

Manx Notes 87 (2007)

“A MOST INTERESTING LECTURE ON MANX MUSIC”

A.P. GRAVES BEFORE THE LONDON MANX SOCIETY (1913)

LECTURE ON MANX MUSIC

A most interesting lecture on Manx music was given by Mr A.P. Graves in Miles Restaurant on Tuesday, the 15th Oct[ober]. The lecturer referred to the restoration of the Manx tunes, and dealt with the subject both historically and temperamentally. He illustrated with stories, and the lecture was interspersed with songs contributed principally by Mr Herbert Collister (who made himself responsible for the programme), Mr Goldsmith, and Mrs Heyes. Miss Graves, the lecturer's daughter, played some characteristic airs, and also accompanied most of the songs, while Miss Sharpe played the accompaniments for Mr Goldsmith. A letter was read from Mr Hall Caine regretting his inability to take the chair, which, in the absence of Mr Freer, the president, was occupied by Mr Denton, vice-president, who proposed a vote of thanks to the lecturer. This was seconded by Captain Collister; and Mr Dougherty, supporting it, remarked that the proceedings ought not to close without a tribute to Miss Wood, who had done so much for Manx music. The function terminated with the singing of the new Manx National Anthem. The next event of the London Manx Society is on November 9th, and takes the form of a supper this year instead of the annual dinner. All Manx friends in London will be cordially welcome.

DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT

It was with great anticipation that I attended the meeting of the London Manx Society on Tuesday evening, 15th inst. I have a very deep personal interest in Manx music and in all that pertains to what as one of the younger generation for whom *Manx National Songs* was on the market before our interest in the subject had awakened, I relished the idea. of hearing one of the helpers in its compilation speak on the subject. Mr Graves, of course, is not a Manxman—he hails from the Emerald Isle; but he is not devoid of genealogical interest in Ellan Vannin, for he informed us that his father and mother were married in Kirk Malew. Mr Graves' name is familiar to lovers of music as the writer of the lyrics for a number of popular songs, the best known of which is “Father O'Flynn.”

As an Irishman and a musician, he had been keenly interested in Irish folk-song before touching the subject of the kindred art of Manxland. His own collection of Irish folk-melodies, indeed, now numbers over 1,000. It was his appointment as an inspector of schools for the district of Manchester which began his connection with Manx music, for, by a strange bit of redtape, Man was coupled with the Manchester rather than the Liverpool district. That was in 1875. From that time until the

'nineties he “dabbled” in the subject on his own lines. His visit to Dr Clague, of Castletown, with a request to see some of his precious manuscript copies of the native folk songs led to a courteous but firm refusal from the worthy doctor. Once bitten, twice shy, said the composer of “Crofton”—he had loaned a number of melodies to the Welsh harper, Ap Thomas, for production in Wales. They were never produced, for the Welshman lost them. No more dealings did Dr Clague intend to have with “foreigners.” So Mr Graves, for the time being, was repulsed. Not long afterwards, however, the work of Dr Clague and the Deemster Gill was reinforced by the accession of Mr W.H. Gill, who not only revised the work of his helpers, but did a considerable amount of original research. His experiences with Phillie the Desert in the Baldwin valley, as told by Mr Graves, were most amusing. Mr Gill recognised that if Manx folk songs were to be saved, new lyrics for them were essential, to appeal to an English speaking and English-thinking generation, and it was on this point that Mr Graves came into the work. He supplied a number of lyrics, all of which reveal his ready power of versification and knowledge of things Manx; but not all of which have real poetic feeling. He also introduced the subject to Messrs Boosey, with the result that *Manx National Songs* was on the market by 1897, and that a number of songs from the volume were given at the ballad concerts at St James' Hall mainly by Mr Plunket Greene.

All this was interesting, the more so as numerous illustrations were given by Mr Herbert Collister (whom I had not heard for seven years), by Mr Arthur Goldsmith, by Mrs Heyes, with pianoforte renderings by Miss Graves; but the interest of it all was that, for the general public, constrained to listen for an hour or two on a topic of passing sentiment. The student of Manx music found little in it. I hoped, when Dr Graves proceeded to deal with the comparative worth of the old ballads and the melodies, that his contribution would be weighty. He singled out—as most writers and lecturers do—“Mylecharaine,” and discussed the time-honoured question of the first dowry given in gold to the daughters of Man. He seemed to agree with T.E. Brown's remark in the preface to *Manx Songs and Ballads*, that the words were altogether unworthy of the melody, and that possibly the original words were lost. He mystified some of us, however, when (still quoting T.E.B.) he alluded to “Mylecharaine” as “suggesting a depth of ineffable melancholy.” The tune was sung for us—as given in Gill's book, at the usual rate of “Allegro moderato.” But how Mr Graves (or anybody else, for that matter) can associate “ineffable melancholy” with the customary rendering of “Mylecharaine” is a mystery to me. I have, at one time or another, endeavoured to see or hear every possible version of “Mylecharaine.” I think Gill's version of it one of the weakest things in an otherwise fine book. Mr A.W. Moore (to whom Mr Graves merely referred by name) has a truer and better version in his *Manx Ballads and Music*. But have the musicians of the Island not become familiar with J.B. Nicholson's version, as published by Johnson, Prospect-hill? His

melody is superb, and his particular instruction that it should be sung “slowly and plaintively” does suggest ineffable melancholy. Is this version known to Mr Graves?

Then as to the future of Manx music. Mr Graves reminded us that many scores of melodies still remained among the manuscripts of the late Dr Clague and urged that they should be secured. Might we not ask that those, and also those in the possession of Mr W.H. Gill, should be obtained for the Douglas Public Library, if not in the original, at least in manuscript copy? We are thankful that in Mr William Cubbon we have a librarian who is an enthusiastic Manx litterateur: can he not initiate such a labour of love?

Then in the matter of the words for these songs. New lyrics are essential: why not this be the task of the rising verse-makers of the Island, “Cushag” leading? One would feel glad to know that Miss Kermode was doing something in this matter; she has the music of the Manx very finely developed in some of her little poems.

It was fine to recognise the interest of London Manx people in such a subject, and if, from the publicity again given to the matter by Mr Graves, Manx opinion at home can be galvanised into activity about it, one will be very thankful.

R. Wilfrid Callin

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