

Manx Notes 443 (2020)

PHILIP CAIN

“DEATH OF THE MANX ‘CARVAL’ SINGER”

(1896)

Mr Philip Cain, of Baldwin, died on Saturday night last, having suffered from a lingering disease. Mr Cain was during his lifetime a notable personage, and was widely known as “Philly the Desert.” He had had experience of most of the occupations characteristic of the Isle of Man in years gone by, for, in addition to serving his apprenticeship and continuing to work more or less as a cobbler, he had been in turn agriculturist, fisherman, and miner. But his pride was in the talent he possessed as a singer. Indeed, a principal plank in his religious creed was that passage from St Paul, “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.” Before old age crept upon him, Mr Cain was the precentor at Keeil-Abban, Baldwin; and up to recently he figured as a singer of carols (or *carvals*) at Christmas times, and of solos in the Manx language at harvest and other festivals where such contributions were appreciatively listened to. He was one of the men to whom Mr Gill, of London, resorted not very long ago in order to hear some of the old Manx airs, with the object of reducing them to notation, and so preventing their threatened extinction. He was held in high esteem by the late Parson Drury, who was ever satisfied that the singing would be all right in any service where Philly (as the old vicar familiarly called him) took the lead; and, possibly in compliance with an expressed wish of the vicar during illness, Philly was present and started the tunes that were sung in the open-air on the occasion of Mr Drury’s funeral. It is said that when wishing to “pitch” a tune in his own house, Mr Cain discarded a key fork, but made clanging sounds with the poker and tongs which enabled him to enunciate his key note accurately. As to his connection with the fishing, he has been heard to tell how he believed in the old theory that the gulls congregated where the fish were plentiful. He was one day up in the turf mountain, from whence he observed an enormous concourse of sea-gulls in the vicinity of Port Soderick. He left the turf, and made for Douglas, where he related what he had seen to the fishermen who were just at that season doing the “back” fishing. They were loth to make any special effort on this occasion, as they had been out night after night and with miserable results; but Mr Cain persuaded them to take his course for this night, with the result that they returned to the harbour in the morning with extraordinary hauls of herring. It may be that but few people know why “the Desert” was affixed to Philip’s name. The explanation here proffered is that Mr Cain’s father, a good many decades back, was deprived (by the landlord) of his cottage home in East Baldwin, whereupon he determined to secure a piece of ground and build a cottage for himself. His choice fell upon a little plot of waste land at the extreme end of Balliaragey, down near the river, where the cottage was erected, and named by old Cain himself The Desert (including the small field of

garey land in which it stood). He lived in the house to the end of his days, and his several sons were commonly known to the public as so-and-so The Desert. Scarcely a trace of the building now remains. A little reminiscence was told the writer the other day, in connection with Mr Philip Cain's time of abode in The Desert. It would seem that (like David the shepherd boy of yore) Mr Cain was skilled at slinging stones. One day he ascended the steep hill rising from The Desert, taking with him a loaded gun. He sat down amongst the heather, and presently observed a plump hare hopping about. Here was his opportunity for trying the gun, and he took aim. But on second thought he said within himself that there was but one chance, and lest the shot should miss he dropped the gun and took up a stone to heave at puss. On further consideration, he again longed for a trial with the gun, and again took aim with that weapon—but no, he couldn't find it in his heart to run any risk with such valuable game as a hare, so once more he abandoned the gun, and “let shine” with the missile, killing the hare on the spot!—The mortal remains of Mr Cain were interred in St Luke's Churchyard on Tuesday, the funeral being attended by many of the neighbours. He was 76 years of age. Two brothers survive him, one resident in Douglas and the other in America.

“[Baldwin] Death of the Manx ‘Carval’ Singer,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 1
August 1896, 5g.

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