

Manx Notes 262 (2017)

THE REVIVAL OF THE MANX LANGUAGE (4) “SHOULD THE MANX LANGUAGE BE PRESERVED?” (1899)

[12a] The movement set afoot to revive public interest in the Manx language, and if possible to resuscitate it as a living tongue, is attracting considerable attention, and it has already seriously raised the question as to the possibility of making Manx once more the language of the Island. We can appreciate the motives which inspire the promoters. They are purely sentimental and patriotic, and if these must weigh over and above considerations of utility, the intrinsic value of the Manx tongue, and the general merits of the question, then indeed they have made their case out. For present purposes in the discussion of this subject we must forget our native affinity to the Isle, and set aside our undying esteem for its history and traditions. For love of Manxland, and patriotism to its institutions and people, we yield to none. Having said so much we shall proceed to discuss the question upon its merits, without prejudice. At the outset we would express the opinion that the movement will be short-lived. The odds arrayed against it are insurmountable. It is questionable whether there be five gentlemen living in the whole world who can speak and write pure Manx correctly, and with proper facility. Manx as a language is all but dead. The few who can still speak it are for the most part old peasants and farmers, and they are almost without exception unable to write it. The present generation most certainly will witness its complete extinction, unless, as it may possibly happen, the new movement serves to postpone the fatal day a little longer. We can all wish the new Society success, and encourage the efforts of the indefatigable Mrs Laughton and Mr W. Quayle, but does anyone seriously believe it will ever be attained? Mr Quayle, the other day, taxed all his resources to advance arguments for the preservation of the Manx tongue, but they amounted to very little beyond sentiment and patriotism. Surprising enough he does not consider the capabilities of the English tongue superior to the Manx. We may pardon him for this, and set it down to his overweening zeal and patriotism. We have yet to learn however, that he is recognised as a philological authority. On the point of utility, Mr Quayle asks, do we apply this test to poetry and fiction, Latin and Greek? Most certainly we do. We study poetry and fiction for their interest, their beauty, the pleasure they afford, and the stimulus which they give to this mundane life; they also improve and extend our acquaintance with the English tongue, multiply our thoughts, inculcate new ideas, and, in a thousand and one different ways, poetry and fiction will repay the judicious student for the time and labour he expends upon them. It is the same with Latin and Greek. The time spent upon these is not wasted. But can the same arguments be urged in favour of the Manx language? Will Mr Quayle tell us who is the Manx Chaucer, or Milton, or Shakespeare? With what fictionists or dramatists may his students become

acquainted for the first time when they have acquired a knowledge of Manx? Who is its Dickens [12b] or Thackeray? We have yet to learn that there is any original literature in the Manx tongue. It is true the Bible is printed in the Manx language, but anyone may read this in English. There is also, we believe, a dictionary in Manx and English. Then there are, of course, a large number of place-names, which Mr Moore has made us familiar with. But where is and what constitutes its literature? With the exception of a few fugitive songs and "carvals," there is nothing of any moment. After his inability to quote anything of the kind, Mr Quayle proceeds to say that the Manx language is full of interest because of its antiquity and historic association, and its peculiar grammatical forms and usages—bald statements in themselves, and, be it noted, they are unsupported by a single argument. He advanced one more statement: Manx was the language of our ancestors. This fact is known to everybody. Verily Mr Quayle is fonder of his ancestors than Charles Surface was of his. He does not seem to realise that the Manx language has disappeared through the natural evolution of time, largely by reason of our proximity to England, He does not see that the increasing power and civilising force of Great Britain have been spreading over the entire surface of the globe, and that it was the most natural thing in the world for a progressive people like the Manx to assimilate its laws, its constitution, and its general characteristics, or rather to bring itself into line with England, in order that we, as a nation, should be in the vanguard of progression. The Manx people would rather occupy a conspicuous position in the escutcheon of the greatest power on earth, speaking the same tongue, and enjoying the same privileges, than preserve an obsolete, and all but-forgotten tongue. Is any man the worse off for its extinction? Is any Manxman less patriotic to his country, or less loyal to the Government because he no longer speaks Manx? Where then are the signs of this national decay that one hears so much spoken about, and yet sees so little himself. It exists only, we fear, in the imagination of Mr Quayle and Mr Fournier. The latter gentleman came all the way from Ireland to make a second attempt to prove the desirability of reviving the Manx tongue. In Ireland Mr Fournier, not without reason, is set down as a faddist, his fad being the revival of the Celtic tongues. He tells us that the Manx language embodies the essence of a large part of our history, and that if it is lost we shall be cut off from the past. Really! A second Daniel come to judgment. The history of the Island to its remotest and dimmest past has been written and re-written a score of times in pure English, and may be supplied to Mr Fournier at prices ranging from 6d to 10s 6d. This unwonted zeal on the part of he and Mr Quayle is not the outcome of excessive patriotism; in our judgment it is directly attributable to a wish on their part to push their fads on to other people. Their inability to show any practical advantages of a knowledge of Manx should rather suggest to them the much wiser course of advising those desirous of the advantages of bi-lingual speech to study French, German, or Spanish, in preference to Manx, in which case they could derive some practical result. Countless

volumes of priceless literature, for example, become accessible to them, new and special paths in the world of commerce are thereby opened out to them, new peoples become approachable by colloquial intercourse, and one's value in the commercial market is thereby immeasurably enhanced. Can any of these advantages be claimed by Mr Quayle for the Manx tongue? Even to those who are recommended to study Manx as a hobby, it would be much more reasonable to select a tongue which has a commercial value. After all, we shall, we expect, be told that every man is the best judge of his own time, and how he shall utilise it, and, therefore, if his inclinations lead him to study Manx, it can do him no harm, and may possibly do him some good. But, to the average man, whose time and labour constitute his stock-in-trade, any other European tongue would much better reward him for his time and labour. Sentiment counts for very little in this busy work-a-day world, and the active man who intends to succeed in life can be more profitably employed than whipping a dead horse.

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