

Manx Notes 255 (2017)

JOSPEPH CANNELL AND HIS “IMPRESSIONS OF CHRISTMAS IN DOUGLAS FIFTY YEARS AGO”

(1935) *

[2a] “These waits or callers were sailors of the Quayside, commonly called ‘hobblers,’ and one noted character was ‘Tommy the Wod.’ Nobody in town was better known than Tommy the Wod. He went along with the callers, playing on his fiddle some tricky old jigs to which—although lame—he danced. Coole the grocer’s warehouse on North John Street had a trap door down to the cellar where they rolled down hogsheads and barrels and spirits. This trap door had always a [2b] fascination for Tommy. When out with the callers, particularly if he had a ‘drop in his eye,’ he couldn’t resist stopping at ‘Coole’s Corner’ to do a little step on the trap door.”

[2a] “The day following Christmas before daylight there would be a noise of horns blowing, then: ‘Oh—The Wren, the Wren, the King of the Birds.’ Looking out of the window you would see a lot of sailors, with a bush mounted on top of a long boat oar gaily trimmed with coloured ribbons, singing lustily ‘Hunt the Wren,’ going from door to door. If any prosperous tradesman happened to walk past, these men would surround him, singing their song until he handed out a silver coin. They would then give him a feather for luck.”

Joseph Cannell, “Impressions of Christmas in Douglas Fifty Years Ago.”
Bulletin of The North American Manx Association 9.1 (1935): 2.

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The “Christmas Callers” as they were termed were not favoured by all. In December 1901, the *Manx Sun* in its issue for 14 December reported from Castletown that “[t]hese musicians, who make hideous with their stentorian shouts and ear splitting music have been—thanks to the police—put a stop to this year. They made a start about a week ago and went their rounds between midnight and and 3 o’clock in the morning, wakening and alarming the peaceful, sleeping citizens with their ‘Good mornings.’”¹ This brought forth a letter in the next issue from someone who signed themselves “Lillipudian,” not all of which can be read as the newsprint is so poor, but the first paragraph makes clear the thrust of his letter:

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “Joseph Cannell and his ‘Impressions of Christmas in Douglas Fifty Years Ago’ (1935),” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* July (2017): [13]–[14]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Anon, “[From the South Side] [Castletown News] The Christmas ‘Callers,’” *Manx Sun* 14 December 1901.

Kindly favour me with a few lines in your valuable journal to express my sympathy with the Castle “waits.” I have recently heard that the Commissioners of the above town have prohibited Christmas “rowdyism” after 10 p.m. They have even prohibited carol singing—what for, I wish to know? I suppose they are all going to bed early on these nights and don’t want their slumbering disturbed.²

That same day in the *Isle of Man Examiner* reported from Ballasalla that ‘[t]he string band will be missed this Christmas, and if no one is allowed to sing after ten o’clock it is going to be a very tame one too.’³ However, on the same page this appeared:

BASELESS RUMOUR—A rumour has got abroad that the police or Town Commissioners had decided to put a stop to some of the old customs, viz., callers, white boys, and bands playing after ten o’clock at night. Upon enquiry we are able to state that those bodies are quite ignorant of any such regulation, and have felt annoyed by the charges made.⁴

That year, at least then, it was still safe to go out on the rounds.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2017

REFERENCES

- Anon. “[Ballasalla] The string band . . .” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901: 5g.
———. “[Castletown] Baseless Rumour.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901: 5f.
———. “[From the South Side] [Castletown News] The Christmas ‘Callers’.” *Manx Sun* 14 December 1901: 5d.
Pseud [signed as “Lillipudian”]. “[Castletown] [Letter to the Editor] The Suppression of the ‘Waits’.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 1901: 5f.



² Pseud [signed as “Lillipudian”], “[Castletown] [Letter to the Editor] The Suppression of the ‘Waits’,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 1901.

³ Anon, “[Ballasalla] The string band . . .,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901.

⁴ Anon, “[Castletown] Baseless Rumour,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901.