

Manx Notes 329 (2018)

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POPULAR CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS OF THE ISLE OF MAN *

(1851)

[4a] Humanity in all latitudes and in all ages ever has loved and still loves to associate itself with the ideal beings of the invisible world. The Teutonic, the Saxon, and the Celtic nations, do but imitate the ancients of the eastern world, especially those of Persia and Egypt, in having their little gods as well as their great ones—their *genii* and their spirits, to make up a respectable nomenclature to their mythology.

The Manx people in particular, inhabiting so small and isolated a spot as they do, and until lately being so barbarous withal, were most fruitful in supernal creations, so that in their history, their laws, their literature, their poetry, and religion, sprites, fairies, and other small people of the sort, were as plenty as the blackberries upon their hedges. The Druids, who held the fastnesses of Mona's mountains for four hundred years after they had been driven out from England, taught the people an entire system of supernatural mystery. They could tell future events by the entrails of beasts and the flowing of the blood of impaled victims—ay, they could create fire by miraculous means—of which the people must obtain a supply of them, or miserably perish. The Manx laws commence with the recital of the wonderful exploits of *Manannan-beg-mac-y-Lheirr*, the first king of Man, who held the land. He was a *paynim* [*ie*, heathen] and a mighty wizard, who among other wonderful deeds enshrouded his little kingdom in mists, which have scarcely disappeared even to this day. The first Manx poet of which we have any record wove up this mysty legend into song; so that it is nowise strange the vulgar commonality should have their superstitious, since their betters and teachers inculcated such foolery in all the laws and literature of the Island.

Perhaps the curious would thank me to give a specimen of this first Manx poet, who wrote in 1504. I will do so, and give a literal translation, without regard to rhythm, measure, or accent.

Manannan beg va Mac y Leirr,
Shen yn chied er ec row rieu ee;
Agh myr snare oddym's cur-my-ner,
Cha row eh hene agh An-chreestee.

* Col[onel] [Charles] Johnson, "Popular Customs and Superstitions of the Isle of Man," *Mona's Herald*, 27 August 1851, 4a–c.

Cha nee lesh e Chliwe ren eh ee reayll
 Cha nee lesh e Hidden, my lesh e Vhow;
 Agh tra aikagh eh Lhuingys troailt
 Oallagh eh ee my geayrt lesh Ray.

Yinnagh eh Doinney ny hassoo er Brooghe
 Er-lhieu shen hene dy beagh ayn Keead;
 As shen myr dreill Mannanan keoie,
 Yn Ellan shoh'n ayn lesh cosney Bwoid.

TRANSLATION

Little Manannan was son of Leirr,
 He was the first that ever had it it; [*ie*, That is the Island]
 But as I can best conceive,
 He himself was a heathen.
 It was not with his sword he kept it,
 Neither with arrows or bow;
 But when he would see ships sailing,
 He would cover it round with a fog.
 He would set a man, standing on a hill,
 Appear if he was a hundred;
 And thus did wild Manannan protect
 That Island with all its booty.

It is, however, difficult at this period to say precisely how far the belief of the peasantry of this Island extends into those occult mysteries, which once made up the principal knowledge of the common people.

When they are asked if they believe in fairies and witches, then evade the question with a mysterious grin, as if ashamed to confess their faith; and yet before you get through the conversation with them, they will relate some marvellous narrative in which themselves, their parents, or friends were concerned, and wherein fairies, sprites, or hobgoblins were the principal actors.

But leaving fairiology just now, it may be well to refer to some of the popular customs peculiar to this Island.

THE QUAALTAGH.

This is a sort of New-Year's greeting, somewhat unique, it being purely a Manx custom. A large company of lads and young men to the houses of the more wealthy, repeating in Manx or in English the following rude rhymes:

Again we assemble a merry New-Year,
 To wish to each one of the family here,
 Whether man, woman, or girl, or boy,
 that long life and happiness all may enjoy.

May they of potatoes and herrings have plenty,
 With butter and cheese and each other dainty;
 And may their sleep never, by night or by day,
 Disturbed be, by even the tooth of a flea;
 Until at the Quaaltagh again we appear,
 To wish you, as now, a happy New-Year

On this being repeated at the door with a twang peculiar to Manx chanters, they are invited into the house to partake of its hospitalities.

LAA BOALDYN.

This is May-eve; and it preserves its Manx ceremonial from the usage and worship of the Druids. The etymology of this word (Boaldyn) has given Cregeen the Manx lexicographer, Train the historian, and all the Celtic critics much trouble. They know not from whence to trace it. If not thought too pedantic, I will propose a solution. I think the origin of the day's observance casts light upon the name given to the day. Pliny speaking of the usages of the Druids says—"The first day of May was a great annual festival in honour of Belinus or the Sun. On the evening of this day prodigious fires were kindled in all their sacred places and on the tops of all their hills and cairns, and many sacrifices were offered to that glorious luminary, which now began to shine upon them with great warmth and lustre."

In the Gaelic tongue this day is still called *Beltein* (that is, the fire of Bel,) from the Druidical observance. Now *Boal* is a broad Manx guttural corruption of *Bel*, and *dyn* is a Scandinavian spelling of *tein*; hence the Manx words *Laa-Boaldyn* mean the day of Bel's fire—*laa* being the Manx word for day. Thus Cregeen's and Train's difficulties are got over.

On the evening preceding this great Druidical festival primroses, butter-cups, and such like flowers are plentifully strewed before the cottage doors of the Manx peasantry, to keep out the fairies on that sacred night. This floral charm certainly presents a pretty sight to the pedestrian stranger, when returning home by twilight, or by the light of the moon, from the mountains or wild glen's. But the Mayfires of Mona gilding her hill-tops from parish to parish are a sublime spectacle well worthy of particular notice. From the ignited dry gorse, ling, and heather, the surrounding mountains on this occasion are all in a blaze of burning glory, casting the reflection upon the mirrored surface of the surrounding sea. Probably most of the Manxmen who now practice these fires are ignorant of their origin. Some say they are kindled to frighten away the fairies and witches, so they shall not come to break the nets of the herring fishery the ensuing season. All consider them as a propitiatory sacrifice to some great ruling power, to obtain favour and ensure safety from the evil *genii* of the sea and the storm. But all such modern devotees to the custom should know, that these May-fires commemorate a religious festival centuries older than the star that guided the Eastern *Magi* to the manger of the infant Jesus. They are a shining, *blazing* proof that Mona was once the home of the Druids. There is something

sublimely interesting to my conceptions, to travel over a land of such rare antiquities, and even at this late period of man's history, to be surrounded by the affecting mementos and proofs of the religious usages of a very venerable and ancient people. Christian though I am, yet I never wish to see abolished the abiding memorials of Druidism on the Isle of Man. There is a grandeur and a sublime glory that gather around the memory of those mysterious worshippers of Nature in her outer temple. Their mystic and symbolic religion leads the mind back to those primeval times, when the volume of Nature, displayed to the senses of the rapt worshipers, summoned up their thoughts and their devout adoration to the Almighty builder and ruler of the universe.

THE MHEILLEA—

of the Manx answers to the harvest-home of the English, and both are derived from the Levitical law. "After thou hast gathered in the corn and the wine, thou shall rejoice in thy feast," &c. It is, indeed, a continuation of the *wave-offering* of the Hebrews, when the reapers old and young, male and female, meet with the family and friends of the husbandman, and join in the feast and merry dance. *Mheillea* strictly means the *reapers' rest*, and one might think that the poor daughters of Mona needed rest after so much tiresome labour in the field; but instead of resting, they generally dance all night with great activity and gusto. In no country in the world are females put to more hardship of out-door labour than in Mona. The usage shows that civilization has not yet reached its acme in the land of Man.

SAUIN—

or Hollantide-Eve, was first a Druidical and then afterwards a Roman festival; for be it known, that the first Christian missionaries to Mona were obliged to incorporate some or the rites of the Druids, and even those of Wodin into the Christian worship, before the adhesion of the people to ancient customs could be overcome. The present name, however, of this festival is derived from the word *saue*, which means *save*, and points, to the prayer for the salvation of all-souls and saints departed. On this occasion bands of Manx boys go round the town, crying

Hop-tu-naa—This is old Hollantide night;

Trollalaa—The moon shines fair and bright;—

Hop-tu-naa—I went to the well,

Trollalaa—And drank my fill;

Hop-tu-naa—On the way coming back

Trollalaa—I met a pole-cat;

Hop-tu-naa—The cat began to grin,

Trollalaa—And I began to run:

Hop-tu-naa—Where did you run to?

Trollalaa— I ran to Scotland;

Hop-tu-naa—What were they doing there?

Trollalaa—Baking bannocks and roasting collops.

* * * * *

Hop-tu-naa—If you are going to give us anything, give us it soon,
Or we'll be away by the light of the moon! *Hop-tu-naa!* &c.

This is silly enough, and shows the unpoetic genius of Mona in olden times. The supper of this eight is a compound of potatoes, parsnips, and fish, dressed with butter.

HUNTING THE WREN—

on St Stephen's day, is still kept up in parts of the Island. It is founded on a tradition that a syren fairy once upon a time charmed the warriors of Mona by her sweet notes, and decoyed them off into the sea where they were drowned. She had thus well nigh stripped the country of its chivalry, when a knight sprang up so bold and artful, that he had certainly slain the fairy, but that she escaped by taking the form of the wren. The knight cast a spell over the wren, and condemned her and all her race to destruction by Manx hands; which destruction has been going on once a year from that day to this. From dawn 'till even, men and boys with bows and arrows, sticks and stones, and even iron spikes, pursue, pelt and shoot the whole family of wrens, in the hope that the slain-one may thus fall by their hands. The feathers of the slain are craved as charms to preserve mariners from shipwreck, and many a jack-tar conceals them in his bosom. The sport ended, the supposed witch-wren is affixed to the top of a pole with its wings extended and decked with evergreens and bows of ribbons; and as the sportman march through the town in marshalled triumph and blowing of horns, they sing

Away to the woods, says Robin to Bobbin,
Away to the woods, says Richard to Robin,
Away to the woods, says Jack o' the land,
Away to the woods, says every one.

What will we do there? says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
We'll hunt the wren, says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
Where is he? WHERE is he? says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
In yonder green bush, says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
I see him! I see him! says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
How will we get him down? says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
With sticks and with stones, says Robbin to Bobbin &c.
He's down! he's down! says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
How will we get him home, says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
We'll hire a cart, says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
Whose cart will we get? says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
The brewers' big cart, says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
He's home! he's home! says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.
How will we get him in? says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.

With iron bars, says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.

He's in! he's in! says Robbin to Bobbin, &c.

[4b] Our own opinion, that this barbarous practice is intended to commemorate the martyrdom of Stephen, and ought to be abolished.

The sport is now principally pursued by the boys for the sake of a few pennies, to be realised from the exhibition and charmed feathers.

CHRISTMAS WAKES

For several nights—or rather mornings,—just preceding the festival, a fiddler or two perambulate the streets of the town for hours together, playing a tune called the Andisop. On their way they stop before the principal houses, wish the inmates by name good morning, crying out—good morning Mr ———, good morning Mrs —, good morning Miss ———, and all the rest of the family; call the hour of morn, report the state of the weather, and fiddling away, they then move on to the next house.

THE OIEL VERRY.

This is a great night for the displays of the church. It is celebrated on Christmas-eve, and kept up till after midnight. The church is gorgeously decorated with holly, laurel, ivy, variegated laurestina, and December blossoms and evergreens of all sorts—is brilliantly illuminated by wax candles of immense size and length; and made vocal with all the grand music available. The whole ceremony of course commemorates the salutation of the angels, to the shepherds on the plains of Bethlehem. Before break of day “the singers” go along the streets chanting “Christians awake,” and other hymns adapted to the occasion. Male and female join in this, with hautboys, “trumpets and shawns,” followed by the multitude, who, if the night be dark, carry lighted torches and flambeaux, to throw a halo around the observance.

THE WHITE-BOYS

This grotesque custom of introducing Christmas is purely of Manx origin; and queer enough it is. Some dozen or so of young lads dress up in white, with high pyramidal paper caps, appearing fantastic enough, and carrying with them wooden swords. They cry out at the doors: “Who wants to see the white boys act?” They then essay a rude comical drama, half verse, and half prose-run-mad, in which St George, Prince Valentine, King of Egypt, Sambo, and the Doctor are the principal actors. The hurried manner and the burlesque intonations of the speakers, make the performance unique, and of all oddities the most odd. It is a Manx conception altogether. These white-boys like the wren-hunters are not averse to the pennies; but if solids are not to be had, they readily put up with the *liquids* in shape of gin, or even *Jough*, *alias* Manx beer.

MANX FUNERALS.

Perhaps in no country save the Isle of Man are the usages of the primitive church preserved in the burying of the dead. No special invitations are given to attend the funeral; but after the corpse has lain some two or three days, the toiling bell at an

early hour in the morning announces the last mournful obsequies. The people of all ranks turn out in great numbers to accompany the remains to the house appointed for all living, and be the deceased Churchman or Dissenter, saint or sinner, believer or infidel, the solemn requiem is chanted, on leaving the house and on approaching the church, by all the multitude male and female, the words being *lined* and given out by the parish clerk, a preacher, class-leader, or some pious elder, who, bareheaded, walks just before the coffin with a book open in his hand. Of all the Manx customs this is to be approved. It is solemn and appropriate in its performance; it subdues and solemnizes the feelings; it breathes of Christian charity toward the memory of the deceased, and raises the imagination, if not the heart, up toward the temple of God, and to the assembly of just men made perfect, who with golden harps in their hands celebrate the praises of the Eternal and the Lamb that was slain, for ever and ever.

Thus much of peculiar customs. I must now bestow a little attention on the demonology of the Manx.

At this period the steamers, the newspapers, and other appliances of civilization, have chased away from the larger towns such as Douglas many of the Warlocks, and made *spooks*, as the Dutch call them, much more scarce than formerly. It is a fact, however, that the peasantry of the pastoral districts are firm believers in the little gentlemen and ladies with pale green jackets, y'clepped fairies; and many of the more illiterate people stretch their faith to take in the monsters hereafter enumerated.

Many Manxmen returning home at a late hour at night across the mountains and the deep glens, and especially if they be persons of *rum*-habits, are sure to encounter the fairies, who, perched overhead upon the tree-tops, cut up rare *fandangoes*, such as gibbering, fiddling and dancing; and it will be fortunate for the sojourner if he be not captured by the little folk, carried to some strange cave or fairy-hall, and held a prisoner for the night. Such encounters occur quite too often to leave any doubt of the fact. Next we have

THE MERMAID,

who of yore by a terrible curse, for unrequited love made to a flesh-and-blood mortal, enveloped the Island in mist; and she is still heard to sing her wailing notes on the lonely rocks near the Calf of Man, at the dread hour of midnight, when the howling storm is past, and the pale moon looks out sickly from the heavens. To one who visits this rude and ragged shore in the vicinity of the Calf, it will not seem strange that the imagination of the natives should conjure up wild monsters of the deep.

Standing on the pinnacle of Cronk Naharah and facing the west and south, Fistard Head, Spanish Head, and the Calf of Man are just before you. The twelve deep chasms separating the disrupted mountain into huge blocks, and yawning like the bottomless pit, are just at your left hand, constituting without exception the greatest natural curiosity of Mona. The gulph-like sea at this point is immensely

deep, even to the foot of the mountain. The latter rises almost perpendicularly 400 feet just at the edge of the water, and towers up to three times that height as it recedes from the shore. It consists of horizontal layers of grey chist, resembling limestone in appearance. Huge masses of these rocks have been detached from the headland, and stand up in frightful fragments on the declivity, ready to topple and plunge headlong into the boiling deep below. These, with the caves, grottos, and frightfully opening chasms, worn by the action, or torn out by the violence of the waves, add a horrific sublimity to the spot, making one shudder on viewing it. The Calf of Man with its swelling hills, its needle, and its burrough are just before you—wild and desolate are these to the fancy. On the right, hang the fearfully shaggy cliffs in all the rudeness of torn and disrupted nature, rent by some mighty convulsion. Dark and fearful thoughts seize the imagination, and hurry the beholder into the mountain caves and subterranean abysses, where sea monsters, mountain *genii*, and boding angels of the storm meet in mystic revelry. On the other hand reposes like molten grass, or is lashed into fury by the winds, the dark blue sea—fathomless and mysterious; and while azure depths, sea-worn caves, frowning precipices, and ragged monuments of God's awfulness seize the mind with terror, the wild screaming of the sea-mew and the pintard, which in countless flocks are ever wheeling over the spot, add to its loneliness and solemnity. No wonder the wailing of the mermaid is heard here. It is just the spot I should expect to find her.

THE TARROO USHTEY,

or the wild bull of the water, is a terrible fellow when he gels among the Manx cattle feeding near the cliff. The fear of the farmer is, that in absence of civilized bulls, the breed may some how or other get crossed; and so the next generation of calves all run off into the sea. Many is the deadly fight farm servants have had with these stubborn intruders, when the former have come home late at night from the village put-house, and armed themselves with pitchforks for the encounter. It is confessed, however, that the light of the next morning has often shone on fearful wounds got by the civilized stock in these affrays; and strange to tell, they were punctured wounds, just such as might be expected from a pitchfork!

THE GLASHTIN,

or water-horse, though fleet as the winds, and much addicted to chase the land horses in the field, is not so much dreaded as the *Tarroo Ushtey*; for, it would be a decided improvement of the Manx ponies, so to cultivate the stock, that the next race of colts should be good swimmers, so as to cross the gullies in flood time.

There is a noisy night-man called DOOINNEY OIE,

who near the sea-shore, and when the storm is high, the mad waves lash the rocks in wild fury, and the darkness lours, raises his voice above the winds and the waves, and cries out: "howlaa! howlaa! howlaa!" This is a fearful fellow, acknowledged on all hands, but what he would be at in this terrible yell, is not so well known—even the

shrewdest Manxman cannot reveal the secrets of this monster of the deep and of the ragged shore.

Then we have the PHYNNODDEREE,
or the great fallen fairie transformed into a wild satyr, covered like a he-goat with shaggy hair. A volume might be filled with the exploits of this wonderful bring. He has been known to mow the grass of a large meadow in a single night, in rebuke of a lazy farmer, who omitted "to make hay while the sun shone." He has carried huge stones of many tons weight from the bottom of the lowest vallies to the top of the highest hills, and placed them as corner stones to mansions about to be erected. But as the doings of this extraordinary sprite verge on the wonderful and romantic, we better go to poetry at once.

His was the wizard hand that toil'd
At midnight's witching hour;
That gather'd the sheep from the coming storm
Ere the shepherd saw it lour:
Yet asked no fee save a scatter'd sheaf
From the peasant's garnered hoard,
Or cream-bowl pressed by a virgin lip
To be left on the household board.—*Craven.*

The history of this strange solitary being is somewhat melancholy. He was once a fairy of the male sex in good reputation; but falling in love head and ears with a pretty Manx maiden, and offering to abandon the fairies for a domestic life with this flesh-and-blood nymph, he so offended his airy people, that they expelled him from Fairy-hall, and cursed him with an undying existence on the Manx mountains, in the shape and form he now appears in. The Manx compassionate his misfortunes, as they all came upon him from his having loved a Manx girl.

And now follows in the list of fearful ones

THE BIG BOGGANE

This is a giant sprite of more potency titan any or all that ever attempted to trample rough-shod over Mona. He has no long goat's hair like the Phynnodderree, neither was he ever in love with a Manx lass, to my knowledge; yet as the great arbiter of right and wrong among the Manx he is without a parallel. His skin is black and thick as India-rubber; he can lie in the dark caves of South Barrule and Snaefell without a bed; and although he has never been seen by day-light, yet his tall shadow has often frowned over the wild regions of the North, as reflected, or rather cast, by the sickly moon, when the storm was gathering on the brownie hills. If by reason of sickness or other misfortune the stack of the farmer remain unthreshed until after Candelmas, the Big Boggane takes the work in hand and in a single night he threshes out the whole stack, scattering the straw and chaff to the four winds, but garnering up every

kernel of the wheat to the farmer's use. On the contrary if the stack be left unthreshed by the laziness or drunkenness of the owner, the Boggane Moar lays to, and does the needed work in a single night—but mark the retribution!—the straw and chaff are found piled up on the threshing floor, but never a kernel of grain is to be found among the offal. What a fine allegory this in rebuke of drunken habits! The bills at the pot-house will engross the grain; while nothing remains to the drinking farmer but the straw and the chaff.

And next comes the LHANNAN-SHEE.

This seems to be a sort of domestic and peace-loving spirit—a guardian angel over special localities, such as Ballafletcher; and it is reported that either the spirit bestowed upon the old lady of the house, or the old lady dedicated to the guardian spirit, a certain wonderful goblet, which has descended to the heirs of the Ballafletcher estate to this day. This generous sprite is not to be lightly esteemed. [4c] She or he, whichever sex the sprite might be, patronized the habit of taking a drop of the *O be joyful* in this cold northern region, and left us as a pledge of her approbation the generous goblet afore mentioned.

Perhaps, of all the notions having to do with the invisible, no one has a stronger hold upon the Manx mind than a belief in

THE EVIL EVE

The general notion is, that when some one has a longing for something in another's possession, and breaks the tenth commandment by *coveting* it, he is apt to cast an *evil eye* at it, if he is refused it. For instance, two persons at a fair are anxious to possess themselves of the same cow. One obtains it; but the other losing it, casts an *evil eye* on it. The cow loses her milk, or the milk loses its unctious property, so that no butter can be made from it; or the cow becomes diseased, and dies, and perhaps taints the whole flock of the purchaser. To detect the mischief, the owner burns the carcass of his dead cow on the highway, and if possible at a cross-road; and the first person who shall come, along the road and approach the barbecue, is the rogue with the *evil eye*. I know a public teacher of religion on this Island, and a man of large property in lands, who not two years since thus burned his dead cow, in full faith of the charm.

FAIRY DOCTORS

While here treating of diseased animals, it may be well enough to mention, that for many years past, the people of the Island have been blest with a fairy doctor, whose skill in the occult mysteries of *spiritism* is so potent, that not all the witches of old England, the hobgoblins of Saxony, the Warlocks of Scotia, the Spooks of Dutchland, nor the fairies and *genii* of Mona can escape his vigilance; but each and every, and all of them, are subject to his exorcism, and for a half-a-crown or a five shilling piece, he can *lay* them all. Old Ballawhane in Kirk Andreas is this mighty master of supernal sprites; and has power to control them has descended in

hereditary succession, in the male line, from generation to generation, lo! these thousand years!

Thus much have I thought proper to reveal of Manx mysteries; and would my readers pay me for writing a long book. I could fill three octavo volumes with an account of the wonderful feats of these strange fellows I have here introduced upon these boards. I will, however, wait to see whether these *odd fellows* are to my readers' fancy—whether their dress and hair are to their liking—before I cause them to dance a hornpipe, or play *snap-dragon* before the audience for their amusement. Should all be agreeable, I may cause the satyrs to dance at our next meeting.

The steam-engine and the press, I opine, by and bye will make sad havoc of the hobgoblins of Mona, and dispel her wizard mists; and with them many of her absurd customs, strange beliefs, and barbarous laws will disappear; so that except in the sequestered glens or on the brownie hills, the elves, fairies, and witches will no where be found. Let England never laugh at the Manx, remembering that late as the reign of James I, Parliament passed a law punishing with death any one who should “consort with, entertain, or *feed* a witch, or other invisible and infernal spirit.” Think of this, O Anglo Saxon! and be humbled.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

