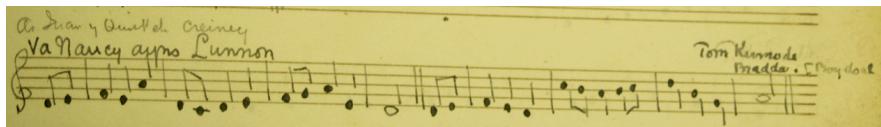


Manx Notes 546 (2021)

"I SPENT MANY HAPPY HOURS IN WRITING THEM DOWN"

THOMAS KERMODE AND THE CLAGUE COLLECTION *



On Christmas Day, 1895, Dr John Clague wrote to Deemster J.F. Gill, the letter here reproduced in full:

25 Dec 95 | Laa-yn-Ullic

My dear Deemster,

I have discovered a new "mine" at Bradda.

An old blind man—Tom Kermode by name, has given me three splendid old songs, and I think I shall be able to get three more yet. I have had three from old Fargher who gave me "Shannon Rea," and he has another which I shall probably get this week.

Altogether I have eight or nine "new" songs since the "Girls of Balla-doole"—although the last named may be Scotch, it was certainly played by the Manx fiddlers, 70 or 80 years ago.

Wishing you and Mrs Gill, "Ullick gennal as Blein Vie Noa."

I am | Yours faithfully | JClague¹

Note here the repeated mention of three songs being collected at a time. This shows up the work involved in taking down tunes when pencil and paper were the recording medium and how few were collected as a result in one session. This is a point to be returned to later.

Clague in his *Cooinaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague*, the title a clue to its posthumous publication in 1911 after the author's death in 1908, mentioned Thomas Kermode in the following terms:

"Tonight is the night" must be very old, for the tune is in the Dorian Mode. I took it down from the singing (voice) of Thomas Kermode, Bradda. He lost the sight of his eyes after smallpox when he was very little, and he was obliged to use his ears in place of his eyes. He had a wonderfully good memory, and he was good to sing,

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, "I spent many happy hours in writing them down." Thomas Kermode and the Clague Collection," *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu April (2021)*, [19]–[20]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Letter from Dr John Clague to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 December 1895, MHNL, MS 09702, Deemster J.F. Gill Papers, Box 2, unlisted.

and he knew the Manx language very well. The greater part of the words and songs that I have are taken down from his singing, and I spent many happy hours in writing them down. Although he was blind, he continued at his work as a fisherman for many years. He had great intelligence, and I owe him a great deal for the knowledge he has given me of the life of the Manx at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He deserves this to preserve his memory.²

“Blind from birth” was the comment in the 1891 census against his entry which enumerated him as being aged 65, born in Rushen, and living at Bradda, with his wife, Mary, 54 years old, born in Liverpool, England, together with their two children, William (12), and Edward (8), both born in Rushen.³ He is again listed in the earlier 1881 census as a fisherman.⁴ He died in 1901, and was interred in Rushen on 4 March 1901.⁵

Clague wrote that “[t]he greater part of the words and songs that I have are taken down from his singing, and I spent many happy hours in writing them down.” The results of this can be seen in the Clague Collection, made up of the four tune books deposited at MNHL, MS 448/1–3 A & MS 449 B, where Kermode figures as the most recorded singer in the collection with some forty-seven tunes to his name. “Tom Kermode by name, has given me three splendid old songs, and I think I shall be able to get three more yet.” So wrote Clague in his letter. He clearly did collect another three and then another three, and so on. This makes for a notional fifteen or sixteen visits to Kermode. The Clague Collection contains tunes only and not texts. However, sets of lyrics have been identified in a series of notebooks compiled by Clague (MS 450/1–24 A) and so some of the song texts might be recoverable. As ever, it is a moot point as to whether or not any of the other singers encountered by Clague could have furnished the same number of songs as did Kermode. With close on fifty songs, it is possible that Clague took down all that he knew and here there is the chance to see the repertoire in full of a Manx singer in the 1890s.

The “mine” that was Kermode had been discovered earlier in 1883, when John Strachan,⁶ and Father Richard Henebry,⁷ had visited the Island staying at Port Erin. “During that time we went about among the surrounding villages to see if we could

² Dr John Clague, *Cooinaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]) 23 & 25.

³ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Rushen 1901, RG 12/4692, fol. 37, sch. 159.

⁴ *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Rushen 1881, RG 11/5608, fol. 121.

⁵ LAWSON, and IOM CIVIL REG, Rushen C1/229 (Manx BMD).

⁶ John Strachan (1862–1907). Hulme Professor of Greek, 1885–1907, and Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Religion, 1890–1907, at Owens College, later the University of Manchester.

⁷ Father Richard Henebry (1863–1916). Professor of Irish Language & Literature, University College Cork, 1909–16.

discover any of the old folksongs or folktales of Man. For the most part our search was unsuccessful. The people have ceased to care for these things, and so they have fallen into oblivion.”⁸ The one singer they did find was Thomas Kermode and they recorded “Ec ny Fidderlyn” from him. Strachan revisited the Island in 1895, to once again take down “Ec ny Fidderlyn,” published later in the *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*. Henebry also returned alone where he came across Edward Faragher, who recounted his visit in an undated letter (1888?) to Karl Roeder:

I had A long talk in the summer with A Catholic Priest and he could read my manx writing very well and pronounce every word and understand it well ennough he told me he had been in the Island 6 years ago and had published some manx songs that he had learned from Tom Kermode in Bradda. blind Tom. but I neve come across any of them.⁹

If Henebry ever published anything collected from the 1883 visit with Strachan then the piece remains to be found unless the letter dates from a later year and refers to the *ZcP* article by Strachan (in which case the date of Henebry’s first visit is out). Whatever the solution to this puzzle, Faragher is correct about Kermode’s songs, although the ones taken down by a different collector, that we are still to “come across any of them,” as they lie unedited in the Clague Collection.

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 Strachan, John. “A Manx Folksong.” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* i (1897): 54–58.



⁸ John Strachan, “A Manx Folksong,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* i (1897): 54.

⁹ Letter from Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder, 25 December [1889], MNHL, MS 2146/6 A.