

Laa Luanyys

A Manx tradition for the start of August

A collection of historical resources



Culture
VANNIN

Samuel Haining

A Historical Sketch and Descriptive View of the Isle of Man (1822)

Marvellous tales are still related by the inhabitants of [...] the efficacious virtues of the water of Maughold's Well. [...] Multitudes still, according to ancient custom, resort thither on the first Sabbath in August, and the sacred day is shamefully profaned by their merriment. Others flock to the mountains on that day, but the origin of this singular custom is unknown.



The name was probably originally associated with the Celtic god *Lug* or *Lieu*, as he is called in Wales, who, as he was said to have been brought up at the court of Manannan, was closely connected with Man.

In Ireland his festival, called the *Lug-nassed*, or the wedding of Lug, was celebrated on this day by a fair, at which games and sports took place. In Man, too, there was, within living memory, a great fair in the parish of Santon on the same day. This festival was, according to Professor Rhys, 'the great event of the summer half of the year, which extended from the calends of May to the calends of winter. The Celtic year was more thermometric than astronomical; and the *Lugnassad* was, so to say, its summer solstice.' The fair has disappeared; but the ancient custom of visiting the highest hills and sacred wells on this day cannot be said to be altogether extinct. [...]

The Church attempted to put an end to this custom and failed, but contrived to give it a religious character by changing the date of its observance from the first day of August to the first Sunday in that month. The following representation made to the Ecclesiastical Court by the curate and wardens of the parish of Lonan, in 1732, will show that this custom was prevalent at that time:

'The curate and wardens represent to the Court that there is a superstitious custom, which is yearly continued and practiced in this and the neighbouring parishes by many young people (and some of riper age) going to the top of Snaefell Mountain upon the first Sunday of August, where (as they are informed) they behave themselves very rudely and indecently for the greater part of the day. Therefore, they crave that the Rev. Court may be pleased to order what method must be taken to put a stop to this profane custom for future.'

The Court (consistorial), in consequence of this order, ordained:

'that publication be made yearly on the two last Sundays in July by the minister for the time being, after the Nicene Creed, that whoever shall be found to profane the Lord's Day after this wicked and superstitious manner shall be proceeded against with severe ecclesiastical censures; and the minister and wardens are hereby required to do their utmost in discovering the persons guilty in this particular and to make presentation thereof.'

But such methods did not avail against this 'superstitious and wicked custom,' and in vain, too, did Bishop Wilson fulminate against it, as it was quite common 70 years ago, and is not quite extinct yet.

The next great day in the pagan calendar of the Celts is called in Manx *Laa Lhunys*, in Irish *Lugnassad*, which was associated with the name of the god Lug. This should correspond to Lammas, but reckoned as it is, according to the Old Style, it falls on the twelfth of August, which used to be a great day for business fairs in the Isle of Man as in Wales. But for holiday making the twelfth only suited when it happened to be a Sunday; when that was not the case, the first Sunday after the twelfth was fixed upon. It is known accordingly as the First Sunday of Harvest, and it used to be celebrated by crowds of people visiting the tops of the mountains. [...]

I have heard it related by persons who were present how crowds on the top of South Barrule on the first Sunday in Harvest were denounced as pagans by a preacher called William Gick, some seventy years ago; and how another man called Patrick Beg, or Little Patrick, preaching to the crowds on Sneafell, in milder terms, used to wind up the service with a collection, which appears to have proved a speedier method of reducing the dimensions of these meetings on the mountain-tops. Be that as it may they seem to have diminished since then to comparative insignificance.

If you ask the reason for this custom now, for it is not yet quite extinct, you are told first that it is merely to gather ling berries [i.e. blueberries]; but now and then a quasi-religious reason is given, namely, that it is the day on which Jephthah's Daughter and her companions went forth on the mountains to bewail her virginity: somehow, some Manx people make believe that they are doing likewise. That is not all, for people who have never themselves thought of going up the mountains on the first Sunday of Harvest or any other, will be found devoutly reading at home about Jephthah's Daughter on that day. I was told this first in the South by a clergyman's wife, who, finding a woman in the parish reading the chapter in question on that day, asked the reason for her fixing on that particular portion of the Bible. She then had the Manx view of the matter fully explained to her, and he has since found more information on it, and so have I. This is a very curious instance of a pagan practice profoundly modified to procure a new lease of life; but it is needless for me to say that I do not quite understand how Jephthah's Daughter came to be introduced, and that I should be glad to have light shed on the question.

30) And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands,

31) Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

32) So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD delivered them into his hands.

33) And he smote them from Aroer, even till thou come to Minnith, even twenty cities, and unto the plain of the vineyards, with a very great slaughter. Thus the children of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

34) And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter.

35) And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back.

36) And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the LORD, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the LORD hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon.

37) And she said unto her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows.

38) And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months: and she went with her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains.

39) And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel,

40) That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.

Dr John Clague
Manx Reminiscences (1911)

People went on the first Sunday of harvest, or on the first day of the first month of harvest, to make an offering to the Lug or Luan, the Corn God. They went to Baroole, the highest mountain, to gather branches of heather and bilberries. They walk to Baroole still to get the berries, but they do not know what for (why) they do it.

'Malew', *Isle of Man Times*, 23/08/1919

<http://www.imuseum.im/Olive/APA/IsleofMan/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=IMT%2F1919%2F08%2F23&id=Ar00516&sk=F315CCB5>

In pursuance of an ancient local custom, which has been kept up, with more or less energy and completeness, right to the present time, an open-air service was held on the summit of South Barrule, on Sunday, in celebration of the opening of the harvest. On this occasion, thanks to the activities of Miss Mona Douglas, the secretary of the Manx Language Society, the service was conducted in Manx language, and a considerable portion of the set order of service used at Kirk Braddan recently was again gone through. About a hundred people, representative of the different districts situate around the foot of Barrule, climbed up the mountain, and the service was conducted by Messrs T. Taggart (Grenaby), J. J. Kneen (Douglas), and Caesar Cashen (Peel). Several hymns in the Manx language were sung with enthusiasm.



Tom Taggart and his 'fiddle'
Taken from *This is Ellan Vannin* by Mona Douglas (1965)

In Man, seasonal and communal visiting of the springs was performed only on the first Sunday in August, except when it was postponed to the neighbourhood of the 12th of August in fidelity to the Old Style of reckoning; but this custom related exclusively, so far as I know, to sources situated on hills or cliffs. *St. Maughold's Well* was one of these; springs on Slieu Dhoo, Slieu Curn and South Barrule were others; the *Farrane Fing* on the side of Snaefell was a fifth. A description of the scenes at Maughold, and the denunciation by the Church of the annual ascent of Snaefell, leave little doubt of the essentially non-Christian character. It is usual to speak of such festivals as having "degenerated," but in my opinion the features to which objection is taken are survivals from a more vigorous and less self-conscious society. The first Sunday in August may be taken as representing a pagan 1st of August, responding, in the Celtic Calendar, to the still more important first days of May and November. In the surrounding countries the usual date for well-visiting in common was the 1st of May, though the first day of August was not wholly neglected. The May date has in part been variously adjusted to the Christian festivals of Easter and Whitsuntide, and particularly to Ascension Day.

Possibly the primary motive in the Isle of Man was the ascent of the hills, and the springs were taken in the stride, so to speak; if the springs were the chief object of the pilgrimage, why were not the lowland wells also visited?

[...] an old fiddler who lived for many years just a little way up the hill from the bridge, in one end of the Grenaby Schoolhouse: Tom Taggart, known throughout the parish of Malew as a wise man and a musician.

His instrument was a rather large 'cello, which he always referred to as The Fiddle, or Herself; and it was, to him, quite definitely a personality. Where it came from I could never find out; a question would only elicit from Tom a vague: "Aw, she's been in the Island a long time—brought by one of them Spaniards, it's like, and she's been here all my time."

Tom and his Fiddle had two permanent engagements: to provide music for the services held by the Vicar in the Grenaby Schoolroom, and to lead up the singing every Sunday in the little Kerrowkiel Chapel up under Barrule; and he had a great repertoire of hymn tunes for all occasions, his favourite being Dr. Clague's tune—Crofton. He had a good many of these written down in small manuscript music books, for he could both read and write music; but some of the best tunes were not written down at all, and were pure Manx folk-airs fitted to hymn words and sung to an improvised accompaniment, sometimes in Manx Gaelic, sometimes in English.

One of Tom's most curious accomplishments was to play the air of the hymn with an accompaniment of chords almost like a bag-pipe drone, while singing the tenor part himself, the chapel congregation joining in improvising harmony.

[...]

Hymns, however, were not the only tunes he played. Now and then he would improvise, making music that seemed the very voice of the mountains and streams; or again, with a flourish of his bow and his white whiskers, he would break into a lively dancetune like the Car y Ferrishyn, and maybe some children from round about would come and dance to it on the little paved "street" in front of the schoolhouse.

But as a good old-fashioned Methodist, Tom felt rather guilty about these lapses of The Fiddle from "sacred" music; and I remember him once stroking the brown wood and saying apologetically: "Herself here has never what you could really call sinned to—but I'm admitting she likes a lively tune!"

Once, shortly after his wife died, Tom had an accident with The Fiddle, and it could not be played. He was dejected. The late High-Bailiff Percy Kelly, an old friend of Tom's, used to tell how he called one day and, thinking Tom was fretting for his wife, tried to condole with him. Tom listened awhile, and then broke in, rather impatiently, "Aye man, it's a pity for the wife, the soul – but she's at rest, and we must take of it. But oh, man, man – The Fiddle is broke at me!" After that The Fiddle was duly repaired, and Tom regained his customary cheerfulness – for he was a very cheery soul, with a sly sense of humour.

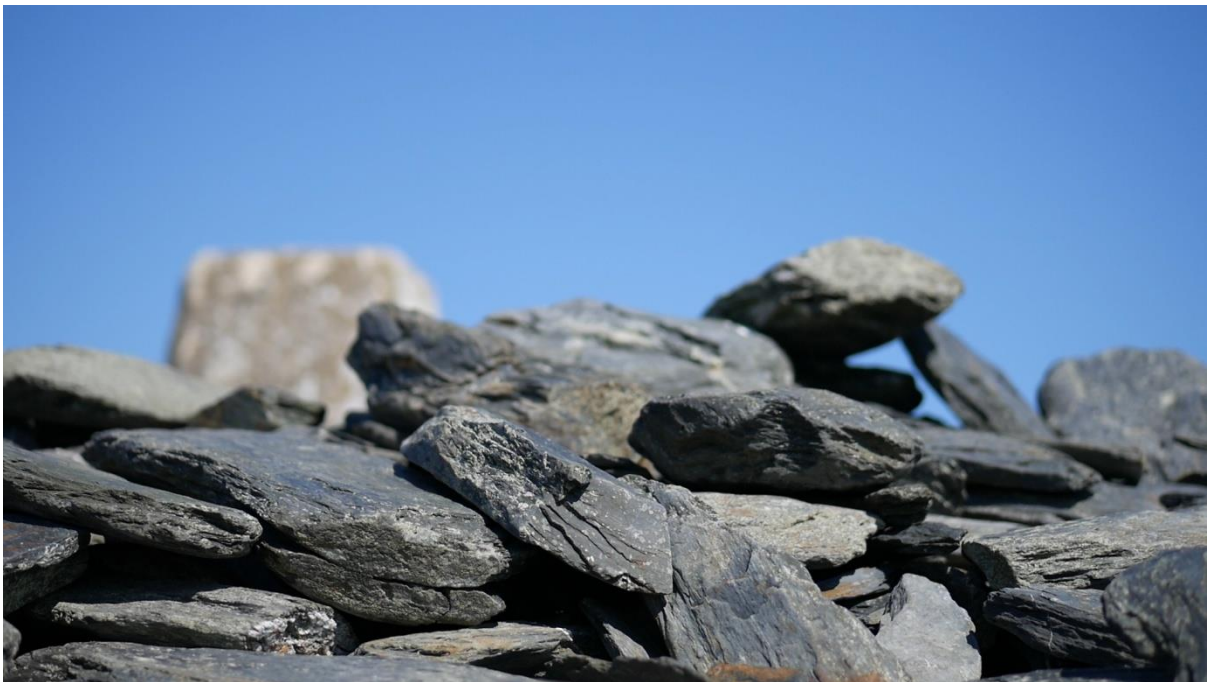
[...]

Almost the last time I heard him play was on the very top of South Barrule. Yn Cheshaght Ghailckach had organised a revival of the Manx Gaelic service formerly held on mountain summits on the first Sunday in August, and Tom and his Fiddle had climbed up to the top with the rest of us.

It was rather a windy day, and I have a vivid memory of him carefully getting his back to the wind, his whiskers and coat-tails blowing, and then playing and singing away imperturbably, as unconcerned as if he were in the Kerrowkiel Chapel.

But after the service was over he said to me in an undertone, jerking his head towards where Manannan's Castle is reputed to have been: "Ta yindys orrym cre ta Ehene smooïnaghtyn jeh shoh?" (I wonder what Himself thinks of this?)

Tom lies in Malew Churchyard now, and his Fiddle is in the Manx Museum, but his aura still clings about the woods and fields and little winding roads of Grenaby and the Kerrowkiel. And perhaps sometime, if you linger at twilight in the green shadows by Grenaby Bridge, you may hear a faint, ghostly echo of an ancient tune played there by him long ago on The Fiddle that was his closest and dearest companion.



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