

Manx Notes 308 (2018)

“AS THE FIRST STEP IN THE PLAN OF CAMPAIGN”
W.H. GILL ON HOW TO COLLECT FOLK SONGS (2) *
(1911)

DEAR SIR,—It is now fifteen years since there fell to my lot the good fortune and the congenial task of completing, in collaboration with my brother, the late Deemster Gill, and our mutual friend, the late Dr John Clague, a very exhaustive search for the traditional songs of our Fatherland, “the little Manx Nation.” Since then the collecting of folksongs has become a popular craze, and an old campaigner like myself, watching the battle from afar, naturally longs to be once more on the war-path. Having now experienced for thirteen years the delight of retirement from public life, I enjoy to the full the sweet air and sunshine of this delightful locality, and the invigorating influence of “The Spirit of the Downs.” In a word, I long once more to be in harness and exercise such small gifts as Nature and training has bestowed upon me; for, indeed, the field, in spite of the many labourers already working there, is—so the best authorities tell us—far from exhausted. A little experimental reconnoitering within a small radius of my own home at the foot of High down Hill, lends no small encouragement to my ambition, and suggests the possibility of considerably extending the field of operation. In these circumstances such light and leading as your own more intimate knowledge and experience of the locality and its inhabitants can give, as well as the co-operation of your numerous readers, would be invaluable to me as a collector. What is necessary for my purpose is information more or less definite as to likely persons and localities, and I would gladly visit any district within a moderate distance with a view to record the music and words of any traditional songs reasonably supposed to be worth preserving. My experience in the Isle of Man emboldens me to speak with some degree of confidence on the subject, while my former connection with the Folk-Song Society, of which I was one of the founders, may serve as an introduction to those who do not know me personally.

I need not remind you that the art of song recording in musical notation a song which has been gradually fading out of existence or gradually deteriorating under the corroding influence of time and tradition, is an art *sui generis*. In many instances a mere mechanical gramophone record is not sufficient, even if the singer has the self-confidence necessary to face the ordeal, nor is an ordinary musical education adequate for purposes of successful record. Some knowledge of the Ecclesiastical Modes, is, as you so well know, one of the essential qualifications, for many of our older folk-songs contain in the intervals common to the modes, and the tendency of the unwary collector—a tendency difficult to resist—is to rectify intervals that to his

* See Stephen Miller “‘As the first step in the plan of campaign.’ W.H. Gill on how to collect Folk Songs (1911).” *Manx Notes* 214 (2015): 1–2.

modern ear sound unnatural or outlandish. But, above all, what is perhaps the foremost qualification of a recorder is that undefinable gift called tact—the art of reviving in an old man or an old woman a musical memory of long years ago, and of overcoming the shyness of using once more an instrument which has become rusty from sheer want of using, perhaps for many years. I mean, of course, the human voice, and, lest any should imagine that for the preset purpose what is wanted is a fine voice or a skilled rendering, it cannot be too plainly insisted that the merest humming or, even better still, the whistling of a tune is amply sufficient, while the words can be recalled and spoken bit by bit, and apart from the tune.

As the first step in the plan of campaign I would suggest that any of your readers willing to assist in the work should send the name and address of the singer, together with the title of the song, and the first verse either to you or direct to myself. The second step would be to sort the material thus furnished into convenient geographical order: and then, as a third step, I would make it my business to visit each locality and arrange a personal interview. This was practically the plan adopted in recollecting the Manx songs, and proved, as generally admitted, a signal success. Working at that time in London, I spent my annual month's holiday for three consecutive years with my brother, at Douglas, and each time found awaiting me a list of persons to be interviewed. Then, on my arriving there we visited together each person on the list, and recorded the result, which on my return home, was put into suitable form for publication. This is, shortly, how our collection of Manx National Music, since published by Messrs Boosey, in their Royal Edition, came into being—a result which, had the search been postponed to the present time, could not possibly have been attained. As matters have turned out, however, the collection is unique, and has been received with considerable interest, not only in Manxland, but by music-lovers throughout the Kingdom.

Yours Faithfully, | W.H. GILL.

White House, Angmering, | March 22, 1911.

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The letter was sent in to the *West Sussex Gazette* and is taken from an undated clipping (though clearly from March 1911) enclosed in a letter from Dorothy Marshall to Clive Carey dated 30 March 1911 and found amongst his papers in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (VWML, CC/2/136 & 1370). The final paragraph contains the greater interest here where Gill outlines how to go about gathering Sussex folk songs using the method used when he was out-and-about with his brother, Deemster J. Fred Gill, collecting in the Island in the 1890s. Whilst we know from letters amongst the Deemster's personal papers in the MNHL that he had a circle of helpers we can see here how their aid was put to good effect. As Gill recounts, he had only his holidays in which to collect and so each day had to be put to good use. There could be no leisurely wandering around the Manx countryside questioning

those found on the Island's high roads and byways to see if they were singers or knew of singers. Curiously, Gill mentions "three consecutive years" of work in the Island but the transcript of their collecting has material only from 1895 and 1898. Two trips were made in 1895 and one in 1898 and it is possible that he is confusing the two visits in 1895.

A glimpse of the physical effort involved in collecting comes from a piece in *The Manxman*, essentially a reminiscence (and a warm one) of the Deemster:

Stories and anecdotes about Deemster Gill are being told all over the Island. About a year ago his Honour walked into the Manxman Office dead-beat and tired. He had been walking the greater part of the day in the mountain districts of Sulby in search of old tunes of Manx songs, and naturally was very much fatigued. We listened with absorbing interest to his many experiences, and presently he told us that he and his brother, after trudging about for hours with no success, chanced across an old Manxman about ninety years of age. After some pleasant conversation, the old countryman began to hum an old tune they had never heard before. It was sweet and dreamy, and the faces of the brothers brightened up as they recorded the notes, and felt that their day's labour was not wasted.¹

It is possible that this "old Manxman" is John Joughin of the Garey in Lezayre, visited on 12 October 1898, and recorded from him was "Shannon Rea" and "Here's a Health to all True Lovers." Whilst this "trudging about" can be seen to be somewhat at odds with his brother's account of their collecting, singers all primed and waiting for the knock at the door, anyone who has done fieldwork themselves knows of its unpredictability. The singers were all very much working men and woman and their priorities lay elsewhere, and not waiting in for that very proverbial knock at the door.

The mention of the pair walking is an interesting insight into how they did move around the countryside. The railway could easily deliver them part of the way but after alighting it was on foot that they made their way. W.H. Gill writes of the collecting done with his brother as being "a signal success" and one cannot but agree with him. Overall, 21 days were spent in the field, 29 singers visited, 40 recording sessions undertaken, and a grand total of 101 tunes collected. Deemster Gill died in 1899 and one wonders that if he had lived on whether there would have been more fieldwork by the pair to make them feel "dead-beat and tired."

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

REFERENCES

Anon. "[Personal and Otherwise] Stories and anecdotes" *Manxman* 21 October 1899: 13a.

¹ Anon, "[Personal and Otherwise] Stories and anecdotes" *Manxman* 21 October 1899.