

Manx Notes 150 (2013)

“TAKING DOWN MUSIC IN THE DORIAN MODE IS NOT SO EASY AS IT LOOKS” P.W. CAINE (1887–1956) AND MANX FOLK SONG *

“Taking down music in the Dorian mode is not so easy as it looks, & one is apt to lose the key, especially when the singer’s voice has lost some of its pristine freshness.”¹ So wrote P.W. Caine in 1914 to Sophia Morrison, a figure who needs little introduction to us—however, who though is P.W. Caine and what was his contribution to the collecting and recording of Manx folk song?² Morrison, a figure enthused by the Pan Celtic cause, was a charismatic figure who drew around her a circle of helpers that included, as we have already seen here, Cressy Dodd, and now P.W. Caine.

Returning to his letter from 1914, the first point of interest was his ability to notate music in the field, not an easy task as he acknowledged himself in the passage quoted. The second point and more major point is that he was personally field collecting in 1914, and so belonged to the second wave of collectors after those who emerged in the 1890s, the Gill Brothers, namely William Henry and John Frederick Gill, Dr John Clague, and A.W. Moore. It is evident from Caine’s letter that singers were still to be found in the Manx countryside and the question arises as to who he was collecting from in 1914, what he collected, and the wider range on a timescale of his activities.

The letter provides not only the name of a singer but also, remarkably, the names of another two collectors. As he wrote, “Is Bertie Corlett, or young Tonkins to see him about tunes?” As ever, but for the survival of this letter found amongst Morrison’s personal papers now deposited in the MNHL their names, as well as that of Caine himself for that matter, would not be known at all as collectors of Manx vernacular song. This singer is a “Mr Shimmin”:

As for words, he has a number of translations of popular songs from English to Manx—“The Farmer’s Boy,” “Poor Old Jeff,” & so on—which he would like to commit to paper. I could take that on, sometimes, though of course I’m not so keen on that sort of thing as on original matter. He gave me scraps of the translations & they certainly seemed faithful & smooth.³

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¹ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 24 February 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

² He is fully Philip Wilby Caine (1887–1956). For a biographical notice, see James A. Caine, “Caine, Philip Wilby (1887–1956),” *New Manx Worthies*, ed. Dollin Kelly (Douglas: Manx Heritage Foundation, 2006).

³ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 24 February 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

Evidently then, he is translating English songs into Manx and one must ask where they were being performed. Caine had seemingly pressed for him to perform at the Manx Music Festival, known better as the Guild:

He personally had no idea of singing at the Guild, but had thought he might sing at a local affair. But he had rather decided against it—the younger generation didn't value these things, & would only ridicule them & his voice was gone, too, & they would laugh at that.⁴

One would like to know just what Shimmin had in mind when he referred to “a local affair” and just how the material he had prepared would be received.

When A.G. Gilchrist was editing part of the Clague Collection for publication in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* between 1924–26,⁵ she included material from other collectors, amongst them Caine himself. The tune “Yn Mac Stroialtagh” (also known as “Arrane y Phelican”) had the annotation: “Sung by Mr W. Shimmin, Porter, Aged c. 60, Ramsey, 1910. Noted by P.W. Caine.”⁶ So we now have a fuller name for Shimmin, an awareness that Caine was collecting from him not only in 1914 but also earlier in 1910, and that Gilchrist both know of Caine but also had access to his collection.

He was modest about his own abilities in the field:

I'm not much good at writing out music, & what I have done now was a very laborious job, but I send you the old hymn-tune which I heard from Mr W. Kneen some years ago, & a couple that I got the other day from Mr Shimmin. The first two, in F, are all-right [*sic*], I know, but I'm uneasy about one or two notes in the one I have written in G. You might play it over & let me know if anything it strikes you as incorrect, will you?⁷

Again, we have another name of a singer, a W[illiam?] Kneen from whom Caine had collected.

Caine was certainly drawn into Morrison's circle, becoming involved with the setting of test pieces for the Manx Music Festival, better known as the Guild. This seemed to cause everyone to declare an opinion about W.H. Gill who produced the pieces for the competition. Caine was no exception:

I agree with you in wishing that he had not made it so “Englified,” but the variation is necessary, I think, for the different treatment of the different verses, & to redeems the air from monotony, & I suppose too, that Mr Gill had to keep one eye on his English public.⁸

⁴ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 24 February 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

⁵ A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part i),” *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* vii.28 (1924), A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii),” *JFSS* vii.29 (1925), A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part iii),” *JFSS* vii.30 (1926).

⁶ Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii),” 256–57.

⁷ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 24 February 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

⁸ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 18 August 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

And again, “I’m afraid I can’t see anything Dorian in this tune at all, but Mr Gill ought to know better than I.”⁹ Finally, this somewhat damning comment:

“Have you noticed the liberty which Gill took with “My Ghraih ta gollish yn ghrian”? No wonder I was puzzled, when writing words for it, to make out what measure the original song had been written in!

It was the measure of “The Loss of the Herring Fleet.” What it is when Gill has done with it, Gill only knows.¹⁰

He was, however, in favour of Gill own original work: “I like Mr Gill’s own compositions, though they are neither ‘Manxy’ or particularly original. But they’ll sing well, & I’d like to see them taken up.”¹¹

He was sufficient of a confidante to Morrison that he was given access to her copy of the Clague tune books:

I am grateful for the privilege of having seen this collection, & I only hope I have not inconvenienced you by having detained the books so long.

I have made a careful study of them, though I think I might have spared myself the trouble, for the collection has been edited & arranged with singular ability.

If the editor & arranger should happen to have been Miss Morrison, I am all the more happy to make the acknowledgement.¹²

He came to appreciate two of the singers:

(By the way, let me salute the memory of Charles Clague.

I don’t know who he was, but he had a marvellous ear for good sweet music. Tom Kermodé’s range is much wider, but Clague’s is select).¹³

Charles Clague was in fact Dr John Clague’s own cousin and worked for him as his coachman. Caine was also given access to other manuscripts in Morrison’s hands, “[t]hanks for J.R. Moore’s M.S. I like much of it very well.”¹⁴

In 1916, he wrote to Morrison:

P.S.—Have just got your last note, as I was finishing this letter. I hunted up Callister, Ballachurry, without success, but I think I got on one or two other tracks.

⁹ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 18 August 1914, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹⁰ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 20 February 1915, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹¹ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 20 February 1915, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1. It would be interesting to trace the emergence of such a term as “Manxy” (or “Manxie” as it is now spelt) in this period. For another coinage, this time “Manxities,” see this in letter from Doris Kelly to William Cubbon: “I have to acknowledge with many thanks, the receipt of ‘Songs of My Fatherland,’ which gave me great pleasure. I am proud to add them to [my *omitted*] collection of ‘Manxities.’” Doris Kelly to William Cubbon, undated, MNHL, MS 09913, Box labelled “WC: Correspondence.”

¹² P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 20 February 1915, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹³ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 20 February 1915, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹⁴ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 26 February 1916, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

I have seen Mrs Callister, Jurby, several times, but she has not as yet found the MS book she has.¹⁵

This is likely a book of *carvals*, this being an area of Caine's interest. He had earlier written on the topic for *Mannin*, edited by Morrison.¹⁶

His letters to her also show her concern for her failing health towards the end of her life, "[...] & was sorry to hear of your continued ill-health. I do trust that you may be right again as speedily & completely as possible."¹⁷ This was written in 1916; she was die the next year and Caine was to put together the "In Memoriam" selection of memories that appeared in her honour in what was to be the final number of *Mannin*.¹⁸ There is a mention in one of his letters of Morrison's *protégé*, Mona Douglas: "I haven't seen Miss Douglas' little play, but Mr Cubbon has promised me a 'squint' of the MS. She's really a remarkably talented girl."¹⁹

As seen, the Clague Collection was edited in part for publication in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* by A.G. Gilchrist in three numbers between 1924–26. Caine reviewed the first number in the *Isle of Man Examiner* in 1925, under the straightforward title of "The Songs of Mannin."²⁰ The sub-title, however, introduced a note of despair: "COULDN'T THE POOR LITTLE ISLAND EVER ACHIEVE ORIGINALITY?" This was a common view, that the Island failed to manifest an original body of folk songs that were entirely and in some way "Manx." There was, however, consolation as Caine himself wrote in 1914 to Morrison, "[b]ut still, if we didn't create, we preserved, & that was worth doing."²¹

But who did the preserving? As Caine wrote in his review:

A word ought to be said about the collection from which the airs presented and discussed by Miss Gilchrist have been taken. Throughout this volume it is invariably alluded to as "the Clague collection." As has been stated in the prefaces to "Manx National Songs" and "Manx National Music," both published by Mr W.H. Gill, the collectors were Dr John Clague, the "beloved physician" of Castletown, and Deemster J. Fred Gill.²²

He continued:

The lion's share of the work, undoubtedly, was done by Dr Clague, who had the *entrée* into hundreds of homes in the South of the Island, and who throughout his

¹⁵ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 22 May 1916, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹⁶ P.W. Caine, "Manx Carvals and their Writers," *Mannin* 2 (1913). He was later write on the same topic for the *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* in 1926. P.W. Caine, "Manx Carols and their Writers," *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* ii.4 (1926).

¹⁷ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 4 October 1916, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

¹⁸ P.W. Caine, "In Memoriam [The late Sophia Morrison]," *Mannin* 9 (1917).

¹⁹ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 4 October 1916, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

²⁰ P.W. Caine, "The Songs of Mannin," *Isle of Man Examiner* 17 July 1925.

²¹ P.W. Caine to Sophia Morrison, 20 February 1915, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.

²² Caine, "The Songs of Mannin," 8 col. d.

life made notes on all manner of Manx subjects, leaving behind him, as his friend the Archdeacon informed Miss Gilchrist, over thirty volumes of manuscript.²³

These “volumes” are now present in the Manx National Heritage Library as a series of twenty-four notebooks, a number of which contain song texts fortunately recognised as such by Professor George Broderick.²⁴ Caine went on to mention the contribution of W.H. Gill:

There is a tendency to regard Mr W.H. Gill as a mere compiler and arranger, and it is obvious that he, being resided off the Island for the greater period of his long life, and being only able to visit his native land during vacations, had not the same opportunity for personal research as his colleagues; but it is nevertheless true that he himself visited the homes of well-known old singers like “Phillie the Desert” and “Blind Cain,” and “Manx National Music” contains occasional airs which he seems to have acquired independently.²⁵

What Caine did not realise was *just* how many of the tunes that he had seen when having access to the copy the Clague tune books later passed on to Gilchrist were collected by the Gill Brothers, or, as Caine phrased it, “acquired independently.” It was only with the release of Deemster Gill’s own papers by the MNHL in 2000, that the full extent of the Gill Brothers’ collecting could be seen and the recognition that material in the Clague tune books was drawn from their own collecting, though not noted by Clague as such.²⁶ Clague remains a major collector but the Gill Brothers have come into their own light.

Caine was articulating a by now long held view (though one that he sought to modify) about the veracity of W.H. Gill’s collecting, one that had surfaced in the very year in which *Manx National Songs* (1896) had appeared.²⁷ That summer Gill had been out with a party consisting of the Rev. T.E. Brown and his daughters, Dora and Ethel, and others, walking from Maughold to Ballaglass for a picnic. As Dora herself was later to recall:

Mr Gill was a delightful guest. He was just bringing out his Manx Song Book and played to us beautifully in the summer twilight, which we found most soothing after our lengthy walk.

²³ Caine, “The Songs of Mannin,” 8 col. d.

²⁴ For which, see George Broderick, “Manx Traditional Songs and Song Fragments: ii, Manx Museum MS 450 A,” *Béaloides* 50 (1982).

²⁵ Caine, “The Songs of Mannin,” 8 col. d.

²⁶ For an overview of their contents as relating to Manx folk song, see Stephen Miller, “The Deemster Gill Papers (MS 09702),” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* xi.4 (2007 [for 2003–05]).

²⁷ 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).

Many were the genuine old Manx tunes, but many we suspected of being his own compositions, such as: “Oh, what of the fowler, my blackbird hath taken.” A very lovely song.²⁸

However, this tune had been taken down by Clague from the singing of Mrs Thomas Kennaugh of Ballakeighan in Arbory.²⁹ He had subsequently sent it on to W.H. Gill as part of their collaboration in which they, in effect, “swapped” tunes. Nevertheless, it shows how early questions, or rather outright doubts, were being raised about the authenticity or otherwise of the material Gill was producing. What has come to general acceptance is that Clague was *the* collector and the Gill Brothers mere bystanders at best and exploiters at worst.³⁰ Caine’s comment was an attempt to temper that view, but it has the effect of showing how widespread the view had come to be accepted.

Returning to P.W. Caine himself, we can now see him in his own right as a collector of Manx folk song, but one whose collecting has sadly been lost. We know from him the names not only of singers but other collectors. His correspondence with Morrison shows him not only to be a member of her circle but drawn into the Pan Celtic *milieu* of the times. He wrote upon Manx folk song and provides us with an insight with the reputation of W.H. Gill at the time, one that we have now come to change.

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²⁸ “Our Great Walk around the Coast from Maughold to Ballaglass,” [21]–[22], in undated notebook of reminiscences by Dora Brown, MNHL, MD 148–214. See too, transcript in MNHL, MXMUS FLS, BDE-A, 13.

²⁹ Dr John Clague, Music Collection, Tune Book No. 1, [25]/2, MNHL, MS 448/1 A.

³⁰ This view was last advanced by myself, see Stephen Miller, “Introduction,” *Dr John Clague: Manx Traditional Song*, vol. i (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2000). It is somewhat ironic that the reprint appeared in the year when the papers of Deemster J.F. Gill were released for study. Whereas Gilchrist’s edition had appeared under the title “Songs from the Isle of Man,” the title chosen for the reprint by myself was “Dr John Clague: Manx Traditional Song,” and with his photograph on the cover. For more on this “branding” of the Clague Collection by myself (and others), see Robert Corteen Carswell, “Music Collected in the Isle of Man in the late Nineteenth Century: ‘Rescue Archaeology’ and the Published Results,” MA dissertation, University of Liverpool, 2001, 10–12, 86.

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