

Manx Notes 20 (2004)

“I HAVE DISCOVERED A NEW ‘MINE’ AT BRADDA”

DR JOHN CLAGUE AND THOMAS KERMODE

25 Dec 95 | Laa-yn-Ullic

My dear Deemster,

I have discovered a new “mine” at Bradda.

An old blind man—Tom Kermode by name, has given me three splendid old songs, and I think I shall be able to get three more yet. I have had three from old Fargher who gave me “Shannon Rea,” and he has another which I shall probably get this week.

Altogether I have eight or nine “new” songs since the “Girls of Balladoole”—although the last named may be Scotch, it was certainly played by the Manx fiddlers, 70 or 80 years ago.

Wishing you and Mrs Gill, “Ullick gennal as Blein Vie Noa.”¹

I am | Yours faithfully | JClague

Source: Letter from Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 December 1895, Manx National Heritage Library, MS 09702, Deemster J.F. Gill Papers, Box 2, unlisted.



“I have discovered a new ‘mine’ at Bradda.” So wrote Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill on Christmas Day 1895. (There had been copper mining at Bradda Head hence the pun.) This was in one sense a rediscovery as John Strachan² and Father Richard Henebry³ had found Thomas Kermode twelve years earlier in 1883. The pair spent part of the summer staying in the coastal village of Port Erin in the southern parish of Rushen. As Strachan himself later recounted:

During that time we went about among the surrounding villages to see if we could discover any of the old folksongs or folktales of Man. For the most part our search

¹ Manx for “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.”

² John Strachan (1862–1907). Hulme Professor of Greek, 1885–1907, and Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Religion, 1890–1907, at Owens College, later the University of Manchester.

³ Father Richard Henebry (1863–1916). Professor of Irish Language & Literature, University College Cork, 1909–16. Father Richard Henebry, *A Handbook of Irish Music*, ed. Tadhg Ó Donnchadha (Dublin & Cork: Cork University Press, 1928).

was unsuccessful. The people have ceased to care for these things, and so they have fallen into oblivion.⁴

They did come across Thomas Kermodé. “Blind Tom” as he was nicknamed, a fisherman then in his mid-fifties blinded in childhood due to smallpox, who lived nearby at Bradda.⁵ From him they took down “the following sweet little song” with the title “Ec ny Fiddleryn” (“At the Fiddlers”).⁶ This was seemingly the only item they managed to record during their visit. It later appeared in the first number of the *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* reproduced in phonetic notation and with an accompanying English translation. Strachan had returned to note down once again the song, “In September of the present year I again visited Man, and I had the song recited to me again.” The version noted down in 1883 must have been lacking in some regard. Strachan did pass comment that “we took it down as well as we could.”

A.W. Moore was alerted to the existence of the text and to Kermodé himself through its appearance in the *Zeitschrift* and he subsequently dispatched W.J. Cain southwards: “Mr W.J. Cain has since then seen Kermodé and has satisfied himself of the general accuracy of this version which he and I have translated.”⁷ Moore mentions that he read Strachan’s piece “in March last,” presumably then in March 1896 (*Manx Ballads and Music* appeared later in that year), which makes Strachan’s return visit to be in 1895 at the latest.

Henebry himself had also returned alone to Man where he visited the village of Cregneash and came across Edward Faragher (1831–1908), a fisherman, who recounted his visit (and part of their conversation) in a letter to Karl Roeder:

I had a long talk in the summer with a Catholic Priest and he could read my manx writing very well and pronounce every word and understand it well enough he told me he had been in the Island 6 years ago and had published some manx songs that he had learned from Tom Kermodé in Bradda. blind Tom. but I neve come across any of them.⁸

This letter is unfortunately undated. The mention of the visit to Kermodé that took place in 1883 and the period of six years since that visit indicate that the letter must

⁴ John Strachan, “A Manx Folksong,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* i (1897): 54.

⁵ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Rushen, 1881, RG 11/5608, f.121.

⁶ For a discussion of this song see George Broderick, “Ec yn Fiddleryn,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 40 (1984).

⁷ A.W. Moore, *Manx Ballads and Music* (Douglas: G. & R. Johnson, 1896) xxiii. William John Cain was the parish clerk of Braddan and assisted Moore editorially on *Manx Ballads and Music*. “All the ballads [...] have been translated by me, with the assistance of Mr W.J. Cain, into literal English prose.” Moore, *Manx Ballads and Music* xvi.

⁸ Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder, 25 December [1889], Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL), MS 2146/6 A. Faragher’s erratic writing style has been left untouched here. Karl Roeder (1848–1911) was a German national living in Manchester who was a frequent summer visitor to Man where he collected folklore from Faragher and others. He befriended Faragher and the pair corresponded regularly.

be dated to 1889. This places the letter outside the date range of the surviving correspondence between Faragher and Roeder from 1896 to the year of Faragher’s death in 1908, but there seems in fact no good reason to reject the dating. It is known that Roeder was collecting personally in August 1883 in Cregneash and that he was a regular summer visitor to the Island. He had the chance to meet and become acquainted with Faragher well before even 1889.

Quite apart from the fact that Henebry evidently revisited Man on at least one other occasion what is intriguing is the mention that a number of songs were collected from Kermode and furthermore that they appeared in print. Faragher had “neve come across any of them” and no one else has as well so this is a blank at present. The difference in reporting success with Kermode does raise the possibility that Henebry was referring to a separate visit from that made by him and Strachan in 1883.

All this activity, admittedly stretched out over the years, occurred of course before Clague came on the scene. Before he came on the scene as a folk song collector that is: “I am medical practioner in Castletown, and have extensive practice both in that town and the neighbouring parishes” he had earlier declared in 1879, “My practice carries me through the parishes of Santon, Rushen, Arbory, and Malew.”⁹ As to Clague’s own interest in collecting, he certainly had a collection in some shape by 1891.¹⁰ He seems to have gained a second wind when he began collaboration with the Gill brothers in 1894.¹¹ It was this burst of activity that led to him finding Kermode but more than a full year after agreeing to work with the Gills. The visits of Strachan and Henebry appear not to have registered with him and so Kermode came as a great surprise to him.

Nevertheless, once found Clague gathered three tunes from Kermode on their first encounter alone, and as he wrote, “I think I shall be able to get three more yet.” In the end it was slightly more than “three more” as he returned time and again and noted down a total of at least 46 tunes, the greatest number from any singer in his or anyone else’s collection for that matter. In Clague’s own posthumously published reminiscences in 1911 he was to write touchingly of Kermode:

⁹ Isle of Man Government, *Medical Aid and Poor Relief Commission (Isle of Man): Report and Evidence, with Appendices* (Douglas: Printed (by Authority) by James Brown & Son, 1879) 61 col. a, 62 col. a.

¹⁰ A.W. Moore attempted, and failed, to gain access to Clague’s material. A.W. Moore to G.W. Wood, 12 September 1891, MNHL, MS 1180/4 A, 22 September 1891, MNHL, MS 1180/5 A.

¹¹ “In the autumn of last year I was invited by some gentlemen in the Isle of Man, including my brother, the Northern Deemster, to go there with the special object of collecting what material could be found with a view to the publication of a more complete and accurate record of our national airs than any that already existed.” W.H. Gill, “Manx Music,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* xxi (1895): 125.

“Tonight is the night” must be very old, for the tune is in the Dorian Mode. I took it down from the singing of Thomas Kermode, Bradda. He lost the sight of his eyes after smallpox when he was very little, and he was obliged to use his ears in place of his eyes. He had a wonderfully good memory, and he was good to sing, and he knew the Manx language very well. The greater part of the words and songs that I have are taken down from his singing, and I spent many happy hours in writing them down. Although he was blind, he continued at his work as a fisherman for many years. He had great intelligence, and I owe him a great deal for the knowledge he has given me of the life of the Manx at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He deserves this to preserve his memory.¹²

Kermode died in 1901 and Clague in 1908 but not before the Doctor had paid his dues.

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VIENNA, 2004

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¹² Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [1911]) 23, 25. Reprinted (English text only) *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences* (Douglas: Hospice Care, 1991).

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