

“POCKET PICKING AT TYNWALD FAIR”

(1871) *

In 1871, a woman who called herself Mary Smith appeared before the High Bailiff “charged with having picked the pocket of Ann Caugherty, who lives in Malew, at Tynwald fair.”¹ The *Manx Sun* went to report the proceedings of the case:

It appeared that on Wednesday the prosecutrix was standing, with some friends, at one of the stalls at the fair selling ballads. The prisoner and another woman stood on the right of the prosecutrix. Suddenly prosecutrix felt something jostle her, and putting her hand down, she found that the prisoner’s hand was in her pocket, in which was a purse containing seven shillings and some loose coppers.²

Sergeant Cashen was passing at the time and so she was apprehended and brought to book. Ballads featured in a much earlier case, this time from 1833, when an itinerant Irish ballad singer and seller from Liverpool, Thomas Lynch, together with his mother (Mary) were prosecuted for the theft of £34 2s. from William Watterson of Lonan. Upon discovering the theft, “[a] few days afterwards he found that a boy selling ballads had been seen about his premises, and he followed him to Douglas, where he caught him in the market-place.”³ According to the *Manks Advertiser*, “[h]e found them in the market-place, the boy singing and selling ballads.”⁴ They had also been doing the same in Laxey:

Mrs Catherine Curgeen, [*sic*] who delivered her evidence in the Manx language, deposed to her living in Lonan parish, and near to Watterson’s house. About the time of the robbery saw the prisoners in the neighbourhood, the lad singing ballads.⁵

Found guilty, and due to the substantial amount stolen, it led to the pair being sentenced to be transported to Australia for a term of fourteen years.

The opening of the railway between Douglas and Peel in 1873, was recalled by Robert Sim of Crosby, when “huge crowds had gathered at the station, and while waiting for the great thing to appear some cheap jacks from over the water were there selling ballads which had been written for the event and singing the tunes set to

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “Pocket Picking at Tynwald Fair (1871),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* April (2017), [18]–[19]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Anon, “[Local News] Pocket Picking at Tynwald Fair,” *Manx Sun* 8 July 1871.

² Anon, “[Local News] Pocket Picking at Tynwald Fair.”

³ Anon, “[Local Intelligence] Court of General Gaol Delivery, Friday Nov. 8,” *Manks Advertiser* 12 November 1833: [3]b.

⁴ Anon, “[Local Intelligence] Court of General Gaol Delivery, Friday Nov. 8,” [3]b.

⁵ Anon, “[Local Intelligence] Court of General Gaol Delivery, Friday Nov. 8,” [3]c.

them.”⁶ He went on to add that “[t]hese things were selling among the people like hot cakes.”⁷ They would have been hawking other ballads and not just those composed for the occasion.

These mention of ballads and broadsides for sale in the Island leads on to Dr John Clague and his recalling of singers coming to farmhouse gatherings to perform where “[t]he ballad was often on bad paper, and when the paper would be folded, and kept in the pocket for a long time, there would be holes in the ballad, and the ballad-singer was obliged to stop.”⁸ As he further wrote, “[n]ew songs would be sung at their feasts, and a ballad singer would come to sing new songs.”⁹ A singer’s repertoire of songs was not a static one and did not stay still as their audience sought to hear fresh songs and clearly the singer with songs unheard before was the star of the occasion. The sale and purchase of these broadsides introduced songs from the wider singing community into the repertoires of singers in the Island, and thereby connected those performers with the wider current of song outside of the Island itself.

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⁶ Robert Samuel Sim, “Memories of Old Crosby, 1868–1900,” p.8, (read at Crosby Wesleyan Guild 1916), MNHL, MD 260.

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⁸ Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]) 250.

⁹ Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* 250.