

Manx Notes 421 (2020)

ROBERT EDWARD CRAINE
OLD MANX CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS
(1900-01)

(I)

[7] Folklore is at all times, and in all places, an interesting subject, and especially is it so in the Isle of Man, where many strange beliefs and practices still linger like heirlooms of a vanished age. To the era of the white-robed Druids, and their mystic creed, may be traced the origin of numerous local customs; and when we remember that Manxland was one of the last, if not the last stronghold of their religion in the British Isles we must not wonder if we find superstition still hovering like the mists along its lovely mountains.

Concerning birth and death tradition is strongest. Salt is connected largely with some of the main Manx beliefs. In olden days it was often scattered along the path, which led to the farmhouse or cottage door, whenever a child was born. This curious practice is referred to in Mr Hall Caine's *Deemster*. Salt figures greatly in a peculiar, but now little known, form of burial. Before the body was placed in the coffin, quantities of salt were laid at the bottom, together with a few handfuls of soil; on this mixture the corpse reposed, with more salt and earth upon its breast. Some five or six years ago I saw a question asked in the *Ramsey Courier* regarding the meaning of this mode of interment. The inquirer stated that his or her curiosity had been aroused through having seen a child buried in Maughold churchyard in this manner. This fact alone proves that some superstitions are still deeply rooted in the country. Those to whom the child belonged very likely had no idea why they put salt in the coffin, but did so simply because their fathers had done the same before them. The custom may be derived from the ancient Druids, who buried their dead in exactly the same manner. In their case the salt was typical of the incorruptibility of the soul, and the earth of the corruptibility of the body. The thought is a fine one, and the fulfilment of it impressive. So, in the event of a birth, the salt must represent another form of the same idea. The burning of fairies and witches [8] on May-night, *ie*, the first of May, is also a survival of Druidical times. On that night the Druids celebrated the first day of their year, by kindling gigantic beacons on nearly every hill top, and compelling the heads of families to drive their cattle, and often their children, through the flames, to protect them from the machinations of the Evil One. All through May-night every man had to keep his fire burning until the break of day. On May-night's eve every one laid in his store of fuel, and woe betide the man whose store gave out before the hours of night were over. If the fire died out then bad luck was to follow, and his flocks and herds would become plagued with all the ills to which they are subject.

A remnant of these May-night festivals is to be found in the old Manx practice of holding a burning torch, for a short time, under each of the projecting stones to which the ropes that bind the thatch to the roof are fastened. The smoke of the brand is supposed to dislodge an evil fairy or witch, which is said to dwell under each of these stones. Another custom, closely allied to this, is sometimes performed by the Peel fishermen before the fleet sails. Some of them have been known to go from end to end of their boats with lighted gorse, to smoke out any stray goblin which might be lurking in some dark cranny of the vessel, and so bring about bad luck.

On the nights of the two great Druid festivals, May-Day and Halloween, a worshipper of Baal would have found it almost impossible to borrow fuel from his neighbour, to replenish his fire, on account of the belief that to lend on such occasions would bring about ill-luck and to this day a form of the belief remains with us. A man will sometimes not lend his friend anything on these two days, for the same reason.

There are many superstitions, the origins of which are not known. Among these are notably the idea concerning the fate of a baby who dies unchristened, and the burial of a murderer. In the case of the infant, its spirit is thought to wander for ever in [9] semi-darkness, carrying a lighted candle in its hand. The body of a murderer was always interred where four roads met, so that his "ghost" might not return to the haunts of his terrestrial existence. These last two superstitions are to be found in Mr Moore's interesting little book entitled *Manx Folklore*.

Forked sticks, Y-shaped, used to be placed about the house at certain times of the year as charms against evil. The fork had, I believe, a mystical significance, the three pieces which composed it being symbolical of the Trinity.

Crossed twigs or straws, laid in the roadway, are often to be found, but are not always the result of accident, but in many instances are the handiwork of some kind-hearted person suffering from disease, who hopes, through their agency, to get rid of his infirmity by the fairies conveying it from him to the first person who steps on the twigs. But now I must close my remarks, wondering if this last mentioned custom is the origin of the expression "as cross as two sticks."

Robert Edward Craine, "Old Manx Customs and Superstitions (i)," *The Ramseian* 2 (1900), 7-9.

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[7] Anyone interested in the subject of Superstition may pass a very pleasant and a not unprofitable half-hour in tracing some folk-tale to its origin, by comparing different portions of the data belonging thereto, either with each other, or else with corresponding facts relating to known customs. In this article will be found two instances of crass superstition which actually occurred scarce a decade ago, and which

furnish excellent testimony to the truth of the foregoing remarks. My information being obtained from a reliable source, I can vouch for the authenticity of every detail.

In a certain Manx parish there resided a farmer who, finding that his church failed in its work, came to the conclusion that it was “bewitched,” and accordingly repaired to the local wizard to request the aid of his magic. Nothing loth, that individual, after hearing the story, desired the names of three of the farmer's enemies, also to know if each of their respective houses possessed a well, and lay in such position that imaginary straight lines could be drawn from one to another so as to form a triangle. Receiving an affirmative reply, he directed the agriculturist to pay an unseen visit at midnight to each of the wells, and to take a little water therefrom. This he was to bring home and add to the milk when next he wished to manufacture butter. The man went away. A few days later he returned crestfallen—the charm had failed. Once more the seer advised. The farmer was to go again at “the hour when ghosts do walk” to a spot where four roads met, and to cut a sod from the hedge, carry it home and place it, together with an immense number of pins, in a saucepan of water, which was to remain on the fire till dawn, when the power of the spell would cease. The pins were, by an uncanny agency, to render the witch, supposed to be in league with the unknown foe, so uncomfortable that she would compel him to appear upon the farm “street” sometime between midnight and early morning.

[8] The person first to arrive was bound to be the hidden enemy. Again the man departed, and in due course fulfilled the necromancer's instructions. While the brew simmered over the flames a labourer kept watch in an adjoining shed till sunrise, but needless to say the enchantment proved inadequate, and lucky was the man who happened not to pass through the farmyard that night.

In a case such as this it is astonishing to observe how distorted, how utterly transformed a religious tenet can become. THREE is the keynote of the charm. THREE enemies, THREE houses, THREE wells—all THREE groups being united in the mystic triangle, which, therefore, seems to be symbolical of the Trinity. It is known that the Y-shaped sticks, used in remote parts of the Island to ward off ill-luck, are emblematic of the Triune God. Hence I take it to be an indisputable fact that the spell recommended by the wizard owes its origin to the Catholic, and not to the Druidical faith. With regard to the water drawn from the wells—was it deemed consecrated because it came from within the area of the triangle? or did the wells boast the same traditional properties with which the waters of a spring associated with the memory of the patron saint of the locality are said to be endowed? Either supposition may be correct. Anent the sod and pins: the former was cut from a place where four roads met—a murderer was buried near four roads, so that his spirit might wander and thus be unable to return to the haunts of old. Is this a branch of the same idea? Was the turf being cut from the junction of the four roads thought to exercise a confusing power upon the witch, as the highways were said to affect the shade of the criminal?

Here is the other story. A man, living in close proximity to the hero of the above narrative, owned a litter of pigs, all of which died in swift succession. Imagining them to have been “bewitched,” he made a great fire and placed the bodies therein, because he believed the spirits (which he supposed had compassed the death of the swine) to STILL POSSESS THEIR CARCASSES, and [9] that by burning the latter he would destroy he demons! This superstition appears to be derived from the miracle wrought by Christ, whereby the devils left the Gadarene demoniac and entered into the swine, so bringing about the extinction of the herd. The belief has not confined itself to pigs, however, the bodies of other animals having been consumed in like manner for a similar reason.

But now those fires are dead, their smoke has rolled away before the winds of Heaven, and with it, let us hope has departed the last cloud of ignorance, leaving the radiant sun of enlightenment to render uninterruptedly cheery the path of man.

Robert Edward Craine, “Old Manx Customs and Superstitions (ii),” *The Ramseian* 5 (1901), 7–9.

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The *Ramseian* was a short-lived school magazine produced at Ramsey Grammar School and even such a title has folklore material within it. Whilst the folklore items are often known and documented elsewhere, nevertheless such pieces are still of interest in showing which aspects of Manx folklore an author chooses to emphasise and as here the intellectual framework in which they are discussed, and as often as not its dismissal. As regards the author here, it is difficult to find a candidate for Robert Edward Craine in the census for 1901 who can fit the author here.

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