

Manx Notes 202 (2015)

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“INTRODUCTION TO THE CARVALS” *

SONGS FROM THE ISLE OF MAN

(PART II)

(1925)

I. WHAT CONSTITUTES A CARVAL

[225] The word *carval* is Manx for ‘carol,’ but the explanation is misleading, for the carval, speaking generally, was a very different type of composition from the traditional English folk-carol. The Manx carval, however, belongs to the interesting old Island custom of singing carols in church on the night of the *Oie’l Verry* (the Eve of the Feast of Mary, *ie*, Christmas Eve). The earliest in date, such as that called (in English) “The Travail of the Blessed Virgin,” bore a close relation to the old English Nativity Carol, but few amongst those which have been preserved are of this type. The old custom with which they were connected is thus described: At the close of the Christmas Eve service the parson generally left, and with him the “quality.” But the clerk remained in charge, and now the carval-singing, often continued late into the night, began. The company brought their own candles—the more well-to-do bringing branched candlesticks—to illuminate the church, which was decked with holly and ivy. According to one account, each person who intended to contribute a carval-sung solo or in dialogue form by two, without accompaniment—fixed a thin lighted taper on the sloping board before him, and continued to sing as long as his taper lasted. Then another would light his taper, and sing till his light went out, and so until all had had their turn. Or, says another account, one or two men would stand up at a time to sing.¹

The custom lingered in the Island till about 1870—a lively picture of it at an earlier day being given in William Kennish’s poem “The Manx Ilvary” (“Oie’l

* A.G. Gilchrist, “Introduction to the Carvals,” *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* vii.29 (1925), 225–30.

¹ The late Miss Sophia Morrison told Mr Paton that it was usual for the singer to start from the west end of the church and move up one pace towards the Table at the end of each verse. Mr Paton understood that this was done and said to be the “old way” when an old man sang “Aarey Jacob,” at Patrick Church some fourteen or fifteen years ago, when the then vicar, Mr Kinred, held a Manx service on Christmas Eve. As regards the use of the name *Oie’l Verrey*, Archdeacon Kewley writes: “We always spoke of ‘Yn Oie’l Verree,’ that is, the carval service on Christmas Eve. It is sometimes announced that ‘an Oie’l Verrey (service)’ will be held on some other evening. For Christmas Eve we say not ‘Oie’l Verrey’ but ‘fastyr Laa yn Ollick.’” —AGG.

Verrey”) of which there is a spirited translation into Manx by Capt. R.E. Christian. In recent years many of these carvals, written in Manx-Gaelic and preserved among the [226] people in smoke-begrimed mss. or little note-books kept for the express purpose of transtriptions and known as. carval-books,² have been collected and edited by Speaker A.W. Moore and others. Amongst the collectors of these relics of past custom are Mr G.W. Wood (whose ms. collection is now in the Manx National Museum and Library, Douglas), Mr Philip W. Caine, Mr Cyril I. Paton, and the Ven. Archdeacon Kewley.

The carvals date chiefly from the first quarter of the eighteenth century to about a century later. They are for the most part unlettered productions—long and at times gloomy pieces, running sometimes to fifty or sixty verses—or even more—and as a rule their authorship is now unknown. Many are really versified sermons, beginning with “My dear friends, take warning”—or some such apostrophe—or they wander through long tracts of Bible narrative from the Creation onwards. Strongly tinctured with Calvinism, many of them would now be considered very inappropriate to the commemoration of the Nativity, being devotional rhapsodies exhorting the sinner to repentance by depicting in lurid language the terrors of hell. The titles of a few may be given in English, and sufficiently indicate their character.

Carol: The Creation, Rise and Fall of Adam.

Carol: To prepare for Death.

² The approximate dates of transcription are given in some cases by the water-marks, and in others by the quaint book-rhyme inscriptions of the copyist, of which the following are examples:

“When this you see remember me
And bear me in your mind
Let the[m] all spake of me as the[y] will
But spake you of me as you will find
John Bridson of Portaballa
His Hymnbook, hand, pen, and Einck
Jan 30th 1790”

“Thomas Kneen his book
And if this book will go amiss
My name will tell me where it tiss
In the year of our Lord 1828 Thomas Kneen”

“Thomas Kneen his book
Andreas of Man is my nation
K. Andreas is my d[welling] Place
The grass is green the rose is read
T. Creare [?] is my name when I am dead
Thomas Kneen’s book in the year of our Lord 182 [?] 8”
“William Teare his hand Oct 17th 1852” occurs in the same book.—AGG.

Carol: A Vision of Things to Come. [In this we learn much more of the tortures of the lost than of the happiness of the saints.]

Carol: Your Duty to God and your Neighbour.

Carol: Sodom, Gomorrah, and Nineveh. [227]

Carol: On Wine and Strong Drink [from an anti-Prohibition point of view.]

Carol: The Revenge on Sinners.

Carol: Base Women [Eve, Delilah, Jezebel, Job’s Wife and others].

There were also favourite carols on Noah, Jonah, Joseph, David, and Susanna.

Was it great wonder that among the young people present at the Oie’l Verrey the prolonged “pious orgies” often ended in larking?—the girls peppering the youths with parched peas, brought in their pockets, as a corrective of the general atmosphere of gloom or tedium.

When the long impromptu programme of sacred solos at last came to an end, an adjournment was made to the nearest tavern to drink hot spiced ale, after which the carvallers sang the traditional parting-song

“Te traa goll thie,

Dy gholl dy Ihie,”³

(It is time to go home—To go to bed,) and the revellers dispersed. In the latest phase of these carval-assemblies, however, they are said to have been “shorn of their riotous accompaniments.”

George Borrow, who visited the Island in 1855 in quest of a native Manx vernacular literature—unaware of the fact that no mere foreign “Lav-engro” possesses the key to a Manxman’s heart—states that he found such material to consist of “ballads on sacred subjects.” (And yet all the time the Manx people must have been singing the fine songs since collected, with others now lost!). “It was formerly the custom,” he says, “for young people who thought themselves endowed with the poetic gift to compose carols some time before Christmas and to recite them in the parish churches.” It is conceivable that some of the longer pieces may have been recited by those who could not sing, but it was the custom for carvals to be sung to current ballad-tunes, and a considerable part of the interest of carvals for this journal is due to the folk-tunes which have come down traditionally, with carval-words or titles attached to them.

No printed collection of carvals with their tunes has ever appeared until now. But as a number of the carval-tunes noted by Dr Clague have titles or first lines attached, it has been possible to re-unite words and tunes by referring to the texts in Speaker Moore’s collection, *Carvalyn Gailckagh*, and in Capt. Christian’s MS. volumes and some old MS. carval-books kindly lent to me by Manx collectors. Not all of Moore’s collection are of the same standing as literature; the book includes a few carvals of real poetic merit and imaginative power, notably one by the Rev. Thomas Christian,

³ See article on “Goodnight and Parting Songs “ in Part i of this Manx collection.—AGG.

author of a Manx paraphrase, rather than translation, of *Paradise Lost*, and there are certain others of known authorship. But not many of these eighteenth-century carval-poets wrote verses of any literary merit. William Kennish tells us of one [228] carvalist who took scandalous advantage of his annual opportunity (after the parson had gone home) to set forth his opinion of bishops and clergy in general, and one in particular, by satirizing them in his carval as priests of Bel—and all because of a personal grievance against the one in particular. The revival of religious enthusiasm in Mann—whose inhabitants were described by John Wesley as a simple, devout and lovable people, when he visited the Island—was stimulated, as Moore suggests, by the Manx people acquiring for the first time in 1772 a Bible in their own tongue.⁴ (The Manx Bible has since formed the standard for written Manx). But this revival suffered a check in the beginning of last century, when strangers, often of undesirable character, began to settle or take refuge in the Island, and the Manx-speaking population began at the same time to emigrate in large numbers. The latest known date at which any of the carvals was composed is about 1836.

It cannot be said that there existed no parallel to the religious verse or doggerel of the carvals in England at the same period. Traditional carols with such titles as “The Sinner’s Dream” and “The Fountain of Christ’s Blood” still survive in rural parts of England in the memory of folk-singers—or did, until quite lately,—and “Dives and Lazarus” must always have appealed to the indigent caroller as a suitable ballad to open the heart of the charitable rich man at the Christmas season. But in this country, Time, Death, and Judgment were at any time, one imagines, less popular Christmas themes than the story of the Nativity. The natural opening of the Christmas carol is not “Take warning, my dear friends assembled here” but:

“God rest you merry, gentlemen!

Let nothing you dismay.”

2. NOTE ON MOORE’S CARVALYN GAILCKAGH

In 1885, Mr John C. Fargher, proprietor of the *Mona’s Herald*, began to publish weekly, from mss. which he had acquired in Baldwin—a district in which he had been told the purest Manx would be found—a number of old Manx carvals, with the object of preserving them. These were transcribed and translated by Capt. R.E. Christian of Baldromma, Kirk Maughold (at one period a ship and customs broker in Douglas), who supplied English renderings more or less rhymed (on folk methods), which though mere doggerel were mostly faithful and respectful translations of the originals, except where the translator had been hard pressed for a rhyme—or suggestion of one—or had preferred to give utterance to a thought of his

⁴ Thomas Seacombe, the author of *The History of the Houtse of Stanley ... And a Description of the Isle of Man*, 1793 (a late edition), speaking of the period before the translation of the Bible into Manx, says that the practice was for the ministers in the churches to turn the English into Manx as they read the lessons.—AGG.

own. Speaker Moore, who had for some time been collecting similar mss, with a view to publication, [229] joined forces with Mr Fargher and Capt. Christian, and Carvalyn Gailckagh (1891) was the result.

As all the carvals had been written before the publication of the first Manx dictionary (Cregeen's) in 1835, and many (says Moore) before the Manx Bible was published in 1772, and most were the work of illiterate men, the spelling was “atrocious.” The editors, including Mr W.J. Cain, considering that its reproduction could be of no value to students, the copyists being obviously unaware of the value of letters in expressing sounds, and mostly possessing but a rudimentary notion of spelling, the orthography was reduced (though not entirely, and there are numerous misprints) to the standard of the Manx Bible.

Moore's is the only printed collection of Manx carvals, though a second series has appeared more recently in the columns of *The Isle of Man Examiner*.⁵ As far as English readers are concerned it is much to be regretted that Moore's original intention of presenting the carvals to them in the “bald simplicity” of unrhymed literal English translations was overruled by others, for in most cases the simplicity of the originals—their chief, and in some instances it must be said their only, merit—has been disguised only too successfully by English so-called translations which are free renderings, generally in an ampler metre (hence padding) of the mostly unlettered verse, in which anything homely or characteristically Manx has been well kept out of sight by the English versifiers.

An analysis of the metrical construction of the eighty-six carvals in Moore's collection, from which variant forms were designedly omitted so as to leave room for a larger number of different pieces, shows that about half—forty-two, to be precise—are composed in common or ballad metre, *cf.* “Chevy Chase.” Seventeen are in a metre of four tens, *cf.* “Let Christians all with one accord rejoice”; nine in long metre, *cf.* “The Old Hundredth”; nine in 7-6.7-6 double, *cf.* “Awake, awake, O England,” “Greenland's Icy Mountains,” etc.; three in long metre of six-line stanzas; and the remaining six in various other measures. This of course does not preclude variety in the folk-tunes to which they were sung, as even the common-metre ballad may be sung to various different rhythms.

Taking Moore's as a representative collection, it may be seen that although the writers have copied, more or less, English verse-forms and the English system of rhymed lines, and have even translated English carols into Manx, retaining their tunes, the Manx carvals are not entirely derivative from an English source. The late Prof. E.C. Quiggin., of Cambridge, notes in *Mannin* No. I some relics in the older carvals of lost inflections and other Gaelic forms of construction which have now disappeared both in the written and spoken language.

⁵ The dates are from 31/7/15 to 20/1/17.—CIP.

(As copies of *Mannin* No. I are very scarce, quotation may be allowed.) Prof. Quiggin remarks that standard written Manx has abandoned certain synthetic verb [230] forms retained in the spoken Gaelic of Donegal and the Highlands—the most remarkable case being the Irish passive forms in “–ar” and “–ah.” There are no means of dating this loss in Manx. The verb forms in Bishop Phillips’ Prayer Book, 1610, are practically identical with those of the eighteenth-century version. But vestiges remain of an earlier state of things. Prof. Quiggin cites from carvals in Moore’s collection the form “ruggyr (rugar) = is born,”⁶ and “vader” [*or*, erroneously, “varad”] (bhader) = “they were.” In the absence of other evidence, such forms are “important as appearing to show that there existed in the Island a traditional ballad-style preserving a number of archaisms in accidence and vocabulary.” Poetic diction, he remarks, universally and invariably lags behind the language of prose, so it is not surprising that carvals composed less than two hundred years ago preserve forms absent from early seventeenth-century prose. Quiggin suggests that mss. of the older carvals might reveal other interesting forms. Unfortunately the original manuscripts are not now available, and one may remark that in a decaying language archaic forms would be very apt to be dropped by the transcriber, particularly if an unlearned one.

3. THE PRESENT COLLECTION

The small number of carvals here given, though fairly representative of the more popular and well-known examples, is limited by the selection of those texts only to which their tunes may be safely assigned. In the case of texts borrowed from Moore, to pair with their tunes, a verse or two only has been given, with a reference to the remainder. But others have been drawn from Capt. Christian’s own mss., and from hitherto unprinted versions, in which the spelling, however “atrocious,” has been preserved as I found it. The discovery of the greatest interest and value has been a good, unprinted version (as well as a second distinct fragment) of the Manx carval on a widespread medieval theme—the after-death debate between the soul and body on the responsibility for their common doom, the carval being known as “Carval er Scollag aeg ayns Ashlish” (“Carol on a Youth in a Vision”). On this Mr A. Martin Freeman has contributed a valuable note. It still remains for the Celtic scholar to select and edit—untrammelled by the distinction between lettered and unlettered origins—the finer of the old Manx carvals, providing an adequate translation, not only faithful and accurate but reproducing the literary grade if not the quality of the originals. But in the case of folk-verse translations, the unconscionable thing is to join oneself to the hereditary ranks of those editors and translators who—unhappy gift!—touch nothing that they do not “adorn.”



⁶ “Ruggyr” occurs in the Manx Bible, *eg*, Job iii, i.—CIP.