

Manx Notes 369 (2019)

“BENEFITS OF NATIONAL AMUSEMENTS”

(1843)

[4c] Perhaps no social institution, religion excepted, confers more benefits on the middle and lower classes than the system of national amusements. Hence English Sovereigns from time to time, and especially the I. and II. Charles', increased the number of national sports, and gave encouragement to the people to engage in them. The palpable benefits derived from these, were, to divert the common mind from discontent and insurrection; to cultivate neighbourhood unanimity, and to make the people happy and content under the Government. The Isle of Man, of all places in the British empire, avails itself the least of these recreative provisions. On the 5th of November no Gay Faukes is paraded about our streets, and burned in effigy. No birth-day, marriage-day, or coronation-day of our beloved Queen is celebrated. No Plough Monday, Morris Dances, or pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. No nothing but annual meighleys, and tee-total tea parties. Now, in the constitution of our nature, athletic exercises, trial of strength, and opposition contests of some sort, are essential aliments, especially in the hey-day of youth. The sports of England furnish these in abundance. For the want of these on the Isle of Man, that passion for trial and contest seeks another out-let: and what do you think it is? Hear it ye shades of Hale and Mansfield! Manxmen rush into your vacated hall, to gratify that pugnacity so common to man. And here they come on with their chosen battalions of swearers on either side, each party selecting his valorous champion. Mr * * * * *, Mr * * * * *, or Mr * * * * *; and placing the Deemster, High-Bailiff, or Vicar-General, as judge of the combat, they go at it pell-mell, with might and main, to see who shall come off conqueror: no matter about the amount contended for; that is only to keep the reckoning, as in case of a genteel whist-party—the sum may be but 2s. 4d., and yet the amusement is the same. The by-standers are delighted with it, and a report of the contest spread out in the insular journals, circulates the sport around the Island.

The question now is, would not a good game at wicket, or some healthful sport, furnished by the calendar, be better?

By the bye, archery, ball-playing, quoits, &c., &c., seem to have but little countenance; and after all, they are more rational, more amusing, more health-inspiring than all the petty law suits in the world.

If the air is too keen in winter for these out-door pranks, the calendar supplies abundance of in-door amusements; and I like all these, because they are national. Look now at this short month of February, just passed, and see how many pleasant things might have been enjoyed had we been true to the calendar. On the second day-evening, we all should have carried wax candles in our pockets to church, to give it a thorough illumination after the ancient usage, and this would have been keeping Candlemas. On the tenth, we might have celebrated the marriage of Queen Victoria;

and that would have set all worthy bachelors and virtuous maids a thinking what was proper to be done on the 14th day: for lo! VALENTINE has come. This worthy saint must have broken the monastic rules—he must have gotten a wife; for the very recurrence of his day annually imposes the obligation on all eligible ones, of both sexes, to select their mates. Choosing a Valentine, or lover is still kept up as an ancient custom—hence the number of letters mailed that day in the Post Office, is said to be double of that of any other day: but it is to be feared the choice in most cases is abandoned without consummation: so it has to be gone over again on the next Valentine.

Well, Shrove Tuesday occurred this very week. It is a day dedicated to pan-cakes: and much domestic comfort is furnished by the occasion. But perhaps you don't understand it. Let us see: shrove is the preterite of the Saxon verb *shrive*, to confess. In the Romish Church, before the Reformation, confession used to be made to the priests on this day, preparatory to Lent. A great bell summoned the people to the confessional. After confession, festivities and amusements were indulged in, to the heart's content. We Protestants have changed this usage. Thanks be to the reformation for the change! We confess to no priests. We make no public display of great bells, or crucifixes, or oracular confessions. But on Shrove Tuesday eve we gather around the domestic board—close the doors from all intrusion—make confession to God—heal up all domestic breaches, if we have any—sup on pan-cakes, preparatory to Lent, which commemorates the forty days fast of our Saviour in the wilderness.

Some object to these good old national usages, because they were derived to us through the Romish [4d] Church. Don't be alarmed—good and evil came mixed to us through that channel. The Reformation professed to sift out the wheat and gather it into the garner of the Reformed Church, while it scattered the chaff to the winds. Among the good, these usages, preserved in our own calendar, descended to us. They are national—they are mementos of important events in the history of Christianity—they keep us out of mischief—supply amusements without law-suits—promote unanimity among neighbours—and what is better, these anniversaries remind us that time is ever on the wing, sweeping us onward over successive epochs, to that boundless eternity which lies just before us. *Dum vivamus vivamus*—Let us seize the flitting moments, and make the best of them.

“Benefits of National Amusements.” *Manx Sun* 3 April 1843: 4c.

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A complaint here of a deficit in the Island as regards “National Amusements,” which the piece goes on to detail:

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The only diversions the author could find celebrated in the Island were “annual meighleys, and tee-total tea parties,” and, with tongue-in-cheek, the pursuance of fruitless legal actions....

STEPHEN MILLER, 2019

