

Manx Notes 654 (2024)

“YOUNG MANXMEN WITH A MISSION” (1950)

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“Our Nation And Tongue Must Survive” Supreme Effort Needed

[5a] Into the Editorial Department of this newspaper marched a young man with a mission. “Do you want the Manx nation to survive?” he demanded without preamble. We assured him that we did; that it most certainly would.

“Then what are you going to do about it?” he asked. “Everyone who is personally engaged in the struggle to preserve the ancient Manx language will readily assure you that a great deal more support is needed if success is to be achieved.”

And so we invited this Manxman. Mr Douglas C. Fargher, a twenty-six-years-old ex-serviceman, former secretary of Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, teacher of Manx, to express his views. He did so in no half-hearted manner.

The time has come, he declared. for a supreme effort by all who love their Island home to save the Manx Gaelic, the mother tongue, from extinction. A small band of enthusiasts who are attempting this face almost insurmountable difficulties.

“A task like this has never before been carried out successfully anywhere else on earth,” he continued, “not even in Ireland, where that language revival has every help and encouragement it needs.”

“We in Ellan Vannin have not only the apathy of the people to contend with. The Manx Language Society is fighting the battle absolutely alone.”

Mr Fargher continued: “Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh has the terrible responsibility of deciding whether we are, in fact, making sure that the future of our ancient and honourable tongue is to be secured for all time or whether we are merely doing enough to ensure that the death of our language shall be gradual and dignified, and that its passing shall be suitably mourned, and that its memory, shall be perpetuated by a pyramid of barren learning, fossilised in some scholastic cemetery.”

To examine the whole question rationally and effectively it was necessary entirely to avoid being involved in “party politics” or narrow mindedness.

“We who have the honour and good fortune to speak the Gaelic love it beyond all measure, as we do our Island home. We are unashamedly sentimental. If our little nation is to be ‘Lost in the Empire’s mass,’ as Tom Brown so aptly expressed it, our language will also inevitably be lost. This folly we cannot and will not allow.”

PUBLIC INDIFFERENT

Never before had a language been saved which had fallen into a similar state of disuse to that which the Manx people had consigned their mother tongue within the past three generations.

Apart from Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, the Island's other patriotic societies were, he contended, merely organisations for social contact, cultural advancement, or sloppy sentimentality based on the works of T.E. Brown and the plaintive, nostalgic melody of "Ellan Vannin."

And what of the House of Keys? Were its members aware of the existence of a Manx language movement? The people of the Island, including the so-called "Real Manx," appeared to be indifferent about the language and the fate of the nation.

"In fairness I must state that Manx people often shows less interest in the mother tongue than those who have come to dwell among us during the past twenty years" continued Mr Fargher.

They were the descendants of that "ignorant and misguided generation which literally threw away their mother tongue."

A classic example of this attitude of mind can be illustrated by the story of two old Manx farmers who were leaning against the hedge in Sulby Glen not so very long ago, talking in the winter sun, when one of their own generation, a real Manninagh dooie, passed along the road with a young man of about twenty. They were carry on an animated conversation in the Manx Gaelic. The young man was an enthusiastic student.

BONE LAZY

One of the farmers took his pipe out of his mouth and said, with a wink to his compatriot: "Do yer hear oul Johnny spakin Manx. Yesser?" "Aye Bhoy." replied the other old chap. "I navar thought that oul John was so stupid." That was sadly characteristic of the attitude of the old Manx people themselves.

"I am afraid that it was usually the case that those who spoke on these lines were either too stupid themselves to have learned Manx in their youth, when Manx was [5b] spoken in nearly every household, or were they just too bone lazy? They usually say that they were not allowed to learn Manx, that their own parents only spoke Manx when they wanted to discuss anything unsuitable for the innocent ears of children."

"They say, too, that we who are trying to perpetuate the mother tongue cannot speak it properly: we have 'too polite' an accent. This is not true. We in Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh have recorded proof that the Manx which we speak now is exactly as good and the same as the Manx the old native speakers heard and used in their youth."

"Children were discouraged from learning Manx, but surely they could have done so if they had really wanted to? Some of them did, or where would we be today?"

“Native speakers of Manx who are alive today are all, without exception, very wonderful old people, intelligent and their interest in things in the outside world is remarkable. They were the intelligent children. The ones who were “not allowed to learn Manx” were the stupid ones.”

There are fourteen native speakers of Manx still hale and hearty in this middle decade of the twentieth century—Is it not a remarkable fact that the language is alive at all? he asked. Consider what has been done in the past to stamp it out, to revile it and to ridicule it. Remember how it was not only discouraged in the home, but by that effective weapon of the schoolmaster, the cane.

The Manx Society has purchased, with strenuous effort and with some considerable financial difficulty, a recording machine which has done great but seemingly unappreciated work for the Manx nation by preserving for all time the voices and speech of our last remaining native speakers. Their folk-lore and their hopes and disappointments, but not half enough has been done.

An American professor made many recordings some while ago and they are in America, and therefore of small use to Manx students.

“The native speakers which have been spared to us are all hale and hearty and in wonderful spirits. As I have already said they are only too willing to help. We are going ahead with the work, making slow but steady progress. Perhaps we can still “Preserve what’ere is left of ancient heritage.” All is ready for a new march forward.” Mr Fargher went on.

GOOD PROGRESS

“In certain directions, heartening progress has been made. A large number of people have a working knowledge of the language. There is more interest and sympathy shown now than at ever any time since the decline set in.”

“The once universal view that the Manx Gaelic was useless, more especially commercially, has practically died out. More Manx is being spoken now than at any time in the last thirty years.”

“An appreciable number of Manx books have been made available. Many more could be made available if the finances were forthcoming, for many valuable books are now out of print.

The Manx Government could help. There is sufficient material in the library and archives of the Manx Museum to give any local printing firm work for twenty years if all the books in the language were re-printed and the yellowed-with-age priceless manuscripts, the “smoke-stained volumes” were once more given to the Manx nation.”

“The scholars, Manx, Scottish, Irish, English, are there, all waiting to help. The demand is there from the Manx public. How often one hears the cry “Where can I get Manx Books?” All that is needed is the money to finance all this.”

[5c] “Power of growth, which is essential to the continued existence of a living language is there. How easy it is for we students to adapt the vocabulary of our

Scottish and Irish cousins. We can, or in most cases have already brought the language up to date.”

TEACHERS AVAILABLE

“Teachers are available to teach Manx in the night schools. This is an essential to any revival. There are at the moment about two hundred non-native speakers of Manx in the island. These could provide the nucleus of a great revival, and are potential teachers in schools.”

“Perhaps if more help and encouragement were provided by the Government and Education Authority something might have been done before now. The principal factor will be the co-operation and help of the Manx people themselves.”

“We must keep in mind the feelings and outlook of the ordinary citizen. Above all, we must not give anyone reason to think that we are out of sympathy with the spirit of the age. We must convince them that we do not advocate a recession into the dark ages. We do not want to sink back into a “Celtic Twilight.” Our stomachs are accustomed to better fare than ‘Spuds and Herrin’ and Buttermilk.”

“The world changes and we change with it. The Manx language must change with it too or die. Perhaps there are some scholars who want it to die, in order to feel that it cannot grow any more and that they would not be compelled to study its continual change. Perhaps they desire to fossilize it with the old stones in the Museum where it can be studied along with the skeleton of the “Last Manxman.””

“Would it not be wonderful to let our visitors really “Go Abroad to the Isle of Man.” That well flogged slogan of the Tourist Board would then have real meaning and would not be an empty shell as it is today. Is not complete and utter change the very basis and essential of a perfect holiday?”

Mr Fargher in conclusion puts the following questions to the people, and Government of the Isle of Man and also those who have the privilege of educating our children.

Do they want the Manx Nation to survive as a Nation?

Do they want the Manx Gaelic teaching in the Island’s schools?

Do they want the monstrosly unsuitable names of almost every new street (and the old ones) perpetuated.

Do they want the names on the Ordnance Survey maps and official guides to the Island spelling correctly?

Do they consider that the names of the streets and the signposts etc. throughout the Island should be bi-lingual? What an attraction for weary visitors.

Do they want the Manx language to survive?

“Young Manxmen with a Mission.” *Mona’s Herald* 30 December 1950: 5a–c.

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