

Manx Notes 422 (2020)

M.L. Q—
“MANX CUSTOMS” & “MANX SUPERSTITIONS”
(1907)

(I)

MANX CUSTOMS

[124] Since the Isle of Man became the resort of pleasure-seekers, resulting in more frequent communication with the outer world, many of the customs once prevalent have gradually died out except in the unfrequented country districts.

Like all Celtic peoples, the Manx are naturally given to superstition and have a strong belief in the supernatural, and many of their quaint customs undoubtedly arouse out of this belief.

Each month had a particular custom, and to certain days special observances were attached, and it is the purpose of this article to mention the most striking of these.

It was considered very unlucky for a fair person, especially a woman, to be the “Qualtagh,” or, as the Scotch have it, “First-foot,” that is, the first person to enter a house on New Year’s Day; not the New Year’s Day celebrate now, but the 12th of January, for it is only recently the Manx recognised the alteration in the calendar. On the other hand, a dark man was received with joy, and on no account was he permitted to leave the house until he had eaten cake and drunk some wine.

On Shrove Tuesday the evergreens which had been used to decorate the house at Christmas time were thrown on the fire to cook the pancakes, in order to ensure the goodwill of the fairies and to keep ill-luck away from the family throughout the year.

By March 21st all farmers were supposed to have their corn sown, and they used to watch for dust flying from behind the harrows, for they believed this was a sign of a good spring and an abundant harvest.

Lady Day, March 25th, was settling day, as at a remote period the New Year commenced on March 26th, and people did not wish to begin the year with any debts to pay.

Old Midsummer Day, June 21st, used to be Tynwald Day, on which all new laws were promulgated; but with the alteration of the calendar Tynwald Day was changed to July 5th, and has remained so ever since.

The reason for the old custom of climbing to the top of the mountain nearest their homes on the first Sunday in August is unknown.

In September, when all the crops are gathered in, comes the [125] “Mhelliagh,” or harvest-home. This was originally always held on the day on which the last corn was brought in from the fields, and was a time of great merry-making, especially if the harvest had been good.

November 12th was, and still is, very important, being the day of the “hiring-fair” Men who wished to be employed walked about the fair-ground chewing straws, so that the farmers would know they sought employment.

On Christmas Eve in most churches was held a very strange service known as the “Oiel Voirrey.” It represented a quarrel, which was finally subdued, and was conducted by means of two parties, who sang carols or “carvels” to one another

On St Stephen’s Day the boys went in the country lanes and stones to death any wrens they could find. They carried with them large bunches of evergreens tied to sticks and decorated with coloured streamers. This custom is still partially observed, the wren-killing, however, not taking place.

The foregoing customs may be considered the most striking ones confined to particular dates. In another number prevalent Manx superstitions will be dealt with.

Anon [initialled as “M.L.Q.”], “Manx Customs,” *The Cushag* ii.6 (1907), 124–25.

(2)

MANX SUPERSTITIONS

[148] All the world over superstition holds its sway, and Manxland is by no means in the rear rank of superstitious nations.

Education, naturally, has done a great deal to dispel it, but still among many Manx people, especially those in the country districts, the belief in things supernatural is still a very prominent characteristic.

Many Manx Customs are superstitions pure and simple: for example, the custom of giving food and drink to the first person who enters a house on New Year’s Day was to ensure there being plenty to eat and drink for that household during the ensuing year. The “evil eye,” or “witching,” as it was sometimes called, was, and is still to a small extent, one of the things most dreaded by Manx people. It generally meant that some person had supernatural power to harm persons and animals, but not usually of their own accord. It was thought that if any misfortune or misfortunes befell a person, which could not be otherwise accounted for, the explanation was to be found in the “evil eye.” If an animal sickened and died it was said to have been “witched,” and the way the owners found out who had done it was this: they carried the carcass of the animal to the nearest four cross-roads, made a bonfire, placed the body on it, and the first person who came to the place after these preparations had been made was accounted the one who had cast the spell.

Another instance of the belief in the “evil eye,” was when some person became the prey of disease which was not known: the sickness was ascribed to the influence of the “evil eye” In cases of this kind a cure could be wrought by collecting dust from any fourcross-roads at midnight and cooking and sprinkling it on the sick person. The one with the “evil eye” was sure to come to the house door and knock while the

dust was being cooked, but on no account was he or she permitted to enter the house.

Of witches Manx people had a horror, and whenever opportunity arose of doing away with a witch they gladly made use of it. One way was to catch the witch and place her in a spiked barrel, the spikes being on the inside, and roll the barrel down the Western side of Slieu Whallian Mountain at St John's, into the sea. At certain times of the year the witches were supposed to change their form and take that of some animals. On the first of May they became hares, and it was considered very unlucky to see a hare on that day, and if by chance a person did see one he took a gun, loaded it with a silver coin, and awaiting an opportunity, fired it at the hare, as silver was the [149] only thing which would destroy it. On account of this superstition many Manx people would not eat hare.

On the 12th May all the gorse was set on fire, in order to burn the witches who were in hiding. If rats or mice which were in the gorse were heard squealing, they were said to be the witches burning.

To earn the goodwill of the fairies, who treated people as they were treated by them, and also to make sure of the butter and milk being good, some farmers used to put food and drink for them on the kitchen table before going to bed.

On Midsummer Day people expected somebody to be drowned, and somebody killed. This was on account of the sacrifice to the gods which used to be made at this season, of drowning one and hanging another.

In the fishing fleet no boat will be the third to leave port, as some misfortune is sure to come to it, and a boat will not leave the shore if anybody in it whistles, as stormy weather is sure to follow.

Anon [initialled as "M.L.Q."], "Manx Superstitions," *The Cushag* ii.7 (1907), 148-49.

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This follows on from the last note (*Manx Notes* 421) with Manx folklore published in another school magazine, in this case one for Douglas High School, and equally one that was short-lived. Again, the folklore is familiar but documentary evidence for Manx folklore is always welcome. Notice, however, the insight into fairy belief, how the fairy-folk "treated people as they were treated by them."

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