

Manx Notes 148 (2013)

“I PICKED UP A MOST BEAUTIFUL
OLD MANX TUNE YESTERDAY”
SOPHIA MORRISON (1859–1917) *

“I picked up a most beautiful old Manx tune yesterday in Sulby Glen. I should rather say that I discovered it, but Miss M.L. Wood is to take it down in black & white—the Manx words begin ‘Keayrt va mee aeg,’ [...].”¹ So wrote Sophia Morrison (1859–1917)² to J.J. Kneen in an undated letter but now known to have been composed on 14 March 1909. This introduces us to Morrison as folk song collector to add to her other activities for the Pan Celtic cause in the Island. And with the mention of the name of Miss M.L. Wood (1839–1925),³ we are, as ever, reminded that figures such as Morrison did not collect alone but were involved with a network of other individuals. Here, Wood’s task was to seemingly notate the tune found, Morrison seemingly unable (or perhaps not trusting herself) to take it down in staff notation. But what do we know at present of Morrison’s collecting activities, its nature and pattern?

The first point that needs to be made about her is that she did not just collect folk song, but folklore in the broadest sense as well, as she recounted to Karl Roeder in a letter from 1906: “I send you my notes on Charms & Charmers, Manx Dye Plants & Herbal Remedies.”⁴ These topics did not alone define her field of interest. This time in a letter from 1910: “[I]ast week I heard a legend about a silver cup stolen out of the “Fairy Hill, [”] & put in Rushen Church.”⁵ From that same year, “I went to Laxey to have a cooish⁶ with the old weaver the day after I saw you at the Spooyt Vane.”⁷ This letter is addressed to Josephine Kermode, the Manx poet known better under her pen

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¹ Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, undated [14 March 1909], MNHL, MS 1086/t c.

² For an introduction to this figure, see Breesha Maddrell, “Speaking from the Shadows: Sophia Morrison and the Manx Cultural Revival,” *Folklore* 113.2 (2002), Breesha Maddrell, *Morrison, Sophia (1859–1917)*, 2004, Oxford University Press.

³ For contemporary notices, see Anon, “Death of Miss Wood,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 9 January 1925, Anon, “The Late Miss M.L. Wood,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 9 January 1925, Anon, “Death of M.L. Wood,” *Peel City Guardian* 10 January 1925. Earlier, Anon, “An Appreciation of Miss M.L. Wood,” *Manx Quarterly* 9 (1910). See also, Fenella Bazin, “Wood, Mary Louisa (1839–1925),” *New Manx Worthies*, ed. Dollin Kelly (Douglas: Manx Heritage Foundation, 2006).

⁴ Sophia Morrison to Karl Roeder, undated [April? 1906], MNHL, MS 09495, Box 4, Letter copy book (1904–07).

⁵ Sophia Morrison to Josephine Kermode, 12 October 1910, MNHL, MS 08979.

⁶ Manx, meaning ‘a chat.’

⁷ Sophia Morrison to Josephine Kermode, 28 September 1910, MNHL, MS 08979.

name of “Cushag.” Here we shift to another member of her circle and amongst whose family papers are preserved most of what is now extant of her folk song collecting.⁸ As ever, we face the fact that the majority of her collecting has not survived and that it is to her surviving letters that one must turn to in order to gain a sense of her work.

The mention of her *cooish* “with the old weaver” raises the issue of her ability both as a female (and an unmarried one at that) to collect in the field. As another contemporaneous female collector, namely Lucy Broadwood, wrote in a piece titled “On the Collecting of English Folk-Songs,” that appeared in the *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* for 1905:

There is something almost esoteric in this ballad singing! Perhaps it seems less esoteric to the privileged man-collector, who can make merry with songsters in the ale-house over pipes and parsnip wine, or hob-nob with the black sheep of the neighbourhood, whose songs are apt to be as primitive and wild as himself, only much more lovely.⁹

Sabine Baring-Gould had earlier written in 1894, that in order to collect traditional song one must “put on an old coat and hat, and go on a tramp through England, lodging at little taverns, and associate with labourers in the green fields and over the tavern table, about the tavern fire.”¹⁰ This recalls an entry in George Borrow’s diary for 1855, of his visit to the Isle of Man seeking traditional Manx song and culture: “[Port Erin] [...] the public house fire; the dinner; the seat by the kitchen fire at evening; the tipsy fiddler; “Molly Charane” [‘Mylecharane’]; [...]”¹¹ This was evidently one world denied to the female collector; in any case, the influence of Methodism in the Island had likely removed the ale house from the social landscape.

The wider issue of social boundaries does arise in her letters, as here: “I [*ie*, Mrs V. Christian] have never yet met you, but Miss Kermodé has promised to introduce us to eachother [*sic*] at the next opportunity.”¹² When J.J. Kneen was interested in Manx plant names in Gaelic, she mentioned that he should contact Percy Ralfe at the branch of the Isle of Man Bank in Castletown, adding in her letter that “if you do not know him, I should be pleased to give you a letter of introduction.”¹³ Returning to J.R. Moore, who was “the old weaver” mentioned earlier, one wonders

⁸ These have yet to be listed out in full and so remain a pressing topic for research.

⁹ Lucy E. Broadwood, “On the Collecting of English Folk-Song,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* xxxi (1905): 95.

¹⁰ Quoted in Simon Trezise, “Sabine Baring-Gould’s Territory: Where the Squarson meets the Labourers,” *The West Country as a Literary Invention: Putting Fiction in its Place* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000) 198.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Mrs V. Christian to Sophia Morrison, 11 July [undated], MNHL, MS 09495, Box 4.

¹³ Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, undated [14 March 1909], MNHL, MS 1086/t c.

if the attraction of folk song and folklore collection for her was not just the gathering in of a perceived passing Manx vernacular culture,¹⁴ but also entry into what was for her a new social space itself through encountering those tradition bearers themselves.

And meet them she did. Amongst her papers, in what survives of her collecting on the topic of folk medicine, one of her notebooks has over forty names in it, a remarkable testament to her documentation of her sources let alone the material collected from them. In 1903, W. Boyd Hawkins wrote to her that:

I am fascinated by the lore of the Island, which I hope you will not allow to pass away without record. All the fragments should be collected so that nothing be lost. You can do this quietly in Peel—without publishing for the present—I fear, that, if you publish, the old people will not tell you anything!¹⁵

When passing on her material on folk healing to Roeder she requested of him that “I will ask you please not to publish the names of any of the givers of the prescriptions & charms, though I have put them down for the sake of remembering them.”¹⁶ Informants then were not for her the anonymous possessors of a vernacular culture, “the folk” as many would come to see them, but individuals in their own right whose identities she sought to record for posterity.

“At present I am staying at Dalby for a week or so & am going on to the South.”¹⁷ This undated letter to A.W. Moore has her staying at “Ballacallin House,” presumably what is better known now as the (former) Ballacallin Hotel. It may seem curious to us now at this time that for someone with a house in Peel that they go off and stay at Dalby a bare few miles away but nevertheless the letter has the value of showing us Morrison basing herself in such a place in order to collect folklore and folk song and giving herself a week as well in which to gather in material. The time there could be linked with her writing that “I met on South Barrule a family pulling ling, for winter firing [...],” from one member of which she collected folk cures and charms.¹⁸ In all these ventures there was, however, the Manx weather to ever contend with: “We [*ie*, Sophia Morrison and Emily Joughin?] spent a day with Cushag [*ie*,

¹⁴ For sample statements in her letters: “But how much we have lost, almost in our own day, of our national treasures, one can tell from the scraps still floating round. Yesterday Prof Boyd Dawkins, Mr P.M.C. Kermode & myself went to Rheaby to explore an old keeill, which the landowner is now pulling down to build hedges (!)”, Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, undated, MNHL, MS 1086/h c. Again, “I am doing my best to collect accounts of all the games of which I have heard, for the most part they are becoming things of the past & it is most difficult to get any old person to give a clear account.”, Sophia Morrison to Josephine Kermode, 3 February 1912, MNHL, MS 08979, Kermode Family Papers.

¹⁵ W. Boyd Hawkins to Sophia Morrison, 15 August 1903, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹⁶ Sophia Morrison to Karl Roeder, undated [April? 1906], MNHL, MS 09495, Box 4, Letter copy book (1904–07).

¹⁷ Sophia Morrison to A.W. Moore, [undated], MNHL, MS 09495, Box 5.

¹⁸ Sheets pinned together with brass pin, incomplete, no title and undated, in archive envelope labelled “Manx Plant Names Lore”, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 6.

Josephine Kermode] last week, & had arranged for a tramp to Dalby, but the rain, it raineth every day.”¹⁹ Dalby was not the only place we know that Morrison stayed at in order to collect as a letter to Kneen shows: “I considerably added to my collection while staying at Sulby last week—& I almost succeeded in gathering enough material for a chapter on ‘Children’s Games.’”²⁰ Again, further evidence for her wider interest in expressive forms of Manx vernacular culture, here the folkore of children.

An important site of that culture for her was to become the village of Cregneash, her interest there through her friendship with Roeder whose principal informant in his own collecting activities was Edward Faragher (‘Neddy Beg Hom Ruy’) lived there for most of his life before moving to England to live with his son. As William Albert Faragher write to her in 1910:

I was rather surprised to receive your letter. I have heard your name mentioned several times by my Father, and Mr Roeder has referred to you in his correspondence with me.²¹

She had never met Edward Faragher as she confided in a letter to Roeder upon hearing of his death in 1908:

I read in Saturday’s ‘Times’ a short memoir of Mr Ed Faragher. I am indeed grieved to learn of his death. I much regret that I never had the pleasure of knowing him personally—I have called twice to see him in my rare visits to Port Erin, but I am sorry to say that both times he was out.²²

This adds, as ever, to the history of collecting vernacular culture, the missed opportunity of an encounter between collector and informant. She did, however, go on to stay at Cregneash and recounted at length her time there in a letter to Josephine Kermode in 1911:

I made many pleasant acquaintanceships at Cregneish. I send two “snaps” of some—the old couple are 60 years married—she is 79, he is 84. Like your Nussy they feel sorry for people who have to live in cities “among favers & durts.” Neither can read nor write. They have, I think the youngest, kindly blue eyes, I have ever seen. The photo gives no idea of the charming colouring of their thatched cottage with its wealth of golden shrubs & bright spring flowers. The other “snap” is of a grand-neice of Ned Faragher the Manx poet. She lives in his cottage—is a particularly nice young woman with lovely soft black eyes & hair. She

¹⁹ Sophia Morrison to Emily [Morrison], [undated], MNHL, MS 09495, Box 4.

²⁰ Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, [undated], MNHL, MS 1086/g c.

²¹ William Albert Faragher to Sophia Morrison, 15 October 1910, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 5.

²² Sophia Morrison to Karl Roeder, 16 June 1908, Manchester Central Library, Manchester Archives, M277/12/1–141.

has eight bonny sons—the eldest not nine years—those who could speak said the Lord’s prayer in Manx for me.²³

The previous year (1910) she had written to Kermode that “[w]hen in Douglas on Monday seeing my sister off, I left Syngé’s Plays with her—I am so thankful I am not living in Douglas—that town is in possession of the tripper.”²⁴ The mention of Syngé is interesting here, not just in her acquaintance with his works, but the possibility that his book *The Aran Islands* was an influence in her seeking to reside at Cregneash, to live there for a time at least amongst a passing culture expressed through the Manx Gaelic language in a similar setting as did Syngé with Irish.

“I must apologise for not answering your query about a plant which you enclosed in your last letter, but my eyes were bad at the time—an attack of inflammation so I put your plant & letter aside for a time & lost the plant.”²⁵ Morrison was to suffer in her later years from both problems with her eyesight and her hearing and was frequently hospitalised for the former. In 1916, when Morrison was in Nobel’s Hospital in Douglas, Florence Quine, then a schoolgirl at Santan School, wrote to tell her in a neat and charming child’s hand that “you will be glad to hear I have won a Scholarship to the Higher Grade School Douglas.”²⁶ She further added:

I am so sorry to hear you have been in Hospital I hope you will soon be quite well again for the schoolmaster Mr Lace tells us scholars how much you have done for the Manx Language and there is no one to do this work so well[.]²⁷

The feeling of the *rôle* that Morrison played in the Manx and Pan Celtic Revival is best summed up by J.J. Kneen, a fellow stalwart, who commented in a letter to William Cubbon in the previous year of 1915: “If we had not Miss Morrison at the wheel, I am afraid our ship would have foundered long ago. I only hope that she may be long spared to carry on her labour of love.”²⁸ She was not to be spared long after this letter, dying as she did in 1917.

There is still much to be learnt about Sophia Morrison and the contents of her personal papers have barely been touched. She is one of those female figures thrown up by Modernity, the world of folklore and folk song collecting allowing her access to an intellectual life and it is also the force of modernity that points up the passing of vernacular cultures and the call for them to be recorded. Added to this was the Pan Celtic aspect of her activities and the situating of the Island in a wider Celtic

²³ Sophia Morrison to Josephine Kermode, 10 May 1911, MNHL, MS 08979. These photographs are now lost.

²⁴ Sophia Morrison to Josephine Kermode, 21 August 1910, MNHL, MS 08979. By “tripper” is meant a tourist visitor to the Island.

²⁵ Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, undated [14 March 1909], MNHL, MS 1086/t c.

²⁶ Florence Quin[e] to Sophia Morrison, 10 June 1916, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 5.

²⁷ Florence Quin[e] to Sophia Morrison, 10 June 1916, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 5.

²⁸ J.J. Kneen to William Cubbon, 9 November 1915, MNHL, MS 09913, in Box labelled “WC: Correspondence.”

sphere, one that looked west to Ireland and no longer east to England. To better situate Morrison's life and activities is to place her both in a Manx and thereby Celtic and Irish world—to see her as simply an Insular figure, in the best meaning of that term, is to limit her.

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