

Manx Notes 320 (2018)

“ANCIENT MANX TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS THEIR GRADUAL DECAY, DEGENERACY, AND ULTIMATE ABUSE”

(1860)

[4a] Talking the other day, of old times and old customs with an early friend and fellow islesman (both having seen somewhat more of the world than stands between the limits of the Point of Ayre and Spanish Head) we were rather startled by his enunciating *ore rotunda*, “There is no use discussing the matter further, I do not think there is a single intelligent individual among us Manxmen that will not agree with me in opinion, that every one of our existing insular and traditional customary nonsensicalities ought to put down by the strong hand of the law as pestilent nuisances, from the ‘Hop-y-Naa’ of Hollantide Eve, to the ‘Quaaltrough’ of the first day of the New Year, or rather the midnight of the defunct one, and, so on, from January to December, *in sæcula sæculorum*.”

There is a good deal of truth in this dictum, or, as it was put, dogma, of our travelled countryman; but let us, for mutual benefit, test it by reminiscences of former days; and, should our personal memory of these (to us, we confess, fondly loved) recollections of childhood be at fault, no doubt, some of our readers of equal date and of old Manx kindly brotherly feeling will set us right.

We shall state the case broadly, and as England’s unmatched poet has it, “nothing extenuate, nor ought set down in malice;” though fearing, greatly fearing, however, that our brother Douglas men (those of equal date we mean) will coincide at once, in the bold condemnation of our friend (who happens to be a Douglas man too). We have a weakness (if we have one at all) for old things, old fancies, old memories, and old traditions, and we revolt against the rough-shod, pretended (because unproved) wisdom of these “days of progress,” which cries “*delenda est Carthago*,” without anything to assail the walls thereof save tempting money bags, cotton bales, or other omnium gatherum. We shall therefore call upon the “memories of half-forgotten days,” to aid us in the “pursuit of knowledge under difficulties.”

To begin then, as nursery tales have it.—In our young days—when old “Lilly Murray” was a dread, and still older Mr “Richard Snary” was an awful horror to juvenile stupids—our earliest Island recollections run back to the (still annually recurring) May fires on the mountain tops—the “Baal-yn-tein.” In other words the fire in honour of the god Baal. How many epochs, how many thousands of years do not those fires evoke—that fire-god whom Zoroaster invoked, in his all but inspired philosophy (when Holy Scripture itself had not been revealed by the MESSIAH to the chosen of God) as the symbol of the pure and illimitable Deity? Well, that flight is beyond our present inquiry; we believe in the “Baal-yn-tien” as little as the islesmen

who follow the fifty or five hundred superstitions connected with it. Still it exists—it is untrue,—but still it proves, for thousands of years, the antiquity of the time-battered and time-defaced Celtic race—yet there it is, and next May will burn as merrily as ever; and will be helped and aided until late hours by young men and young women; aye, and by boys and girls, whose parents cannot possibly care about their present or future welfare, or they would never permit their presence at the inevitable obscenities of the unholy “Baal-yn-tien.”

It is impossible to defend *this* traditional custom, and we join our friend in saying “*Delenda!*” to this iniquity. But the question arises—the possible results of these midnight meetings?—who is to pay for their possible consequences? On this point, we confess our friend has us at advantage, and we “surrender at discretion.”

Let us try another. It smacks of early Christendom, long before Catholics or any other Christians thought of persecuting or killing each other in the name of that GREAT GOD, whose fiat was pronounced amid the thunders of Mount Sinai—“*Thou shalt do no murder!*”

Well, when we were in early childhood, we can well recollect witnessing and enjoying, too, at the commencement of May, the sight of troops of young, pretty, and modest girls, neatly dressed in white, and bedecked with gay ribbons, and yet gayer garlands and natural or artificial flowers, perambulating the streets of Douglas, under the guidance of a chosen leader, who was hailed by her companions, and, without fail, bowed to and greeted by all passers-by, as the “Queen of May.” She was sometimes the daughter of a humble labourer, sometimes of a respectable mechanic, sometimes of a high-class shopkeeper, sometimes of a private gentleman, (native or stranger), but always one, whom, as “Queen of May,” no one, at peril of his limbs, dare insult, and to whom the then High-bailiff (Mr. Thomas Gawne, afterwards Deemster) always “doffed his tyle,” and made his humblest and singularly graceful bow. The old gentleman is gone to his account, as we must all go, but whatever charges the attorney-general for the Potentate in Black may allege against him at that Bar, he cannot possibly include among them “forgetfulness of the Queen of May.

This scene, if our memory prove not treacherous, annually recurred on the 12th May, or the anniversary of Old May Day.

On the same day bands of grown-up boys—the male sex exclusively—all of them, however, of honest parentage (without reference to rank), and well conducted, were also accustomed to parade the thoroughfares of Douglas. But they were in very different guise from that of their feminine compatriots. These grim ones marched with dishevelled hair, with faces uncouthly disfigured as if from exposure to excessive cold, and clad in wintry garb, under the command of a potential personage, bearing the dreary title of “The King of Winter.” We had forgotten to say that each of these potentialities—“The Queen of May,” and “The King of Winter,” had a band of music parading before them, and, whenever they met, (as they frequently did) the monarch who did the dismal on the occasion, was bound to doff his grim crown,

lower his sceptre, and bend his knee to “The Queen of May.” A ceremony which he not only did, but obsequiously sought out occasions for so doing. A word to the wise—the Queen and the King not unfrequently [4c] did the matrimonial before the rev. vicar of Braddan.

These were innocent pastimes, the origin of which has been long lost in the mists of forgotten antiquity; yet, considerably within the last half century, they were blooming as in their pristine years. Modern “progress” interfered, “vice” followed in its footsteps, and away went the “Merry May-Sport” out of the path of either for ever. The stain of earthly sensuality soiled its “Queen,” and, from that moment, the sportive pastime of May, despoiled of the harmlessness to which our early memory reverts, rushed from old Ellan Vannin without leaving a trace of its whereabouts, save in the dim recollection of some quaint old folk, who, like ourselves, are inclined to believe that the world, instead of being better, is a great deal worse than it was fifty years ago.

We fear that our cynical friend, and a good many more of our readers whose “thronging memories” rush back to these days of “auld lang syne,” will, so far as we have touched upon them, agree in opinion. Possibly next week we may touch upon a few more of these old world affairs, and, after doing so, we shall be in some tribulation lest our honest verdict with respect to them (as they are *now*, but not as they were *then*) will also be *Delenda est Carthago*.

“Ancient Manx Traditional Customs—Their Gradual Decay, Degeneracy, and Ultimate Abuse,” *Manx Sun*, 17 March 1860, 4b–c.

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