

EDWARD FARAGHER

THE LAAR VANE

141

To m laare vane nish craayl-gigs ^{shee}
Morish daagh shen chliaghtog elley
As nish cha well ayn nish ether
Yn allick son dy milley

The white mair now is gone to rest.
With all other foolish things
We've naught to spoil this season blast
For all have taken wings

To m pimer as yn fiddle meucht
nish furrisaght eck y thie.
As la yn allick nish cha feagh
Ga magh well shin fannoo thie.

The pipers and the fiddlers too
Seems now to stop at home
Christmas is quiet now tis true
For no one want to roam

The big bogane at the black head
Has shut his mouth and gone to bed
And now his hole is free for all
Visitors who chuse to call

Yet few would dare to show their face
Or poke their noses in such a place.
Though now we hear him shout namore
The old folks often heard him roar

Hee must have gone from Monaslee.
To dwell upon the fairy soil.

EDWARD FARAGHER

THE LAAIR VANE



Ta-n laare vane nish ersayl gys [shee]¹
Marish dagh shen chliaghtey elley
As nish cha vell ayn nhie erbee
Yn ollick son dy villey

The white mair now is going to rest
With all other foolish things
We've nought to spoil this season blest
For all have taken wings ¹

*

The *Laair vane* (Mx, 'white mare,' Ir. *Láir Bhán*),² is a Christmas-time house visiting custom, which sees one of the party disguised as an animal, here a horse, whose design and appearance can range from being simple to one quite elaborate in execution.³ Following admittance into a domestic space such as a house, or a public one, as for example a public house, the *Laair vane* is thereby licensed to create havoc, seeking to bite those who it finds there.

Edward Faragher (1831–1908) of Cregneash had no regrets of the *Laair vane* being put out to folkloric pasture as seen in the passage above, also writing that “the people are wiser now than to have such things.”⁴ Fortunately, he recorded his reminiscences for the German folklorist Karl Roeder (1848–1911), long resident in Manchester, and for whom Faragher collected folklore. Descriptions of the *Laair vane* are few to say the least, and his account has the value of being one from an insider to Manx folk culture. Besides Faragher, there are just two other accounts to note, one by A.W. Moore and the other by Mona Douglas.

A.W. Moore (1863–1909) in *The Folk-lore of the Isle of Man* published in 1891, links the appearance of the *Laair vane* explicitly to Twelfth Night (6 January):

¹ Misc. disbound notebook pages in the hand of Edward Faragher in a folder titled *Manxiana*, MNHL, MS 09447, Karl Roeder Papers. See page numbered 141.

² *Laare vane* is the accepted historical spelling that appears in the source material; however, *laare* means ‘floor.’ Quotes here will simply use the spelling as found.

³ These seasonal house visits are extensively discussed in Ruairidh Greig, “Seasonal House-Visiting in South Yorkshire,” MPhil, Sheffield, 1988.

⁴ Misc. disbound notebook pages in the hand of Edward Faragher in a folder titled *Manxiana*, MNHL, MS 09447, Karl Roeder Papers. See page numbered 140.

During the supper the *laare vane*, or white mare, was brought in. This was a horse's head made of wood, and so contrived that the person who had charge of it, being concealed under a white sheet, was able to snap the mouth. He went round the table snapping the horse's mouth at the guests who finally chased him from the room, after much rough play.⁵

According to Moore, the *Laair vane* also appeared at the harvest supper or *Mhellia*:

After this [*ie*, the end of reaping] they all adjourned to the supper, which it was usual for the farmer to provide on these occasions, and which was a scene of great joy and merriment, the *Laare-vane* as on twelfth-day, being a conspicuous feature (see p. 104).⁶

From Faragher's account it is clear that the *Laair vane* was associated with the Christmas period and not just a specific date, and he also makes no mention of the *Mhellia*. However, Faragher does make it clear that the *Laair vane* was not going around when he was writing in the 1890s, recounting that "there is no one going about with it for about forty years."⁷

There is one final account of the *Laair vane*, C.I. Paton publishing an extract from a letter to him from Mona Douglas (1898–1987) in the Addenda to *Manx Calendar Customs* (1942):

I used to see when a child an *actual* Laare Vane at Cardle Veg, Maughold, which was supposed to be used in the dance and ceremony. It was of wood, rather roughly fashioned and painted white with red eyes and nostrils, and when I knew it the hinged jaw was broken and tied up with string. I made enquiries for it some years later, but it had disappeared and nobody seemed to know what had become of it. It may have been burnt, alas!⁸

This letter was occasioned by an enquiry in 1940, from Violet Alford (1881–1972), the author of *English Folk Dances* (1925) and *The Traditional Dance* (1935), interested in the *Laare vane* and other Manx folk dances. Eleanor Callow (1865–1916) lived at Cardle Veg, and she was an informant for Douglas for the Flitter Dance and the Stick Dance.

STEPHEN MILLER 2018

⁵ A.W. Moore, *The Folk-lore of the Isle of Man* (Douglas & London: David and Son & David Nutt, 1891) 104–05.

⁶ Moore, *The Folk-lore of the Isle of Man* 122.

⁷ Misc. disbound notebook pages in the hand of Edward Faragher in a folder titled *Manxiana*, MNHL, MS 09447, Karl Roeder Papers. See page numbered 140.

⁸ Cyril I. Paton, *Manx Calendar Customs*, Publications of the Folk-Lore Society, vol. cx (London: Folk-Lore Society, 1942) 140–41. A *Laair vane* was made in the 1930s as part of the Manx folk dance revival led by Douglas and Leighton Stowell and so her distinction in her letter of seeing an "actual" *Laair vane* at Cardle Veg.

REFERENCES

- Greig, Ruairidh. "Seasonal House-Visiting in South Yorkshire." MPhil. Sheffield, 1988.
- Moore, A.W. *The Folk-lore of the Isle of Man*. Douglas & London: David and Son & David Nutt, 1891.
- Paton, Cyril I. *Manx Calendar Customs*. Publications of the Folk-Lore Society. Vol. cx. London: Folk-Lore Society, 1942.



THE LAIR VANE



129

For days ^{of} youth will come nomore
And I must die like the folklore

For now lifes sun is gone far west
And I must soon retire to rest
With my fore fathers in the grave
And all the charms of nature leave

O Roeder, cha well ^{any more} arragh aym
Dy insh myst ^{ra. a. a. a. a.} ralisshyn shen vnaane
I'm poagey follym fo my warn
Gyn skeal pch ferisshyn er maym

White mare & man

The young men of our Parish
used to have great sports at
Christmas times. I dont know
whither they had the laare vane
or white mare. The young
men used at christmas to go
about with a horses head made
of wood and covered over with
white calico and ears and lips
of roe hide and a big red
tongue in its mouth with iron
teeth and there was two handles
to it. Then there was one of the
young men taking the head
in his hands and they were

140

covered him with a white sheet and another led him with a bridle made of strag and the white mair was going into the houses and pretending to bite every one that ~~that~~ seemed to be afraid. I remember the white mair coming into our house many times and frightened the children. but if you did sit quiet the mair would not come near you. I have heard my Father telling about one night he was in a publick house in port st mary. at christmas time. and there was some Irish men in the house that knew nothing about the white mare. When the door opened and the white mare came in. the Irish men were frightened one got up the chimney and the white mair bit his feet. he was frightened nearly out of his senses. But there is no one going about with it for about forty years and it is a good job for the children sake and the people are wiser now than to have such things.

WHITE MARE XMAS

*

Misc. disbound notebook pages in a folder titled *Manxiana*, MNHL, MS 09447, Karl Roeder Papers. In the hand of Edward Faragher and numbered also by him with an error by jumping from page 129 to 140. Relevant material only from 129 transcribed here. The title here is in the hand of Karl Roeder.

PAGE 129

White mare xmas

1 The young men of our Parish
used to have great sports at
Christmas times. I dont know
whither they had the laare vane
5 or while mare. the young
men used at christmas to go
about with a horses head made
of wood and covered over with
white calico and ears and lips
10 of raw hide and a big red
tongue in its mouth with iron
teeth and there was two handles
to it. Then there was one of the
young men taking the head
15 in his hands and they were

NOTES

White mare xmas] in red ink in the hand of Roeder.

COMMENTARY

2-3 sports at Christmas times] likely underlined by Roeder.
5 while] *white* meant but a clear looped-l.

PAGE 140

1 covered him with a white sheet
and anather led him with a bridle
made of stray. and the white mair
was going into the houses and
pretending to bite every one that
5 that seemed to be afraid. I remember

the white mair coming into our
 house many times and frightened
 the children but if you did
 sit quiet the mair would not
 10 come near you. I have heard
 my Father telling about one
 night he was in a publick house
 in port st mary. at christmas
 15 time. and there was some Irish
 men in the house that knew
 nothing about the while mare.
 When the door opened and the
 white mare came in the Irish
 men were frightened one got
 20 up the chiomney and the white
 mair bit his feet he was
 frightened nearly out of his
 sences. But there is no one
 going about with it for about
 25 forty years and it is a goog
 job for the children sake
 and the people are wiser now
 than to have such things.

COMMENTARY

3 stray] *straw* meant.

16 while] *white* meant but a clear looped-l.

20 chiomney] *chimney* originally but *io* written over *i*.

24 about] word overwritten cannot be established.

25 goog] *good* meant.



EDWARD FARAGHER

THE LAAR VANE

Misc. disbound notebook pages in a folder titled *Manxiana*, MNHL, MS 09447, Karl Roeder Papers. In the hand of Edward Faragher and numbered also by him with an error by jumping from page 129 to 140. Relevant material only from 129 transcribed here.

*

DIPLOMATIC TRANSCRIPT

[129] The young men of our Parish used to have great sports at Christmas times. I dont know whither they had the laare vane or while mare. the young men used at christmas to go about with a horses head made of wood and covered over with white calico and ears and lips of raw hide and a big red tongue in its mouth with iron teeth and there was two handles to it. Then there was one of the young men taking the head in his hands and they were [140] covered him with a white sheet and another led him with a bridle made of stray. and the white mair was going into the houses and pretending to bite every one that that seemed to be afraid. I remember the white mair coming into our house many times and frightened the children but if you did sit quiet the mair would not come near you. I have heard my Father telling about one night he was in a publick house in port st mary. at christmas time. and there was some Irish men in the house that knew nothing about the while mare. When the door opened and the white mare came in the Irish men were frightened one got up the chiomney and the white mair bit his feet he was frightened nearly out of his senses. But there is no one going about with it for about forty years and it is a goog job for the children sake and the people are wiser now than to have such things.

CLEAR READING

The young men of our parish used to have great sports at Christmas time. I do not know whether they had the *laare vane* or white mare. The young men used at Christmas to go about with a horse's head made of wood and covered over with white calico and ears and lips of raw hide and a big red tongue in its mouth with iron teeth and there were two handles to it. Then there was one of the young men taking the head in his hands and they were covered him with a white sheet and another led him with a bridle made of straw and the white mare was going into the houses and pretending to bite every one that that seemed to be afraid. I remember the white mare coming into our house many times and it frightened the children but if you did sit quiet the mare would not come near you. I have heard my father telling about one night he was in a public house in Port St Mary at Christmas time and there were some Irish men in the house that knew nothing about the white mare. When the

door opened and the white mare came in the Irish men were frightened, one got up the chimney and the white mare bit his feet, and he was frightened nearly out of his senses. But there is no one going about with it for about forty years and it is a good job for the children's sake and the people are wiser now than to have such things.

*

LAAIR VANE DESCRIPTIONS



I. A.W. MOORE, THE FOLK-LORE OF THE ISLE OF MAN (1891)

MEHILLA

[122] After this they all adjourned to the supper, which it was usual for the farmer to provide on these occasions, and which was a scene of great joy and merriment, the *Laare-vane* as on twelfth-day, being a conspicuous feature (see p. 104).

TWELFTH NIGHT (LAA GIENSE) [6 JANUARY]

[104] During the supper the *laare vane*, or white mare, was brought in. This [105] was a horse's head made of wood, and so contrived that the person who had charge of it, being concealed under a white sheet, was able to snap the mouth. He went round the table snapping the horse's mouth at the guests who finally chased him from the room, after much rough play.

A.W. Moore, *The Folk-lore of the Isle of Man* (Douglas & London: David and Son & David Nutt, 1891).

2. CYRIL I. PATON, PERSONAL DIARY (1905–49)

28 NOVEMBER 1940

Letter from Prof. James enclosing a letter from a Miss Violet Alford asking for information about the Laare vane & dances etc. Answered to Prof. James and to Miss A. sending Moore's Folk Lore referring her for the dances to Miss Mona Douglas, to whom I also wrote.

30 DECEMBER 1940

Heard from Miss V. Alford & answered the letter. She returned the Moore's Folk Lore.

Cyril I. Paton, Personal Diary (1905–49). In *Private Hands*.

3. LETTER FROM VIOLET ALFORD TO C.I. PATON, [?] DECEMBER 1940

c/o The Westminster Bank | Queen's Road | Clifton, Bristol.

Dec 1940.

Dear Mr Paton,

Many thanks for the loan of the book, which I now return. I have taken notes of subjects which interest me. I quite agree as to the fanciful appearance of the two dances revived by Mona Douglas, & it was just that which made me write, hoping for corroboration of her work. A pity. Revival is horribly dangerous. If you ever

learn more of the White Mare please do write to me—or of any other such appearance or hobby horse.

Yours faithfully | Violet Alford.

Annotated top-left hand corner by CIP:

“Answered | 30/12/40. | sending her Miss Douglas’s | account of the Laare | Vane”

Letter from Violet Alford to C.I. Paton, [?] December 1940, MNHL, MS 09505, C.I. Paton Papers, Box 4.

4. CYRIL I. PATON, *MANX CALENDAR CUSTOMS* (1942)

TWELFTH NIGHT (LAA GIENSE) [6 JANUARY]

[140] I used to see when a child an *actual* Laare Vane at Cardle Veg, Maughold, which was supposed to be used in the dance and ceremony. It was of wood, rather roughly fashioned and painted white with red eyes and nostrils, and when I knew it the hinged jaw was broken and tied up with string. I made enquiries for it some years later, but it had [141] disappeared and nobody seemed to know what had become of it. It may have been burnt, alas!—Miss Mona Douglas (letter).

Cyril I. Paton, *Manx Calendar Customs*, Publications of the Folk-Lore Society, vol. cx (London: Folk-Lore Society, 1942). See Addenda, 140–42.

