

Manx Notes 273 (2017)

“STANDING ON THE BORDERLINE” (1)

“THE CURSE OF BABEL”
BISHOP SHIRLEY’S LETTERS (1847)

At sometime in the 1890s, William Cashen wrote that he was “[s]tanding on the borderline between the going out of the Manx and the coming in of the English.” By the time his words were published in 1912, Cashen had passed away and the census for 1901 and 1911 showed that Manx was on the ebb. Now it is on the flow.

STEPHEN MILLER

BISHOP SHIRLEY’S LETTERS (1847)

I. BISHOP SHIRLEY TO HIS SON (5 FEBRUARY 1847)

[463] You will understand one feature of this responsibility, when I tell you that though I am patron of only four vicarages, these livings, with some chapelries recently constituted in my gift, comprise more than half the population of the island, and have not an aggregate income of one thousand pounds per annum; besides which I have the additional difficulty that the Manx language is required in most of them, which limits my choice to men who, for the most part, are behind the English in vigour, education, habits of business, and even piety and their moral standard.

2. BISHOP SHIRLEY TO HIS PARENTS (18 FEBRUARY 1847)

[476] The Manx papers amuse me now and then with letters from correspondents about what Bishop Shirley ought to be made acquainted with, and how he ought to act. The great point of discussion is whether Manx-speaking clergymen are to be exclusively appointed to livings. I have appointed one to the vacant vicarage; but they are a heavy set, and will soon be exhausted, for their children do not understand Manx. I am glad to hear that the children in the streets play in English. The Manx is a language without a literature, except the Bible and Prayer-book lately translated, and as far as I can make out, has neither dictionary nor grammar deserving of the name. It is an unmitigated portion of the curse of Babel. I will send you a Manx paper it is sad stuff.

3. BISHOP SHIRLEY TO THE VENERABLE ARCHDEACON HILL (20 FEBRUARY 1847)

[477] I have service always on the last Sunday in the month, when the service at the parish church is in Manx, and I should be very glad if you can time your visit so as to spend one, of those Sundays with me.

4. BISHOP SHIRLEY TO R.H. CHENEY (23 FEBRUARY 1847)

[481] The old language is, I am thankful to say, in *articulo mortis*, so that I should be even more mischievous than certain Welsh gentry of my acquaintance if I were to attempt to preach in Manx or give prizes for Manx bards. Bards, indeed, there are none, nor any literature, except the Bible and Prayer-book, which were translated during the last century.

Thomas Hill, ed., *Letters and Memoir of the late Walter Augustus Shirley, D.D. Lord Bishop of Sodor and Man* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1849).

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Bishop Shirley's time as Bishop of Sodor and Man was one of the shortest on record in modern times. He accepted the appointment on 24 November 1846 and died the following year on 21 April 1847. In 1849, Thomas Hill produced a memoir on his life and times that consisted largely of reproducing Shirley's correspondence in its pages. A small number of letters written from the Island mention in passing the Manx language and it is clear that Shirley was not sympathetic to the linguistic situation he found, writing as he did that "[i]t is an unmitigated portion of the curse of Babel." Aware that Manx-speaking clergy were still needed to be appointed to livings in the Island, they were to be the last in his opinion, "for their children do not understand Manx." He went on to add that "I am glad to hear that the children in the streets play in English."

STEPHEN MILLER, 2017

