

Manx Notes 170 (2013)

MANX CAROLS AND THEIR WRITERS (1926) *

[393] The Manx people, as George Borrow declared some sixty years ago now, after a most interesting visit to the Island have a native literature. It is not extensive, nor does it treat of any but a most narrowed range of subjects; but such as it is, it is a genuine product of the soil, it is a characteristic expression of the thought of the nation, and it may possibly prove in some small degree to be a contribution to the thought of the world. It is by no means so abundant or so varied as the literature of Wales, or Scotland, or Ireland, but that circumstance will surprise no one. Ellan Vannin, as a country, as the home of a separate race, is so minute; geographically, it invariably excites delight, but very rarely inspires to awe, rarely ministers to the sense of Nature's grandeur; in its political experience, it was continually subjected to alien influences, never allowed to develop itself as a nation, never really let alone, culturally, it never possessed those institutions, those bardic orders, those national and district feasts, those travelling story-tellers or those retainers at the boards of chieftains, which in the other Celtic countries proved a potent means of stimulating the love of learning and of the love of romance. Finally, it must be said that not only was the Manx environment prosaic, but that the Manx temperament, though it is indeed fanciful, is, considered as a whole, the very reverse of ardent.

The native literature, this modest flower of the Manx mind is not to be found in the Manx ballads. Of the ballads, as preserved by the indefatigable, and—yes, well-directed—labours of Mr A.W. Moore, it can only be said that, with very few exceptions, they are meagre in quantity, mediocre in quality, and, except for those which enshrine the native customs and the native folklore, unoriginal in subject. But a remarkably prominent phase of the Manx character does find its expression, and on the whole a worthy expression, in the Carvals, or carols—those long metrical compositions originally intended as narratives of the Nativity of the Saviour, but developing into general ecstasies of religious emotion or disquisitions upon religious doctrine, which were customarily sung in the Manx churches on the eve of Christmas Day. The function, it is hardly necessary to inform this audience, was known in the Manx language as the Oiel Verrey—a corruption of “Oie Feaill Voirrey,” the eve of the Feast of Mary, and its character may be tersely described by quoting a passage from Mr A.W. Moore's *Manx Folk Lore*, a passage which, by the way, he repeats in his Preface to his book called *Manx* [394] *Carols*, to which I shall have occasion to refer very freely later on:

“It was the custom for the people on this night to bring their own candles, so that the church was brilliantly illuminated. The decorations were of a very primitive kind, mainly consisting of huge bunches of holly and festoons of ivy or *hibbin*. After the

* P.W. Caine, “Manx Carols and their Writers,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* ii.4 (1926), 393–402.

prayers were read and a hymn sung, the parson usually went home, leaving the clerk in charge. Then each one who had a carol to sing would do so in turn, so that the proceedings were continued till a very late hour, and sometimes also, unfortunately, became of a rather riotous character, as it was the custom for the female part of the congregation to provide themselves with peas, which they flung at their bachelor friends. On the way home a considerable proportion of the congregation would probably visit the nearest inn, where they would partake of the traditional drink on such occasions, *viz*, hot ale, flavoured with spice, ginger, and pepper. After this the parting song, “T’eh traa goll thie, dy gholl dy lhie” (“Tis time to go home, to go to bed’), would be trolled out, and the last of the revellers would depart. The Oiel Verrey services are still continued, but are entirely shorn of their riotous accompaniment.”

The custom is thus described in verse by the famous Manx poet William Kennish:

The parish bell rang merrily,
 Indeed as well it might,
 For through the year, save at that time,
 It never rang at night.
 Group after group now fast arrived,
 From all the parish round,
 While mirth and rural jollity,
 Did ’mongst the whole abound.

The lasses with their gowns tucked up,
 And strongly pinned behind,
 Were led by lads along the aisle,
 Their landlord’s seat to find,
 With candles formed in many a blanch,
 The pew to illuminate,
 Fused in the cresset by young Peg,
 And dipped by thrifty Kate.

Along the gallery and nave,
 Of the old church were seen,
 Festoons of many a holly-branch,
 Relieved with “hibbin” green,
 When in full light the sacred pile,
 Of many a year appeared, [395]
 And the selected prayers were read,
 The parson homeward steered,
 Leaving the delegated clerk to rule the rustic train,

While each in turn his carol sang,
Celebrity to gain....

By custom taught for ages back,
The lasses brought their pease,
In pockets full each Ilvary,
The bachelors to tease,
By taking opportunity,
When they were least aware,
To throw their pulse artillery,
And make the rustics stare.

A homelier and kindlier description will be found in Miss Kermodé's charming little poem, "The Oiel Verrey."

The temperament of the Manx people is, it will be conceded, to an unusual degree reflective and pensive, inclined to be sombre, and exceedingly susceptible to the influences of religion. If Manx writers have found it more congenial to write about religion than about love and war, it is because they were more readily seized and more permanently held by the emotion of religion than the emotion of love. Besides, the native literature of the Isle of Man owes its origin, very much as does the native literature of England, to the translation of the Holy Scriptures into the language of the people. The great bulk of the carols follow on, first, the appearance of the Manx Bible in 1772, and, second, the Methodist revival, which began in the Isle of Man by the visit of John Crook in 1775. When that priceless possession came into the hands of the people, to be studied and rejoiced in at their leisure, then some realisation came to them of the general beauty of the artistic assembling of words. Earlier dates than this period are assigned to perhaps half-a-dozen of the carols, and it may be that prior to the great achievement of Bishop Hildesley and his coeditors, some Manx people did depend for their knowledge of the details of the story of Bethlehem upon the public reciting and private repetition of verses, just as the common people depended for their knowledge of the Bible generally upon the regular reading of the appointed passages of Scripture in church. But it may be claimed without exaggeration that the Oiel Verrey became the Manx equivalent of the Eisteddfod and the Oireachtas and the Mod, that it was the place where candidates for literary renown came and sought the approval of their fellows.

Interesting traces of the powerful effect of the appearance of the Bible in Manx can be discovered in the very ballads. The [396] song writers of the period found their most telling illustrations in the incidents recorded in the Scriptures. When the deserted lover wishes to express his passionate desire to rejoin the beloved one, he calls upon the waters of the sea to dry before him and make him a way; when a simple story is being told of the shipwreck of three fishermen off the Niarbyl, the

writer cannot resist a comparison with St. Paul's voyage to Rome; and when the author of the well-known "Song on Farmers' Daughters" wishes to denounce the women of his day for what he regards as their idleness and their love of finery, he draws his most fiery invectives from that grim third chapter of the Book of Isaiah.

It is opportune now to state the extent, so far as it is known, to which this class of native literature was written. In the year 1891, at the joint instance of Mr A.W. Moore and the late Mr J.C. Fargher, then proprietor of the *Mona's Herald*, a book was published under the title of *Manx Carols*. Both these gentlemen possessed, or had access to, collections of old manuscript books, dating back for a century or more, in which generations of carval-singers had laboriously copied the compositions which most pleased them. They were for the most part written from memory, in scanty scraps of leisure, by uneducated men, and it is not surprising to find in the one volume dates ranging over four or five years. The published volume contains eighty carvals, consisting of about 12,000 lines of verse, but that collection is acknowledgedly incomplete, and I have during the last few years been enabled to discover some fifty more. Many of these I have unearthed by my own personal research, but I have had the very competent and very generous assistance of Mr G.W. Wood, of London, who is unquestionably the most alert and most successful collector of Manx books living, and of his friend and my friend Mr Cyril Paton. For some time past, at the instance of the Manx Society, these recently discovered carols have been published serially in the *Isle of Man Examiner*, and it is hoped that this series may make an early appearance in book form. Furthermore, many additional verses belonging to published carvals are extant, so that it is quite a modest estimate to suppose that the total quantity of carvals written in Manx is not less than 20,000 lines. It must be borne in mind that the work of preservation was not begun until more than a century after the carols were written, and that during that period the language had come to be neglected and despised, and that many of these old manuscripts had been spurned as mere waste paper, and destroyed, or had more mercifully, perhaps, been allowed to perish through damp. Nor must it be forgotten that at the same time that original carol-writing was at its height, a large and representative selection of the hymns of Wesley and Watts [397] was translated into the Manx language. Apart from the published hymn-books, I have alternative translations, and translations of additional hymns, which never saw print, besides quite a number of hymns for which I have not been able to discover any English originals, and which may possibly have been genuinely composed in Manx. The practice of translation continued down to the days of the Primitive Methodist camp meetings, for I have seen compositions in Manx which came from what is known as the "Small Book" of the Primitive Methodists, published about the year 1824. The well-known "Good Old Way," which is to be found in Mr W.H. Gill's *Manx National Songs*, is an example. At the least, it maybe said that the instinct of versification was not dead or dormant among our Manx forefathers.

The quality of the Manx carols is, of course, a subject upon which there is room for difference of opinion. I am compelled to admit that some of the carols are painfully disfigured by a repulsive theology, an unmitigatedly sordid appeal to cupidity and fear; and that some others are interesting more for their quaintness than for any literary merit they possess. But many of them, I do not hesitate to say, display real strength of imagination expressed in real strength of language, and an occasional one of them might, if adequately translated prove a real acquisition to the religious poetry of the world. One can only maintain this thesis by illustration, and the time at my disposal hardly permits of quotation at all, much less of quotation from compositions which were, as Mr Moore very justly remarks, characterised by portentous length. The “Carval Nebuchadnezzar,” as it is called, which contains 50 verses of six lines each, or “Lhig da’n slane seihll cur clashtyn,” which in its complete form contains 45 verses of eight lines apiece, have several very close competitors. I have heard one veteran singer calculate the length of one favourite carval by the fact that the candles had to be re-lighted twice during the singing of it! Perhaps I may give an example of each of the simple style, of the quaintly earnest and prophetic style, and of what I consider the really noble and elevated style:

THE CAROL ON SALVATION
(*Manx Carols*, p.64).

My friends, if you but listen, the tale I’ll try to tell
Of all the fear and danger which wretched Man befell;
For we are shaped in falsehood; evil is in our heart;
And from our God’s commandments we constantly depart.

’Tis plainly shown in Scripture how happy was man’s birth;
He dwelt in lovely Eden, the monarch of the earth;
God made man in His image; God uttered one decree;
Man should not eat the fruitage of one forbidden tree. [398]
But man was disobedient to his Creator’s will;
He ate the fruit forbidden; his seed have shared the ill;
For sin becomes a custom; men’s minds grew dull and dark;
Till one alone was righteous, when Noah built the ark.

But God in His great mercy surveyed us from above;
He smote us in His anger, He healed us in His love.
A solemn inquisition was held one day in Heav’n,
To solve the mighty problem, how sin might be forgiv’n.

The angels heard the question, and every saint was dumb;

They none of them were able the barrier to o'ercome;
The mighty problem balked them, and awe upon them broke;
The courts of Heav'n were silent; for half-an-hour none spoke.

Then the Messiah gracious took up the solemn cause;
He said, "Myself I'll offer, to satisfy God's laws;
I'll bear the bitter burden, I'll shed my own heart's blood;
So shall I bring communion twixt ransomed man and God."

So, promise came to Adam ere from God's face he went,
That from the seed of woman the One All-Innocent
Should come, to slay the serpent, and thwart his base device,
And purchase man's salvation by cleansing sacrifice.

To our forefather Abraham the promise also came;
His seed, like sand for number, should be a mighty name;
And hence should come a Saviour, to rescue souls forlorn,
And in the town of David, Emmanuel should be born.

Isaiah, too, the prophet, foretold the Mighty One:
He sang the gracious vision, "To us is born a Son:
The rule upon His shoulder shall be, and shall not cease;
The Everlasting Father, the loving Prince of Peace."

According to this season these counsels did appear,
For Mary bore Christ Jesus in winter of the year;
No room the tavern yielded, no place to lay His head;
A manger was His cradle, wherein the oxen fed.

THE CAROL ON NEBUCHADNEZZAR

We [good] friends, have nearly forgot
The Christian customs that once they had;
Are the servants of the Word holding their office from God
Ruling among the Christian society
Going among the holy flock,
To see if sins are ruling in them?

Are they going to see those that are sick,
To put them in memory of their sins,
To turn to grace those that stray,

Counselling and telling them their duty,
Praying with, and conforming unto peace,
Those that cannot go to the temple of God?

Are those that are stronger meeting in fellowship?
Are they coming to the table of the Lord,
To the scandal-mongers exercising the law,
And they that walk from house to house
With their lies [and tales] awaking strife,
Causing failings out among the flock?

Are the parents correcting their children,
Growing in obedience to the faith of Christ,
Coming with the flock to the temple of God,
And leading their prayers from the priest,
Not wandering like cattle, without correction,
Without fear, or grace, or any instruction?

Are you taking notice, my brethren,
What customs are among people, high and low,
Unrighteousness instead of Christian ways,
Strife and unrest instead of peace,
Rage and malice instead of love,
Making themselves poor with disputes at law.

Instead of pity, they are taking advantage,
Instead of straight dealing, none can be trusted,
Instead of being at unity, they contend furiously,
Instead of the truth, [there is] lying and scandal,
Instead of good words, [there is] cursing and swearing,
Instead of wishing well, [there is] envy and coveting.

Instead of mourning, they are laughing,
Instead of suffering meekly, they grow hot,
Drunken men [when in their cups] strike people,
And then [come] lawyers and going to law,
Their goods fly out of the house like smoke,
All because of their [own] evil conduct.

If all of you loved God so much
As oppressors love the gaining of gold,

There would be less troubles among mankind,
And fewer actions done unjustly;
Alas! you do not perceive [all this],
Your minds are set on ill-gotten gain. [400]

“AYNS HAUNYS ARD”
(‘IN HEAVEN ON HIGH’)

In Heaven on high, in height supreme,
Amid the angelic company,
I saw the Son of God in dream,
Saw Him in bliss and majesty.
O how shall I, unhappy I,
Formed from the dust, gain Heaven on high?

That gracious state no years deface,
No bounds are set to that great deep;
It is the Lord’s own dwelling place,
Reserved for His own favoured sheep.
How shall I reach that blissful shore,
A wretched sinner, laden sore?

How shall I reach that radiant height,
And stand among the perfect ones
The heav’nly angels robed in white,
Whose faces shine as countless suns?
How shall I from my Maker’s hand
Gain portion in that blessed land?

O soul perplexed, O soul distressed,
Clothed in a form that needs must die,
O, have no fear but you shall rest
In mansions far beyond the sky,
Shall yet exchange earth’s narrow cage
For ample, spacious heritage.

Ask of the happy saints of God,
Who shine above, serenely bright,
How came they to their blest abode,
How gained they joy and peace and light;
With swelling hearts they soon shall tell

Who gave them in such bliss to dwell.

“God,” they shall say, “gave this delight,
These joys celestial; wherefore then
To Him be majesty and might,
Praise, laud, and thanks—Amen! Amen!
Praise God for all good things and pure,
Comforts divine, salvation sure.”

“And if we work the works of love
’Tis not for our own self-acclaim,
These good works come from God above,
And through the merits of God’s Lamb.”
Thus shall the angels answer you
When you with eager questions sue.

For the translations I myself am responsible, and, in some instances, I plead guilty to a certain amount of embellishment and very decided, and I think very necessary, condensation; but in these particular instances I can assure the audience that the English does follow the Manx very faithfully.

I observe that the exact title of my paper, as selected by the Secretary, is “Manx Carols and their Writers,” and it is, therefore, incumbent on me to say a word or two about the writers. There is really very little information available; very seldom did the copyist state the name of his author.

The second and third in Mr Moore’s collection were composed by the Rev. Thomas Allen, vicar of Maughold from 1727 to 1746. The carol of the Prodigal Son, sometimes called the “Pelican” Carol, because in its first verse the repentant prodigal likens himself to a pelican in the desert, was written by Patrick Caley, of Lezayre, a celebrated Methodist local preacher of the first generation. The carol of Saint Paul was written by John Moore, author of the ballad called “The Cruise of The Tiger.” The carol contained in pp. 31–33 of Mr Moore’s collection is ascribed in MS. books to “Daniel Corlett, of Michael,” whom one is disposed to identify with Daniel Cowley, the printer of the first Manx hymn-book. The “Carval er Feeyn as Jough” (‘Carol on Wine and Strong Drink’) was composed by John Lewin, sumner of Jurby, who also wrote, in conjunction with the famous Evan Christian, of Lewaigue, the temperance rhyme called “The Fool’s Pence,” a translation of an English rhyme of the same name, and was also the author of the ballads “Yn Venainshtyr Dewil” (‘The Cruel Mistress’) and “The Old Dolphin.” One of the most prolific writers of carols, some of them characterised by very genuine, if sombre, eloquence, was William Kinrade, of Ballachrink, Maughold. To him belong, among others, “Lhig da’n slane sei’ll cur clashtyn” (‘Let the world give hearing’), of which part is given on p.110 of

Mr Moore's collection; "O uss vriw bioee as merriu" ('Thou judge of living and dead') on p.40; the famous "Question-and-Answer" or "The Class Leader" carol and almost certainly, "The Carol of Warning and Example to Young Men." The carol contained on p.224 is attributed in a ms. to John Kerruish, of Kion-ne-Hinnin, Maughold, and a series of six, including the "Carval Calvary," the "Carval Drogh Saggrytyn" ('Carol of the Evil Priests'), the "Carval Noah" not that included in Moore's collection, but one composed in the conventional ballad metre—and that contained on p.124 of Mr Moore's collection, are attributed to John Kermode, of Maughold. If John Kermode wrote the "Carval Noah," which is sad doggerel, he certainly also wrote the "Carval Susannah," which one has seen attributed to William Kinrade, and if he wrote the "Carval [402] Drogh Saggrytyn," he equally certainly wrote the famous "Carval Drogh Vryaane" (the 'Carol of Bad Women'), which one has seen attributed to William Kinrade and "Moore the Tiger." One suspects that people living at the other end of the Island, copying the more popular carols, were not certain of the exact name of an author living in a distant parish. The carol contained on p.68 of Mr Moore's book "Myr vamee lieayrt ny lhie syn oie" ('As I was once abed at night'), is described in a ms. as "Carval Philip Ellison." The "Carol of Before the Heavens were Created" (p.52) contains several phrases which are exactly identical with the Rev. Thomas Christian's translation into Manx of *Paradise Lost*. The energy and eloquence of the carol make it clear that it is no plagary of an original, but that the same writer told his story both in a narrative and a lyrical form. And if the Rev. Thomas Christian wrote this carol, he certainly wrote several others in the same metre, one of which, "Ayns flauyns ard" ('In heav'n on high'), is, in my judgment, the noblest poem in the Manx language. Other carols are attributed to the Rev. W. Gale and the Rev. John Bridson, both of Kirk Bride.

I propose to conclude with a reference to the tunes to which the carols were wedded. In Mr W.H. Gill's volume, *Manx National Music*, arranged for the pianoforte—a volume which has been lamentably ignored, and the perusal of which I cannot too strongly or too frequently recommend to those who really desire to know the character of the folk-music of their native country—in this collection of 139 Manx airs are contained 30 which are definitely described as carols and hymns. Some of these airs were, as a matter of fact, sung both to ballads and to hymns; and in many cases, of course, the same tune was sung to a large number of carols of the same metre. Still, these tunes as a whole form a distinct type, and, while displaying those musical characteristics which are observable throughout the general body of Manx Music, are recognisably of a religious tone.

