

Manx Notes 305 (2017)

JAMES COWIN

“THE FIDDLERS” OR ‘CALLERS’
A REMINISCENCE OF FIFTY YEARS AGO”
(1898)

This has been my first Christmas in Douglas, to the best of my knowledge, that this old Manx custom has to me been conspicuous by its absence. In my early years they began their night marauding in the latter end of November, and finished by a begging expedition on Christmas Day, the fiddler giving a few twinges on the fiddle as proof of their bona-fides.

The “Good morning, Mr Kelly, good morning, Mrs Kelly, and all the rest of your family; fine morning, half-past two o’clock.” The half and full hours as a rule were only called, and they had nearly always “fine mornings.” But if they could drag in a son or a daughter, or lodger, as not forgetting Tom, or Kate, or Bill Crowe, it gave a finish and a knowledge of the family that brought “a tip” from those specially marked out for distinction, and it was said that some so much coveted being called, that they conveyed the desire and knowledge to the caller. There were generally three or four lots of callers, and very often the street got at least two lots in the night, and no one was expected to complain of being wakened up, but on the contrary, felt that they had scored by being singled out for a call. There were three well-known fiddlers in the town; Archie Cuckoo, Tommy Cringle, and Neddy Bell, but Archie

STOOD OUT AS THE FIDDLER OF FIDDLERS.

And in the estimation of many he never had or could have a rival. Mr Harry Wood’s scientific playing, or even Paganini himself could not “make the fiddle speak” like Archie.

When the boys called out “cuckoo, cuckoo,” Archie would pop his fiddle to his shoulder and give a scratch or two, and people declared they could detect the swearing that Archie made the fiddle do; for Archie was a sober man, and I never heard him swear but by the fiddle, although he was a son of “Collins the Bruiser,” and of course one of the “twin family.”

What brings all these things so forcibly to my mind just now is the recollection of my only boy and youth companion, and his early death. We were about the same age. His father was a respectable tradesman, living in Duke-street, and John was one of five sons and one daughter. Now there is not a single member of the family alive, all become extinct. This lad was as much unlike all the other members of his family as he well could be, and in fact very much unlike the ordinary run of lads, for he was possessed of rare talents that could have been turned to good account. For quick repartee, punning on words and things, seeing the ridiculous side of human nature, and an eloquence of expression, I never met his equal.

The very idea of Mr Hall Caine in giving a lecture or spoken novel was carried out by him. For frequently I have seen and heard him on the bulwarks of Callow's slip with a crowd of boys around him, and when asked for a story, would begin by sketching out Manx characters, Manx names, localities, and incidents, could make it tragic or comic, finish it in a night or extend the same story to five or six nights, fix his plots and inner plots with the genius of a Dickens, and with a continued flow of choice good language. There is no doubt but he possessed rare talents that, if diverted into their proper channel, would have given him a place in literature.

He grew up with all his abilities increasing with knowledge and years, and got married. On the visit of the Queen and Prince Albert to Liverpool, we went together to see them, and left by a trip and night boat. Rain set in just as we got on the Landing Stage, rained all day, and we returned wet by the night boat again. He caught a cold from which he never recovered, but hurried him to an early grave.

As he lay on his deathbed, and with a full knowledge of his early fate, and full of the hope of a Christian, his buoyant happy spirit never left him, but he would pun and joke with his poor old mother. Calling one morning about Christmas, he said, "I have been sitting up in bed writing my first attempt in rhyme for you." This contained ten or twelve verses headed

STRAYED NOTES DROPPED BY THE FIDDLERS.

I have unfortunately lost the paper and can only recollect the following on his neighbours:

Good morning Mr Corkhill,
Not forgetting your wife,
You deal in the bread that perishes,
And in the bread of life.
(Mr Corkhill was a baker and local preacher.)

Good morning Mr Hamilton,
An elder in the Kirk,
But as a chicken butcher,
Your duties never shirk.
(Mr H. was a poulterer.)

Good morning Mr Spencer,
With your trousers cut in halves,
The reason why—you're a butcher,
And want to show your calves.
(Mr S. was a tall man in knee breeches.)

Good morning Mr Cubbon,
Though improvements round you push,

You call them “pride and nonsense,”
Stick to your farthing rush.
(Mr C. would not substitute gas for his “dip.”)

Good morning Mr Blank,
I don’t know how you raise,
You were once upon the pinnacle,
And now are at the base.
(Mr B. has still a grandson in business, and therefore leave out the name.)
Some of the other hits were remarkably good, and would be relished by the old
stagers still living.

James Cowin, “The Fiddlers” or ‘Callers’: A Reminiscence of Fifty Years
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