

STEPHEN MILLER

THE MOLLAG BAND

We are the Mollag Band
So glorious and so grand
Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi
We are the Mollag Band

We're likely come from say
We haven't had our "tay"
Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi
We are the Mollag Band



CHIOLLAGH BOOKS
FOR
CULTURE VANNIN
2018

INTRODUCTION



“The old days were the days of the candles, the fairies, the ghosts, the Mollag bands, and the White Boys.” This was T.H. Corkhill speaking in 1924, at a Manx Tea and Concert organised by the Waterloo Road Wesleyan Church in Ramsey. [“Manx Tea & Concert,” *Ramsey Courier* 4 April 1924, 5e.] Here the interest is with the Mollag Band, the anarchic opposite to the White Boys. Named after the *mollag* that they carried, a float for a fishing net made from a dogskin, they are best documented for Castletown, less so for Ramsey, and with some evidence for Peel. Drawn together here is the source material for them drawn from print [P], newspapers [N], the Manx Museum Folk-Life Survey [FLS], and the Mona Douglas Papers [MD]. This is followed by the song texts [S] along with the tune known to date [T] together with a drawing made by Mona Douglas of the costume worn [C].

To stand as an introduction, reproduced here is an article on the Mollag Band published first in *Kiaull Jiu Manninagh* for December 2012 and later as *Manx Notes* 146 (2013). Since then the Manx newspapers have been digitised and material has come to light that was not available then. The original contribution has been left to stand and the newspaper accounts written up as a separate note.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

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“WE ARE THE MOLLAG BAND” *



Christmas-tide saw many itinerant groups out and about in the Isle of Man celebrating the holiday season: familiar are the White Boys and those on Hunt the Wren. Less familiar is the Mollag Band, though they are the one group well described by twentieth century collectors of folklore, notably Mona Douglas,¹ Leighton Stowell,² and W.W. Gill³ but not as such from earlier ones. It is just Dr John Clague who mentions them in the passage here published in 1911 but dating likely from the 1890s:

At Christmas time the Manx boys used to go about making a rough music with tin whistles, Jew’s-harps, tin-cans, and papered combs, and flourishing and thumping *mollags*—the sheepskin bladders which buoy the nets. This procession was called “the Mollag-band.” Faces were blacked or raddled, dress was eccentric, and coppers were not refused, but these street minstrels were quite distinct from the Wren-boys.⁴

There is a lengthier and later description from W.W. Gill worth quoting in full:

The Christmastide “Mollag Bands,” like the Wren Boys and other ceremonial processions, descended in the course of time from men to boys before dying out altogether. My only recollection of the Mollag Band is that of an itinerant party of boys with blackened and raddled faces and eccentric attire, one or more waving and thumping with a *mollag* and all bellowing some popular song of the period. But I have been told by old residents that the Ramsey Mollag Band formerly

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “‘We are the Mollag Band,’” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu*, December (2012): [12]–[13]. Reproduced here with sources [as *Manx Notes* 146 (2013): 1–5].

¹ For her main piece, see Mona Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” *Yn Lioran* 8 (1960) [P11]. Other mentions are Mona Douglas, “Manx Folk Dances: their Notation and Revival,” *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* iii.2 (1937): 28 & 31 & 32 & 33 [P6]; Mona Douglas, “Folk Song and Dance in Mann with Some Notes on Collection and Revival of the Dances,” *Proceedings of the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society* iv.1 (1949): 41 [P7]; Mona Douglas, “Some Ritual Dances of Mann,” *The Folklorist* 4.3 (1957): 51–52 [P9]; Mona Douglas, “‘A Chiel’ Amang ’Em’: Memories of a Collector on the Isle of Man,” *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* viii.3 (1958): 59 [P10].

² Leighton Stowell, [Victoria Road,] Castletown, interviewed in May 1971. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, s/38 B, 1–2. [FLS6]

³ W.W. Gill, *A Second Manx Scrapbook* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1932) 370 fn. [I] [P2]; W.W. Gill, *A Third Manx Scrapbook* (Douglas: Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, 1963 [from 1933]) 260 & 77–78, W.W. Gill, *Manx Dialect: Words and Phrases* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1934) 83 [P3].

⁴ Dr John Clague, *Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]) 15 [P1].

consisted of fishermen, headed for a period by a big Irishman who swung his mollag at the end of a pole and swatted all who ventured too near. Some members of the old processions were dressed as women. The party used to go into shops and demand money, in addition to collecting coppers *en route*. They had a marching-song with English words.⁵

This dates from 1933, and there are a number of points to be unpicked here. In order of Gill’s own comments, the Mollag Band was now one composed of adolescents having formerly been an adult phenomenon. They went about in disguise, a point made as seen by Clague. As they made their rounds, they made what was termed “rough music,” in other words, “disorganised music,” entering into another liminal zone (disguise the other). Their song repertoire was a current one, showing the interaction of metropolitan culture with that of the Island. Then we have the observation that the Mollag Band formerly consisted of adult males, notably fisherman, a point picked up by other folklorists. Again, disguise, though on this occasion by reverse dressing. They collected money, or rather, demanded it. Finally, there was a specific song associated with them.

Turning to the adult phenomenon of the Mollag Band, they were as seen above all fisherman, and they have been sighted all over the Island: Castletown, Dalby, Douglas, Lezayre [*sic*], Maughold, Peel, and Ramsey (it is, however, with Castletown that the descriptive material is particularly rich).⁶ They went about as a party, in disguise as already mentioned, and with one of their members known as “The Fool” and variously named: “Bimbo” (Castletown);⁷ “Incabon” (Castletown);⁸ “Sambo” (Douglas & Ramsey);⁹ “Sonnys” (Dalby).¹⁰ This character in places was disguised apart from the rest of the band. In Castletown it was as a bear,¹¹ in Dalby a pig (*sonnys* is Manx Gaelic for pig),¹² in Maughold the Fool wore a whole sheepskin (complete with the horns),¹³ while in Douglas and Ramsey it was just a blackened face.¹⁴

But not all Mollag Bands were in disguise according to descriptions provided by Mona Douglas. From an informant in Castletown, who also said that the band appeared after “*Hunt the Wren*” was finished, they were “dressed in tall hats and old

⁵ Gill, *A Third Manx Scrapbook* 277–78.

⁶ This draws on the material listed in fns 1–3.

⁷ Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” II.

⁸ Charles Watterson, Castletown. Text of a lecture given 6 January 1950, MNHL, MXMUS FLS, WC A, unpagéd [1] [P8].

⁹ Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” II.

¹⁰ Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” II.

¹¹ Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” II.

¹² Charles Watterson, Castletown. Text of a lecture given 6 January 1950, MNHL, MXMUS FLS, WC A, unpagéd [1].

¹³ Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” II.

¹⁴ Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” II.

tail coats and white trousers, generally a bit ragged and all decorated with holly and ivy and coloured ribbon or paper streamers.”¹⁵ Another mention by Douglas has them “dressed in white suits with long sleeveless coats and tall felt hats of blue, decorated with evergreens and paper streamers.”¹⁶

All descriptions agree that they carried with them *mollags* (the Manx name of floats for fishing nets made from dog-skin) on the ends of poles—hence the name, of course, of the group—and as Douglas reports “with which they made passes at any person they met [...]”¹⁷ Associated with the Mollag Band was both a song and a dance: “they performed a kind of marching dance with high leaps at intervals, to their own singing of a wild dance-tune.”¹⁸ She provides further information on this point:

The man who told me all this could not remember either the words of their song—they were Manx words though, he said—or the steps of the dance; but he hummed over the air for me, a variant of an old tune to Hunt the Wren, and said that they danced round in a circle in a peculiar spiral motion of the body, but separately not joining hands, and sometimes they leapt up all together and shouted.¹⁹

As regards this dance:

I am inclined to think the dance [“The Salmon Leap”] virtually the same as [...] The Mollag Dance, which belongs to Castletown, and was also formerly danced by fishermen, though later by men of the town. Here mollags slung on ropes were used to chase one dancer and imprison him, and although I have not got nearly such a complete description, certain features of the dance suggest the above. Both dances seem to have inspired great terror in all except those actually taking part in them.²⁰

This is one feature of the Mollag Band that must be noticed: whilst the White Boys and Hunt the Wren were welcomed customs, the Mollag Band was of a different nature: everything about them was liminal—disguised with blackened faces they dressed variously as women, animals, or reversed their clothing. Their music was rough in all senses of the word. They were aggressive and attacked bystanders with

¹⁵ “Old Manx Songs, Dances and Customs,” 7, undated typescript of a talk given in Liverpool (most likely to the Liverpool Manx Society). MNHL, MS 09495, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15 [MDI].

¹⁶ Douglas, “Some Ritual Dances of Mann,” 51.

¹⁷ “Old Manx Christmas Customs,” undated typescript, MNHL, MS 09495, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 5.

¹⁸ “Old Manx Christmas Customs,” undated typescript, MNHL, MS 09495, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 5.

¹⁹ “Old Manx Songs, Dances and Customs,” 7, undated typescript of a talk given in Liverpool (most likely to the Liverpool Manx Society), MNHL, MS 09495, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15.

²⁰ Douglas, “Manx Folk Dances: their Notation and Revival,” 33.

their mollags and they demanded money. Above all, they were fishermen on dry land and not at sea. Folk customs at times take one into a world turned upside down. Dark, anarchic of the established order, and above all, though just for a while on a sanctioned day, dangerous to the social order and above all the forces of authority.²¹

This theme takes us to the only nineteenth century reporting of the Mollag Band we have to date and taken from the *Manx Sun* for 1892:

A Correspondent asks what has become of the “Mollag Band” this Christmas. They have certainly not been going about making the night hideous with song and revelry. I don’t know whether they have gone up aloft or migrated into some other sphere. My correspondent had better ask a policeman. He will be more likely to know.²²

Evidently, this is a report of what might be called the “junior” Mollag Band, the adolescents as mentioned by Clague rather than the adults of the other Mollag Band as described by later folklorists. Interesting is the mention of “better ask a policeman” as to where the Mollag Band were nowadays. In other words, they are under active suppression by the authorities as they seek to contain folk customs and make them passive and decorative rather than them being active and usurping of public space. This is taken up in a piece from 1914, in the *Peel City Guardian*:

Writing of Christmas reminds me of changes which have taken place in some respects in the manner of its observance. The “White Boys” and “The Mollag Band” have disappeared, and I think to a great extent the police are responsible for this.”

I have not heard any regrets expressed in consequence. Both institutions were an almost unmitigated nuisance, especially the “band.” Both parties used to walk into shops and take possession of them for a time, even on Christmas Eve, and render business impossible. And when they got into houses they often scared the younger children almost into fits.

They are gone, together with a lot of other outrages which used to be inflicted on the community—“jus’ for fun” in many cases, but in that of the “White Boys” and “The Mollag Band” for profit combined with fun. Peace to their ashes.²³

This does read as rather confused as regards the activities of the White Boys; all other accounts have them simply performing the Mummings Play in public houses and private households and not involving themselves as reported here in blockading access to shops for ransom. Nevertheless, it is an eyewitness account and must be taken into account. But returning to the Mollag Band, and here the “junior band,”

²¹ For further on this theme, see Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks, “Wee be black as Hell’: Ritual, Disguise and Rebellion,” *Rural History* 4.1 (1993).

²² Pseud [signed “Chit Chat”], “[Local Gossip] A correspondent asks...,” *Manx Sun* 31 December 1892: 4f [N6].

²³ Pseud [signed “Occidental”], “Notes by the Way,” *Peel City Guardian* 26 December 1914: 6d [N13].

we see again the mention of the police force as being a factor in the suppression of this calendar custom. The so-called rougher element associated with Hop-tu-Naa was similarly repressed in this period. The White Boys in Ramsey who sought to reform themselves after the end of the 1914–18 war were told they needed a Street Performers License in order to carry out their performances; the cost alone wiped out the money they were likely to earn. The Mollag Band is now gone from the streets of the Island and not one feels by their own choice. Vernacular culture is one always under threat of control if not downright suppression by the authorities, to be permitted only when it appears “folkloric,” in other words passive and decorative. The Mollag Band were unlikely ever to have become folkloric and that of course led to their ending.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2013

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- Pseud [signed “Occidental”]. “[Notes by the Way] Writing of Christmas....” *Peel City Guardian* 26 December 1914: 6b.

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THE MOLLAG BAND IN THE INSULAR PRESS



The first mention of the Mollag Band in the Manx newspapers comes from the *Isle of Man Times* for 25 December 1886, with the report from Castletown that “[d]uring the last few days there have been the usual visits of the ‘Whiteboys,’ the ‘Mollag band,’ and other merry folk’s to the different parts of Castletown and neighbourhood.” [N1] The next year (1887) they were sighted in Ramsey, in the North of the Island, and described as “humorous gangs of boys and young men called, we understand, ‘mollag bands.”” The *Isle of Man Examiner* went on to comment that “[t]hey seemed on the whole to be received goodnatureedly, and rewarded more or less for their entertaining performances.” [N2] The Mollag Band was spotted again in the town in 1889, the *Mona’s Herald* writing that “[t]he usual mollag band and Christmas white boys have commenced their patrols in our streets.” [N3]

“Paul Pry” writing in his column in the *Isle of Man Times* in 1890, welcomed the appearance of the Mollag Band in Ramsey, as they “do a great deal towards enlivening the dreariness of the winter nights by parading the streets of the town, and creating a stir with their singing and calling.” Now, though, there was a note of caution. “The police do not look upon them with a friendly eye, and I understand that steps are to be taken to give the aforesaid gentlemen in blue adequate power to deal with them, and prevent them from becoming a nuisance.” [N4] The Mollag Band on their appearance in Castletown in 1892 were not well thought of by the *Manx Sun* in their issue for 17 December. “During the past week the town has been infested with these dreadful nuisances, and their uncouth appearances as well as their ‘music’ and the usual accompaniment of the cries of the small fry who follow after them have caused anything but the most pleasant sensation.” It went on to conclude, “[h]owever, these are one of the old institutions we must submit to with good grace.” [N5] “Chit Chat” in his column for 31 December in the same paper answered someone who “asks what has become of the ‘Mollag Band’ this Christmas,” as “[t]hey have certainly not been going about making the night hideous with song and revelry. I don’t know whether they have gone up aloft or migrated into some other sphere.” His answer was brief. “My correspondent had better ask a policeman. He will be more likely to know.” [N6]

In 1893, however, the Mollag Band were certainly out in Castletown. “The usual throngs following the white-boys, mollag bands, and singers have been one of the principal attractions out of doors, while the peaceful midnight has been disturbed with the mournful calls of the waits.” [N7] (repeated as [N8]) [N9] They were also seen in Port Erin a few years later. “Signs of Christmas are fully manifested in Port Erin. The ‘White Boys’ and ‘Mollag Band’ have made their appearance.” This was to

be their last appearance in the *Isle of Man Examiner* and the other newspapers in the Island for that matter. [N11]

“Writing of Christmas reminds me of changes which have taken place in some respects in the manner of its observance. The ‘White Boys’ and ‘The Mollag Band’ have disappeared, and I think to a great extent the police are responsible for this.” This from 1914 in the *Peel City Guardian*, the writer going to mention that “I have not heard any regrets expressed in consequence. Both institutions were an almost unmitigated nuisance, especially the ‘band.’ Both parties used to walk into shops and take possession of them for a time, even on Christmas Eve, and render business impossible. And when they got into houses they often scared the younger children almost into fits.” His final note was again not one of regret. “They are gone, together with a lot of other outrages which used to be inflicted on the community ‘jus’ for fun’ in many cases, but in that of the ‘White Boys’ and “The Mollag Band” for profit combined with fun. Peace to their ashes.” [N13]

This view was echoed in the same newspaper a decade later. “Certainly some features that were conspicuous in the Christmases of the past are absent today.” By this was meant the Mollag Band and the White Boys. There was a repeat of the complaints made against them in 1914. “They paraded the business streets on the night preceding Christmas, marched into shops, and hold up business until they had said their ‘pieces’ and the shop keepers were glad to buy them off, that they might go ‘into the next streets.’” They also went into domestic spaces noted earlier. “In the same way they would walk into houses, where they could find an open door.” The writer ended with no note of regret. “We cannot mourn the absence of such features as those.” [N14]

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The Mollag Band from these accounts has a *locus* in Castletown [N1], [N5], [N7], [N8], [N9] (Port Erin [N11]) and Ramsey [N2], [N3], [N4], with perhaps also Peel [N13]? [N14]? Missing is Douglas. Linking the accounts is a familiar narrative arc, the Mollag Band first being welcomed as a sign that the coming festive season of Christmas and the New Year was close, then no longer tolerated and considered now a nuisance, and finally a call for their suppression. The final two accounts [N13] [N14] describe them in action, in both public and domestic spaces.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018



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MANUSCRIPTS

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NEW SERIES

MS 09495 MONA DOUGLAS PAPERS, BOX 9
 “Folklore Notebook. | Dances. | Tunes, description & notes”,
 undated notebook.

MONA DOUGLAS PAPERS, BOX 15

“Old Manx Songs, Dances and Customs,” typescript of a talk given in Liverpool (most likely to the Liverpool Manx Society), undated.

MANX MUSEUM FOLK-LIFE SURVEY

- c/98 c Mr A. Clarke, St Johns village, interviewed in 1959. Aged 83.
- CJ-J Notes made by John Comish, Ontario, 1950–55.
- M/16 Mr R.W. McKneale, “Greenbank,” Summerland, Ramsey, interviewed in April 1959. Aged 89.
- R/II E Mr W. Robinson, Glen Mona, Maughold, interviewed in 1972.

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- s/38 B Leighton Stowell, [Victoria Road,] Castletown, interviewed in May 1971.
- WC-A Charles Watterson, Castletown. Text of a lecture given 6 January 1950.
- WA-E Notebook No. 1 compiled by Miss Alice A. Watterson, Douglas, 1950-51.

MANX NATIONAL HERITAGE

MANX MUSEUM TAPES

- No. 81 Interview with Robert Cormode, Ramsey, 1971. With transcript made by Kirsty Neate, 1999.

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THE MOLLAG BAND

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SOURCE MATERIAL

§1 PRINTED REFERENCES	
[PI]–[PI2]	I
§2 NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS	
[NI]–[NI4]	8
§3 MANX MUSEUM FOLK-LIFE SURVEY	
[FLSI]–[FLS8]	12
§4 MONA DOUGLAS PAPERS	
[MDI]	16
§5 THE MOLLAG BAND SONGS	
[SI]–[S2]	17
§6 THE MOLLAG BAND TUNE	
[TI] MONA DOUGLAS	18
§7 THE MOLLAG BAND COSTUME	
[CI]	19
TABLES	
1. THE MOLLAG BAND SIGHTED	20
2. THE NAME OF “THE FOOL”	20
3. THE COSTUME OF “THE FOOL”	20
4. KNOWN MEMBERS OF THE MOLLAG BAND	21

*

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[P1] DR JOHN CLAGUE,† COOINAGHTYN MANNINAGH (N.D. [BUT 1911])

[15] At Christmas time the Manx boys used to go about making a rough music with tin whistles, Jew's-harps, tin-cans, and papered combs, and flourishing and thumping *mollags*—the sheepskin bladders which buoy the nets. This procession was called “the Mollag-band.” Faces were blacked or raddled, dress was eccentric, and coppers were not refused, but these street minstrels were quite distinct from the Wren-boys.

Dr John Clague,† Cooinaghtyn Manninagh: *Manx Reminiscences By the Late Dr John Clague* (Castletown: M.J. Backwell, n.d. [but 1911]).

[P2] W.W. GILL, A SECOND MANX SCRAPBOOK (1932)

[370 fn. [1]] At Christmas time the Manx boys used to go about making a rough music with tin whistles, Jew's harps, tin-cans, and papered combs, and flourishing and thumping *mollags*—the sheepskin bladders which buoy the nets. Faces were blacked or raddled, dress was eccentric, and coppers were not refused, but these street-minstrels were quite distinct from the Wren-boys.

W.W. Gill, *A Second Manx Scrapbook* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1932). **Notes:** (1) This passage lifted from [P1].

[P3] W.W. GILL, A THIRD MANX SCRAPBOOK [1933] (FROM 1963)

[260] *Skit*, a character who suffered a mock execution in the dance of the “Mollag Bands”; for these see page 277. In ordinary parlance a “skit” is a queer sort of fellow who lays himself open to be “skitted” i.e. derided.

W.W. Gill, *A Third Manx Scrapbook* (Douglas: Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, 1963). See Part 1, Chapter vii, “Dialect Words and Phrases,” 255–63. **Notes:** (1) Prepared for the press in 1933, but for some reason never appeared.

[P4] W.W. GILL, A THIRD MANX SCRAPBOOK [1933] (FROM 1963)

[277] The Mollag Bands. The Christmastide “Mollag Bands,” like the Wren Boys and other ceremonial processions, descended in the course of time from men to boys before dying out altogether. My only recollection of the Mollag Band is that of an itinerant party of boys with blackened and raddled faces and eccentric attire, one or more waving and thumping with a *mollag* and all bellowing some popular song of

the period. But I have been told by old residents that the Ramsey [278] Mollag Band formerly consisted of fishermen, headed for a period by a big Irishman who swung his mollag at the end of a pole and swatted all who ventured too near. Some members of the old processions were dressed as women. The party used to go into shops and demand money, in addition to collecting coppers *en route*. They had a marching-song with English words. The police put an end to the custom about fifty years ago, on account of the men's rough behaviour. The Peel Mollag Band seems to have had much the same characteristics. Castletown and Dalby had a dance of their own, recently rescued by Miss Mona Douglas. A woman who remembers the custom in Castletown over fifty years ago says that when she was a child she was so much afraid that she never dared even to look out of the window when the band was passing, and once, when they tried to come in at the door, she fainted. At all these places they came out after dark, when the Wren Boys had finished their performance. The people everywhere, and not only the children, seem to have stood in greater awe of the bands than the swinging bladders warranted, or even the occasional rowdiness, and it would be interesting to know whether any superstitious feeling lay behind this timorousness; and if so, of what ceremonial procession the Mollag Band was a vestige.

W.W. Gill, *A Third Manx Scrapbook* (Douglas: Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, 1963). See Part 2, Chapter i, "Customs and Traditions," 267–307. **Notes:** (1) Prepared for the press in 1933, but for some reason never appeared.

[P5] W.W. GILL, *MANX DIALECT* (1934)

[83] **Mollag-band.** Parties of dressed-up men used to patrol the streets at Christmas making primitive music and thumping "mollags" (net-bladders). They were regarded as an institution, and rewarded with coppers.

W.W. Gill, *Manx Dialect: Words and Phrases* (London & Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1934).

[P6] MONA DOUGLAS, "MANX FOLK DANCES" (1937)

[P6.1] [28] In some parts of the Island folk have partly got round the religious difficulty by calling reels and set dances "games"; and under this name I have been able, since I realised what the term might cover, to gather much interesting information. Traditional practices like the Mummers' Play and the Wren Singers have also, by some queer twist of reasoning, been brought under the tolerance of religion as harmless Christmas customs like carol singing! But on the other hand, certain ritual dances such as "Mylecharane's March," or "Cutting off the Fiddler's Head" and the "Mollag Dance," are still regarded with fear and believed to be

magical—“the sort of thing that was going a-doing at the old Druids before now,” as one old lady said to me.

[P6.2] [31] Following is a list and short description of the dances recorded up to date. [...] [32] Dances partly noted but still incomplete. [...] [33] (3) “The Salmon Leap.” I heard of this dance first as a very difficult and unusual solo dance, then as a figure ending a dance, and now find it appearing in a curious dance or ceremony formerly performed by the fishermen of Dalby. Characters are the Skipper, the Mate, the Skit (Fool?), and 6 men. The first three danced a 3-hand jig, Skipper and Mate taking the Skit’s hands and forming arches under which he ran. Then all three took each other round waists and led off in a sort of S-shaped procession (moving abreast), with the other six men following in single file, carrying peeled hazel rods in their right hands. They then formed a circle, and afterwards two files, with the Skipper, Mate and Skit at the top, facing down. The Skit then knelt before the Skipper and Mate, and the other men came up one by one and struck him with their rods. When all had struck him the Skit fell and lay flat on his back, while the men made a ring round him (on the ground?) with their rods, danced round him, and then stood back. During all this the Skipper and Mate stood in place at the top. The Skit then leapt upright and out over the ring of rods in one movement (the actual Salmon Leap), and danced another 3-hand jig with the Skipper and Mate, while the other men bowed to them. At the end the Skipper and Mate lifted the Skit on their locked arms to shoulder level and carried him off and aboard the ship, the rest of the men following, shouting and stamping. I am inclined to think this dance virtually the same as (4) “The Mollag Dance,” which belongs to Castletown, and was also formerly danced by fishermen, though later by men of the town. Here *mollags* (inflated dogskin buoys) slung on ropes were used to chase one dancer and imprison him, and although I have not got nearly such a complete description, certain features of the dance suggest the above. Both dances seem to have inspired great terror in all except those actually taking part in them.

Mona Douglas, “Manx Folk Dances: their Notation and Revival [1937],” in *Restoring to use our almost-forgotten dances”: Writings on the Collection and Revival of Manx Folk Dance and Song by Mona Douglas*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004), 27–34. Originally, “Manx Folk Dances: their Notation and Revival,” *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, iii.2 (1937), 110–16.

[P7] MONA DOUGLAS, “FOLK SONG AND DANCE IN MANN” (1949)

[41] There is also the “White Boys Sword Dance,” performed at the end of the well-known folk drama of St George and the Turkish Knight, and the “Mollag Dance,” which survived until quite recently in Castletown but which I have not yet been able

to complete, though I still hope to do so. The “Mollag Band” of men dancers paraded the town on St Stephen’s Day after the Wren Singers had finished their rounds, dressed in tall hats and old tail coats and white trousers, generally a bit ragged and all decorated with holly and ivy and coloured ribbon or paper streamers, and carrying *mollags* (inflated dogskin buoys used by the fishermen) slung on ropes. They also carried holly branches, and they went through the town singing and dancing, lashing themselves as they went, and anybody else who came near them, with the branches and the whirling mollags, and whenever they stopped for a few moments the people would run out and offer them food or drink or both, for luck. The man who told me about having seen this dance often in his childhood did not know the words of their song, but he hummed the air over for me—an old variant of the Wren Song—and said that they danced round in a circle with a peculiar spiral action of the body, without joining hands, and every now and then they all leapt up together and shouted. This dance is even today regarded by many people with a certain amount of fear—a sort of unspoken feeling exists that it is definitely magical.

Mona Douglas, “Folk Song and Dance in Mann with Some Notes on Collection and Revival of the Dances [1949],” in *Restoring to use our almost-forgotten dances: Writings on the Collection and Revival of Manx Folk Dance and Song by Mona Douglas*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004), 39–46. Originally, “Folk Song and Dance in Mann with Some Notes on Collection and Revival of the Dances,” *Proceedings of the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society*, iv.1 (1949), 51–60.

[P8] J.Q. QUALTROUGH, “OLD CUSTOMS” (c. 1950)

OLD CUSTOMS

Then there were the “Darkies” or “Mollag Band” as they were called. They consisted of boys with blackened faces and dressed in fantastic costumes. They had a few instruments, principally concertinas, mouth organs and triangles with one or two cymbals and a home made drum—made with a sheep skin drawn across a cheese barrel. They made a rare din.

J.D. Qualtrough, *Castletown: Some Notes on Its History* (c. 1950). [Online link no longer works] **Notes:** (1) For the origin of this transcript, see “Introduction,” 1–6, Lady Eva Wilson, ed., *The “Town Clark’s” Castletown*, Castletown Heritage, Occasional Papers, No. 2 (Castletown: Castletown Heritage, 2009), 1 fn. 1.

[P9] MONA DOUGLAS, “SOME RITUAL DANCES OF MANN” (1957)

[51] The one set of dancers who seem to have inspired fear in their beholders in all parts of the Island, even well within living memory, is the “Mollag Band.” There

seems to have been one of these Bands in each of the towns, and in some country districts also. They were men (number uncertain, but eight or ten seems to be the general opinion) dressed in rough white suits, sometimes with open sleeveless coats having one or two short shoulder-capes worn over them, and tall-crowned blue or black felt hats, once made in the village of Ballasalla; with brightly-coloured ribbon cross-gartering over their trousers and long trails of ivy and other greenery decorating the whole costume. They carried long staves of about six feet, also decorated with ivy twined around them, and *mollags*, the inflated skins used to float fishing nets, dangling from ropes, which they swung about them, giving blows with them on house doors, and sometimes hitting anyone who got in their way, as they danced through the streets of Ramsey or Castletown, shouting and leaping high in the air and flourishing their staves.

[52] Unfortunately, I have not been able to get a demonstration of this dance, or even a workable description of the step used, though I am fairly certain that the High Reel Step would come into it. But I have seen one of the old “Mollag Band” costumes, and heard many general descriptions, all of them emphasising the fear motive. In fact, more than one informant has said: “Aw, you’ll not get any person to show you that dance, at all, for the only ones that can remember it were just little ones when they saw it, and would be far too scared to take notice, of steps and the like.”

Mona Douglas, “Some Ritual Dances of Mann [1957],” in *Restoring to use our almost-forgotten dances”: Writings on the Collection and Revival of Manx Folk Dance and Song by Mona Douglas*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004) 51–55. Originally, “Some Ritual Dances of Mann,” *The Folklorist*, 4.3 (1957), 75–77.

[PIO] MONA DOUGLAS, “‘A CHIEL’ AMANG ’EM” (1958)

[59] Another well-known man of the south was Jack Davis of Ballasalla. He once had a carrier’s cart which plied between Douglas and Castletown, but when I knew him had long ceased from work and was a very old man living a little way out of the village and generally to be found sitting on a stone in the sun. He claimed to be on intimate terms with the fairies, and averred that he had often seen “Themselves” “as thick in the road as the scholars coming out of Ballasalla school.” He was too old to dance when I knew him, much to my regret, but he had formerly been a member of the Castletown “Mollag Band,” and there is a photograph of him in the white homemade suit which he wore as a Mollag dancer, and which, in his old age, became his normal wear, for he believed that white was the colour for good health and longevity—incidentally a fragment of ancient Druidical lore. It seemed to be true in his case, for he lived to be well over a hundred. He gave me many descriptions of dances, but his great talent was storytelling, at which he was a real artist.

Mona Douglas, “A Chiel’ Amang ’Em’: Memories of a Collector on the Isle of Man [1958],” in “*Restoring to use our almost-forgotten dances*”: *Writings on the Collection and Revival of Manx Folk Dance and Song by Mona Douglas*, ed. Stephen Miller (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2004), 57–60. Originally, “A Chiel’ Amang ’Em’: Memories of a Collector on the Isle of Man,” *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, viii.3 (1958), 156–59. **Notes:** (1) The photograph of Davis not present in the Mona Douglas Papers deposit at the MNHL. Given the colour mentioned, it is more likely connected with him being a former White Boy.

[PII] MONA DOUGLAS, “THE MOLLAG BAND” (1960)

[II] When Miss Davies asked me to write something for *Yn Lioran* about the Mollag dancers, my first reaction was—What? For, although the tradition about them is very much alive all over the Island, I am nearly always told how everyone was so scared of them that they never really saw what the dance was like! So I cannot record any special steps or figures, except vaguely.

There seem to have been some variations in the performance in different places, for each town, and probably each parish or village, had its own Mollag Band. General characteristics seem to have been as follows: (1) The dancers were dressed in white, or partly white, costumes—Castletown, for instance, white trousers and blue ganseys; in Ramsey, white suits and black coats and high-crowned blue felt hats; (2) They carried long, thick staffs, taller than themselves, and these were decorated with garlands of ivy and other greenery; (3) Both dancers and staffs were decorated with garlands of ivy and other greenery; (4) They each carried a *mollag* (inflated bladder or sheepskin) slung on a rope, sometimes attached to the staff, sometimes swung in the dancer’s free hand, with which they banged on house doors, and sometimes hit anyone who came too near them; (5) There was one comic character, or Fool, sometimes with his face blackened, sometimes dressed to imitate an animal, such as a performing bear; (6) An important part of the dance were the high leaps and shouts which came at rhythmic intervals.

In Lezayre, persons who were ordinarily good and habitual dancers would not join the Mollag Band, and they were generally regarded as something sinister. Children were threatened with “The Mollag Band will get you” when naughty. In Maughold the Fool wore a whole sheepskin, complete with horns, and pretended to butt the other dancers. In Dalby he imitated a pig, and was called “Sonny,” meaning good luck. In Castletown he was a bear called “Bimbo,” and performed tricks such as standing on his head, pretending to “Die for his Country,” and then rising to “Salute the King.” In both Ramsey and Douglas he was simply a man with his face blackened, called “Sambo,” and here the tradition was probably mixed with that of the “White Boys,” who had a Black Sambo.

Some years ago I was shown a home-made white suit formerly used by a Mollag dancer, and the sleeveless coat or cloak and high-crowned felt hat that went with it, and I append a rough sketch of these from my notebook.

I am indebted to Mr P.L. Stowell for the information [I2] about the Castletown Mollag Band, which he claims was the last one to operate. He tells me he got it from Miss E. Corrin, formerly principal of a private school near the Old Grammar School, whose father had been a member of the Band, and also for the following air and words of the doggerel verses they sang, and demonstration of a tripping step used in the dance.

Mona Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” *Yn Lioran*, 8 (1960), 11–12. **Note:** (1) The complete text of the article reproduced here. (2) For the “rough sketch” of the costume of the Mollag Band, see [C1]. (3) The notebook mentioned is “Folklore Notebook. | Dances. | Tunes, description & notes”, undated notebook. MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 9. (4) For the tune and words see [T1] and [S1].

[PI2] ANGELA TEMPLETON, MUMMING IN THE ISLE OF MAN N.D. [BUT 1984]

[I9] When talking to some elderly people who remembered the “White Boys” and the “Mollag Band” in Castletown, there appeared to be a hierarchy whereby the White Boys were all young men and the Mollag Band were older men, often fathers, uncles, or elder brothers of the White Boys. These adults intervened and stole the money intended for the players, in order to buy drink.

According to Phoebe and Eva Christian, to whom I spoke in August, 1983, the clothes worn were old-fashioned, often worn inside-out, or back-to-front, and composed of women’s skirts, hats, and capes.

Angela Caroline Templeton, *Mumming in the Isle of Man*, BA dissertation, Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies, School of English, University of Leeds, n.d. [but 1984].



§2

NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS *



[N1] ISLE OF MAN TIMES (25 DECEMBER 1886)

During the last few days there have been the usual visits of the “Whiteboys,” the “Mollag band,” and other merry folk’s to the different parts of Castletown and neighbourhood.

“[Castletown & The South] Christmas.” *Isle of Man Times* 25 December 1886: 5h.

[N2] ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (31 DECEMBER 1887)

During the last week the town was favoured (or otherwise) with the serenades and performances of humorous gangs of boys and young men called, we understand, “mollag bands.” They seemed on the whole to be received goodnatureedly, and rewarded more or less for their entertaining performances.

“[Ramsey and District] Christmas Displays.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 31 December 1887: 5f.

[N3] MONA’S HERALD (18 DECEMBER 1889)

The usual mollag band and Christmas white boys have commenced their patrols in our streets.

“[Ramsey and District] The usual mollag” *Mona’s Herald* 18 December 1889: 5f.

[N4] ISLE OF MAN TIMES (1 JANUARY 1890)

The “Mollag band” in Ramsey do a great deal towards enlivening the dreariness of the winter nights by parading the streets of the town, and creating a stir with their singing and calling. The police do not look upon them with a friendly eye, and I understand that steps are to be taken to give the aforesaid gentlemen in blue adequate power to deal with them, and prevent them from becoming a nuisance.

Pseud [signed “Paul Pry”]. “[Paul Pry in Douglas] The ‘Mollag band’” *Isle of Man Times* 1 January 1890: 2d.

* I am grateful to James Franklin of Culture Vannin for the transcripts here.

[N5] MANX SUN (17 DECEMBER 1892)

“Christmas comes but once a year” is an old saying, but if it brought only the discordant music of the Mollag Bands, &c., we should say that it came once too often. During the past week the town has been infested with these dreadful nuisances, and their uncouth appearances as well as their “music” and the usual accompaniment of the cries of the small fry who follow after them have caused anything but the most pleasant sensation. However, these are one of the old institutions we must submit to with good grace.

“[Castletown] ‘Christmas comes but’ *Manx Sun* 17 December 1892: 8f.

[N6] MANX SUN (31 DECEMBER 1892)

A correspondent asks what has become of the “Mollag Band” this Christmas. They have certainly not been going about making the night hideous with song and revelry. I don’t know whether they have gone up aloft or migrated into some other sphere. My correspondent had better ask a policeman. He will be more likely to know.

Pseud [signed “Chit Chat”]. “[Local Gossip] A correspondent asks”
Manx Sun 31 December 1892: 4f.

[N7] ISLE OF MAN TIMES (23 DECEMBER 1893)

During the past two or three weeks the usual scenes which cannot be separated from Christmas have thickened as every evening has come on. The usual throngs following the white-boys, mollag bands, and singers have been one of the principal attractions out of doors, while the peaceful midnight has been disturbed with the mournful calls of the waits.

“[Christmas] Eve of Christmas at Castletown.” *Isle of Man Times* 23 December 1893: 5f.

[N8] ISLE OF MAN TIMES (26 DECEMBER 1893)

During the past two or three weeks the usual scenes which cannot be separated from Christmas have thickened as every evening has come on. The usual throngs following the white-boys, mollag bands, and singers have been one of the principal attractions out of doors, while the peaceful midnight has been disturbed with the mournful calls of the waits.

“[Christmas] Christmas at Castletown.” *Isle of Man Times* 26 December 1893: 2f.

[N9] ISLE OF MAN TIMES (30 DECEMBER 1893)

During the past two or three weeks, (our correspondent writes) the usual scenes which cannot be separated from Christmas have thickened as every evening has come

on. The usual throngs following the white-boys, mollag bands, and singers have been one of the principal attractions out of doors.

“[Christmas] Christmas at Castletown.” *Isle of Man Times* 30 December 1893: 2d.

[N10] MANX SUN (1 SEPTEMBER 1894)

The “Kazoo Band,” which appears to be a near relative of what is known in Manxland as the “Mollag Band,” was given with instrumental interludes by [...].

“[Kirk Michael] Concerts by the Board School Children.” *Manx Sun* 1 September 1894: 5c.

[N11] ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (26 DECEMBER 1896)

Signs of Christmas are fully manifested in Port Erin. The “White Boys” and “Mollag Band” have made their appearance.

“[Rushen] Signs of Christmas” *Isle of Man Examiner* 26 December 1896: [6]f.

[N12] PEEL CITY GUARDIAN (17 MAY 1913)

Something handy and cheap might be got up in this way, I am sure. To make the thing more indigenous I would venture to suggest a mollag band. If that would not please and entertain our visitors and increase their number I don't know what would. Pseud [signed “By Occidental”].

“[Notes by the Way] Something handy and” *Peel City Guardian* 17 May 1913: [6]a. **Notes:** (1) A satirical comment on the need for a summer band in Peel to entertain visitors.

[N13] PEEL CITY GUARDIAN (26 DECEMBER 1914)

Writing of Christmas reminds me of changes which have taken place in some respects in the manner of its observance. The “White Boys” and “The Mollag Band” have disappeared, and I think to a great extent the police are responsible for this.

I have not heard any regrets expressed in consequence. Both institutions were an almost unmitigated nuisance, especially the “band.” Both parties used to walk into shops and take possession of them for a time, even on Christmas Eve, and render business impossible. And when they got into houses they often scared the younger children almost into fits.

They are gone, together with a lot of other outrages which used to be inflicted on the community—“jus’ for fun” in many cases, but in that of the “White Boys” and “The Mollag Band” for profit combined with fun. Peace to their ashes.

§2 NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS

Pseud [signed "By Occidental"]. "[Notes by the Way] Writing of Christmas" *Peel City Guardian* 26 December 1914: 6b.

[NI4] PEEL CITY GUARDIAN (20 DECEMBER 1924)

Certainly some features that were conspicuous in the Christmases of the past are absent today. Some of them we miss with satisfaction rather than regret. The minds of older readers of the "Guardian" will revert to the days of "The Mollag Band" and "The White Boys." These were gangs of youths, I believe those forming the "The Mollag Band" blackened their faces, and the "White Boys" wore more or less white skirts. They paraded the business streets on the night preceding Christmas, marched into shops, and hold up business until they had said their "pieces" and the shop keepers were glad to buy them off, that they might go "into the next streets." In the same way they would walk into houses, where they could find an open door. We cannot mourn the absence of such features as those.

"[Crisp Notes] Certainly some features" *Peel City Guardian* 4 April 1924: 2c.



THE MANX MUSEUM FOLK-LIFE SURVEY



[FLS1] CHARLES WATTERSON, FLS INTERVIEW (1950)

[[1]] Then there was the “Mollagh Band”—this was compounded principally by the young sailors out of the vessels who made a great point to be home if possible for Christmas. They were very fond of their boats and would have a bunch of evergreens decorated with apples and oranges tied to their ships’ topmasts, and had us young boys persuaded that if we stole either the apples or oranges they had been treated so as to make us very sick.

The members of this alleged band had their faces blackened, some had concertinas and melodeons, and some had tin whistles, and to make up for the lack of musical instruments, they had alleged fiddles made out of cheese boxes with a piece of wood attached to receive the wire strings. The bow was an old saw. Their performance would certainly charm no birds out of the bush. They likewise had one of their number dressed up to represent a bear and would have a chain attached to him. He would be covered with old matting similar to the matting that the salt fish came in. The bear would receive his orders from the conductor as follows, “Incabon, Head-a-Heel!” And the bear would turn a somersault. After that he would lift a collection and would take good care to leave the copper on the ground to cool when lifting the collection opposite the Barracks, for the soldiers would have them well-warmed on a shovel before they went out of the windows.

[2] During the collection some of the then music-hall songs would be sung, and there were good singers among them. I can almost hear the conductor, when he thought the band had played long enough, ordering them to drain instruments.

Charles Watterson, Castletown. Text of a lecture given 6 January 1950. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, WC A, unpagged [1]–[2]. **Notes:** (1) This reproduced in Lady Eva Wilson, ed., *The “Town Clark’s” Castletown*, Castletown Heritage, Occasional Papers, No. 2 (Castletown: Castletown Heritage, 2009), 47–48. (2) The garrison at Castletown left in 1899 according to Watterson; see “[Heritage Year Recollections] When soldiers were part of Castletown’s daily life,” *Isle of Man Examiner*, 6 August 1986, 13 g–i.

[FLS2] ALICE A. WATTERSON, FLS NOTEBOOK (1950–51)

[5] The “Black Boys” were “done” at Christmas. This was just a bit of fun in dressing up in any article of clothing which didn’t belong to you—the more “guy-like” the better; faces and hands were blackened with burnt cork; instruments consisted of tin

whistles, triangles, any old tins as clappers and combs covered with tissue paper through which we sang. Good music—to us! The Black Boys went to houses where we got a welcome.

Notebook No. 1 compiled by Miss Alice A. Watterson, Douglas, 1950–51.
MNHL, MXMUS FLS, WA E, 5.

[FLS3] JOHN COMISH, FLS NOTEBOOK (1950–55)

[3] There were one or two groups of boys who went around at Christmas, with blackened faces, and who were known as “Mollags.” If my memory serves me right, they used to call on the houses and ask the householders if they “wanted the Mollags,” and if the reply was in the affirmative they would sing a carol or two, but I’m of the opinion that the few coppers they got wasn’t so much for their carol singing as it was to get rid of them. Some of their singing was pretty hard to listen to, due, no doubt, to the easy way they sang.

Notes made by John Comish, Ontario, 1950–55. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, CJ J, 3.

[FLS4] A. CLARKE, FLS INTERVIEW (1959)

[5] There was one lot that were going about a long time ago, that we called the “Mollag Band.” They were going around at Christmas time like the “White Boys,” but longer ago than I remember them. There was one lot in Castletown I believe, but I really don’t know much about them—only heard of them. They were rather a rough lot from what I’ve heard and a bit unruly too. They had bears and lions among them, and four or five kinds of wild animals. I don’t know how they were dressed, but its like they’d have some kind of camouflage of a coat on them—a costume of some sort. They’ve died out a long time ago.

Mr A. Clarke, St Johns village, interviewed in 1959. Aged 83. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, c/98 c, 5.

[FLS5] R.W. MCKNEALE, FLS INTERVIEW (1959)

[8] Another lot that were going round at about the same time as the “White Boys” were the Mollag men—or the “Mollag Band” was what they were known by. They were a common lot of men, some fishermen among them and others as well of course—just any casual man who took the notion to join in. They used to turn their coats inside out and they would have their faces blackened. They were a peculiar sight I can tell you. With their faces blackened you couldn’t know who they were. They would be carrying a long stick—a pole it was really, with a *mollag* on the end of it. They hadn’t anything particular to do or say, no set piece like the White Boys. They just went knocking on doors, and then away off up the streets and knocking at another house. There would be half-a-dozen or a dozen of them maybe. It was about Christmas time when they were coming round as a rule. They weren’t actually doing

mischievous, but playing havoc and a bit disorderly. That would be about 80 years ago as near as I can remember, and then they stopped coming round.

Mr R.W. McKneale, "Greenbank," Summerland, Ramsey, interviewed in April 1959. Aged 89. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, M/I6, 8.

[FLS6] LEIGHTON STOWELL, FLS INTERVIEW (1971)

[1] As children they used to be terrified of the "Mollag Band." There were six men dressed in outdoor clothes, blue jerseys, and with evergreens around their shoulders, one carried a *mollag*, he was a kind of buffoon, carried a pig's bladder on a stick and he belaboured anyone who came too near. One member was dressed as a bear, the skin and head of a bear, made of pasteboard. A man who was known as "Tommy the Councillor" used to play the part of the bear in Castletown. The tune the Mollag Band had in the South was something like the "Hunt the Wren." One man played a concertina, the others had cheese boxes. The custom was part of the Christmas festivities. It had been done by good musicians at one time, with good dancers too, but it became vulgarised, they would be getting drunk and catching hold of the girls, and turning the youngsters upside down and smacking them. It was invariably in Castletown done on St Stephen's morning between 10 and 12 o'clock, or 12:30, after the "Hunt the Wren." When they were dancing, one would go begging for money in the shops and at the house doors. The bear used to dance and do antics, once "Tommy the Councillor" climbed up a drain pipe and found he couldn't get down and a ladder had to be fetched. The dance was done by four men. They joined hands and danced round the bear slowly, and then they pivoted or spun round, quite an intricate dance. The bear joined in for a few of the figures. The song was, "We are the Mollag Band, So glorious and so grand, Ye-Ho, Ye-Ho, Before we take our ease, It's you we intend to please, *etc.*," and in a third verse, "A true and faithful band," they always were claiming virtues of this kind. This song, however, he got from Mr Cleator of Ramsey, "Juan Noa." He remembers them as a child, he was five or six years old and used to go out with the Hunt the Wren, they were going at seven o'clock in the morning, waiting for the lights to appear in the houses, then going and singing the song very fast as there would be another lot coming after them, and they would be going through it as fast as they could to get along to another house. [2] It was getting on in the morning and the Mollag Band put in an appearance, the children were very much afraid of them and as soon as it was known that they were out the word went round, "The Mollag Band, Mollag Band, they're in the Market Place," the children all ran home, they wouldn't stay around when the men came. He remembered a time when he ran home when the band came out and he was so frightened that he went and hid under the kitchen table, the cloth was still on the table and he got underneath and was hidden, then in came "Tommy the Councillor" dressed as the bear, he was with the Mollag Band, but he came in to see Mr Stowell's father on some business matter, he the child under the table sat there and "Tommy

the Councillor” sat on the table and swung his leg backwards and forwards, a fur-covered leg, as he was dressed as the bear, it was a terrifying experience for a small child, the swinging leg nearly touching him and he not daring to move. At the end of the Mollag Band’s performance, the bear who carried a pole, held the pole upright and the dancers stood still with arms outstretched. Corlett, known as the “Ranter,” told him about the Mollag Band, he used to be in it, but it was not all seamen who were in it, all kinds of men took part, it wasn’t fishermen only.

Leighton Stowell, [Victoria Road,] Castletown, interviewed in May 1971. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, s/38 B, 1–2.

[FLS7] R[OBERT] CORMODE, FLS INTERVIEW (1971)

[...] [Of] course in those days, you know they had the “Mollag Band” going round. And then there was something else, “Hunt the Wren,” that was a great thing in those days. In my younger day, they were gradually dying out, you see, the Mollag Band. They used to go round with bladders, sheep’s bladders or pigs bladders on sticks and they would be clouting people, you see, and making them give them some money in the streets.

How did they dress?

That’s now something I couldn’t tell. I never actually seen them at all.

But they didn’t have any play or any song or anything?

No, there was no play or song. Not to my knowledge, never heard it anyway.

Taped-recorded interview with Robert Cormode, Ramsey, 1971, MNH, Manx Museum Tapes, No. 81. Kirsty Neate, Curatorial Services Officer, Manx National Heritage, made this transcript in 1999. I am grateful to her for drawing its existence to my attention and for kindly sending a copy for inclusion here. Some slight and minor corrections have been made and punctuation added in places to make the text read a little easier.

[FLS8] W. ROBINSON, FLS INTERVIEW (1972)

[2] There used to be a man going round with a baker’s van out Maughold way and he used to be a member of the “White Boys” and was going round with them at Christmas, and another man called Moore whose father used to farm in the Roan above Ramsey and he was in the “Mollag Band” and in the White Boys too—he said the Ramsey White Boys used to go to Laxey to do performances. The Mollag Band had a melodeon and a drum and other instruments, and they had some kind of a play as well.

Mr W. Robinson, Glen Mona, Maughold, interviewed in 1972. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, R/II E, 2.

THE MONA DOUGLAS PAPERS



[MDI] MONA DOUGLAS, OLD MANX SONGS, DANCES AND CUSTOMS (UNDATED)

[7] Then there was the Mollag Band. Their doings seem to be almost forgotten now-a-days, but in Castletown at any rate they must have had a great time of it. A Castletown man told me not long ago that they used to come out on St Stephen's Day after the Wren Boys had finished their rounds, dressed in tall hats and old tail coats and whit[e] trousers, generally a bit ragged and all decorated with holly and ivy and coloured ribbon or paper streamers. They went through the town singing and dancing and lashing themselves as they danced with holly branches, and everyone gave them food and drink or both, for luck. The man who told me all this could not remember either the words of their song—they were Manx words though, he said—or the steps of the dance; but he hummed over the air for me, a variant of the old tune to "Hunt the Wren" Song, and said that they danced round in a circle with a peculiar spiral action of the body, but separately not joining hands, and sometimes they leapt up all together and shouted. If anyone here knows anything more about this song and dance I wish they would tell me about it, as I am very anxious to find out all there is to know.

"Old Manx Songs, Dances and Customs," undated typescript of a talk given in Liverpool (most likely to the Liverpool Manx Society). MNHL, MS 09495, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 15.

[MD2] MONA DOUGLAS, DRAWING OF THE COSTUME OF THE MOLLAG BAND (UNDATED)

See [CI]

"Folklore Notebook. | Dances. | Tunes, description & notes", undated notebook. MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 9. **Notes:** (I) Reproduced in Mona Douglas, "The Mollag Band," *Yn Lioran*, 8 (1960), 11–12, see 12 [PII].



THE SONGS OF THE MOLLAG BAND



(1)

[s1] Mona Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” *Yn Lioran*, 8 (1960), 11–12, see 12 [PII].

Notes: (1) For the tune, see [TI]. (2) Passed on by Leighton Stowell. (3) Obtained from John Cleator of Ramsey, pen name “Juan Noa.”

- 1 1 We are the Mollag Band
 So glorious and so grand
 Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi
 We are the Mollag Band
- 2 5 We’re likely come from say
 We haven’t had our “tay”
 Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi, Yo-Hi
 We are the Mollag Band

(2)

[s2] Leighton Stowell, [Victoria Road,] Castletown, interviewed in May 1971. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, s/38 B, I. Note: (1) Obtained from John Cleator of Ramsey, pen name “Juan Noa.”

- 1 1 We are the Mollag Band
 So glorious and so grand
 Ye-Ho, Ye-Ho
 Before we take our ease
 5 It’s you we intend to please
- 3 [We are the Mollag Band]
 A true and faithful band



THE MOLLAG BAND TUNE



[TI] MONA DOUGLAS, “THE MOLLAG BAND” (1960) *

The Mollag Band Song

1. We are the Mol - lag Band. So glor - ious and so grand. Yo
 2. We're late - ly come from say. We have - n't had our tay.

5
 hi yo hi yo hi yo hi, we are the Mol - lag Band.

Mona Douglas, “The Mollag Band,” *Yn Lloran*, 8 (1960), 11–12, see 12 [PII]. Notes: (1) For the song text, see [SI]. (2) From Leighton Stowell.

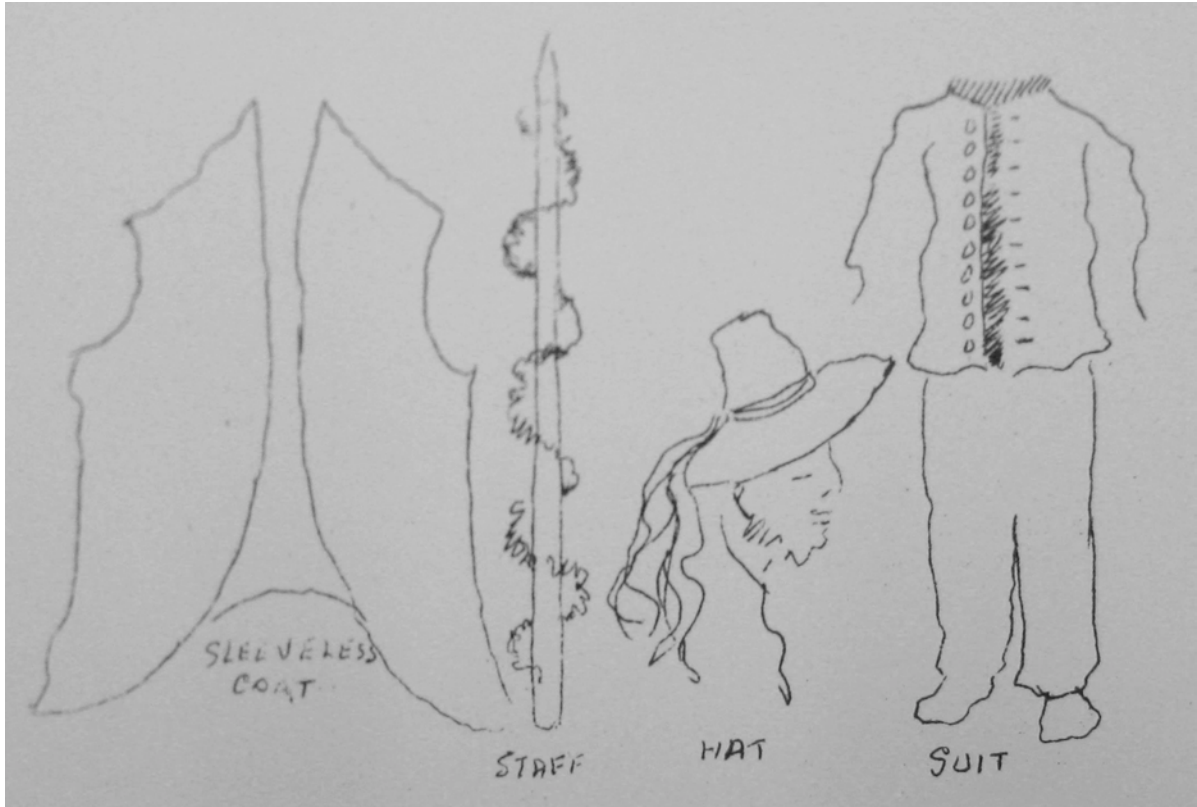


* I am grateful to Dr Chloë Woolley of Culture Vannin for supplying the tune here.

THE MOLLAG BAND COSTUME



[CI] MONA DOUGLAS, "THE MOLLAG BAND" (1960)



Mona Douglas, "The Mollag Band," *Yn Lloran*, 8 (1960), 11–12, see 12 [PII]. Note: (1) Original found in "Folklore Notebook. | Dances. | Tunes, description & notes", undated notebook. MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 9.



TABLES

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I. THE MOLLAG BAND SIGHTED

PLACE	SOURCE
Castletown	[P4], [P6], [P8], [P9], [PIO], [PII], [PI2]; [NI], [N5], [N7], [N8], [N9]; [FLS1], [FLS4], [FLS6]; [MDI]
Dalby	[P4], [P6], [PII]
Douglas	[PII]
Lezayre	[PII]
Maughold	[PII]
Peel	[P4]; [NI3]? [NI4]?
Port Erin	[NII]
Ramsey	[P4], [PII]; [N2], [N3], [N4]; [FLS8]

The references to Douglas, Lezayre, and Maughold come only from a singular source, namely Mona Douglas [PII]. Dalby is referred to in [P6], again by Douglas, and by W.W. Gill [P4], where he is repeating information from her. These must be bracketed as being doubtful at present.

2. THE NAME OF "THE FOOL"

NAME OF "THE FOOL"	PLACE	SOURCE
"Bimbo"	Castletown	[PII]
"Incabon"	Castletown	[FLS1]
"Sambo"	Douglas	[PII]
"Sambo"	Ramsey	[PII]
"Sonnys" [Manx, pig]	Dalby	[PII]

3. THE COSTUME OF "THE FOOL"

PLACE	COSTUME OR DISGUISE	SOURCE
Castletown	Dressed as a Bear	[PII]
Dalby	Imitated a pig	[FLS1]
Douglas	Face blackened	[PII]
Maughold	Whole sheepskin complete with horns	[PII]
Ramsey	Face blackened	[PII]

THE MOLLAG BAND

4. KNOWN MEMBERS OF THE MOLLAG BAND

NAME	TOWN / VILLAGE	SOURCE
Oscar Corlett ("The Ranter")	[Castletown]	[FLS6]
? Corrin	Castletown	[PII]
John ("Jack") Davis	Ballasalla	[PIO]
? Moore	Ramsey	[FLS8]
"Tommy the Councillor"	Castletown	[FLS6]
"A big Irishman"	Ramsey	[P4]

