

Manx Notes 428 (2020)

“THOSE HARVEST FETES, HERE CALLED ‘MELLIAHS’”

(1827)

SIR,—On Thursday evening last, I was one of a party invited to witness one of those harvest fetes, here called “melliahs.”

Our host was a respectable farmer, and one whose frank and hearty welcome delights the lover of rustic ingenuousness, and native good-fellowship. Our hostess was a most pleasing person, whose attractions would seem to entitle her to rank in the proudest spheres of beauty—young, lively, and delighted, she did the honours with gracefulness and cordiality. Such a couple seem to realize all the calm and peaceful enjoyments of rural life. The reapers (in number about fifty) in due form “called the melliah” in a full chorus, where the deafening reiterations of the “hurrah,” defied the possibility of discriminating the individual component voices—but the loud and sonorous tones of the bass, by no means overwhelmed the piercingly shrill notes of the treble. Having by this exercise of their lungs, whetted appetites, already in good edge by the exertions of the day’s hard labour—they approached the hospitable manse, where they were received by our handsome hostess, whose exertions were now to commence. But “the labour we delight in, physics pain,” and she seemed highly gratified with the sudden disappearance of the mounds of bread and cheese and good cheer with which her bounty heaped and re-heaped the groaning boards. Then came the liquor and the “barley bree,” of which, “potations pottle deep” were hid. Now you might have seen the “long pull, the strong,”—aye, and—the “pull altogether”—of the stout, regular Tomsonian vat. The punch bowl, too, circulated apace, and the increased brilliancy of female eyes, and heightened ruddiness of complexion, betokened that the wassail bowl should—at least for a time—delay its rounds, and that dancing time had arrived. To the barn then hied the joyous crowd, where the soul exciting reel and jig were executed with an energy of spirit that would put to the blush the silly milk sop *pas du quadrille* of the —— and the sickly movements of the waltz. Nor were there wanting specimens of graceful agility and elegance. Whilst thus busily engaged in the evolutions of the dance—lo and behold! the sudden entry of the “grey mare,” (a spectral sister of “Tam’s Meg”) whose prancings and threatenous roarings alarmed each lass, and made her cling the closer to her partner. When this apparition had sufficiently excited the applausive screams of the of the blooming fair ones, and had overturned some of the benches, making the recumbents “stand prostrate”—she vanished, and left us to exclaim with the wonder-stricken Thane of Glamis, “The earth hath bubbles as the water hath, and this is of them.”

The revelry went on quite unalloyed, nay, the fun, the cream of the fun, the merry dance of “kerry-ballege,” was yet to come. In this, a chair was placed in the midst of the floor. This seat forms a throne, the panting aspirants (I must feminisest) to

which becomes the object of a thousand salutes.... But bliss like this is not, even to the enthroned, of long duration, and the deposed Queen soon sees her successor the object of the same oscillatory tribute.

But it struck ten o'clock—a late hour in the country, and we left them in their innocent mirth.

Yours, &c.

CONSTANT READER.

St Ann, September 16, 1827.

Pseud [signed as “Constant Reader”], “[Letter to the Editor] To the Editor of the Manx Sun,” *Manx Sun* 18 September 1827, [3]b.

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The mention of some fifty repears as here taking part in the harvest of 1827 shows the intense labour involved in the days when the sickle or scythe was in use to cut the corn in the harvest field. This too was a time when the failure of that harvest was a disaster for the Island. Given the work involved and the anxiety over the weather the last day of reaping was one to be looked forward to when those in the field “called the melliah” and the celebration could begin, first with bread and cheese, washed down with ale and spirits, followed by dancing in the barn for the rest of the evening and on into the night. “Kerry-ballege” is a phrase that is only found in this piece here and what the words reference is difficult to fathom. In the context of the *mbhelliah* a chair is evidently placed in the middle of the barn and it is occupied in turn by females who are applauded for their charms and beauty. Of interest here too is the appearance of the *laair vane*, “whose prancings and threatenous roarings alarmed each lass, and made her cling the closer to her partner.” Benches are overturned in a moment of chaos and then as soon it appears the *laair vane* is gone allowing the celebrations to continue.

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