

Manx Notes 694 (2024)

“‘CUSHAG’—A MANX POET INDEED” (1907)

O poet, somewhere to be born
’Twixt Calf and Ayre before the century closes.
Old Manx is waning,
She’s dying in the tholthan. Lift the latch,
Enter, and kneel beside the bed, and catch
The sweet long signs, to which the clue
Trembles, and asks there one interpreter in you.
T.E. Brown

Has he arrived, then, the great Manx poet? In the decade which has “failed from forth the skies” since that delightful old schoolmaster at Clifton, whom another generation may adjudge to be a great English poet, whom Manxmen will ever endearingly remember for what he has done to save their national heritage from “absorption in the Empire’s mass,” uttered his yearning aspiration for a nation’s minstrel in very truth, has the promise, the prophecy, been realised? As one ran through the pages of that volume of poems which has been published in the last few days, after much of its contents had already appeared periodically in the Insular Press, under the nom-de-plume of “Cushag,” one thought one saw the face and form of the “excellent babe” issuing from the “ante-natal roses,” heard the perfect song that revealed the peculiar, the personal emotions of the Manx heart, “our own and not another’s.” The book is small, the poems number less than fifty, yet in their depths are stirred which that intensely-cultured artist never skimmed; simple actualities which may seem trivial, but are as the very native air, as the very blooms of the hedgerows, without which Mann ceases to be Mann, find an expression hitherto pent up in the unknown. Take, for example, that superstition, if it please you to call it such—that susceptibility to the touch of the supernatural, let others call it—which is a part of the composition of our Keltic souls. The thing is not to be laughed away—there are more things in heaven and earth, *etc.*, The Island was and is full of stories of enchantment, of the second sight, told positively by people of undoubted intelligence and unimpeached veracity. “Old Manx is waning, is dying in the tholthan,” but “superior enlightenment, ingenious theories of rats and wind, and the “Pish! all imagination!” of the smug and solid materialist, have not done more than hocus the primal instincts of the race, and every Manxman who has not bargained his shadow to the devil will catch his breath, will sink into emotional silence as he reads:

“Mother,” she said, “my head is sore,
An’ the lil wans is callin’ me;

They say there's a boat waitin' down at the shore
 To take me a sail on the sea.
 Keep by a piece of my supper," she said,
 "An' lave some milk in the cup;
 I'll go with the fayries a bit," she said—
 An' she went to the wans from up.

And he will form his own picture for himself as he reads of the daybreak journey of the "little people," toiling up the mountain "with their beds, and crocks, and spuds, and grips, their spinnin' wheels, and taller dips," with that wailing, murmuring, sound, like the sound of the weary tide.

Our poet has assimilated his forerunner's kindly warnings—he is, speaking generally, "nervous, soaked in dialect colloquial, retaining the native accent pure." A perfectly pure accent, a faultless reproduction of dialect, we suppose is an ideal unattainable. Brown's dialect was far from being always faithful—it was rough and ready, with an engaging willingness to adapt itself to the necessities of rhyme, a convenient fo'c'sle lingo in which the same word might be spoken several different ways, in which slangisms were constantly to be found which no Manxman would ever dream of using. Our author's lapses are very few, but occasionally we see glimpses of what is hateful to every true Manxman, the attempt to make him in his origin, in his habits, in his speech, an Irishman. Kindly note, Manxmen do not speak of windows as "windies." Nor, so far as our observation goes, do they say for frightened, "freckened"—though that rendering is backed by authority, in the same way as another gross mispronunciation, "lek" for like—rather do they use the word "frikened," the vowel being a variation of the long I, with rather more emphasis on the first part of the diphthong. A similar observation applies to the word "gel" for girl—if the vowel sound of the "e" in that word were lengthened, something more nearly correct would be obtained. But we have seen so many absolutely abominable travesties of the delicious old dialect of the Island that anything so near entire sanctification as "Cushag's" dialect is an inexpressible relief. And the narratives themselves are true Manx. After all, Tom Brown more often told common tales in a Manx manner than the Manx tales themselves. Remove the locale of his "Yarns," change the idioms, delete a few descriptive passages, and they are as good as ever. But it would be difficult to induce such a story as that of "Poor Bobby, who travelled from dhure to dhure, an' each one gev him a piece," of the lonely old woman who "stirred up the bons on the chiollagh till the house was full of light," who

Sat with a fut on the cradle till the blaze was dyin' down,
 And the childer goin' a mixin' with the shaddas creepin' round;
 Watchin' one and another, and always her that was took,

An' daa comin' in on the dhure, and Henry readin' his book—
 that combination of national traits in the old woman's acceptance of the "King's Visit"—that sparkling warning against "that tejus Traa-dy-Liooar" the story of "The

Tholthan,” the “Oie’l Verry”—it might be difficult to induce these to take kindly to another soil. Brown’s noblest display of “Manxness,” his poignant, pathetic expression of the—national weakness? call it rather national strength—of “longing,” in his “Clifton,” is worded in such a way as to appeal only to kindred minds; but he who “builds the house and binds the sheaf” may comprehend the simple pathos of “Where I was rarin’ to,” or that passionate yet resigned cry of

O Mona ma Chree! We are long, long from home,
 And longer our exile may be;
 Yet a wreath of blue smoke, or a curl of salt foam,
 Brings us back to our Mona ma Chree.

And if once or twice a suspicion should flash o’er our mind that sentiment is degenerating into platitude, that the author is eking out his subject by hollow sermonising, what shall we say to the ringing reality, the unconscious but inevitable blend of the humorous and the pathetic which makes life, in the concluding words of “Kate Cowle’s” dream:

An’ glo-ry for ever, glo-ry,
 An’ a light for the blin’ to see—
 An’ a lil bit of pudden, Miss Geargie,
 If Mayry will spare it for me.

The author is not inarticulate, illiterate, un able to express himself except in the language of the uneducated. “Ta Baarle mie echey”— he has good English, though not such masterly, inexhaustible English as he had whose work we have been using for the purposes of comparison. He—or it may be she—has not the power of probing and analysing men and movements, could not have written that exhortation from which we have quoted at the head of this article. But he can see, and convey faithfully what he sees—can “hold the mirror straight to Nature.” Manxland is, as he whose eye could pierce lamented, “sliding into deep sea English soundings,” “becoming lost in the tide of Empire.” Our people are serving foreign task masters in the land of Goshen, or are daily making their exodus to lands of promise. But if ever there comes a day when the time of our hewing wood and digging water, our blacking boots and carrying trunks is past, when all Manxmen shall be something approaching to a people distinctive and independent, something near to one homogeneous race, then these poems should be as much part of Manxland as the yellow bloom that gives them name. And if that time never comes, these poems—if the author never write more, which it is to be devoutly prayed he may do, so long as he never sinks into the mechanical, daily-journalism spirit should be read by every patriotic Manxman and woman, that they may, “as the time-flood onward rolls, secure an anchor for their Keltic souls.”

“Cushag’—A Manx Poet Indeed.” *Isle of Man Times* 31 August 1907: 4c.

Stephen Miller RBV