

Manx Notes 561 (2021)

P. W. CAINE ON BLANCHE NELSON

(1953 & 1954)

(1)

[6e] On Saturday Mr P. W. Caine read to the Manx branch of the Celtic Congress an unpublished collection of Manx folk stories. They were compiled by the late Mrs Blanche Nelson, of Glenchass, Port St Mary, and are contained in manuscripts deposited in the Manx Museum. Scarcely any of them is the same as any story in the printed books on Manx folklore.

Mrs Nelson was an educated woman; her father was a Dublin doctor, and her mother's father was a linen manufacturer who had a house in County Down. She was deeply religious, and conducted services, and even revivals, in the Howe Chapel and in other places in Manx Methodist [6f] circuits. Most of the stories which she heard and wrote down concern fairies, the "witching" of cattle and of human beings, and the haunting of houses by people, alive or dead, who had lived in them. They tell of the boiling of herbs, and the sweeping of dust from the roads, in order to discover a "witch;" of fairies eating "cowree" (a dish made of oatmeal) in a farmhouse, or stealing the gingerbread from the stalls at a fair; of customs connected with the birth of children; of the "beggars' room" left for vagrants who came regularly on their rounds; of people who had left some article out of place, who died, and who gave their family no rest until things were put right.

A more human story, perhaps, is this: "If a young man and young woman who are keeping company happen to be standing at a spring well of an evening, and the young man throws up his arms as if to stretch himself—as men do after a day's work—and he breaks the stretch,' letting his arms drop before they have gone above his head: he and the girl will never be married."

Appreciation of the lecture was expressed by Mr David Craine, M.A., C.P., the branch president, and by the secretary, Mr Joseph A. Woods.

"Stories of the Fairies." *Isle of Man Times* 14 March 1953: 9f–g.

(2)

The next meeting will be held on November 12th in Douglas and 15th in the Albert Road School, Ramsey, when the speaker will be Mr Phillip Caine and the subject "The Collected Folk Stories of Mrs Blanche Nelson."

"Antiquarian Society." *Ramsey Courier* 5 November 1954: 7c.

(3)

At meetings of the Natural History and Antiquarian Society held at Douglas last Friday, and at Ramsey on Monday, Mr P.W. Caine read extracts from the manuscript books of the late Mrs Blanche Nelson, which deal with Manx folklore.

“Manx Folklore.” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 20 November 1954: 9c.

(4)

At last week’s meetings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, held at Douglas and Ramsey, Mr P.W. Caine read extracts from the manuscript books of the late Mrs Blanche Nelson, which deal with Manx folklore.

The book contains many stories of witchcraft, and of dust being gathered off the road and sprinkled so as to avert the evil influence, and of herbs being boiled in the belief that they would induce the guilty person to come and be caught. There are many stories of fairies, of their gratitude or their vengeance; of dead people haunting a place because something, perhaps a quite trivial thing, something they have forgotten, lies heavily on their spirit; and there are stories of charms.

“Antiquarians Meet.” *Mona’s Herald* 23 November 1954: 5c.

(5)

[7e] Mrs Blanche Nelson died at Glen Chass in 1909. She was a most remarkable woman, educated and talented; she wrote verse and short stories and what is of considerable importance to Manx people, she collected folk-lore, adding her own pithy comments and reactions. Her manuscript was presented to the Manx Museum in 1930 by the late Venerable Archdeacon Kewley.

Mr P.W. Caine gave an absorbing talk on this wonderful lady and her writings at the first lecture of the winter session of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society at the Albert Road Schools, Ramsey, and on the previous Thursday at the Museum, Douglas.

Helen Blanche Nelson was the daughter of a Dublin doctor. James Wallace. At the age of 17, from curiosity, she attended a Methodist open-air meeting at Bray. As a result she became passionately religious and went about preaching, to the great displeasure of her parents. She visited a friend, Miss Brabazon, who lived in Port St Mary and continued to preach there. So much was her work appreciated that she was presented with a volume of Tennyson’s poems by her congregation.

She married Ned Nelson, a sailor, fisherman and small farmer and while he sailed she had full charge of the farm and stock, but still found time to preach, not only in Port St Mary but at anniversaries all over the Island. She once addressed an audience of fishermen from a boat in Port St Mary harbour.

Mr Caine visited her daughter to get permission to give this paper and for its subsequent publication in the Society's *Proceedings*. Miss Nelson willingly granted it, but reminded Mr Caine that, "These people have got relations." The names have, therefore, been altered, otherwise the actual manuscript was quoted by Mr Caine.

Dr Clague and Mr Walter Gill, in their scrap-books, have published one or two stories almost identical to those of Mrs Nelson, but for the most part she has made a new and considerable addition to the Island's store of old customs and beliefs that continued up to her own time, less than 50 years ago, and may still exist in the inner minds of people to-day.

Rejected lovers retaliated in vicious ways. One buried a beef's heart with the full burial service, after which the false love wasted away and died as did her husband. But the rejected lover did not go scatheless, he became a cripple and was still walking round on crutches in 1899. Another young man in similar circumstances could not sleep, he also used a beef's heart, but in this case stuck it full of pins and needles. However, he was interrupted while burying it and the dogs ate it. Mrs Nelson commented that perhaps he could have slept better had his windows been opened.

SPIRITS OF DEAD RELATIONS

Spirits of dead relations and friends kept Mrs Nelson entertained. She said that she was "not at present short of company." Her mother-in-law's spirit came back rummaging and rattling, looking for a favourite tea-pot. An old friend, Mrs Quaggan was dying, and sent for Mrs Nelson, who found the old lady gasping for breath, whereupon she cut the strings of the bonnet to give relief. After the old lady died, her spirit returned to haunt Mrs Nelson's house with thumpings because the bonnet strings should not have been cut with a knife, indeed, the third knot should never be cut nor loosened.

Spirits returned to complete tasks left unfinished during their fives. One man found a penny on his way to church and, as he already had a penny for the collection, he kept it. After his death he rattled so much in the cupboard that the penny had to be removed before there was any peace.

A sailor lent a neighbour an adze before he went on a journey from which he did not return. The neighbour returned the adze so that the spirit would be at rest. Mrs Nelson thought that it was an insult to the man's generosity as well as to that country where his spirit was.

Indeed, her husband believed in this superstition for she told how when Ned was seriously ill, he left an "iron" (an implement for hedging) hidden in a hedge. Ill though he was, he turned back and put it where it could easily be found. She asked if he did this because he feared he would not rest easily in his grave if it could not be found, to which he replied, "Ones have been known to do it before now."

According to Mrs Nelson, fairies were malicious creatures. She tells of a woman who heard the fairies coming up the stairs, making a noise and talking in Manx. She jumped out of bed and called out, upon which they fled in terror, dropping a baulk

of timber, which they had intended to put in the bed beside her husband in her stead.

A *Lhiannan-shee* was a tiny fairy woman, dressed in white, who sometimes fell in love with a mortal man and never left him. If she held his hand, her finger prints remained for ever and even if he escaped his health suffered.

Mr Caine remarked that it was astounding how similar stories persisted down the ages. The harpies, that appear in the works of Homer and Virgil, breathed upon food and made it filthy and tainted. A *Lhiannan-shee* did the same to a man in Port St Mary so that he never ate a wholesome meal again and became abnormally thin. Did this belief come from the Mediterranean in prehistoric times?

Water must be left in the house at night for the visiting fairies. A servant girl who neglected to do this was punished by their wounding her big toe and collecting the blood in a crock, which they buried under the *bink* (the slate slab upon which the water crock rests). The girl wasted away until a “wise woman” told her to dig under the *bink* and destroy the clot of blood. She recovered and never again forgot to fill the crock at night.

Mrs Nelson gave an amusing account of how she treated a sick cow in the manner prescribed by a wise woman, Betty the Howe; but the cow died. Another cow was treated with herbs and dust boiled furiously at midnight; but that also died.

She tells of charms, spells and omens.

If a courting couple should stand by a well and the man should begin to stretch and not complete the movement, he may build a house in readiness for her; but she will never live there because he “broke the stretch at the well.” She may love him all her life; but she will never marry him because he “broke his stretch at the well.”

Mr Cable’s audience will look forward to reading Mrs Nelson’s collection of folk tales in the Society’s *Proceedings* as much for [7d] her racy style as for their subject matter.

Mr G.E. Quayle thanked Mr Caine for his fascinating paper. The Society’s Vice-President, Mr N.V. Crampton, accompanied by Mrs Crampton, secretary, presided at this, the first lecture of the session in Ramsey. The members elected Mr Quayle to be chairman at the Ramsey meetings for the rest of the winter.

“Curious Beliefs.” *Ramsey Courier* 26 November 1954: 7e cont. d.

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STEPHEN MILLER RBV

