

Manx Notes 166 (2013)

THE SONGS OF MANNIN

VALUABLE PUBLICATION BY EMINENT STUDENTS

COULDN'T THE POOR LITTLE ISLAND **EVER** ACHIEVE

ORIGINALITY? (1925) *

[8c] The patriotic Manxman, zealous to preserve for himself and his countrymen “whate’er is left to us of ancient heritage,” is probably incapable of viewing with an impartial eye the attempts made from time to time to filch that heritage from him—demonstrations by the learned that that every vestige of the national “manners, speech, humours, polity” has been appropriated from other countries, or is at best a mere cast-off clout—that his forebears, in short, subsisted on the crumbs cast to them by the possessors of a superior culture. If he be at all candid, at all mindful of the Island’s political and economic history, he will not prefer any considerable claims to exclusive property in this or that institution or custom or scrap of folk-lore or folk-song. He will recognise that in his veins flows the same admixture of blood as those of the Scottish Gael; and the same soil is likely to grow the same flowers. He will recognise his country’s proximity to other lands, and its consequent exposure to alien influence, and will understand that there must have been a fair amount of definite and avowed borrowing. But he will, nevertheless, cling obstinately to the belief that some of Mannin’s belongings really are expressions of a peculiarly Manx temperament, come straight from the creative genius of the race. to quote Tom Brown again—

“Dear me! If it was only Dick-Quayle-Vessy,

He’s yours for all; take care of the lek—

‘Cair! [‘properly’] cair!’ says Billy Injebreeck.”

The scientist’s enthusiasm for classification, for reconciling the apparently diverse, for tracing everything to a primitive source, is as likely to lead him astray as the acquisitive zeal of the most rampant nationalist.

The twenty-eight number of the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, published a few days ago, is devoted to a reproduction of nearly eighty Manx tunes, edited with great industry and great skill by Miss A.G. Gilchrist, a prominent member of the Folk-Song Society, assisted by Miss Lucy R. Broadwood. Miss Gilchrist is a very prominent worker in this field of research and has laboured in the exploration of the folk-tunes of many British counties; she has for many years past corresponded with well-known Manx students, and has carefully examined all the Manx airs of which there is any record, and notably those contained in the published collections of Mr A.W. Moore and Mr W.H. Gill, and the manuscript collection of Dr Clague. Manx patriots cannot be sufficiently grateful to her for having fixed upon the page many

* P.W. Caine, “The Songs of Mannin,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 17 July 1925, 8 cols c–d.

interesting and sometimes beautiful melodies of which they had not hitherto suspected the existence, and they will acknowledge that many of her comparisons with the melodies of England, Scotland, and Ireland are illuminating, and often conclusive; and it is quite without conclusive; and it is quite without resentment that they will note that now and then she seems to build up identifications upon very slight and casual resemblances.

“KIRREE FO NIAGHTEY” AND ITS SCOTCH RELATIONS

Even on that point, Miss Gilchrist speaks with two voices, once of which will not fall very harshly upon the susceptible ear of Manx patriotism. In her preface, she declares that the majority of Manx tunes “seem to be immigrants, and mostly with no very long period of settlement behind them,” adding by way of soothing saving clause that “these Manx versions are attractive and well-formed members of the families to which they belong,” and that “careful comparative study would probably help one to differentiate a special Manx flavour.” But when she comes to discuss the beautiful “Kirree fo Niaghtey,” and produces two Scottish melodies which are undeniable brother and sister to the Manx tune, and which also are wedded to lyrics relating to the care of sheep, then she is prepared to concede that the various forms of the tune may have derived from a common original current in both Scotland and the Isle of Man. Why not extend the same characteristic construction to other airs besides this? Why not, occasionally, give Manxland credit for something more than “having gathered into her bosom those waifs and strays of the surrounding lands, and thus kept them alive, whereas they have been permitted to die and are unknown elsewhere?” This last quotation, one ought to explain, is not from Miss Gilchrist, but from Mr W.H. Gill’s preface to the shamefully-neglected collection called *Manx National Music*.

THE DORIAN MODE AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE MANX SOUL

And some airs of which the folklorist would rob us seem far more patently peculiar to the Isle of Man than is “Kirree fo Niaghtey.” The Dorian mode—a scale commencing and ending with D, with a flattening of the sixth, or the seventh as it would be in the “open key” of C—the habitual use of an interval of seven tones instead of the complete octave, and the use of a form of verse-structure which has been christened the “In Memoriam” stanza, because in it the second line is repeated in the third, and the last line in the fourth—all these can be found in the minstrelsy of Scotland and Ireland. But in those countries their appearance is rare, whereas in the Isle of Man tunes constructed after those forms constitute a very considerable proportion of the whole. The beautiful air “Nancy in London,” (No. xc in *Manx National Music*) combines most of the characteristics of what is unquestionably the prevalent Manx “flavour.” The Dorian mode, grave and pensive rather than

positively melancholy, suited well with the somewhat sombre and fatalistic temperament of the Manx people.

TRANSLATIONS FROM ENGLISH BALLADS

When the Manxman desired to express himself, musically, in a mood of sprightliness or of contentment, then, one verily believes, he did borrow from his neighbours. Irish and Scottish harpers and fiddlers did not miss the Isle of Man in their peregrinations, and the Stanleys [8d] brought over a retinue of serving-men as well as of officials. A large proportion of the population must have learnt to speak in both languages at quite an early period, and before long they began to sing songs which unquestionably came from England, and, apparently, to fit out the English songs with Manx words, sometimes translations from the English. Dr Clague found a tune known in Manx as “Young men, beware of jealousy,” and Miss Gilchrist produces the final line of many a local version of the English song “Oxford City”—“So, young men, beware of jealousy.” Similarly, an English original of “My love is like the sun”—of which air three variants were recorded by Dr Clague—is now presented. There are other cases of the same sort, and there are airs of which only the title survives, and yet that title is English. Contrariwise, there are tunes which conform perfectly to English models, but which bear Manx titles, and titles suggestive of pastoral and nautical subjects. Dr Clague and Mr Gill, it must be observed, confined their researches mainly to the airs, and usually let the words go, retaining only the identifying titles. The present writer has composed scores and scores of lyrics to these airs, using the original title as a mere hint to the imagination.

THE EVOLUTION OF A “MANX” (!) SONG

How easy it is to manufacture a tradition, and from what morasses of mock-antiquity the researches of investigators like Miss Gilchrist can save the well-meaning who do not know, but are anxious to be told, is illustrated in this book by the story of the air “Yn Eanleyder as yn Lhondhoo” (“The Fowler and the Blackbird”). Dr Clague came across an air of that name, with, as usual, no accompanying words other than the title. Mr Gill, when preparing a selection of the airs for singing, was struck with the similarity between this title concerning the blackbird, and two genuine bits of Manx folk-lore concerning the blackbird, neither of which ever were or could have been associated with music. He communicated this blackbird theme to one of his London friends of his who wrote the lyrics for *Manx National Songs*, and the result was the modern Manx song, “O, what if the fowler my blackbird has taken.” It fitted adorably with the old air, but had nothing to do, of course, with the lost Manx poem. The lyric so charmed that admirable composer, Mr Roger Quilter, that he wrote a new air to it, a new “O, what if the fowler,” which air now appears in a sheet form as having been “written to an old Manx song”! Now comes Miss Gilchrist with the original “fowler and blackbird” poem, which was a Jacobite ditty, the “blackbird”

being a cautious pseudonym for the Old Pretender—a sort of “King over the water.” Even the air, so Miss Broadwood states, is a blend of “The Flowers and the Forest,” and “The Irish Stranger.” It was a beautiful tune, too, and one feels almost heart-broken to have to relinquish it.

DR CLAGUE AND W.H. GILL

A word ought to be said about the collection from which the airs presented and discussed by Miss Gilchrist have been taken. Throughout this volume it is invariably alluded to as “the Clague collection.” As has been stated in the prefaces to *Manx National Songs* and *Manx National Music*, both published by Mr W.H. Gill, the collectors were Dr John Clague, the “beloved physician” of Castletown, and Deemster J. Fred Gill. The lion’s share of the work, undoubtedly, was done by Dr Clague, who had the *entrée* into hundreds of homes in the South of the Island, and who throughout his life made notes on all manner of Manx subjects, leaving behind him, as his friend the Archdeacon informed Miss Gilchrist, over thirty volumes of manuscript. The tunes recorded by Dr Clague total 315; of this number, only fifty or so appear in *Manx National Songs*, and 140 in *Manx National Music*; a few more were later published by Miss S. Morrison in the magazine *Mannin*. It should be borne in mind that some of them were only variants and that others were identifiable importations. There is a tendency to regard Mr W.H. Gill as a mere compiler and arranger, and it is obvious that he, being resided off the Island for the greater period of his long life, and being only able to visit his native land during vacations, had not the same opportunity for personal research as his colleagues; but it is nevertheless true that he himself visited the homes of well-known old singers like “Phillie the Desert” and “Blind Cain,” and *Manx National Music* contains occasional airs which he seems to have acquired independently. Criticisms of Mr Gill’s very scant “restorations” of the airs, and of his pianoforte symphonies—criticisms in which the present writer, for one, flatly refused to join, having an intense admiration for many of those same symphonies—should not lead the friends of Dr Clague to exclude Mr Gill and his brother the Deemster from their share in the credit for this great work of preservation. Mr Gill, in his lifetime, never behaved thus ungenerously to Dr Clague.

MISS MONA DOUGLAS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Several airs collected by Miss Mona Douglas see light for the first time in the publication under review. The “Sea Invocation,” with which the volume opens, is singularly beautiful, and has a refrain of meaningless vocables—the equivalent of the English “fa la la”—very suggestive of the Hebridean airs. The stories of the “Bollan Bane” and “The Lazy Wife,” told as accompaniments to certain tunes, are given in this book, besides a new and wholly charming piece of folklore concerning the legendary hero Manannan.

“THE SONGS OF MANNIN”

A second instalment of this collection of Manx airs, consisting solely of tunes wedded to the carols in Manx sung at the “Oiel Verry” celebrations on Christmas Eve, is to appear shortly, and will be awaited with the liveliest interest. Copies of the journal, it should be made clear, are only to be obtained by subscribers to the Folk-Song Society; and the Society is doing so admirable a work throughout the British Isles as to be well deserving of support from Manx people. The secretary is Mrs E. Lydia John, of 19 Berners-street, London, W.1.

