

Manx Notes 194 (2014)

“KIARK CATREENEY MAROO” THE FEAST OF SAINT CATHERINE (6 DECEMBER) *

Amongst the collections of the Manx National Heritage Library is a diary kept by a visitor to the Isle of Man in 1799.¹ The author, together with others, sailed for the Island from Dublin, 28 November 1799, and then left on 22 December for Liverpool. The identity of the writer remains unknown but in trying to join a card game in Douglas he refers to himself as “being a Strange Irishman,”² strange in the sense of being not part of the Irish community then living there. A visit weather-wise at that time of the year was probably not of the best even then or now but this party was not content—or the writer at least—to stay put in Douglas. The diary has as one of its entries “Kirk Arbory near Port Mary & Port Iron people are very hospitable and fond of Dancing &c, particularly at fairs [...]”³ This is undated but the parish and the month points to this being a reference to “La’al Catreeney” or St Catherine’s Day, celebrated on 6 December with a fair at Colby.

There was more than dancing going on at the fair, Karl Roeder recorded in the 1890s a song too as being involved: “The short ditty which used to be sung at Colby fair was given to me thus: ‘Kiark Catreeney maroo, | Gow uss ny cassyn, as goym’s yn kione, | As ver mayd ee fo’n thalloo.’ And if a man got too jolly over the mug it was said of him: ‘Ren eh plucky yn kiark mie riy’ (‘He plucked the good hen last night’) [...]”⁴

Dr John Clague around the same time was to provide a fuller description of the proceedings of the day:

I have heard an old man say that his mother kept a public house, and she had told him that the men and young boys of the neighbourhood would kill a hen, and they would walk two and two, holding the hen between them, and other persons would walk two and two through the fair with their hats off, as if they would be at a funeral, and sing, “Katherine’s hen is dead. | You take the head and I shall take the feet, | And we shall put her under the ground.”⁵

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘Kiark Catreeney Maroo’: The Feast of Saint Catherine (6 December),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* November (2014), [9]–[10]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ “Voyage to, and Tour of Isle of Man for 24 days” (1799), MNHL, MS 32 A.

² Entry for 5 December, “Voyage ...,” MNHL, MS 32 A.

³ Undated entry, “Voyage ...,” MNHL, MS 32 A.

⁴ Charles Roeder, “Contributions to the Folk Lore of the Isle of Man,” *Yn Lioar Manninagh* iii.iv (1897): 187.

⁵ Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [1911]) 45. This was published with matching pages of Manx and English; English-only text here reproduced.

He added, “[t]hey would then go to the public-house and get plenty of ale.” This was not the end however:

A wake was kept (held) over the hen, and early the next day the men went to “peel the hen.” The head and the feet were cut off, and they were buried. It gave them an opportunity to get a little drop on the next day. Any one who went to the public-house (tavern) on the day after the fair, people said “He is going to peel the hen.”⁶

Both Roeder and Clague’s comments raise the problem with such descriptions as to whether these practices were still current or are being recalled by their informants. Or in Clague’s case, born as he was in Arbory, a memory from when he was growing up there. However, a letter from Clague to Deemster Gill from 5 December 1894, shows it very much still happening as described: “I believe that the ‘Kiark Catreeny Marroo’ procession—by the bye tomorrow is the day for it—is one of the oldest of our national customs. Much older than ‘Hunt the Wren’ & the ‘White Boys.’”⁷

Clague was responding to a query passed on to him by the Deemster’s brother, W.H. Gill concerning “Kiark Catreeny Marroo” at the end of November:

[...] you might deliberate with the Doctor as to the fate of the tune with the title “Kiark Catreeny Marroo.” It is a nice point for you to settle, viz. Is it Manx or Scotch? I find it note for note in a book of professedly Scotch Songs. I am afraid we have not a leg to stand on, especially as the tune does not appear in “Mona Melodies.” But perhaps the Doctor can tell us something of its history. It has a Manx name. How came it by that name? What does it mean? and are there any Manx words to it?⁸

Gill went on to write that “[i]t is a capital dance tune and I sh[oul]d be sorry to have to exclude it. But the Scotch have appropriated it, and, as we laymen say, ‘possession is points of the law.’ I shall be curious to know what you make of it.” This was to become one of his obsessions, the need to find tunes which were recorded nowhere else but in the Island and so thereby were Manx and Manx alone.

Clague, however, when writing to the Deemster had made his opinion clear:

As to Kiark Catreeny Marroo I think it is an old Gaelic tune and is as much Manx as it is Irish and Scotch. I have seen the tune in a collection of Irish airs as well as of Scotch airs, the Irish title being “The ducks dang my daddie”—the Scotch one “The deuks gang o’er my daddie.”⁹

Gill was never to lose this opinion though obsession is the better word for it. When collecting in Sussex in 1911, he wrote to Sophia Morrison “[a]ready I have discovered, close by, three of ours (sung of course to English words) and shall not be

⁶ Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* 45.

⁷ Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 5 December 1894, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

⁸ W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 27 November 1894, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

⁹ Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 5 December 1894, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

surprised to find many more.”¹⁰ To William Cubbon: “Already I have found within a two mile radius of my house two Melodies which I had fondly claimed as Manx! Of course this is to be expected and other similar cases will surely follow.”¹¹ There was, however, to be a small note of comfort: “[b]ut the fact that so many of our most admired tunes have been sung in Mann to Manx words that are either imitation or translations of English words only shows that such tunes ~~are~~ ‘though’ vagrants and comeing [*sic*] from nobody knows where. ‘still are ours by adoption’.”¹²

One doubts if those who turned out on 6 December 1894 for the procession that year were so worried—the chance of peeling the hen the next day, licensed excess ever a feature of calendar customs, was more likely uppermost in their minds....

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2014

*

REFERENCES

- Clague, Dr John. *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague*. Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [1911].
- Roeder, Charles. “Contributions to the Folk Lore of the Isle of Man.” *Yn Lioar Manninagh* iii.iv (1897): 129–91.



¹⁰ W.H. Gill to Sophia Morrison, 29 April 1911, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 2.

¹¹ W.H. Gill to William Cubbon, 1 September 1911, MNHL, MS III70, Box 1. See binder marked “MLS”.

¹² W.H. Gill to Sophia Morrison, 4 January 1912, MNHL, MS 09495, Box 1.