

Manx Notes 552 (2021)

“ILLIAM”

“A PLEA FOR MANX NATIONALISM”

(1935)

[5d] In a small town in the north of Lancashire, some time ago, I was surprised to find with what pride the traditions of the place were cherished. The highest distinction which anyone could possess was the acknowledgment that he or she belonged to one of the old families of the town, even though that family was never possessed of wealth, position or influence. The children loved to lapse now and then into the broad homely dialect. The townsfolk were delighted to recall the days when the town was the capital of the surrounding country, when its Castle, a building much less imposing in size and appearance than any of the boarding houses in Palace Terrace, was the guardian of the royal road, and they could talk by the hour of the traditions and the folklore of the district.

They were immensely proud of their heritage, humble though it might appear to be. As I listened to them I could not help wishing that we Manx people displayed the same lively interest in and knowledge of, our national heritage. Our Island story has many glorious pages of romance, of heroism, of suffering endured with fortitude, and of victories won by the self-sacrifices of patriots. Year by year, fresh discoveries are being made by the small and devoted band of Manx scholars which serve to show how great a field of knowledge relating to our Island and its story which yet remains to be explored.

There are, I believe, a great many people in the Island who are interested in things Manx, but, unfortunately, they do not associate themselves with any of the existing Manx Societies, with the result that the membership of these several societies is composed very largely of the same people.

The question arises whether it is not possible for the societies to make, a more direct and popular appeal, so that the spirit of Manx nationalism may become more widely spread.

NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

It is somewhat paradoxical that in days when internationalism is being preached with fervour, national consciousness is growing. But there is nothing incompatible, certainly nothing antagonistic, between the ideals of true nationalism and genuine internationalism. A people proud of its own traditions, cherishing its own individuality as a precious possession, is not on that account disposed to cut itself off from contact with other sections of the human family. Rather will it gladly embrace the opportunity of making its own contribution to the common stock of those things which possess a universal appeal through the medium of scholarship or art. whether expressed in literature, music, painting or dancing.

FOUNTS OF INSPIRATION

Our kinsfolk who have settled in all parts of the globe are proud of their national individuality, and look to us at home to develop and enrich it. I am not suggesting that our eyes should always be turned to the past, but I do suggest that from the past we can draw inspiration which will enable us to maintain a distinct and honourable place as a nation in fact as well as in name.

RECOGNITION FROM ABROAD

We have only to observe how others, viewing our Island from a sphere of larger experience, have recognised both the value of the work which is being done by the faithful few in this field and the immense potentialities which it holds.

To emphasise this point one need but recall the honours paid to Mr J.J. Kneen, MA, by the King of Norway and by the University of Liverpool in recognition of his services to Manx literature; the honour which Norway would fain have conferred upon Mr William Cubbon, the Curator of the Manx Museum, of the recognition which the work of the late P.M.C. Kermode found in academic circles outside his native Island, of the value placed on the patient and devoted labours of the late Arthur W. Moore, and of the ever-growing band of lovers of the works of T.E. Brown.

The wider world sees in the work performed by these and other patriotic Manxmen in their own sphere, that the Isle of Man has a very real and a very valuable contribution to make to literature and learning.

MANX MUSIC

The plaintive beauty which characterises Manx music has its own special appeal, and the fact that Mr Haydn Wood's compositions based on the traditional airs of the Island are to be found so frequently in programmes arranged for national [5c] broadcasting is a further indication that in music, also, the Island has something of its own to offer.

Those who were present at the last Highland Gathering will agree that the item which made the biggest popular appeal to the great holiday crowd gathered round the arena was the presentation by Mr Leighton Stowell's youthful troupe of folk dancers of some of the traditional dances of the Isle of Man—thus providing another example of how folk of other countries, especially our Celtic cousins, find pleasure in what Manxland can provide from its rich store. The work of Miss Mona Douglas in rescuing the traditional Manx dances has won the warm approval of discerning critics, and we all take pride in the repeated successes of our young countryman, Mr Billy Cain, of Ramsey, who has, more than once demonstrated Manx dances at the Folk Dance Festival at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Only the other week he also represented the Island at an Irish folk dance festival at Belfast.

These things I mention to support my plea for making a wider appeal to our own people to join in the work of reviving and developing the arts, yes, and the crafts of

the Isle of Man, so that through them we may express in some degree our national individuality.

A NATIONAL FESTIVAL

Why should not the Isle of Man have its own Gathering, on similar lines to those which are so popular in Scotland? Suppose that on Tynwald Day instead of the crowds hurrying away from St John's immediately the law-giving ceremony is over, they were able to adjourn to a nearby field and there enjoy a full afternoon's programme of Manx music—solo and choral, Manx folk dancing, short Manx plays, and examples of Manx games—I am certain that visitors and natives alike would find it fascinating. Supposing at Christmastime, we had a carol festival, when the Manx *carvals* could be heard again. During Xmastide, we have listened with delight to broadcasts of old carols collected from England, France and Germany. Who knows but what a Manx carol service might provide a novel and welcome feature in future Christmas radio programmes, if the old tunes can be restored.

The Manx Music Festival has a splendid opportunity to give immense impetus to this national movement by encouraging the singing of Manx traditional airs, and still more by encouraging Manx musicians to submit compositions of their own which possess the characteristics of our national music.

WHY NOT A NATIONAL DRAMA?

In the same way, it should be possible to build up a Manx drama. In this connection I want to recall what was said by Mr F.E. Doran, of the Manchester and Rusholme Repertory Theatres, who adjudicated on the dramatic section at last year's "Guild."

"May I suggest to the organisers of this Festival that you make it a truly national Manx Festival; that you should endeavour to evolve a national drama of your own, expressing the life of the people of this Island. You have an unfathomable mine of good things in your legends, your history, your culture, and all the life of this Island, and I am sure, if you try you can do for the Isle of Man what Lady Gregory, Synge and Yeats did for the Irish peasant.

Given time, and provided you stick to your ideal, there is no reason why you should not have a Manx equivalent of Oberammergau.

I think you have excellent national material, but it is employed for a second-rate purpose, when you can put it to a first-rate purpose. I should like to see this Festival go on from strength to strength and become the important festival in the literary life of the British Isles. I should like to see the boats packed with people coming to see the Manx Drama Festival."

That, you see, is a stranger's opinion of the possibilities which lie in the national cultural movement, and I firmly believe that when the movement becomes sufficiently widespread we shall see a gratifying revival of creative artistic effort.

YN CHRUINNAGHT

All praise is due to the handful of hardworking and devoted men and women who have kept Yn Chruinnaght alive; but surely the Manx people can aim at something higher than an event which takes place in a church hall on one half-day in the year. Even so, I am not sure that the most is being made of the Chruinnaght in its present modest form. Competitors are encouraged to submit stories, poems and plays, but beyond receiving a medal or certificate, and the glory of having their names published in the prize list, they receive no recognition. The publication of the most meritorious literary efforts would provide a far greater stimulus. One wonders what becomes of all [5f] the prize winning work of budding bards, dramatists and novelists submitted year by year. Yn Chruinnaght—if given the support it deserves—should grow into an institution of national importance, and its organisers might do well to consider whether it would not be worth while err-barking on a campaign early in the year to stimulate the interest of prospective entrants so that the festival might be staged on a scale more worthy of the title of the “Assembly of the Manx People.”

NEW HISTORY FOR SCHOOLS

The most encouraging news which those interested in the future of Manx nationalism have received for some time is that a short history of the Isle of Man, for use in the schools of the island is to be published, jointly by the Education Authority and the Manx Society, in the coming year. Perhaps this book will be the mean’s of arousing in the rising generation a new interest in their native Island.

The Manx have reason to be proud of their nationhood; they are important members of the great Celtic family. If they will take with reverent, hands the precious offerings of the past, and use them as their inspiration in the creation of distinctive art forms worthy of their Island home, Manx nationality will become an honoured and precious possession.

Pseud [signed as “Illiam”], “A Plea for Manx Nationalism,” *Mona’s Herald*
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