

Manx Notes 212 (2015)

DID DEEMSTER GILL EVER PHOTOGRAPH MANX FOLK SINGERS? *

In December 1895, W.H. Gill wrote to his brother Deemster J.F. Gill about having recently attended “a capital lecture on Irish Music by D^r Annie Patterson (Mus Doc)” at the Irish Literary Society.¹ Gill was impressed by both the occasion and the setting: “It was held in the rooms of the Soc^y of Arts—a large & very handsome Hall which was filled to overflowing by a most enthusiastic audience—mostly Irish of course.” His letter carries on, “[n]ow this reminds me (I think I told you of it) of their invitation to me to lecture on Manx Music.” Gill had earlier lectured before the Royal Musical Association,² though not he felt with success—“My last attempt at the Mus^l Assocⁿ was evidently thought of too popular a character for the occasion. Next time I will try to be still more popular.”

On that occasion he had lectured for two and a half hours but he was now going to trim it to the two hours mark. There would be (as before) “lantern slides of Manx Scenery as a background and plenty of music.” Both, however, were to be ramped up. As regards the latter, “[w]ould have instrum^{ts} as before + a variety of soloists of repute, a small chorus, and a harp!” As regards the former, a favour was required from his brother—“I am telling you all this because I want you to help me.” And what was to be the nature of that help? W.H. Gill went on to elaborate about what was he was after his brother to do:

I have set me heart first & foremost on having portraits of the “Last of the Minstrels”—our old friends the singers.

I feel every day may bring news of the death of some of them.

I wish therefore you would arrange for photographs to be taken of all of them at my expense.

Separately, I suppose, it must be in the first instance, and afterwards in groups of say 5 or 6.

Nothing more is ever mentioned in the letters and so the scheme seems never to have come to fruition.

As this distance from the 1890s, it is difficult not to feel uncomfortable at the thought of the singers being herded into groups to be photographed as if they were

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “Did Deemster Gill ever photograph Manx Folk Singers?” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* February (2015): [9]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Letter from W.H. Gill to Deemster J.F. Gill, 3 December 1895, MNHL, MS 097032, Deemster J.F. Gill Papers, Box 2. All subsequent quotes are taken from this letter.

² Subsequently published as W.H. Gill, “Manx Music,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* xxi (1895). Later reproduced as W.H. Gill, “Manx Music,” *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr. J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1896).

the last specimens of a dying tribe or vanishing race—that said, it is all too cheap and easy as here to accuse figures such as the Gill brothers of an exploitative stance. When W.H. Gill on one occasion writes of “our old friends the singers” one could argue that he was being warm towards them rather than being patronising. The Gill brothers at least recorded the names of their singers and so enabling us to find out what is now more than one century later just who were their “old friends the singers.” Sadly, they were not to be photographed so it just their names that we have to hand.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2015

REFERENCES

- Gill, W.H. “Manx Music.” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* xxi (1895): 115–31.
- . “Manx Music.” *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr. J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill*. London: Boosey, 1896. v–xi.

