

THE CHRISTMAS FIDDLERS OR “CALLERS” *

The *Manx Sun* in its issue for 14 December 1901 reported on the Christmas “Callers” in Castletown:

These musicians, who make night hideous with their stentorian shouts and ear splitting have been—thanks to the police—put a stop this year. They made a start about a week ago and went their rounds between midnight and 3 o’clock in the morning, wakening and alarming the peaceful citizens with their “Good mornings.”¹

However, the *Isle of Man Examiner* the next week (21 December) under the heading of “Baseless Rumours” commented that:

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.²

From Ballasalla came the remark 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 This also brought forth a letter from someone signing themselves as “Lillipudian,” part of which reads as follows:

I have recently heard that the Commissioners of the above town have prohibited Christmas “rowdyism” after 10 pm. They have even prohibited carol singing—what for, I wish to know? I suppose they are all going to bed early on those nights and don’t want their slumbers disturbed.⁴

The writer went on to add that “I see all the leading men in the Island are endeavouring to promote Manx customs and now Castletown has actually passed a new law prohibiting them.”

James Cowin in the *Examiner* earlier in 1898 wrote a piece about the “Christmas Fiddlers” as he termed them, beginning his piece saying that “[t]his has been my first Christmas in Douglas, to the best of my knowledge, that this old Manx custom has to me been conspicuous by its absence.”⁵ The Christmas Fiddlers or Callers first

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “The Christmas Fiddlers or ‘Callers,’” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* December 2017–January 2018 (2017): [14]–[15]. Reproduced here with sources.

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

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

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

4 [“Lillipudian”], “[Letter to the Editor] The Suppression of the ‘Waits,’” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901.

5 James Cowin, “‘The Fiddlers’ or ‘Callers’: A Reminiscence of Fifty Years Ago,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 31 December 1898.

appeared at the end of November and continued going around until Christmas Day. They knocked on doors in the early hours of the morning and when the household was aroused commenced to sing “Good morning, Mr —, good morning, Mrs —, and all the rest of your family; fine morning, half-past two o’clock.” This could be lengthened by adding in the names of other members of the family. Once that had been done they would start again but moving the time forward (“[t]he half and full hours as a rule were only called”) no doubt until they were given money. Often the rhyme was made specific to a family as when a trade or profession was involved as here with a baker and Methodist preacher:

Good morning Mr Corkhill,
Not forgetting your wife,
You deal in the bread that perishes,
And in the bread of life.

As to numbers active, “[t]here were generally three or four lots of callers, and very often the street got at least two lots in the night.”

Cowin makes it clear that they were welcome visitors, writing “it was said that some so much coveted being called, that they conveyed the desire and knowledge to the caller,” and as to the annoyance of being woken so early, “no one was expected to complain of being wakened up, but on the contrary, felt that they had scored by being singled out for a call.” Whilst the suppression of the Christmas Callers in Castletown in 1901 seems not to have happened, it is clear that their visits were not, in some quarter at least, as welcome as in the days of Cowin’s youth.

In its first issue for 1904, the *Examiner* commented that “1904 was ushered in quietly enough,” going on to add that “[q]uite a halo of romance and tradition has ever been associated with the birth of a New Year, but these are prosaic times, and each succeeding twelve months sees less and less observance of old customs.”⁶ It was this slow but steady withdrawal of support or sanction that saw the passing of many a Manx custom or tradition.

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.
 ——. “1904 was ushered” *Isle of Man Examiner* 9 January 1904: 4e.
 Cowin, James. “‘The Fiddlers’ or ‘Callers’: A Reminiscence of Fifty Years Ago.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 31 December 1898: [3]e.

⁶ “1904 was ushered” *Isle of Man Examiner* 9 January 1904.

Pseud [signed as “Lillipudian”]. “[Letter to the Editor] The Suppression of the ‘Waits’.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 December 1901: 5f.

