

# Manx Notes 270 (2017)

## “MISS MORRISON AT THE WHEEL” (1) THE PROPOSED MANX NATIONAL COSTUME (1901)

“If we had not Miss Morrison at the wheel, I am afraid our ship would have foundered long ago. I only hope that she may be long spared to carry on her labour of love.” So wrote J.J. Kneen to William Cubbon on 9 November 1915.<sup>1</sup> She was not to live much longer, dying as she did in 1917. She left behind her nearly two decades worth of dedication to what she referred to as the “Manx Cause.” The detail of both what she achieved or struggled for is often little known and some of that effort will be presented here but not necessarily in chronological order. Here is her proposal for a Manx National Costume from 1901.

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### THE MANX NATIONAL COSTUME (1901)

“Manx Language Society.” *Manx Sun* 14 December 1901: 3c–e. See, “The Manx National Dress,” 3d.

“[The members of ...].” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901: 4d.

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### I. “MANX LANGUAGE SOCIETY,” MANX SUN (14 DECEMBER 1901)

Miss Morrison read the report drawn up by and Miss Corrin, on the above subject, as follows:

The importance of costume has been recognized by great minds. In our own times Ruskin insisted on its significance in several fine passages, and he held that “national costume, wisely adopted and consistently worn, is not only desirable, but necessary in a right national organisation.”

Dress may be a useful symbol. Not alone from vanity did Queen Elizabeth deck herself in such resplendent robes; and certainly not in vanity does the extraordinary and versatile genius of the Emperor William bend itself to the details of his costume. It is a language that can be read at a glance by all. And so it the Isle of Mann is to preserve its distinctive character, it should surely adopt an expressive costume. At the Pan-Celtic Congress, in Dublin, it was the only nation that had no national dress. Some time soon this Congress will meet in Mann, so the Manx Language Society should at once consider the question of devising a proper costume for its members.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from J.J. Kneen to William Cubbon, 9 November 1915, MNHL, MS 09913, William Cubbon Papers, Box labelled “WC: Correspondence.”

Concerning the historical development of Manx costume we have very little material. We may assume, however, that in mediaeval times it was similar to the Irish, and of this we have very full accounts. Irish dress seems to have been most beautiful and distinctive in the 11th century. The women wore a cloak, "brat," generally crimson or purple, which was fastened by a brooch. Their tunic, "leine," reached to the feet and was embroidered with gold or silver thread. On their heads they wore a long veil, fastened with a golden crescent. The men wore a shorter tunic, fitting closely above the belt,—which consisted of a twisted girdle—and full below. Later, they may have worn a separate kilt. They also wore a sort of trousers and leggings or greaves. Their cloak was fastened on the right shoulder by a brooch; it had a border differing in width according to the rank of the wearer. There were two other kinds of cloak, the "ionar," a short, sleeveless jacket, and the "cochal." The latter was a shaped cloak or cape, usually reaching to the elbows, though sometimes to the hips, with armholes but no sleeves. It had a detachable hood, "ceannad," like a Capuchin friar's cowl, with a tassel at the end. The oldest colours used were crimson, blue, and green.

Of the Manx costume itself, there are few notices. A law enacted in 1419 says: "Corbes for a woman.—the best beads of jet or amber, the best brooch, the best cross," which shows that the Manx women were not behind their Irish sisters in the wearing of ornaments. In 1577, Merrick, Bishop and Governor of the Island, makes the strange statement that "the women never stir about without their winding sheet, to put them in mind of their mortality." Blundell, writing thirty years later, shows that the winding sheets were plaids or blankets.

They were also worn by the men. A law of 1629 says that "from farmers noe blankett called the Sunday blankett shall be taken for Corbes." These blankets were probably the survival of the ancient brat or cloak. Train, the historian, without giving his authority, says that the ancient Manx wore their hair long and bound with a leather thong. He states that in 1836 the peasantry in the uplands still wore "carranes," "a cover for the soles and sides of the feet, made of raw hide, salted and dried, and laced with thongs of the same at the top of the foot." The dress of the peasantry in the 18th century was made of kialter, a woollen cloth, neither milled nor tucked. It consisted of trousers and a short coat and waistcoat. The colour of these garments was usually dark brown from the undyed fleece of the native sheep, but sometimes it was brown and grey, or brown and blue, the colours being mixed in the wool. Blue was also a favourite colour. They wore stockings without feet and "carranes." On their heads they had a "bayrn," like the Scotch bonnet, but at the beginning of the 19th century this was replaced by the tall beaver hat. Buckled shoes and knee breeches, with blue stockings came in vogue early in the century. A long, blue tail coat, or a white coat bound with black braid, called the "perry bane," was also worn. The women wore a petticoat of home spun which was usually dyed dark red, but it was also blue, or blue and white chequered. It was full and loose and fell

“THE PROPOSED MANX NATIONAL COSTUME” (1901)

to within six inches of the ground. Over this there was a loose jacket with a broad collar, called the “bedgown,” usually made of linen and dyed some bright colour, drawn in at the waist by a linen apron. On the head a mob cap, called “quoif cooil corran,” or cap shaped like the back of a sickle; dark blue stockings and carranes, or, at a later date, buckled shoes, completed the attire. A sun bonnet was substituted for the mob cap in summer, and in winter they wrapped themselves in their plaid or blanket. At the beginning of the 19th century very high caps were also worn. Women of a higher class wore the following costume: A short waist body of homespun, turned in from the neck to the waist, showing a white habit shirt; a white handkerchief crossed down to the waist; the undershirt, striped or figured and quilted; the overshirt to the sides only, of the same material as the body; a white linen apron; white open worked stockings and sandal shoes.

A national dress for daily wear is neither practical nor necessary, but the use of Manx homespun and linen should be encouraged for both men and women. Also a distinctive cloak might be adopted, which would at the same time be serviceable and useful. It is for festal occasions that the dress is required, and for such the old costume of the Manx peasantry is hardly suitable; the Irish costume of the 11th century has far more possibilities. Women might wear a tunic or dress of cream coloured serge, embroidered with silver thread, with a cloak in the shape of the Cochal. The Brat has been adopted by the Irish, so the Cochal would be quite distinctive. It might be made of blue homespun, as blue was a favourite Manx colour, and it should have the detachable hood.

For men the question is more difficult. It is no use fixing a dress in which most men would feel self conscious or ridiculous; neither must it be too hot or uncomfortable for evening wear. The most convenient would be the short jacket, “ionar,” with knee breeches, stockings and buckled shoes. If this is not considered sufficiently distinctive, a short tunic might be worn, about the length of a Norfolk jacket—the most artistic garment of modern male attire—and a cloak fastened with a large clasp or brooch of some old design.

These are merely suggestions, but they are given in the hope that they may stimulate others to take up this important question, and evolve a costume for the Manx people, which artistic and practical, shall at the same time be a symbol of their nationality and their patriotism.

A. CORRIN.

S. MORRISON.

Miss Morrison and Miss Corrin were thanked for their paper, and it was resolved “that Miss Morrison, Miss Corrin, the President, Rev. J. Quine, and Mr W. Quayle be a committee to devise a suitable national costume.”

“Manx Language Society.” *Manx Sun* 14 December 1901: 3c–e. See, “The Manx National Dress,” 3d.

2. “THE MEMBERS OF THE MANX LANGUAGE SOCIETY ...,” ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER  
(21 DECEMBER 1901)

The members of the Manx Language Society are surely making themselves ridiculous in their efforts to secure the wearing in the Isle of Man of a dress which shall be distinctively Manx. It is all very well to conserve the Manx language and other things peculiarly Manx which have not entirely died out, and in their endeavours in these directions the Society will have the good wishes of their fellow Gaels, and of thousands of Saxons. But why a Manx dress? Possibly some hundreds of years ago the inhabitants of this Isle had a garb peculiarly their own, and possibly they hadn't. No record has been preserved of any such garb, and the probabilities are that Manxmen have, at any rate from the days of the Stanleys, been content to attire the outer man—and woman—similarly to their fellows of like degree in Lancashire and Cumberland. True, cananes were worn in the Isle of Man until the early part of the Nineteenth Century, but then caterings for the pedal extremities, fashioned from untanned oxhide, were not peculiar to Manx folk, nor yet even to Celtic peoples. It must not be forgotten that for hundreds of years the people of the Isle of Man have been in fairly close intercourse with the people of Lancashire and Cumberland, that their rulers—the Stanleys—for over two hundred years were Lancashire people, that the garrisons of Peel and Rushen were most probably officered by Englishmen, and that merchants from Lancashire and Cumberland have traded extensively to and from the Island from time immemorial. This constant association with English people—and more particularly with the County Palatine—must have had its effect upon the dress of the Islanders, and in any case it is quite certain that there has been no dress peculiarly Manx within the last three hundred years. As, then, nobody has the faintest idea in what the ancient Manx costume consisted, it is impassible to revert to that costume, unless indeed we go to the fountain head and adopt the garments that found favour with our paleolithic ancestors—a combination of blue paint and bangles, which however tasteful, cannot be regarded as either decent or comfortable. But certain of the members of the Man Language Society, having got up an enthusiasm upon the subject of national garments, are not to be deterred in the propagation of their craze by the fact that no man knoweth anything concerning the ancient Manx costume, and accordingly they would fain invent a distinctive dress for the men and women of this Isle, to be worn upon festal occasions. In what the festal occasions are to consist there is no definite information. Possibly chapel anniversaries, weddings, christenings, the Tynwald promulgation ceremony, and the arrival of a new steamer, may be regarded as festal occasions, and in that case we are free to admit that the appearance of the principal personages upon such occasions—the bride and bridegroom, the infant candidate for Christianity, the preacher and choir leader, the Lieutenant-Governor and the chairman of the Steam Packet Company to wit—in the costume suggested by a sub-committee of the Manx Language Society, would add quaiutness of a sort to the proceedings, to say nothing

“THE PROPOSED MANX NATIONAL COSTUME” (1901)

of the opportunity that would be afforded rude little boys of making comments of a personal and sarcastic character. The suggestions of this sub-committee are that upon festal occasions “women might wear a tunic or dress of cream-coloured serge, embroidered with silver thread, with a cloak in the shape of the Cochal.” Be it understood that the Cochal is a short cloak, and was in the days of long ago part of the clothing of Irishmen. But have not the members of the fair sex ere this worn the breeches? And why, in the approximation of male attire, draw the line at breeches? In regard to male costume, the sub-committee go on to say: “For men the question is more difficult. It is no use fixing a dress in which most men would feel self conscious or ridiculous; neither must it be too hot or uncomfortable for evening wear. The most convenient would be the short jacket, “ionar,” with knee breeches, stockings, and buckled shoes. If this is not considered sufficiently distinctive, a short tunic might be worn, about the length of a Norfolk jacket—the most artistic garment of modern male attire—and a cloak fastened with a large clasp or brooch of some old design.” Arrayed in the costume thus submitted for their approval, our Manxman would look a picturesque cross between an operatic brigand and a footman,—really his appearance would be uncommonly striking. It is, however, feared that Manxmen and Manxwomen will, despite the suggestions of the sub-committee, persist in wearing, even upon festal occasion, the ordinary everyday clothes which find favour with most civilised peoples in these perhaps degenerate days. Our modern garments may not be strictly beautiful, but generally-speaking they are sufficiently useful for the purposes of life, and this being so. They are not likely to be displaced in the affections of Manx folk by cochals or ionars or tunics of embroidered serge. Verily the Manx Language Associates would do well to stick to Manx philology, and eschew questions of obsolete millinery. The Manx Language movement has sufficient merits of its own to command success, and does not require aids so adventitious and meretricious as are suggested by the costume committee.

“[The members of ...].” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901: 4d.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2017

