

Manx Notes 17 (2004)

“MAKING THE OLD BIRD SING” THE GILL BROTHERS AND “OLD Q—”

Mr Gill had many curious and interesting experiences during his search for old folk-tunes on the Island. Here is one:

“In our quest for folk-songs among the hills and dales of Manxland one of our greatest difficulties was to overcome the shyness which characterizes the Manx peasantry, and many were the stratagemns to which [w]e had recourse. One day we visited the cottage of old Q— who in the days of his youth had been in great request as the favourite vocalist at the wayside public-houses. More than usually shy, this time he positively refused to sing. No amount of coaxing would entice him out of shell. Would he come with us? “No!” Would he come and sit under the fushcia tree? “No!” Would he come —? “No; he wouldn’t come anywhere!” not even for the Governor himself or the assembled Keys.¹ Would he come to the “King Orry Arms”? At this his lustreless eyes brightened up. We had struck a responsive chord, had revived bright memories in that schrivelled remnant of a heart. Then, after a pause, half deference, half mistrust, and with the usual qualifying “May be” of a Manxman’s every statement, “Aw, well, may be I’ll come yander, anyway.” In a twinkling we three, the Deemster,² the Coroner of Glenfaba, and myself had hauled the old man up into the car, and in a few minutes had reached those familiar scenes of his halcyon days. Once there, he became strangely changed. What with the magic influence of old associations, and (tell it not in Gath!³) the judicious administration of suitable stimulants, he became inspired, filled and overflowing with song, splendidly vocal! Being lame, he stood stork-like, supported by a crutch under his left arm and a stick in his right hand, singing lustily and clearly one song after another until all had been duly recorded. Asked for a jig, he produced one with extraordinary vivacity and humour, playing on an imaginary fiddle, which was his crutch, with an imaginary bow, which was his stick, his voice the while supplying the melody. It was a weird performance, this resurrection of songs that had lain buried all those years—the old repertoire revived!”

The above story, somewhat amplified, gained a prize offered some years ago by the *Musical Herald* for a musical experience, and Mr Gill has had similar successes on

¹ The Lieutenant Governor is the British Crown’s representative on Man. The House of Keys is the lower elected chamber (since 1866) of Tynwald, the Manx parliament.

² As part of its judiciary the Island has two Deemsters or judges. They are distinguished as First and Second Deemster. The Deemster appointed to the Northern circuit is often referred to as the Northern Deemster.

³ “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph,” 2 Sam. 1:20 kjv. Gill was evidently struck by this biblical passage as it peppers his letters.

other occasions in our excellent contemporary with brief essays on brief subjects in which he has specialized.

Source: Extract taken from C.T. C—, “A Manx Composer,” *Manx Quarterly* 16 (1916), 369–71. Reprint of “Mr W.H. Gill and the ‘Manx Fisherman’s Hymn,’” *The Choir* vi (1915), 75–78 col. a.



Leaving aside how the piece must have appeared after being “somewhat amplified” the question here is what is factual and what is fictional? The return to old haunts and the wiping away of passing years with the recollection of youthful activities is a stock device of the first order. The name of the public house the “King Orry Arms” which incorporates the Manx folk name for Godred Crovan, the first Norse king of Man, suggests on a first reading fictional excess at play.

However, as the “King Orry,” it really existed and it was a public house in Colby.⁴ But was there indeed anyone such as “Q—”? The Gill brothers collected from three performers whose surnames all began with that letter.⁵ In addition, by a strange coincidence all three of them shared the same surname, namely Quayle. They did have differing christian names, being James, John, and an unbiblical William. James Quayle was an agricultural labourer and seasonal fisherman living at Killey’s Cottage, Kerrow Croie, in the parish of Jurby.⁶ John Quayle was a tenant farmer and one-time lead miner living at the Cronk, in Patrick.⁷ William Quayle farmed 16 acres of ground on Ballacurrey, in Jurby.⁸

The mention of the coroner of Glenfaba is crucial in suggesting that it John Quayle who is the subject of the piece. Glenfaba sheading consists of the parishes of Patrick and German whereas Jurby is in Ayre.⁹ The office of coroner during the

⁴ Neil Mathieson, “Old Inns and Coffee-Houses of the Isle of Man,” *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* vi.1 (1959): 156. And thereby a gift of a name although the resonance was likely totally lost to the earlier audience of *The Musical Herald* as well as to that of *The Choir*. Colby is a village in the southern parish of Arbory.

⁵ This in itself is of no real surprise as Man has a restricted set of traditional Insular surnames that are readily identified as commencing with the letters C, K, and Q.

⁶ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Jurby, 1881 & 1891. In 1881 he was enumerated as a fisherman onboard of the “Bonnie Maggie” taking part in the seasonal mackerel fishing off the Irish coast at Kinsale. See I.M. Killip, “Going to Kinsale,” *Journal of the Manx Museum* vi.75 (1958).

⁷ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Patrick, 1881 & 1891. In 1881 he was returned as a lead miner and living elsewhere but still within Patrick.

⁸ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Jurby, 1881 & 1891. The acreage detail comes from the 1881 census return.

⁹ The Isle of Man is divided into six sheadings, each of which groups together three ecclesiastical parishes, except Garff which contains only two.

period in which the Gill brothers were active in collecting alternated between Philip Teare and William Kermode. In fact, they were both coroners at the same time but for different sheadings, one being responsible for Glenfaba and the other for Michael.¹⁰ J.F. Gill, brother to W.H. Gill, is of course the Deemster of the piece. As Northern Deemster, his area of jurisdiction covered the Northside of the Island taking in the three sheadings of Glenfaba, Michael, and Ayre.

Two letters are extant between Kermode and J.F. Gill written in early 1898 when he was known to be the coroner of Glenfaba. The topic of both letters is “Shannon Rea” and the search for words to the song. The first letter reads:

I have got four or five verses of Shannon Rea. but they are only very imperfect. Thomy the Mate¹¹ have not got it. by the first of next week I think that I will have the whole of it in Manx. I have seen Quayle this evening.¹²

The Gills had already collected the tune to “Shannon Rea” from John Quayle but earlier in 1895.¹³ Typically, they concentrated on noting down tunes alone but occasionally first lines are recorded and very rarely the first verse.¹⁴ For whatever reason the search was definitely on in 1898 for the words. Kermode’s second letter was written a week later:

Quayle promised to write the Shannon Rea for me. but did not do so I send you herewith eight verses which I wrote this evening when he was singing it I am afraid it is not all spelled properly but you will see that there is a corruption of English & Manx in it it is taken as I got it some of the Manx I know is not properly spelled¹⁵

Although referred to only by surname it is reasonable to assume that John Quayle of Patrick is the Quayle in question. The text recorded by Kermode has not survived.

Did Quayle, now in his late sixties, ever receive his beer in return for his songs? The “King Orry Arms” was a real public house as we have seen but this does not mean that it was not being used as a prop for the piece, and chosen simply because of the colour the name could bring. But what is indeed intriguing is Mathieson’s

¹⁰ This very convenient arrangement between the pair is gleaned from examining the annual list of Insular office holders in the *Isle of Man Examiner Almanac* Yearbooks between 1893 and 1898. Tenure of office ran from one Tynwald Day (5 July) to the next.

¹¹ Thomas Crellin of Peel. As his nickname of “Tommy the Mate” suggests, he was a mariner. He is also likely to be the “Mr Crellin” of “What Mr Thos Crellin Remembers,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 2 March 1901.

¹² William Kermode to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 May 1898, Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL), MS 09702, Box 2.

¹³ “THE ORIGINAL COLLECTION | OF | MANX FOLK MUSIC | [rule] | MADE BY | HIS HONOUR THE DEEMSTER GILL | MR W.H. GILL & DR. CLAGUE | COMPLETED IN 1895 & 1896,” bound up by Mrs J.F. Gill in 1912, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2. See p.106, tune O.21, collected 16 April 1895. A second version was collected from John Joughin who farmed at the Garey in Lezayre on 12 October 1898. See p.48, tune O.92.

¹⁴ They did record one line from Joughin’s performance, “Three times I kissed her ruby lips.”

¹⁵ William Kermode to Deemster J.F. Gill, 1 June 1898, MNHL, MS 09702, Box 2.

comment that, “Local tradition recalls that *c.* 1880 the landlord was one Richard Kinvig, generally known as ‘Rosin the Bow.’”¹⁶

It was as the “King Orry Inn” that it appears in *Brown’s Directory* for 1881 and indeed with Richard Kinvig running it.¹⁷ In fact he was a butcher as well as a publican according to the 1881 census held that year. He ran the place with Mary, his second wife, and his two stepdaughters, Margaret and Mary, the latter working as a waitress and the former as barmaid.¹⁸ But by the time the Gill brothers were collecting both name and publican had changed. In 1894, it was now the “Colby Glen Hotel” and with James Thomas Beale as licensed victualler in the place.¹⁹

A singing tradition at some date then appears to have existed in the erstwhile “King Orry Inn,” although on this occasion “the old repertoire” was revived solely for a record to be made of it and for W.H. Gill to find it all such a “weird performance.”

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¹⁶ Mathieson, “Old Inns and Coffee-Houses of the Isle of Man,” 161.

¹⁷ *Brown’s Isle of Man Directory*, (Douglas: James Brown & Son, 1881).

¹⁸ *Census Enumerators’ Book for Arbory*, 1891.

¹⁹ *Brown’s Isle of Man Directory*.