

# Manx Notes 203 (2015)

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MANX CARVALS AND AN OLD CHRISTMAS CUSTOM \*

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[223a] And what on earth is a “carval”? was the question I encountered on telling a musical friend that I was gathering material for a paper on Manx carvals. Well, one could have said that *carval* was Manx for “carol,” but this would have been misleading, for the carval was of a very different type of composition from the traditional English carol, sung in choirs and places where they sing—outside the door—at Christmas. These carvals, none the less, are relics of the interesting old Manx custom of singing carols in church on the night of Oie’l Verrey (the Eve of the Feast of Mary), that is, Christmas Eve. The earliest in date—such as that called “The Travail of the Blessed Virgin”—bore a close relation to the old English Nativity carol, but few amongst those preserved are of this type.

According to custom, at the close of the Christmas Eve service, the parson generally left, and with him the “quality.” But the clerk remained, 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 one who intended to contribute a carval (which was sung by one person—or two in dialogue—without accompaniment) fixed a thin lighted taper on the sloping board before him, and went on singing as long as his taper lasted. Then another would light his taper, and sing till *his* light went out, and so on until all had had their turn. Or, says another account, one or two men would stand up at a time to sing.

The custom lingered in the island till about 1870—a lively picture of it being given in Captain Robert Christian’s poem, “Yn Oiel-Verree Manninagh” (“The Manks Christmas Eve”). In recent years many of these carvals, written in Manx-Gaelic, and preserved among the people in smoke-begrimed mss., have been collected and edited by A.W. Moore and others. They date chiefly from the first quarter of the eighteenth century to about a hundred years later. Very few, as already said, had for subject the Nativity. They were, for the most part, long and often gloomy pieces, running sometimes to fifty or sixty verses, [223b] and their authorship is now generally unknown. Many were really versified sermons, beginning with “My dear friends, take warning,” or a similar apostrophe, or they wandered through long tracts of Bible narrative, from the Creation onwards. Strongly tintured with Calvinism, many

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\* A.G. Gilchrist, “Manx Carvals and an Old Christmas Custom,” *The Choir* xiii.156 (1922), 223–25. The illustrations in of the five *carval* tunes are not of the best due to the poor quality of the source material. Hopefully, they are usable to some degree but will be replaced when possible with better quality images.

would now be considered very inappropriate to such an occasion, being devotional rhapsodies exhorting the sinner to repentance by depicting in graphic language the terrors of hell. The titles (in English) of a few sufficiently indicate their character:

Carol: The Creation, Rise and Fall of Adam.

Carol: To prepare for Death.

Carol: A Vision of Things to Come. [in which 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.

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

Carol: The Revenge on Sinners.

Carol: Base Women [Eve, Delilah, Jezebel, Job's wife and others].

Then there were favourite carols of Noah, Jonah, Joseph, and David. David is called the "man of heart," and the carol tells how he destroyed the "filthy brute" Goliath. The writer of the "Carol of Bad Women," after enumerating Biblical examples of men, led astray by women, has the grace to say:

"In such wickedness and scorn  
But few women did abide."

But I remember no carol of Bad Men, few or many.

Was it great wonder that among the young people present these prolonged "pious orgies" often ended in giddy maidens peppering the more stolid youths with dried 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 carvellers sang the traditional parting song:

"Te traa goll thie.  
Dy goll dy lhie.

"It is time to go home-to go to bed"

(which doubtless it was) and the revellers dispersed. In the latest period of these carval-assemblies, however, they were "shorn of their riotous accompaniments."

[224a] George Borrow, who visited the island in 1855, in quest of a native Manx vernacular literature, states that he found this to consist [though it certainly did not entirely] of "ballads on sacred subjects." "It was formerly the custom," he says, "in the Isle of Man 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." Some of the longest pieces certainly may have been recited, but others were sung to current ballad-tunes, and a good many of these folk-tunes have come down traditionally with the carol-words or title attached to them.

No printed collection of carvals set to these tunes appears to exist. In four of the musical examples here given, the words and their tunes have been brought together from different sources. An English rendering of one verse is given under each tune, in

a metre corresponding to the original Manx. (In these renderings I have to acknowledge the help kindly given by the Ven. Archdeacon Kewley.) Of these fine old folk-tunes, Nos. 1 and 2 are certainly old, and seem more distinctively Manx—that is, less reminiscent of English folk-tunes familiar to the collector—than the vigorous No. 3 or the graceful No. 4. The beautiful and expressive tune of No. 5—the “Goodnight Song”—which has a Scottish flavour, is a variant of the ballad-tune “Geordie,” and was also sung to “Barbara Ellen” It is a type of melody whose detached phrases, with resting places between, endear it to the folk singer.

The revival of religious enthusiasm in Man—whose inhabitants John Wesley found a simple, devout and lovable people when he visited the island—was stimulated, as Moore suggests, by the Manx people receiving in 1772 a Bible for the first time made accessible in their own tongue 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 Manx carvals was written was about 1836.

Not all of these quaint old productions are of the same standing as “literature.” One in particular, attributed by P.W. Caine to the Rev. Thomas Christian, author of a Manx translation of *Paradise Lost*, stands out: from the rest for its poetic merit and imaginative power. It opens by asking: [224b]

“Before the heavens were created .....  
 What was there then? What was there then?  
 Before the light of sun and moon? .....  
 Before horizon was, or time?”

So successive questions build up expectancy till at last in the fourth verse the answer comes that there—then—before any of these things—

“Without foundation or a zone,  
 [Was] the Almighty God alone.”

But not many of these eighteenth-century carvalists reached such heights as Thomas Christian, though some, like William Kinrade (1769–1854) rhymed with skill and some felicity of imagery. The carol on “Wine and Strong Drink” (No. 3) was composed by John Lewin, sumner, of Jurby, in 1836, who, “judging from the carol” (says Caine) “was a devout man who objected to having teetotalism forced upon him as part of his religious creed.” A few of the carvals, like “Jacob’s Ladder,” and “The Fool’s Pence,” are translations from the English into Manx. We are told of one carval-writer who took a scandalous advantage of his annual opportunity (after the parson had left) to set forth in his carol his opinion of bishops and clergy in general, and one in particular, by satirising them as priests of Baal—and all on account of a personal grievance against the one in particular!

One cannot say that there existed no parallel to the religious verse or doggerel of the Manx carvals in England at the same period. Traditional carols sung at

Christmas, with such titles as “The Sinner's Dream,” still survive in out-of-the-way places, in the memory of folk-singers; 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 Judgement were, at any time, I think, less popular Christmas themes than the story of the Nativity carol—whose natural opening is not “Take warning, dear friends!” but

“God rest you merry, gentlemen

Let nothing you dismay.”

To those accustomed to think of the Isle of Man simply as a delightful holiday resort, these old carvals may, with their human as well as historical interest, offer a glimpse of Man, life and religious feeling in the bygone clays of the Little Manx Nation.

