

Manx Notes 214 (2015)

“AS THE FIRST STEP IN THE PLAN OF CAMPAIGN”

W.H. GILL ON HOW TO COLLECT FOLK SONGS (1911) *

W.H. Gill collected not just in the Isle of Man but also in Sussex, to where he had retired to live with his daughters in the “White House” at Angmering in West Sussex.¹ This second bout of collecting—the material in large part now lost—started in 1911, and in the course of an article in the *West Sussex Gazette* about this activity, the newspaper reproduced a letter from Gill in which he laid out his “plan of campaign,” one based on how he had gone about collecting in the Island. The relevant part of his letter is the following:

As the first step in the plan of campaign I would suggest that any of your readers willing to assist in the work should send the name and address of the singer, together with the title of the song, and the first verse either to you or direct to myself. The second step would be to sort the material thus furnished into convenient geographical order: and then, as a third step, I would make it my business to visit each locality and arrange a personal interview. This was practically the plan adopted in recollecting the Manx songs, and proved, as generally admitted, a signal success. Working at that time in London, I spent my annual month’s holiday for three consecutive years with my brother, at Douglas, and each time found awaiting me a list of persons to be interviewed. Then, on my arriving there we visited together each person on the list, and recorded the result, which on my return home, was put into suitable form for publication. This is, shortly, how our collection of *Manx National Music*, since published by Messrs Boosey, in their Royal Edition, came into being—a result which, had the search been postponed to the present time, could not possibly have been attained.²

Leaving aside the final—and somewhat expected—rhetorical flourish, the “just in time” trope which was even then undercut at that date by Sophia Morrison and her circle’s collecting still in the Island, what is shown here is the systematic nature of the approach of the Gill brothers to their own collecting. As Gill made clear, he was using his holiday allowance to be in the Island and so his time had to be maximised.

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘As the first step in the plan of campaign.’ W.H. Gill on how to collect Folk Songs (1911),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* April (2015): [9]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Discussed in Stephen Miller, “‘You will be interested to hear of a project to form a Folk Song Society’: W.H. Gill and the Founding of the Folk-Song Society.” *Folk Music Journal* 11.1 (2010): 73–88.

² Undated clipping from the *West Sussex Gazette*, likely to date from March 1911 as it accompanies a letter from Dorothy Marshall to Clive Carey dated 30 March 1911, VWML, Clive Carey Manuscript Collection, cc/2/136 & 137. I am grateful to Dr Chloë Woolley for bringing these items to my attention.

His brother the Deemster could not notate music that was why Gill was essential. The brothers also wished to cover the whole Island, or rather the parishes that Dr John Clague, their collaborator, was not able to visit. Clague lived in Castletown where he had his practice and from where he also visited patients in the southern parishes of the Island.

For the Gills to be successful there needed to be preparation and this is what Gill lays out in his letter—singers to be found and where they lived to be noted down, some idea as to their repertoire formed and so a list of titles to ask after when visiting, and finally, a schedule to be drawn up to allow them to go forth as a folk song raiding party in the Manx countryside. And it was as such a raiding party that the Gill brothers were to be successful.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2015

REFERENCES

Miller, Stephen. “You will be interested to hear of a project to form a Folk Song Society’: W.H. Gill and the Founding of the Folk-Song Society.” *Folk Music Journal* 11.1 (2010): 73–88.

