

Manx Notes 142 (2013)

“THE WHEEZY CONCERTINA” THE CELEBRATION OF THE MHELLIAH *

Canon John Kewley is an important figure in the history of Manx vernacular song as the “inheritor” of the personal papers of Dr John Clague later depositing the four tune books as well as a number of the Doctor’s notebooks in the then Manx Museum Library. In 1923, he published a piece based on his reminiscences of country life that included the following passage:

And the harvest. How different from the present. How laborious and wearying the reaping, the “shearing” I suppose we ought to call it, with scythes and sickles; the juvenile limbs aching with making and laying bands; the inexhaustible supply of “Quayle and Usher,” necessary to quench the reapers’ not altogether unwelcome drought; the Mheillea at the end;¹ the supper; the dancing on the barn loft,² carefully dusted for the occasion; the wheezy concertina, which had to do duty for the fiddle, because the fiddlers had become few; the *jough*; the regret when it was announced that it was time to go home; the eager looking forward to next year’s Mheillea.³

Such a description reminds us of the connection of the performance of song and dance to social occasions and the calendar, here the end of the harvest, the most important event in the farming year. Note Kewley’s comment that the concertina had come to replace the fiddle player, one such as “Phillie the Desert” (Philip Caine) who was recalled in an interview as late as 1962: “They were great for fiddlers in them days. Phillie the Desert would play for the dancing—he was one that was going round to play [...]”⁴

Dancing was an important part of the *Mhelliah* as Thomas Quayle recounted much earlier in 1812:

The Manks peasantry being much attached to dancing, it is a constant practice on the evening of the day on which the last corn is cut, for the farmer to call in a fiddler or two. Laborers, young and old, then assemble; and often the family and

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “The Wheezy Concertina: The Celebration of the Mhellia,” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu*, August (2012), [6]–[7]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ *Mheillea* (Manx), “Mheillea, the term is used for the finishing of reaping corn.” Archibald Cregeen, *A Dictionary of the Manks Language* (Douglas & London & Liverpool: J. Quiggin & Whittaker, Treacher, and Arnot & Evans, Chegwin, and Hall, 1835 [but 1837]) 114 col. a. Often spelt as *Mhelliah*, it is now taken to be the Harvest Supper itself as here in Kewley’s passage.

² The floor was polished by the movement of sacks. As the barn was empty, there was an percussive effect from feet on the boards. Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle: Brandon, 2004) 110.

³ Rev. John Kewley, “Rambling Memories of a Manx Sexagenarian,” *Ellan Vannin Magazine* i (1923): 18.

⁴ Mrs Lace, Cronk-y-Voddy, German, interviewed in 1962. MNHL, MXMUS FLS L/15 B, 4–5.

friends of the farmer himself join in the merry dance. The reason of fixing the period of this festivity, which is called the *mellow*, not at harvest-home, but on the day when the last corn is cut, is probably because the females' share of the labour then ceases, and they disperse. During the dance, a diminutive sheaf, formed of the last cut corn, bound with ribbands, which had been borne in procession from the field by the queen of the mellow, passes from hand to hand among the young woman, and in dancing is waved above the head. English country-dances are still unknown to them. Jigs and reels, in which four or five couples join, take their place, the fiddler changing his tune, and often playing one of the few national lively airs, preserved from early times, resembling strongly in character the Irish.⁵

As ever, one is left to tease out the meaning in such an observation that “English country-dances are still unknown”—so what then were they dancing? “Jigs and reels” we are told, but from which tradition? The “few national lively airs” remind Quayle of Irish folk tunes—again, where had he heard them in order to make his conclusion? Are these Irish itinerant musicians visiting the Island that he had witnessed? Such questions are likely to remain open ones.⁶

For that same year in which Quayle's account was published, there is an account of the Mhelliagh in a dairy kept by Josepha Dalby of Ballacooley Lodge, Kirk Michael:

When the last bundle of wheat and barley is cut, it is tyd up and ornamented with long streamers of new ribbon.

The person who cuts it has the bundle and dances all night with it in her hand. It is called the Mhelliagh, which everybody who has a farm gives, with abundance of strong beer.⁷

The previous year, 1811, George Woods had been present at a Mhelliagh on the Calf of Man:

The day which I spent on this retired but hospitable island, was the harvest-home, the *meller* of the Manks, a time of jubilee. The labourers had plenty of ale, and the master dealt out his excellent rum with a cautious, not sparing hand. Though of ten or twelve people all were merry, none was absolutely intoxicated. A dance in the barn concluded the festivity of the day: and Mr Gourlay conducted me to the opposite shore in his own boat.⁸

⁵ Thomas Quayle, *General View of the Agriculture of the Isle of Man* (London: W. Bulmer, 1812) 124–25.

⁶ See, however, the relevant passages in David Speers, “The Historical References to Manx Traditional Music, Song and Dance,” *Béaloides* 64–65 (1997 [for 1996–97]).

⁷ Entry for 25 September 1812, diary kept by Josepha Dalby of Ballacooley Lodge, Kirk Michael, MNHL, MS 5583 C.

⁸ George Woods, *An Account of the Past and Present State of the Isle of Man* (London & Edinburgh: Printed for Robert Baldwin & William Blackwood, 1811) 146. I am grateful to John Wright for this reference.

The Mhelliah, however, was later to come under pressure from the influence of Methodism:

The same night the Melliah supper was held in the big barn. There was plenty to eat, but no strong drink (for “himself” was a teetotaler); there was singing, but no dancing (he was a local preacher, and high up on the Plan-beg).⁹

And this from 1880:

The day being finished, the shearers proceeded on their way home, where a supper was provided, and after supper sports were commenced, frequently including music and dancing, and plenty of beer &c. But these things have died out, and now-a-days if there is a harvest supper at all it is when the corn is all saved, and very properly so.¹⁰

One readily notices the moralistic tone there—“very properly so,” the reformation of vernacular culture. That this in the Island was to come under such pressure was already seen with the extract above. Sophia Morrison reporting to the Manx Language Society in 1905 about the activities of the recently purchased phonograph mentioned a major problem she had encountered in collecting material:

One difficulty in the way of obtaining the material which we want, has been, as I have found by experience, the unwillingness of our intensely earnest and religious peasantry to speak into the instrument such “boghtynid”¹¹ as folk-stories and sayings and secular songs. They prefer that such a serious thing as a record which is to be handed down to posterity shall consist of Hymns, Scripture, or Carvals.¹²

The passage ends: “One who knows them can understand the feeling, but, for the purposes of the M.L.S. more frivolity is to be desired.”¹³ That was not to be forthcoming from John Nelson, one of the collectors with the phonograph, as Morrison wrote in 1905 to J.J. Kneen:

I have done my best to persuade Nelson to give us some every day jig-jog yarns in homely Manx—but he looks upon that kind of work as just so much ‘boghtynid’—his one ambition being to translate Moody & Sankey. It is such a pity as we have so much of that wishy washy stuff in Manx—& of no real value.”¹⁴

⁹ Hall Caine, *The Little Man Island: Scenes and Specimen Days in the Isle of Man* (Douglas: Isle of Man Steam Packet Co. Ltd, 1894) 29. *Plan-beg* (Manx), ‘Little Plan,’ the listing of local Methodist preachers and where and when they would be found preaching.

¹⁰ I. Margaret Kelly, “*Twas Thus and Thus They Lived*” (n.p.: Privately, by the Author, n.d.) 154.

¹¹ *Boghtynid* (Manx), ‘nonsense.’

¹² Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, “Records of the Manx Language,” *Annual Meeting, 1905* (n.p.: Manx Language Society, 1905).

¹³ Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, “Records of the Manx Language.”

¹⁴ Letter from Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, 22 November 1905, MNHL, MS 1086/13 c. Morrison was a candid correspondent.

This was in answer to Kneen's letter earlier that month where he commented that "I wish that Mr Nelson would turn his attention to secular songs instead of sacred songs, our secular songs are very limited, but of sacred songs and carols we have *go leór*."¹⁵

In 1895, W.H. Gill had written that "the old tunes were being replaced by the tunes of the London music halls," in his lecture before the Musical Association.¹⁶ Change had come much earlier from another direction, as the schoolmistress of Baaregarroo, Agnes Wicksey, recorded in the school logbook for 1874:

Singing not so good; one boy, who has been converted at the "revival meetings" held in this Chapel at the present time, refused to sing school songs, as he thought it wrong to do so.¹⁷

That player then with his "wheezy concertina" was upholding a vernacular song culture that was under threat, one from within and not as Gill saw it without. One hopes that he played his tunes with vigour and that his audience danced with strength against this tide of change.

STEPHEN MILLER
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¹⁵ "Go leór" (Irish), 'enough'. Letter from J.J. Kneen to Sophia Morrison, 15 November 1905, MNHL, MS 09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 3. An interesting drop here into Irish from Kneen.
¹⁶ W.H. Gill, "Manx Music," *Manx National Songs with English Words: Selected from the MS. Collection of the Deemster Gill, Dr. J. Clague, and W.H. Gill, and Arranged by W.H. Gill* (London: Boosey, 1896) ix.
¹⁷ Entry for week of 9–13 March 1874, Baaregarroo School logbook, German, MNHL, MD 10025. The entry for the following week, 16–20 March 1874, read: "Kept some of the second class boys in to do their home exercises, & made them understand that if they are attending the evening meetings at the chapel, they must not for that reason neglect their home & school duties."

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