

Manx Notes 167 (2013)

THE SONGS OUR MOTHERS SANG ANOTHER ADMIRABLE COLLECTION OF MANX NATIONAL AIRS (1926) *

[8b] If the old ballads sung by the former inhabitants of the Isle of Man, with their Manx-Gaelic words and their curious characteristic and sometimes intrinsically beautiful tunes, are known very little among the present generation of Manx people, the sacred melodies which inspired Manx hearts and dwelt upon Manx tongues have sunk little more deeply into oblivion. It is probable that after the publication of the 29th number of the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, which is now in the hands of subscribers, more persons will be aware of the existence of these native hymns, with their native airs, and will have some familiarity with their general composition, outside the Isle of Man than in it. This volume is the successor to one published twelve months ago, devoted to the collection and examination of secular Manx music, and the amount of material awaiting skilled investigation has proved so large that yet another number of the journal is to be allocated to this purpose. That a large and influential body of students, many of them positively eminent in their particular line, should be willing to let their official publication be monopolised for nearly two years by matter obtained from the Isle of Man, is highly flattering to this little community, and Manx people who prize their national heritage ought to be profoundly grateful to the editor of this collection, Miss A.G. Gilchrist.

THE “CARVALS”

The Manx are, it is needless to say, an intensely religious people, and those among them who conceived themselves to possess the poetic talent usually preferred to exercise it upon sacred subjects rather than secular. And so, there grew up in the Isle of Man a special branch of literature which may almost be considered unique. The Manx “carval” is not quite the same thing as the English carol, and it is by no means unquestioned that even the Manx title is a corruption of the English word. The English carol was almost invariably a Christmas carol; the subject in every case, practically, was the birth of Jesus Christ, and the singer brought tidings of comfort and joy. While a few of the Manx carvals are of reasonable antiquity, and some would seem to have even a medieval origin, the great majority were composed following upon the translation of the Bible into Manx, and upon that concurrent event, the Methodist revival. The carval-composer was a local preacher in verse, and while he did sometimes preach upon the Nativity, and while indeed he very often began, at least, upon the Nativity, he ranged over the whole of the Scriptures for his

* P.W. Caine, “The Songs Our Mothers Sang,” *Isle of Man Examiner*, 21 May 1926, 8 cols b–d.

text. We have our “Carval Yoseph,” “Carval Susanna,” “Carval Sodom and Gomorah,” “Carval Ean Basher,” (John the Baptist), “Carval Nebuchadnezzar,” “Carval Yonah,” “Carval Yezebel,” “Carval Noo (Saint) Paul,” and “Carval of the Beginning and End of the World.” One of the most popular of all, to be found in numerous manuscripts books which have been preserved, was sometimes called “The Question and Answer Carol,” but more often than not “The Class-Leader.” And the “call” which the Methodist received to preach in prose or verse, was essentially a serious call. The carvals are not always doggerel; sometimes they possess a grim eloquence reminding one of the Hebrew prophets; but they are usually sombre, and it is perfectly true that in their visions of the Day of Judgment, for every one line which describes the raptures of the blessed, ten are devoted to the tortures of the damned.

THE CARVAL TUNES

Hymns, particularly hymns of comparatively modern date, and above all hymns which are frequently fifty or sixty verses in length, do not specially appeal to the folklorist, and in any case Miss Gilchrist has had to be guided in her selection from a great mass of matter, by the association of words with tunes. The number of tunes known to have been sung to Manx carvals—though the same air frequently did duty both for a carval, or several carvals in the same metre, and a ballad—is not more than thirty. Carval-tunes to that number were published many years ago in *Manx National Music*, of which the basis was a collection made by Dr Clague of Castletown. Dr Clague visited the homes of very many old people, and noted the airs as they were sung, and Miss Gilchrist prefers to go straight to the fountain-head, in the form of the doctor’s original manuscripts, placed at her disposal by his executor, Archdeacon Kewley, himself a very reliable Manx scholar. By a very happy coincidence, the carvals which survived on the lips of the old people who used to sing them, and not merely in what George Borrow, after a visit to the Isle of Man, called “smoke-begrimed manuscripts,” happen to be among those which are the most quaint, and full of general interest.

A THEME HANDED DOWN FROM THE IV CENTURY

One of them, and one which was only unearthed quite recently (by Mr Cyril I. Paton of London), has proved of very great scientific interest, and has been made the subject of a most valuable essay by that very thorough student, Mr A. Martin Freeman. The carval in question consists [8c] of a debate between the body and the soul, when their companionship has been dissolved by Death. The body, lying mouldering in the grave, is visited by the uneasy soul, and each reproaches the other for having led it into the state of convicted guilt and impending punishment in which both now find themselves. Says the body, “Why didst thou not keep me from sin, as we were setting it forward every day?” Replies the soul, “O, body! thou wast so

strong, I was not able to turn [thee].” “Each protests,” as Miss Gilchrist summarises the case in a review of a Middle English similar in subject, “that he was the slave of the other.” And so the debate goes on until devils drag the soul away to everlasting torment. There are suggestions of the same theme in the “Carval Scollag Aeg,” the story of an ungodly youth who was converted after a vision had come to him of a soul which was met on the borad way by the Devil and his angels, and bidden to show cause why he should not be considered as lawful prey. “What hast thou to say against the body?” demands the Devil. “Was it not thyself that was its matter?”

Now this theme of the soul’s sifting the responsibility on to the body, and the body throwing the responsibility on to the soul, is shown by Mr Freeman and Miss Gilchrist to be very ancient in origin, and to be current in almost every European language. There are versions in Anglo Saxon, in early Irish, in early French, in Dutch and Russian, and in some fifteen languages, and indeed the germ of it can be traced to the “Apocalypse of St Paul,” which belongs to the fourth century.

THE CAROL ON BAD WOMEN

One of the best-known of all the carvals was that concerning “Drogh Vraane,” or wicked women. This was the earliest carval to be printed, and it was sung to several tunes, the finest of which is embodied in *Manx National Songs*, and set to words extolling the virtues of the martyred patriot Illiam Dhona. It is a most curious production, and warns men against succumbing to the wiles of feminine tempters by citing the awful examples of all the wicked women in the Bible, from Eve downwards. (Hence the carval’s alternative title, “Carval Yezebel”). As one of the “Little Minster’s” congregation said, “He riddled them, he fair riddled them, till I was ashamed of being married.” But at last the moralist relents, and bethinks him that there were good women in the Bible as well as bad, and that the Saviour himself was born of a woman. He ends by exhorting his hearers, men and womn alike, to forsake sin and follow Christ.

TWIN PICTURES

Now, it was the good fortune of the present writer to discover, only a few months ago, a companion to the “Carval Drogh Vranne”—the carval concerning “Drogh Haggertyn,” or evil priests. The existence of this carval had been known since 1844, when the Manx poet William Kennish published a versified description of the “Oiel Verrey” services, at which the carvals were usually sung, and instanced one man who used to take advantage of the absence of the parson from the church—the parson went home after the appointed prayers had been said, and left the carollers to their pious orgies—by singing a tirade against the misdoings of parsons in general. It is said that the singer had a personal spite against the then vicar of Maughold because of some private disagreement, but the contents of the carval, as revealed after an interval of eight years, do not suggest any such contemptibly petty motive. As in the

“Carval Drogh Vraane,” the writer searched the Bible for examples of priests who neglected or abused their function—the Pharisees of the Gospel and the false shepherds of the Prophecies. “It is a distress to my spirit,” says he, “and a trouble to my heart, that the rulers of the Church should have been compared to dogs—yes, to dumb dogs that they will not bark.” “But,” he concedes, “they are not all like that. There are pious priests”—and again he turns to his Bible. There was Phineas the son of Eliezer, and Jehoiada, who slew Mattan the priest of Baal—“this, then, was a good priest.” And he winds up, as he had done in the “Carval Drogh Vraane”—with an exhortation to all, priest and congregation alike, to offer their hearts to God.

“THE PRODIGAL SON,” OTHERWISE “THE PELICAN”

Another well-known carval, quoted by Miss Gilchrist, was the “Mac Stroiltagh,” “The Prodigal Son.” A man who had been brought up in a pious home, and had himself begun well, but had backslidden and fallen into sin and into poverty, laments his sad state. In the first verse of the carval, at the outset of his lament, he compares himself to the pelican in the wilderness, and hence the carval was alternatively known as “The Pelican.” The author was Patrick Caley, of Lezayre, a well-known Methodist local preacher in the early part of the nineteenth century.

THE RESURECTION OF THE BODY

The carvals ought not to be described as grim and repellent; some of them, though they treat serious subjects in an earnest fashion, have a quiet, pious simplicity which is very appealing. And some provoke the tender smile by refreshing quaintness of speech. One write whom Miss Gilchrist quotes, speaking of the summoning of the quick and dead to the bar of judgment, remarks that the sea will give up its dead, “though they were eaten at the fishes.” Expressed in rustic language, the idea seems ludicrous; and yet, is it not the logical equivalent, applied to those who die at sea, of Job’s “Though worms destroy this body”? Elaborating the idea, the writer adds that restoration shall also come to those who were set in gibbets, their bodies blasted with the wind and wasted with the sun, and to those who were burnt at the stake. “How wonderful it is, my friends, that ashes scattered abroad should come to be living men.” “Each part of the body,” he concludes, “will come into its proper position; sight, hearing, walking, talking, as they were in the world.”

THE OLD SINGERS—“BLIND CAIN,” “PHILIE THE DESERT,” AND THE REST

Where did Dr Clague get all these quaint old songs, sacred and secular? Who were the old people, who had in their youth delighted to sing these traditional airs, and who, with possibly quavering voice and faltering memory, delighted to repeat them before a simple-hearted, sympathetic listener? Many people who read this article will have seen “Blind Cain” and his concertina in the streets of Douglas. Many will

remember [8d] Philip Cain of Baldwin, who is immortalised in “The Manx Wedding” as “Phillie the Desert,” and his companion in the verse, “Tommy the Mate”—Thomas Crellin of Peel. Another very noted ballad and carval-singer was Tom Kermode, of Bradda—“Buy [*sic*] Doal” or “Blind Boy,” as he was familiarly called. There was George Moore, of Balladoole, Thomas Cowell, of Marown, John Joughin, of the Garey, Lezayre, Henry Clague, of Ballanorris, Simpson Clucas, of Castletown, John Cain, (Douglas), Charles Faragher, of the Cross-Four-Roads, John Radcliffe, of the Howe, Charles Clague, of Ballaclague, Edward Corteen, surveyor of highways, Mrs Lawson, of Ballachurry, Jurby, and Miss Mary Gawne, Peel. They loved these simple, artless memorials of their childhood, and the present generation, with all its musical education and material sophistication, might do well to bestow a little of its love in the same place.

The journal in which all this has appeared is the official publication of the Folk-Song Society, whose secretary is Miss Lydia John, 19, Berners-street, London, W.1. It is only issued to subscribers, so that if you would like a copy, or would wish to bespeak the third number relating to Manx folk music, which is to be issued shortly, you know how to obtain it. The work which the Society is doing in every district in the British Isles, and in those parts of America where British influence is strongest, is worthy of the utmost support.

