

# Manx Notes 566 (2021)

RUTH HERBERT LEWIS

“WELSH AND MANX FOLK SONGS”

(1921)

[165] There are few Welsh Folk-Songs which have corresponding Manx versions. But I have only been able to see a very limited number of Manx folk-songs. Moore's collection seems to be the best. Gill, in his collection, frankly states that in one song he has compounded a major and minor version, which makes one doubtful of the value of the other songs from the student's point of view. The Manx folk-songs seem more nearly related to the Irish and Scotch than to the Welsh, but in subject matter there are two which are nearly related to Welsh songs. “My Good Old Man” (see Moore's collection) is very interesting. One would like to know what other variants of this song are found in the Isle of Man, or whether there is any trace of a children's game having been played with these words. In Wales it is found in every county, and we have at least four, if not more, [166] variants of the song. The nearest in words to the Manx one is found in Anglesey.

The first verses of each of the variants differ to some extent, but the last verses, as in the Manx version, deal with death and burial in the smoke hole or hearth Stone. This seems to point to very old age, for these songs belong to the time when there was a handed-down memory of such “intermural burial” as it is called in Nigeria, where it is still practiced. In one Welsh version, the song goes rather further, because the old man on being asked what he will do in the smoke hole, says he will listen to the porridge boiling and that he will get up and stir the porridge. This seems to point to the folklore of brownies or the familiar and helpful fairy of the hearth for whom the housewife would leave a jug of cream and some cakes overnight. From Rhys's Celtic Folklore this seems also to have been a belief in the Isle of Man. This is exceedingly interesting, as it goes back to the ancestor worship so very much alive today in China, and of which traces are found in the folklore of many countries. In parts of Central Europe the ancestor is supposed to live in the oven room and to come out in the form of a snake. Can this in any way be connected with the luck of a cricket on the hearth? One would like to know any Manx folklore with traces of ancestor worship, and whether the cricket or the snake or any other animal on the hearth is considered lucky.

The other cousin of the Manx folksongs is the Hunting of the Wren. Versions of it are found in many parts of Wales as far apart as Dyffryn Clwyd, and Dolgellau and Pembrokeshire, where the songs are [167] sung in both English and Welsh. Of course the custom has long been dead in Wales, but it was practiced within living memory, and the wren house or cwt is to be seen in the Cardiff Museum decorated with ribbons. Whole volumes might be written on the folklore of this custom. It probably goes back to some sort of substitution sacrifice where the bird, perhaps the token of a

tribe, was sacrificed in place of a human being, who himself was substituted for the king, who it is well known was in some early stages of civilisation sacrificed by his people in the annual fertility rites. Any light on the Hunting of the Wren or any details or superstition connected with it will be gratefully received by those of us in Wales who are interested in these old custom songs.

The usual song in Wales is the same as the Manx Robin the Bobin and Richard and John, but in Pembrokeshire there is also the Wren Boys' Song, which describes the custom, the gay ribbons, etc., which were put on the wren cage and the early morning start, the visiting of different villages and the collection and feasting from house to house. This Wren Boys' song is also to be found in Ireland. This customs was very widely spread, especially in Celtic countries, and there is a most delightful Breton Wren Song, "La Mort du Roitelet," in Duhamel's Collection. (See Welsh Folk-Song Journal. Songs in article by Llew Tegid).

Ruth Herbert Lewis. "Welsh and Manx Folk Songs." *Transactions of the Celtic Congress, 1921*. Ed. D. Rhys Phillips. Swansea, 1923. 165–67.

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For further on Ruth Herbert Lewis, see the sources mentioned in Stephen Miller, "Ruth Herbert Lewis (1871–1946)," *Manx Notes* 565 (2021), 1.

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