¹ They were sizeable in the extreme as a1911 shows: "We had to take to our house, as far as I can judge, 6 or 7 tons of books & papers, & our house is only a small one. Consequently with books, papers & so many other things we scarcely have room to move among boxes, hampers, drawers & piles on the floors." Rev. John Kewley to Sophia Morrison, 1 May 1911, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 3.

²² He had earlier written to Morrison in 1908, who had evidently enquired about his papers that "[h]e has left an enormous quantity of Manx in the way of many scores of note books &c. I have been with Mrs Clague 5 or 6 days already sorting them out from among his papers. I fancy that some of them are practically ready for publication, but it will be some time before I shall be able to report on them." Rev. John Kewley to Sophia Morrison, 8 September 1908, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 3.

was evidently a large number of the original field notes.²³ These have disappeared from sight as have the rest of Clague's papers save—fortuitously given the circumstances—a number of his notebooks and the four tune books containing the tunes collected by him in the 1890s when he was working alongside the Gill Brothers (all now in the Manx National Heritage Library).²⁴ The remainder of Clague's papers are lost; Kewley died in 1941, and seemingly made no provision for the papers to pass to the then Manx Museum Library. They have gone and amongst them is likely the manuscript of *Manx National Airs*. What we have have, however, is a draft of the introduction.

“[A] book rather for a folk Soc[iet]y publisher ~~and~~ than a music publisher. Such would be Boosey's objection” was W.H Gill's comment on *Manx National Airs*.²⁵ Again, an ironic statement, as he was to be one founders of the Folk Song Society whose editorial requirements matched those of the Deemster and Doctor and not him.²⁶ And then his comment about recording in the field:

This is a serious question considering the enormous difficulty (if not impossibility) of getting an absolutely true first record. Next time I come over I will “fetch a compass.” In other words I will bring a Phonograph. But even then the thing would have to be translated into black & white and different translators would translate differently.²⁷

If published as planned, the editorial technique of *Manx National Airs* would have established Deemster Gill and Doctor John Clague as the founders of a new approach to the presentation of the materials of vernacular culture; sadly, its loss removes these figures from the record unless the manuscript can be found. There is no evidence that W.H. Gill ever collected with the phonograph—if so, he would

²³ Lucy E. Broadwood, “Preface [Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii)],” *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* vii.29 (1925): v. See further, A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii),” *JFSS* vii.29 (1925): ix. Also, Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii),” ix, fn. *.

²⁴ The Clague tune books are deposited at MNHL, MS 448/1–3 A and MS 449 B in 1935; see Anon. [but William Cubbon], “Dr John Clague's Collection of Folk-tunes,” *Journal of the Manx Museum* iii.44 (1935). Reproduced as William Cubbon, “Dr John Clague's Manuscripts,” *A Bibliographical Account of the Isle of Man*, vol. ii (Oxford University Press [for the Manx Museum and Ancient Monument Trustees], 1939). The notebooks are to be found at MNHL, MS 450/1–24 A. Folk song texts have been identified by Professor George Broderick amongst the notebooks. See, George Broderick, “Manx Traditional Songs and Song Fragments: ii, Manx Museum MS 450 A,” *Béaloides* 50 (1982).

²⁵ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

²⁶ For further on W.H. Gill and the Folk-Song Society, see Stephen Miller, “You will be interested to hear of a project to form a Folk Song Society”: W.H. Gill and the Founding of the Folk-Song Society,” *Folk Music Journal* 11.1 (2010).

²⁷ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 July 1897, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

then have joined Béla Vikar, the Hungarian folk song collector, as one of the pioneers of song collecting in Europe with the phonograph.²⁸

We have here a double loss for the Island, namely *Manx National Airs*, and a new technique of field recording. The former was one of action, the latter of denial. It fell to Sophia Morrison to follow in the footsteps of Vikar and to be the catalyst to sound record Manx folk songs, but there we have (again) a collection that is now lost. However, behind all of this lies W.H. Gill—"I am nobody," he once wrote. If only he had embraced the publication of *Manx National Airs*, made use of the phonograph, and dropped his "craze for restoration," he would have been someone to note in his lifetime.

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²⁸ Sándor Kovács, "The Ethnomusicologist," *The Bartók Companion*, ed. Malcolm Gillies (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 52.

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