

Manx Notes 597 (2022)

“THE MANX LANGUAGE” (1896)

SIR,—I perceive in your last issue that Mr Moore appears to take great interest in the vernacular language of the Isle of Man. In my opinion all attempts at resuscitating, or even maintaining, that language will prove as difficult as endeavouring to galvanise an Egyptian mummy to articulate the dialect of the period of the Pharaohs. There appear nothing to subserve in fostering the Manx language, as there is no literature identified with it. What is the nature of the ballad literature embraced in Mylecharane, Illiam Dhone, Keerie fo Snaghtey, &c.? Are they not doggerels—devoid of the least attempt at talent? And the carvals, or carols, recently published in the *Herald*, grate on ones ears like listening to a saw-sharper at work.

Mr Moore asks, “In which parish church was the last Manx service held?” That is a problem difficult to solve. When I was a lad, some half-century or more ago, I resided in Kirk Patrick, at which time Parson Holmes was vicar (successor to Parson Stephen, grandfather to your present Mayor of Douglas, who married a Miss Swan, grandmother of your municipal magnate, from whom he inherits his front name.

The first Sunday in each month Parson Holmes conducted the service in the vernacular, with the result that he descanted to empty pews, as the farmers made a special rule to be conspicuous by their absence on that occasion. Therefore, if there was an indifference in encouraging the national language then, what subsequently would be the result in fifty years? Why, to render it as extinct as Siberian elephants. Again, a few years ago I was visiting at Glenmeay, and in a house I called at there was a child with a head of peculiarly red hair, which I addressed in the few Manx words I brought to mind, such as “Khon jerg.” The mother was evidently pleased at my addressing her baby, but wanted to know what my words were. Nothing astonished me more that to find, in the heart of Kirk Patrick, that the Manx language was unknown; and, on the words being interpreted, though the mother was Manx by lineage and had never been off the Island, she affirmed she had never heard the words before, and, further, did not understand a word in Manx.

Mr Moore mentions about Mr Kneen, your town missionary, conducting the service occasionally in Manx. On a visit to Douglas, within the present decade, I was present on Douglas Head when Mr Kneen was preaching, and, on his giving out the popular hymn “There is a fountain,” &c., and raising the tune, the greater part of his listeners joined in a ribald manner, as though it was a music hall ditty. So much for the impression produced by preaching and singing in Manx.

Mr Moore will probably gain more information from the States of Ohio or Pennsylvania, or Johannesburg, or Australia, where Manx Associations exist, and the language of your little rock fostered, than he will in the Isle of Man, for the simple reason that the introduction of board schools—like the metaphorical sparrow with

his bow and arrow—have killed the Manx Cock Robin as effectually as the volcano which blasted up Mona from the azure main in the Irish Sea is extinguished.

At the same time Mr Moore is deserving of great praise from his countrymen for his persistent efforts in endeavouring to keep alive the flickering candle of *Gaelk*, but the Anglo-Saxon language is over-running and absorbing all languages. After a long absence from the Island, I visited a relative at Dalby, with whom I walked to Peel, overtaking a group of fishermen proceeding to the herring crusade. The conversation was mostly carried on in Manx, and on my friend enquiring whether I understood what the discourse was about I replied that though I had forgotten the vernacular, yet there were so many English words used that I made out the gist of the conversation; on which he retorted, “There’s where thou’rt mistaken; it’s Manx words got into the English. The English is such a mixture of all languages, but the Manx is only one language!”—Yours truly,

C.

Newton Heath, Manchester, May, 1896.

Pseud [signed as “C”]. “[Letter to the Editor] The Manx Language.”
Mona’s Herald 13 May 1896: 3g.

Stephen Miller, RBV

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