

Manx Notes 171 (2013)

MANX FOLK SONGS (1927) *

[284] A happy inspiration came to the organisers of this year's Cruinnaght of asking Mr James Lyon, Mus.D., a well-known student of folk-song, to adjudicate in the musical classes, the test-piece in each of which was one of the recognised Manx folk airs. Dr Lyon adjudicated in the Manx Music Guild competitions seventeen or eighteen years ago, and acquired a perfect passion for the melodies native to the Isle of Man, several of which he provided with appropriate harmonic arrangements, and caused to be published. On the evening preceding the Cruinnaght, Dr Lyon gave a lecture in the Douglas Town Hall. Mr Ramsey B. Moore, Attorney-General, presided over a very respectable-sized gathering.

Dr Lyon claimed that music was the most expressive of the arts, and reflected the inner soul of those who made it. Folk-song was not "composed," as ordinary music was; it gradually came into existence, it spoke from the heart, telling of joy, love, sorrow, or any other overpowering emotion. Three great influences played a great part in the making of a nation's folk-song—the national geography, the national history, and the national temperament. Discussing the influence of the Norse invasion, Dr Lyon thought it extraordinary that the strong rhythmic element which was so pronounced a feature of Norwegian music had left no trace in the folk-songs of the Isle of Man. Perhaps this might be due to the next generation being born of Norse fathers but Manx mothers, so that the children would be likely to sing the songs learnt from their mothers

As for the Manx temperament, Dr Lyons described it as a mixture of optimism and pessimism. If you asked a Manxman a question, he would not give a definite "yes" or "no," but would answer with qualifications, such as "Oh, like enough," or "maybe." The Manx proverbs showed what sort of folk the Manx were—take, [285] for example, the proverb, "Traa dy liooar," "Time enough." He could suggest a proverb to complete that—"There's always plenty of time, until it's too late." They had thought they had plenty of time to collect their folk-song, but they had left it till it was nearly too late. He hoped he was not hurting anybody's feelings by not speaking too flatteringly of hitherto published collections, but a collection could be made which would be of infinite value, not only to this part of the world, but to the world at large. They had a genuine heritage of song, of which they had a right to be proud—a heritage which compared well with those of nations which boasted of the beauty of their folk-song. It was a sacred trust committed to them, and they were not doing much with it. Nearly twenty years ago he had advocated the use of the phonograph as a means of recording the folk-songs of the Island, and he wondered whether that idea had been carried into effect.

* P.W. Caine, "Manx Folk Songs," *Ellan Vannin Magazine* ii (1927), 284–87.

It would be very foolish, continued Dr Lyon, to publish a book of folk-tunes which contained the melodies only. Such a book would have purely an academic interest. There must be some kind of accompaniment, either for voices or instrument. Personally, he preferred the accompaniment of voices, though he saw that it was necessary to have instrumental accompaniments. It was necessary that the mode of the tune should be carefully noted, but one must never sacrifice the feeling of the song for the mere slavish carrying-out of a particular mode. To add a feeble, obvious, banal harmonisation to these old songs was desecration. Folk-songs were worthy of the tenderest care and the most conscientious thought, for, after all, was not a folk-song the spirit of the past speaking to the spirit of the present?

The only way to preserve the old songs in a worthy form, Dr Lyons was convinced, was to teach them to the children. If you gave a child the choice of good music or bad, he would almost invariably choose the good. How often was he given the bad! If they were going to feed [286] the coming generation on what he might call “such as was so common in the present day, then God help the national tunes of the future.” But if they decided to have a collection of the best of their national tunes—for they had several downright bad ones; still, they had fifteen or sixteen very fine tunes, and very few nations had more—and if they published these fine tunes in small parcels, say, four in each, and issued them to the schools, then the children would grow up upon them, and they would become part and parcel of the children’s being. There would be very little difficulty about getting their tunes into the schools, he thought, because he happened to be adviser to a publishing firm, and was in a position to say, “We will publish this, or this.” There might be opportunities for arranging some airs as choruses and quartettes, and he could not see why a good piano suite, suitable for instruction to the children, could not be prepared. But school music was expensive to publish, and so long as they could show the publishers that they would at least not be out of pocket over it, he was convinced they would have no difficulty in getting the matter through. But they must think things out seriously, and ask themselves whether they were going to undertake this work with all the enthusiasm of which they were capable, and do it without hope of reward, or whether they were going to let their national music die out. They had to decide; “there’s always plenty of time, until it’s too late.”

Dr Lyon gave as illustrations of how to do it and how not to do it, in the “arranging” of folk-songs, the children’s song known as “The Straw Cradle,” adapted from a Manx air by the late Mr W.H. Gill, and a four-part chorus which was the same air harmonised by a man who really understood his craft, Dr Vaughan Williams. At his request, Mr John Christian sang “Kirree fo Niaghtey,” to a pianoforte accompaniment by Mr J.E. Quayle, Mus.Bac., played on this occasion by Mrs. H. Towler, L.R.A.M. “Kirree fo Niaghtey” was described [287] by the lecturer as being equal to the best folk-song of any country. Dr Lyons also played, by way of illustrating his lecture, “Marry me, Mary Veen,” an air which he himself had

arranged, and which is set to words by “Cushag”; his own arrangement of “Arrane Sooree” (“The Courting Song”); the frolicking “Mummers’ Song,” to be found in A. W. Moore’s *Manx Ballads* and W.H. Gill’s *Manx National Music*; and a common-metre hymn submitted in this year’s Cruinnaght—which, we may add, has already been published in *Manx National Music* (No. xii, Part ii), and, more recently, in No. xxix of the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*. This tune was sung to the Carol of John the Baptist.

Dr Lyons concluded by urging the adoption of another Manx National Anthem, instead of the adaptation of “Mylecharaine,” published by Mr W. H. Gill a few years ago. He described it as the worst national anthem in the world, sloppy, banal, and something that ought never to have found its way into the hearts of the Manx people. It was a corruption of a beautiful old tune, harmonised in a mid-Victorian manner that was a disgrace to the composer. If they were going to sing a national anthem, for Heaven’s sake let them sing one of the tunes of their ancestors, and not a dished-up affair that was nobody’s. He suggested the air known as “Carval Drogh Vraane,” which has been set by Mr W.H. Gill to words commemorating the death of Illiam Dhoan. Dr Lyon described this as a very fine tune, full of dignity, and said that, if they could only get the right words for this purpose, this was a national anthem which they could be proud of, as the French were of theirs. At his suggestion the audience tried the effect of it, singing the air to the “Illiam Dhoan” words alluded to above.

