

“NOTES ABOUT THE BARRULE PEOPLE AND THE RECENT FIRE”

(1892)

The inquiry into the Barrule fire does not seem likely to lead to the discovery of the incendiary, so far as we can judge. The act was done sometime after midnight, and the miserable wretch who did it slipped away in the darkness unseen and unknown. It would be unjust to emphasise here the suspicions that were supposed to be cast on anyone; because those suspicions were really without sufficient ground, and had little else but popular rumour to raise them at all. Up to the present it is probable that the inquiry will fail in its end.

But, though useless for its main purpose, one can remark, with some interest, the light which it has thrown on the life and doings of the people who live in the neighbourhood of Ballamoda, Ronnag, and Barrule. All that district before was a *terra incognita* to the ordinary run of people, and one gets a glimpse of the *rale* Manx character, and the manners of an unsophisticated people, which is very valuable.

One fact is to be noted about these people, and that is their exceeding caution which seems to bespeak their original descent from the Gael. Though no one doubted the fire was intentionally caused, no one hazards a conjecture as to who caused it, until the inquiry suggests likely individuals.

Late hours on Saturday night are a prevailing institution. According to the evidence, the majority of the people around Barrule are strolling about the roads up to midnight, attending temperance meetings that last almost to the witching hour, and visiting at one another's houses.

The occupations of the people all around the shoulders of the gloomy mountain are very various. The largest proportion of them, especially on the north and eastern sides, are miners at Foxdale, others go to the fishings, others again work on the farms either as tenant farmers or labourers. Most of the men about own a few sheep on the mountains, and so make a few shillings in the year to help the rent.

A favourite pastime of the Ballamoda and Ronnag boys is fighting. The term “boys” may be said to include any persons of the male sex over 9 and under 90. The big hardy frames of the stout fellows who gave evidence at the inquiry seem to have been expressly intended for fighting purposes, and it is not surprising that their owners are fond of the game of fisticuffs. In former days there were constant feuds between the Ballamoda and the Ronnag chaps, and each side chose its champions

from time to time. On other occasions there were battles royal in the road, when flying sods and stones filled the air, and sticks wielded by powerful arms made the air resound.

It would be rash to say that every man is a poacher, but it is a fact that most of the men have a gun and some kind of a dog which they take out for “exercise” now and then. There are also a few undoubted “Nimrods,” who, we are informed on excellent authority, “can get you a hare at any time.” A blind man is reckoned the most successful sportsman in the neighbourhood, and to him are referred all knotty points relating to the chase.

From time to time young men emigrate from these neighbourhoods, and the letters they send to their folks at home form a great deal of the talk and life of the district. Many people here know as much of the States of America where their friends have gone to as they know of Douglas. One half the witnesses at the inquiry could neither read nor write, and half the rest would find it hard to pen more than their names. A great many are not sure how even their names should be spelt. A man, whose name is Karran, will allow you to write it with a “C,” or a “K,” according to your own fancy. If he is on the North side of the mountain he rather less in favour of the “C,” if on the Southside his inclination, if anything, is towards a “K.” Another man named Gell or Gill is willing to agree to either spelling, and you can just please yourself.

As a rule the people are temperate, but a few of the men here, as elsewhere, are fond of an occasional booze. A gallon of beer would hardly suffice to make one of the big pure-blooded country fellows tight. They are rough and ready fellows, with a keen appreciation of a joke, and quite as intelligent as you could expect them to be. They take a great delight in yarning to each other, which, with sparring and fighting, form their principal amusements. They are very hospitable people, and preserve the best traditions of the old Manx in their kind treatment of strangers.

“Koorring” (courting) is also quite *en regle* as a matter of course. The fellow usually leaves his girl about 11 o’clock at night, or, if he is very much “gone,” he may stay as late as 12 without transgressing mountain etiquette. Saturday night is the most propitious time for indulging the tender passion; but Sunday is also largely spent in sweet dalliance. The proceedings of a young couple at this critical period are not specially interesting to a third person, who might fail to understand how two young people can stand for half-an-hour squeezing one another’s hands without speaking. They might also be uninterested in the monotonous topics of life on Barrule, which, at other times, keep the two standing in the shadow of a doorway for four mortal hours hand-running.

The folks have several dialectic peculiarities which are the more interesting to observe as they are likely to be lost through the invasion of the Board schools. A lady who wishes to say you could hear a thing distinctly says “as plain as plain.” The expression is apt and forcible. If a person is suspected of a thing he is “put in for it.” If he is capable of doing it they would not “put it past him.” In all their answers the old Manx people avoid committing themselves. Everything must be qualified and the most absolute statement is preceded by the formula “I dunno’.” If a person intended a thing “he was for doing it.” They like to answer one question by asking another. This shows their shrewdness, but makes a lawyer “raggy.” They always say “expect” for “suspect.”

These are some of their characteristics; but all round they are very decent people. They work very hard and live contented, good humoured lives. If the passing generation is rather too ignorant, the rising one may perhaps know too much. Surrounded by their own circumstances there is a certain quiet dignity about these old Manx country folk that commands respect. As the late Bishop once said, there is nothing of 'Arry or 'Arriet about the old Manx people. They ate simple and unostentatious, and are nothing more or less than what they pretend to be.

OBSERVER

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