

Manx Notes 554 (2021)

“SEE THE MHEILLEA DANCES IN THE BIG BARN AT RABY” *

MONA DOUGLAS AND “THE MASTER OF RABY”

GAIETY THEATRE.
St. Patrick's Night, Mar. 17
Under the Distinguished Patronage and in the Presence of the Lieut. Governor and Lady Hill.
THE MASTER OF RABY
A New Manx Drama by Miss Mona Douglas
(For the first time in Douglas).
Presented by the
LAXEY PLAYERS
(Under the management of the Author).
See the Mheillea Dances
IN THE BIG BARN AT RABY.

Isle of Man Examiner, 4 March 1927

VISIT OF THE LAXEY PLAYERS TO RAMSEY.
IN THE
NEW MANX PLAY— THE MASTER OF RABY
(By MONA DOUGLAS).
(As presented at the Gaiety Theatre, Douglas, before the Governor and Lady Hill),
IN
RAMSEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL,
Wednesday, April 6.
Doors open at 7 o'clock.
Play to commence at 7-30.

Ramsey Courier, 25 March 1927

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The *Isle of Man Examiner* in its issue for 7 July 1926 announced that on the 28 October the Laxey Players were to present a bill of three plays that evening, namely *Kebeg*, *Luss ny Graih*, and *The Master of Raby*.¹ *Luss ny Graih* was written by Christopher Shimmin, the other two plays authored by Mona Douglas. The plays were performed not in October as advertised but on 18 November from a report in the *Examiner*:

A company of Manx dialect players resident in Laxey, and directed by Miss Mona Douglas, on Thursday presented two hitherto unperformed plays from Miss Douglas' pen, entitled "Kebeg" and "The Master of Raby." The scene of both plays is laid in the parish of Lonan. Incidental music and dances, part of it Manx and

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¹ Anon, "[Laxey] October 28th (Thursday) ...," *Isle of Man Examiner* 16 July 1926.

part Hebridean, were given by a choir under the direction of Miss E. Taylor, and a company of dancers under Miss A.I. Caine.²

There was to be a repeat performance the following year in the Gaiety on St Patrick's Day 1927, and with the Lieutenant-Governor and the Lady Governor in attendance, though this time *Kebeq* was dropped from the bill.³

"Brightness was imparted to the harvest scene in the first play by several old-fashioned dances stepped to old Manx airs, thanks to the training of Miss A.I. Caine."⁴ This is from the only review that appeared in the newspapers of the performance of *The Master of Raby* at the Gaiety. That said, the dancing had been flagged up in the adverts: "See the Mheillea Dances in the Big Barn at Raby," they had all read, a number mentioning that they were "genuine old Manx Folk Dances." The play was repeated a third (and seemingly final) time on 6 April 1927 at the Grammar School in Ramsey.⁵ The final mention of the play is from 1929, when Mona Douglas won first prize for best play by the Folk Song and Dramatic Association.⁶

So which "genuine old Manx Folk Dances" formed part of the performance of *The Master of Raby*? Fortunately, a copy of the programme for the Gaiety Theatre performance exists where they are described as:⁷

² Anon, "[Laxey] A company of ...," *Isle of Man Examiner* 19 November 1926.

³ For adverts, see Anon, "[Advert] Gaiety Theatre | The Master of Raby," *Isle of Man Examiner* 4 March 1927, Anon, "[Advert] Gaiety Theatre | The Master of Raby," *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 5 March 1927, Anon, "[Advert] Gaiety Theatre | The Master of Raby," *Mona's Herald* 9 March 1927, Anon, "[Advert] Gaiety Theatre | The Master of Raby," *Ramsey Courier* 11 March 1927. For advance notices, Anon, "The Master of Raby' ...," *Mona's Herald* 2 February 1927, Anon, "Miss Mona Douglas ...," *Isle of Man Examiner* 4 February 1927, Anon, "New Manx Play by Mona Douglas," *Ramsey Courier* 18 February 1927, Anon, "New Manx Play by Mona Douglas," *Ramsey Chronicle* 18 February 1927, Anon, "New Manx Play by Mona Douglas," *Peel City Guardian* 19 February 1927, Anon, "The Master of Raby'," *Peel City Guardian* 26 February 1927, Anon, "The Master of Raby'," *Mona's Herald* 2 March 1927, Anon, "The New Manx Play," *Isle of Man Examiner* 11 March 1927, Anon, "The Author of 'The Master of Raby'," *Mona's Herald* 16 March 1927.

⁴ Anon, "The Master of Raby'," *Isle of Man Examiner* 18 March 1927.

⁵ For adverts, see Anon, "[Advert] Visit of the Laxey Players to Ramsey," *Ramsey Courier* 25 March 1927, Anon, "[Advert] Visit of the Laxey Players to Ramsey." An advance notice is Anon, "New Manx Play by Mona Douglas." The reviews are, Anon, "[Ramsey] Miss Mona Douglas' ...," *Isle of Man Examiner* 8 April 1927, Anon, "The Master of Raby," *Ramsey Courier* 8 April 1927, Anon, "The Master of Raby'," *Ramsey Chronicle* 8 April 1927.

⁶ Anon, "[Douglas] Miss Mona Douglas ...," *Isle of Man Examiner* 5 April 1929, Anon, "[News from Town and Country] Miss Mona Douglas ...," *Ramsey Courier* 5 April 1929.

⁷ MNHL, Printed Collections, J62/CHE.

The Dances in the Mheillea Scene are :—

- (1) “Hie Mee Stiagh” (I went in)—a harvest dance.
- (2) “Chyndaa yn Bwoailley” (Return the Blow)—an old Manx Courting Dance.
- (3) “Car y Phoosee” (Wedding tune)—The Manx Wedding Dance.

(These three dances and their placing in the chronology of collecting by Mona Douglas await further consideration.)

The Gaiety performance was in aid of the Publication Fund of the Manx Language Society, specifically for J.J. Kneen’s *The Place-Names of the Isle of Man* which was published in six parts (one per sheading) between 1925–28. This was not the first time that plays had been performed in order to raise funds for Kneen’s work, nor for that matter plays that involved Manx folk dances. In 1926, to support the Manx Language Society, the Castle Rushen Players led by Leighton Stowell were at the Gaiety on 18 March to present two plays, *Mylecharaine* by “Cushag,” and *A Li’l Smook* by J.J. Kneen. “Revival of Old Manx Dances by Children” (also as “Revival of Old Manx Dances”) were mentioned in the adverts for the evening.⁸ The *Mona’s Herald* carried an account of the performances and mentioned that “[b]efore and between the plays, folk dances were danced charmingly by sixteen Castletown School children and pupils of the Olwyn School of Dancing. Miss Ruth Bird gave a delightful jig, and Misses Lily Radcliffe and Louie Bird shone in a country dance.”⁹ The Castle Rushen Players later repeated their performance of *Mylecharaine* at a Manx Tea and Entertainment held the following week on 24 March at the Port St Mary Wesleyan Church.¹⁰ There was dancing of sorts here: “A tableaux ‘Spring’s Awakening,’ an Irish Jig, and fairy dances were pleasingly presented by Kathleen Corrin (‘Queen of Spring’), Kathleen Clucas, Doreen Corrin, Iris Kneale and Kitty Cubbon.”¹¹ To complete the picture, J.J. Kneen’s own dramatic troupe, the Purt Iern Cushags, later put on his own play, *Gool on Cushags*, in December 1926, again to support his own *The Place-Names of the Isle of Man*.¹² This time, however, dancing

⁸ Anon, “[Advert] The Castle Rushen Papers,” *Ramsey Courier* 5 March 1926, Anon, “[Advert] Gaiety Theatre, Douglas | Thursday, 18th March, 1926,” *Peel City Guardian* 6 March 1926, Anon, “[Advert] The Castle Rushen Players,” *Mona’s Herald* 10 March 1926, Anon, “[Advert] Gaiety Theatre | Thursday Next, March 18,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 12 March 1926, Anon, “[Advert] Gaiety Theatre, Thursday Next, 18th March | The Castle Rushen Players,” *Peel City Guardian* 13 March 1926, Anon, “[Advert] Gaiety Theatre. | To-Morrow (Thursday), March 18th,” *Mona’s Herald* 17 March 1926. For an advance notice, see Anon, “In addition to ...,” *Mona’s Herald* 3 March 1926.

⁹ Anon, “Manx Plays at the Gaiety Theatre,” *Mona’s Herald* 24 March 1926: 6b.

¹⁰ Anon, “[Rushen] In connection with ...,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 19 March 1926.

¹¹ Anon, “[Rushen] ‘Castle Rushen Players’ at Port St Mary,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 26 March 1926.

¹² Anon, “In order to ...,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 24 December 1926.

did not feature, instead “[t]he old Manx Xmastide custom of ‘The White Boys’ was also enacted.”

Intertwined here are the figures of Mona Douglas, J.J. Kneen, and Leighton Stowell, each with their own company of dramatic performers, the Laxey Players, the Purt Iern Cushags, and the Castle Rushen Players. Douglas and Kneen were each playwrights, the pair also presenting and directing their own works, while Douglas and Stowell were both involved in the revival of Manx folk dances. At the heart of all these activities—plays, folk dances, calendar customs, place names—is the promotion of a sense of Manxness.

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