

Manx Notes 172 (2013)

MYLECHARAINE: A FEW NOTES ON AN OLD POEM (1924) *

[303] This is decidedly the best known of all Manx ballads, though there are many of far superior merit. George Borrow says that it is one of the three Manx songs known to all Manxmen, the other two being “Kirree fo sniaghtey” and “Baase Illiam Dhoan,” and I have seen it referred to in a History of the Scottish Highlands as “the Manx National Ballad.” Though very far from being worthy of this latter description it is a very old song, probably one of the oldest now known in the Manx Gaelic. At the end of M’Alpine’s *Dictionary of the Scottish Gaelic* (the second part of which was written by John Mackenzie and published in 1847) there is a short list of Gaelic proper names, and in a footnote the author says:

Maol-ciaran, a votary of St Kieran, was in former times a Gaelic proper name, but is now used only as descriptive of a person who is woe-begone and bending under sorrow. Examples of this use of the term will be found in the poetical compositions of Mary M’Leod, the celebrated poetess of Harris, and of Roderick Morrison, the famous blind harper of Lewis.

Maol-ciaran is evidently the Scottish Gaelic spelling of Mylecharaine (in Moore’s *Manx Surnames* the same derivation is given as in M’Alpine’s dictionary), and possibly M’Alpine or Mackenzie assumed that it was an extinct Highland name because he found it used in Hebridean poetry. However that may be, it is curious to find the name used traditionally as that of a wretched man, such as the Manx miser [304] may be supposed to have been, and it seems probable that some version of the Manx song may have been current in the Hebrides at an early period, the name of the chief character in which at length obtained a proverbial meaning. To suggest a parallel—if we were to find the name “Grandfather Smallweed” used in a Welsh poem of 50 years ago for a wretched fellow we would undoubtedly draw the conclusion that Dickens’ Bleak House was written before the poem was composed, and that the poem was indebted to the novel and not the novel to the poem. “Mylecharaine” is undoubtedly Manx, all the versions known to us at the present day give the Currags of Jurby as the locality; and if any Highland song of the sort had been known to the authors of M’Alpine’s dictionary they would surely have mentioned it instead of quoting indirectly from other poems. We may, I think, therefore, assume that some version of “Mylecharaine” was current in the Western Isles prior to the use of the word by Mary M’Leod and Roderick Morrison. Now I do not know in which of the songs of these two poets the word is used. nor the exact date at which they were written, but Roderick Morrison of Lewis, who was a harper and musical composer as well as a poet, composed his most celebrated piece of music, “Suipeir Thighearna Leoid,” or, as we should call it, “Shibber Chiarn Lude”

* Cyril I Paton, “Mylecharaine: A Few Notes on an Old Poem,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* ii.3 (1924), 303–09.

(‘The Laird of Lude’s Supper’) in the year 1650. Mary M’Leod died about the year 1673 or 1674, but she was then in extreme old age, having been born in 1569. Even if she composed the poems in question in her 70th year this would bring us back to 1639, and the song about a woe-begone Maol-ciaran must have been, even at that time, no new song, for it would take some time before it was sufficiently well known to allow of the metaphorical use of the name.

Another fact which suggests a certain amount of antiquity is the number of variants of the poem. Even the carvals do not as a rule vary to the extent that “Mylecharaine” does in different copies. One appeared in *Mona Miscellany*, Manx Society, vol. xvi, p. 57, published in 1869, with a translation from another version, of nine verses, by George Borrow—the translation of the Manx version in this volume is given in vol. xxi. Moore’s *Manx Ballads* has the same version with the addition of two interesting verses from “the ms. of the late Robert Gawne”—a ms. referred to in a note in Manx Society’s vol. xvi, where the date is given as 1837. Another was communicated to *Notes and Queries*, June 18th, 1870, by W.R. Drennan, and yet another in Leech’s *Guide to the Isle of Man*, published in Ramsey about 1859, which agrees fairly well with Borrow’s English translation. The oldest which I have seen is included [305] in the wretchedly scanty collection of Manx mss. in the British Museum. The bound volume is numbered MSS. 11215, and contains a few Manx songs, one—a very poor one—is translated from the Scottish Gaelic, the others, with the exception of “Mylecharaine,” have been published. They consist of Bishop Rutter’s songs and “Fin as Oshin.” Here, again, no accurate date can be assigned to the copy of “Mylecharaine,” but it is a fairly early one. According to a note on the flyleaf of the volume, it was purchased from Professor Magnusen. July, 1837, but the contents are about half a century older, and the ms. in question was probably written in the closing years of the 18th century, say, 1780, or thereabouts. It is called an “Old Manx Madrigal.” I shall first quote it in full, and then note some of the variations in other versions. The spelling of this ms., though very faulty, follows as a whole the orthography of the Manx Bible.

MOLLECHARANE—AN OLD MANKS MADRIGAL

I

Vylecharaine, c’raad hooar oo dty stoyr? Tol lol dy rol tol la.
Mannagh dooar oo ’sy churragh wooar, dowin dy liooar,
As my lomarcán daag my ghraill’s mee.

Chorus

As she my lhome-lomarcán daag ee my hene. Tol lol tol, etc.,
Myr thammagh chonnee as aile ayns y vean.
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee.

2

As Vylecharaine, c’road hooar oo ny t’ayd? Tol lol tol, etc., etc.
Mannagh dooar oo ’sy churragh woar eddyr daa *lat* *
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee. Etc., etc.

3

As Vylecharaine, cre hooar oo dty sthock ? Tol lol tol, etc., etc.
Mannagh dooar oo sy’ churragh, fo ceab, ny shenn vlock,
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee. Etc., etc.

Chorus

As shen [? she] my lhome-lomarcán ren ee m’aagail, Tol, lol, tol, etc., etc.
Myr thammag chonnee ayns lossey dy aile
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee. [306]

4

Va [un] charrane vane ayd as [un] charrane vuigh, Tol lol tol, etc., etc.
As piyr jeh’n un chullyr ’gholl dy cheill y Doonee,
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee.

Chorus

[As she my lhoine-lomarcán, etc., etc.]

5

As va [un] charrane ghoo [ayds] as [un] charrane vane, Tol lol tol, etc., etc.
As piyr jeh’n un chullyr ’gholl dy Doolish Je-sarn,
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee.

Chorus

[As she my lhome-lomarcán, etc., etc.]

6

Osnageyn trome va thie Mylecharane, Tol lol tol, etc., etc.
Tra hie’n sthock as yn stoyr sheese dys y Charlane,
As my lomarcán daag my ghraih’s mee, etc,

Chorus

As she my [lhome]-lomarcán, etc., etc.

* *lat*: the word in the ms. seems to read *llad*, which I take to be *lat* = oisier rods. It may, however, be a corruption of the English word “clod.”

7

My hiaght meeilley mollaught er Mylecharaine. Tol lol tol, etc.
 Yn chied dooinney Mannin' hug toghyr d'inneen,
 As my lomarcán daag my ghraih's mee.

Chorus

As she my lhome-lomarcán, etc., etc.

The first thing that strikes one on comparing this with other versions is the chorus. There is first of all a “tol lol tol,” English-looking, burden for the second line instead of the usual “my lomarcán daag oo me,” but the fourth line follows the other copies in this respect, though the line has been a little lengthened “And alone my love left me,” instead of “Alone you left me.” The ballad was, however, always sung in a very deliberate, not to say drawling, manner, and the longer line is no doubt primitive. Then comes the chorus proper, which I have seen in no other copy. You will notice that two forms are given, one after the first verse, and the other after the third. I do not know whether they were used [307] alternately or indifferently; they both mean much the same thing:

“And absolutely alone left she me
 Like a furze-bush in a flame of fire.”

or

‘And absolutely alone left she myself
 Like a furze-bush and fire in the midst.’

Is this a complaint by a disappointed suitor, as Mr J. Beale suggests, in his note on the verse, cursing Mylecharaine, in Manx Society’s Volume xxi?

In verses 1 to 111, Mylecharaine is asked where he got his stock and store and all that he possessed. This is practically the same in all the versions. One, the *Notes and Queries* copy, says that the question is put by a neighbour, “Dooyrt y naboo rish Myle, cre voish haink dty storr?” ‘Said the neighbour to Myle, whence came thy store?’ In most versions Mylecharaine gives evasive replies to these questions, the rhyme thus consisting of a dialogue, but there is no trace of this in the British Museum copy. Neither does his daughter come on the scene, though in all the other copies at least one verse, and often several verses, are put into her mouth. The questioner in the version which I have quoted in full suggests that Mylecharaine got his wealth “deep in the curragh,” “between two osier rods,” and “under a clod or old block.” Tradition says that he dug up a treasure in the curragh, and a figure of an antique silver cross has even been published on the supposition that it formed part of the “treasure trove.”

It is quite possibly a true tradition, but I recollect being told on the curraghs by a woman whose family had lived there for generations that the treasure that Mylecharaine dug for was bog timber, which was probably valuable in the treeless

Mannin of 300 years ago. Verse iv, “Thou hadst one white sandal and one yellow sandal, and a pair of one colour to go to church in on Sunday,” and verse v, “Thou hadst one black sandal, and one white sandal, and a pair of one colour to go to Douglas in on Saturday.” This agrees pretty well with Leech’s and George Borrow’s versions, but in other versions he goes even to church and market in an odd pair, and in a verse, which I remember hearing from a Kk Michael woman some 30 years ago, his old-fashioned appearance was emphasized by his wearing a feather in his cap.

“Lesh e edjag ayes e vayrn
My-lomarcán daag oo mee
Hie Mylecharaine gys Doolish Je-sarn
As my-lomarcán daag oo mee.” [308]

‘With his feather in his cap,
Alone, etc.,
Mylecharaine went to Douglas on Saturday,
Alone, etc. ...’

Verse vi is new:

‘Deep groanin there was at Mylecharaine’s house. Tol-lol, etc.
When the stock and store went down the Carlane,
And alone my love left me.’

The Carlane is the name of a sluggish stream in Jurby. Was the stock and store swept away in a flood? or was it to some owner of land on that stream that old Mylecharaine unwillingly paid his daughter’s dowry?

The vii th verse, in which Mylecharaine is cursed with seven-thousand curses (or in one copy “hiaght-*filley*,” sevenfold curse) is given with slight variations in all the versions except that in *Notes and Queries*, and is probably part of the original song. It has been suggested that in ancient times in the Isle of Man the bridegroom paid a sum of money to the bride’s father—a form of marriage still in existence in many parts of the world—and the curse was for changing the old custom of the country. If so, this would be another argument for a respectable antiquity for the poem.

The *Notes and Queries* copy commences:

“Ayns Jurby ayns Mannin va dooinney, v’ad gra,
My-lomarcán daag oo mee,
Lesh thaloo as argid, ceau carraneyn dy braa,
As my-lomarcán daag oo mee.”

‘In Jurby in Man, there was a man they were saying,
 Alone, etc., etc.
 With lands and wealth, who always wore carranes,
 And alone, etc., etc. ...’

In addition to the queries as to his stock and store, he is asked where he got his wife, and replies that he married her in Jurby Church, and he gives her a good character, for he says that “t’ee ghennal as ghlen” (‘she is neat and cheerful’), a verse which I have seen only in this copy.

I mentioned that there were two verses in Moore’s *Manx Ballads* from the Robert Gawne ms. These refer to a certain Juan Drummey (apparently John of the Ridge) who got his wealth on the hill as Mylecharaine did on the curragh. As he is coupled with the latter in the same curse we gather that he backed up the new-fangled custom. Manx Society’s vol. xvi [309] mentions another version of 14 verses by T. Shimmin (“Tom the Dipper”) part of which, however, was of his own composing. I have never been lucky enough to come across a copy. Leech’s Manx version does not greatly differ from George Borrow’s English one, but he gives a 6 verse English rhyme on the same subject, which he says was written on the tradition that a farmer living at Andreas found the riches buried in a glen—which seems rather unlikely in that part of the Island—and dowered his daughter. He states that, as above suggested, it was the ancient custom for the suitor to make a payment, not to receive a dower. The wording is somewhat obscure, but the writer, after saying that it must have been an evil spirit which guided Mylecharaine to the treasure, says:

‘Bright eyes and kind hearts have no longer effect,
 Since you bartered with wealth of the glen.’
 The first question now asked is “Vel toghyr vie eck?
 Er son nish to shin poosey son shen” [*ie*, ‘Has she a good dowry’]
 For now we marry for that.’

In 1858 and 1859 Elizabeth Cookson published two editions of a book of poems, including a translation of Mylecharaine. It has some good notes, and the second edition has a copy of the music, which I refer to on account of its being the same tune as Leech published, a different tune entirely from that given to Moore’s ballads.

In concluding, I would express the hope that if any of the members of the Society come across an old ms. of this ancient rhyme they will place it on record, and, if possible, have it printed.

