

Manx Notes 169 (2013)

THE MANX FISHERMEN'S EVENING HYMN A FINE HYMN, BUT WITH NO APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION FROM THE FISHERMEN (1926) *

[4d] We recently reviewed that immeasurably valuable collection of Manx folk airs compiled and annotated by Miss A.G. Gilchrist from the manuscripts of the late Dr Clague, of Castletown, and published in three successive issues of the "Journal of the Folk-Song Society"; and in doing so, we drew attention to the origin of the Manx air which is probably better known throughout the world than any other, that which was furnished with new words by the late Mr W.H. Gill, and launched into fame under the title in Manx of "Eaisht oo as clashtyn" ('Listen and hear'), and was at one time sung to words which, as Mr Gill himself has said, were anything but sacred or devout in character. Old airs preserved only upon the lips of succeeding generations of singers were naturally subject to a great deal of variation, and at least two versions of the music "Eaisht oo as clashtyn" exist. One of them, noted by Dr Clague from the singing of Tom Kermode, of Bradda, was published a few weeks ago in Miss Gilchrist's selection. It differs very considerably from the version popularised by Mr Gill, and we had been led to suppose that Mr Gill's version was not contained in Dr Clague's manuscript, and might therefore have been discovered by the independent researches of Mr Gill himself. Further evidence, however, has come within our possession, and the fact is beyond doubt that the version already known was sung to the same words about a "young couple" by the late John Cubbon, of Cross-e-Caley, Rushen, was reduced to writing by Dr Clague, and was adapted and published by Mr Gill, who was working in conjunction with Dr Clague and with his own brother, the late Deemster Gill, for many years. The adaptation of the notes so as to make them fit an ordinary hymn metre containing four lines of ten syllables each necessitated very little departure from the original.

"The Manx Fishermen's Evening Hymn" appears to have been published for the first time in 1896, as an item in the volume of *Manx National Songs* published at the instance of Mr Gill. At that time it contained two verses only of the really noble words which Mr Gill himself wrote for it. It may have been published in leaflet form, with the complete six verses in the intervening period, but its vogue really began with its inclusion in the new Methodist hymn-book, published in 1904. By this means it became known in every part of the world where Methodists do congregate, and one has an impression that it has been copied into other hymnals as well. It was not, like "Kirree fo Niachtey" and "Mylecharaine," one of the outstanding survivals of Manx folk-song, known to practically all Manx folk without the aid of the enthusiast; it is

* P.W. Caine, "The Manx Fishermen's Evening Hymn," *Isle of Man Examiner*, 22 October 1926, 4 col. d.

doubtful whether any Manx folk then living knew the air before 1896, and whether more than a handful knew it before 1904. Its vogue has become so firmly established by now, however, that a Manx gathering assembled on some emotion-stirring occasion will never separate without singing “The Manx Fishermen’s Evening Hymn,” together with “Ellan Vannin.” One well remembers how the first contingent of Manx reserve men set out for the Great War, and how their compatriots bidding them farewell from the Victoria Pier sang this “song of the fatherland,” to the disgust of a bellicose English bystander who in vain endeavoured to persuade the crowd to leave off this melancholy dirge and, and join him in some full-blooded ditty about the British navy and the girls on shore.

It is a noble tune, with much in its structure and cadences which seems characteristically Manx, and one rejoices that it has come back into use among Manx people, and has been wedded with a poem which is a worthy companion to the music. But the Manx fishermen never sang this as their hymn when they put out to sea; it is merely a conjecture that they sang a hymn at all on such occasions, though they certainly did offer prayer. Mr Gill in an interview with a representative of the journal called *The Choir*, in April, 1915, made the following avowal:

“Among the many beautiful and more or less characteristic melodies we unearthed will be found one which, strangely enough, although it came to us, as it were, in the rough, and associated with Manx words of anything but a sacred or devout character, nevertheless contained the germ of metrical and harmonic beauty which, with a little ingenunity and much love on my part, and the addition of more worthy words, resulted in the hymn and tune under notice.

It is true that the Manx fishermen in times gone by were wont, before shooting their nets, to pray for the divine blessing on their ‘harvest of the sea,’ and it is more than probable that a hymn would be sung on such an occasion; for these hardy fishermen are by nature a devout race and keen lovers of music.

Although it is now unknown what particular hymn, if any, was sung, or what thoughts actually filled their minds, [*type missing*] the idea was to my mind so beautiful that I could not resist the impulse to combine all these diverse elements and associations of the part into one artistic and harmonious whole.”

