

MONA DOUGLAS

“SURVIVAL OF CELTIC MYTHOLOGY IN MANX FOLKLORE AND SONG”

(1928)

At the Bayswater Art Group on Thursday, May 17th, Miss Mona Douglas spoke on “Survival of Celtic Mythology in Manx Folklore and Song,” illustrating her lecture by a number of folksongs and tales. Miss Douglas outlined the ancient Gaelic cosmogeny as found in old Irish and Scottish literature, indicating the different names given to various deities by successive races. She then proceeded to deal with the philosophy expressed in the Gaelic pantheon; the conceptions of Leirr as the Ancient Deep existing beyond all being, of Mananan the son of Leirr, who signifies creation, or life coming into manifestation, and of Angus and Teobhal, who represent the masculine and feminine aspects of nature. The speaker then indicated some interesting survivals of these ancient beliefs in the folklore of the Isle of Man. Mananan, she said, was the name best remembered, and there was a distinct tradition in the island of certain rites and customs connected with him. She gave us illustrations of the surviving belief in Mananan, a fishing prayer used by Manx fishermen to invoke his blessing on their boats and themselves, and a folk-story relating how he appeared to a shepherd.

Teobhal, the Sea Woman, was also remembered to some extent. She appeared in many forms—as an enchantress luring men away from their work to death or madness, as a power invoked especially by women, and as the seal-woman who marries a mortal, lives with him for a time, and then departs to her own world. She was believed to have in her gift, music and poetry, and to have appeared to certain mortals and bestowed these gifts upon them. The songs were given as illustrations of these traditions.

Of Angus fewer traces were to be found than of Mananan and Teobhal, but the speaker believed that he was indicated in the name of one Manx mountain, and in certain customs and beliefs connected with it. Also, she thought a survival of Angus was to be found in a being called the Nikkessen, whose haunt was in the same district, and who lured by his singing young girls to death in his embrace. She here gave as illustrations the Nikkessen’s song and a protective charm.

Traces of many other figures from Gaelic mythology might be discovered in present-day folklore, the speaker said, but she had chosen to concentrate on the central ideas as giving the clearest conception of the system of thought of which they formed the basis, and as representing best the old Gaelic form of the eternal and universal religious ideas which were presented in so many ways to the human understanding.

Miss Douglas delighted her listeners with her unaccompanied singing of some beautiful traditional songs.

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Stephen Miller, RBV

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