

Manx Notes 141 (2012)

“REE! BEN JUAN TAMMY”
(‘RUN! JOHN TOMMY’S WIFE’) *

“Ree! Ben Juan Tammy” (‘Run! John Tommy’s Wife’) is a Christmas-tide processional custom known to date only from Castletown. Whether it was more widely practised (or known) in the Island is unclear as we just have sources from Castletown available to us. The first mention in print is from A.W. Moore’s *Manx Ballads and Music* (1896) where he writes that:

The strange ditty, “Roie Ben sheen Tammy,” of which I give three versions,¹ still lingers in Castletown. It is probably merely a fragment of the original song, the words having decreased in number, while losing their meaning.² Mrs Ferrier says that the boys came round singing it at Christmas arrayed in sacks, and that they danced a sort of jig to the chorus which they sang very rapidly.³

Like Annie Gell, Mrs Ferrier was another of the female collectors of the period drawn into Moore’s circle of helpers. In her own right, she was Margaret F[rances?] Ferrier (1835–1907), aged 56 in the 1891 census, the wife of Edward Ferrier, the Government Chaplain. They lived not in Douglas (now the capital) but in Castletown, at 3 Arbory Road with their four unmarried daughters together with a cook and housemaid.⁴ She contributed at least two tunes to Moore’s *MBM*, “Roie Ben sheen Tammy” and the second version of “Hop-tu-naa.” She was both collector and originator of the material.⁵

Dr John Clague also witnessed this seasonal custom and a brief description appears in the posthumously published *Cooinaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences* (n.d. but 1911):

At Christmas young boys used to go about with their faces made black, and women’s white caps and aprons on them, dancing and singing,
“Run! John Tommy’s wife.”⁶

Fortunately, we have a little more detail in a notebook kept by Clague that contains much of the material later worked up into the manuscript that became *Cooinaghtyn Manninagh*. The two passages read so:

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘Ree! Ben Juan Tammy’ (‘Run! John Tommy’s Wife’),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu*, July (2012), [8]–[9]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ In fact, four versions are given in the text.

² This is, of course, mere surmise. Based as ever on the notion of the so-called “decay” of vernacular material.

³ A.W. Moore, “Introduction,” *Manx Ballads and Music* (Douglas: G. & R. Johnson, 1896) xxi.

⁴ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Castletown 1891, PRO, RG 12/4691, fol. 11, sch. 45.

⁵ Moore, “Introduction,” xxxiii & xxxiv.

⁶ Dr John Clague, *Cooinaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]) 15.

Ree! Ben Juan Tammy
 Boys with their faces blackened—wearing white
 women’s caps and white aprons going about on the
 Houses singing & dancing Ree Ben Juan Tammy.⁷

Ree Ben Juan Tammy
 Local song & dramatic dance
 Boys with blackened faces—wearing old fashioned white night caps with long
 ‘*interlined* white’ strings—dancing before the doors or in halls or houses.
 also white aprons⁸

This is a regular feature of such calendar customs—the disguising of identity and reverse dressing thus creating a liminal zone in which such activities take place. Again we can see such a festivity now the preserve of children or adolescents rather than men as would have been the norm in an earlier period. Evident from the notebook is that it was a house visiting custom, similar to the “The White Boys” who performed the mumming play on their visits. We have no description of the dance but Moore reproduces four texts of the song (though lacking the chorus that he makes mention of).

In order of reproduction in *MBM*, the first text is supplied by the Rev. T.E. Brown,⁹ the second by Rev. J.W. Kewley,¹⁰ third from “J.C. Cannell” (taken to be a misprint for J.E. Cannell), and finally the fourth by Mrs [Margaret] Ferrier. As seen Ferrier was from Castletown. Kewley was the vicar of Arbory, Brown was familiar with the Castletown variant of the “Hop-tu-Naa” song and likely sourced his text alongside that, it is only Cannell who is outside the orbit of the town itself. If a misprint, then it is the John Edward Cannell enumerated in the 1901 census, aged 48 years old, living at [34] Parliament Street, Ramsey, with his mother and brother and sister. His occupation was given as an outfitter and shopkeeper.¹¹ That he is from

⁷ “Manx Folk Lore,” notebook compiled by Dr John Clague (1842–1908), undated [1892 or after], MNHL, MS 952 A.

⁸ “Manx Folk Lore,” notebook compiled by Dr John Clague (1842–1908), undated [1892 or after], MNHL, MS 952 A.

⁹ For those who need an introduction to this figure, see Thomas Seacombe, *rev.* Sayoni Basu, *Brown, Thomas Edward (1830–1897)*, 2004, Oxford University Press. The best guide is Richard Tobias, *T.E. Brown*, Twayne’s English Authors Series, ed. Herbert Sussman, vol. 213 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

¹⁰ For the (later Archdeacon) Rev. J.W. Kewley (1860–1941), see J.D. Qualtrough, “Archdeacon John Kewley, 1860–1941,” *Journal of the Manx Museum* v.65 (1941). Corrected by Emma [as “Miss Kewley”] Kewley, “Errata i,” *Journal of the Manx Museum* v.65 (1942). See too, John Gelling, “Kewley, Venerable John (1860–1941),” *New Manx Worthies*, ed. Dollin Kelly (Douglas: Manx Heritage Foundation, 2006). Also, Rev. John Kewley, “Rambling Memories of a Manx Sexagenarian,” *Ellan Vannin Magazine* i (1923).

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Ramsey might indicate the wider extent of the custom; however, he was an enthusiast for the revival of Manx and may have come across the text as part of that activity.

There is another pair of texts and a tune recorded by Mrs Margaret Clague (*d.* 1911) to note. This material is reproduced in A.G. Gilchrist’s (partial but substantive) edition of the Clague Collection and here we now have to deal with yet another unnoted female collector active in this period.¹² Again, the wider extent of her activity is lost but one wonders if she collected as a pair alongside Margaret Ferrier, in the way that Sophia Morrison and Josephine Kermodé worked together. That they did in fact do so would explain the pair having recorded “Ree! Ben Juan Tammy” as a piece of joint activity as opposed to separate solo collecting of the same item. This still raises the question as to the activity of the couple whether as a pair or as individual collectors.

Returning to “Ree! Ben Juan Tammy” itself, that the custom appears to have taken place only in Castletown on the strength of the evidence so far available to us, shows that we need to be more aware of variation *within* the Island of the practice and performance of seasonal and calendar customs. As can be seen with the “Hop-tu-Naa” song, there are definite differences in the texts and these can be readily localised to Douglas, Peel, Ramsey, and Castletown. Here, however, we have a custom likely *only* to have been performed in Castletown. As ever, the full meaning and function of the custom is difficult to recover from the small amount of evidence available to us. There is no mention, surprisingly given the nature of the custom, of the performers receiving a dole for their performance though this must have occurred given that it was a house visiting custom. That “John Tommy’s Wife” was told to run has a suggestion that martial infidelity was something ever suspected within a Manx

given as an outfitter and shopkeeper. *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Ramsey 1901, PRO, RG 13/5307, fol. 131, sch. 65; *Brown’s Directory* for 1894, has the following entry: “Cannell John Edward, hatter, tailor, and clothier, 34 Parliament-street.” See “Ramsey Alphabetical List,” 427–47, *Brown’s Directory for the Isle of Man*, (Douglas: Brown and Son, 1894); *Porter’s Directory* for 1889, has similar entries: (a) “CANNELL JOHN EDWD., tailor, hatter, clothier and outfitter, 34 Parliament st” (361b). See “Ramsey Alphabetical Directory,” 359–85; (b) “Clothiers and Outfitters. Cannell John E., 34 Parliament st” (349). See “Ramsey Classified Trades,” 347–57, *Porter’s Directory for the Isle of Man*, (Liverpool: Rockliff Brothers, 1889).; Cannell later involved in the Manx Language Society’s initiative (from 1906 onwards) to sound record examples of Manx Gaelic. Cannell was seemingly recorded by John Nelson on 7 November 1906, and one (if the only) cylinder survives from this session. MNH, IOMMM 1955–344 A. Typescript label (in blue) on top of the cylinder casing reads: “LORDS PRAYERS | READ BY | J.E.CANNELL | RAMSEY | I.O.M. | NOV.7. 1906”. However, Cannell is enumerated in the 1901 census record as speaking English *only*. Evidently then, an enthusiast for the revival of the Manx language.

¹² A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part i),” *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* vii.28 (1924), A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part ii),” *JFSS* vii.29 (1925), A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part iii),” *JFSS* vii.30 (1926).

household (whether actual or not...) and shows the the function of many folk customs is in reinforcing normative social and personal boundaries within a community.

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73.—CHRISTMAS MUMMERS' SONG-DANCE :

Re, Ben Yan Tammy!

(RUN, JOHN TAMMY'S WIFE!)

Noted by Mrs. Clague.

Re, ben Yan Tam-my, Re, ben Yan hi-ra! Re a spit-tag beg a,
Hur-ra the wad-dle, Dim a doo-dle dod-dle! Re a spit-tag beg a,
[or Ree a spit a veg a,

Shan-na reg-an bi-ra. Dim a dod-dle, dim a dod-dle.
Shan-na reg-an bi-ra.
Shu-na reg-as bir-ra.]

Source: A.G. Gilchrist, “Songs from the Isle of Man (Part i),” *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, vii.28 (1924), v–xvi & 99–198. See No. 73, “Christmas Mummings’ Song-Dance: ‘Re, Ben Yan Tammy!’ (‘Run, John Tammy’s Wife!’),” 180.

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VIENNA, 2012

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