

The Melliah

A poem by George Quarrie (c. 1846 – 1926)

The Melliah

The following piece, bearing the above name, is an attempt to transfer living characters, with a few contemporary surroundings, from the writer's memory to paper, as these existed at Ballavair some twenty-five or twenty-six years ago; dwelling now, as they ever will dwell in his mind, as a kind of pleasant dream. A dream is indeed the proper term, as one finds nothing now which in the least recalls those good old days. Let anyone who knew Ballavair *then* go and see it now — or see, for that matter, any other farm in any other parish. He will at once agree that all now looks deserted, cheerless, and miserable, where in those days it was well populated, and all around smiling with waving crops of grain — populated, too, with a people who were contented and happy, whereas now any solitary labourer you meet looks almost like a mournful camel crossing the great Sahara desert. The Melliah as depicted here is, the writer thinks, a fair representation of the jollification allowed to all the harvest workers on the day when the last of the season's grain was cut; and the persons named were more or less leading features in the band of shearers then employed. The truth or otherwise of their several descriptions he must leave to the judgment of any reader who, like himself, was present on the scene. He anticipates a ready forgiveness at the hands of his old friends whom he has taken the liberty of naming herein, whose names in very deed he cites with nothing short of an affectionate remembrance of them and the good *owl times*.

THE MHELLIAH

Just thirty thurrans in the haccad we'd got
Of oats, and barley, and whate;
Th' was a sleugh out and a bit to cut —
The harvis was rather late.
Well, man, the Melliah was took to-day,
'Is a show, though the fun wis them days gone!
We worked that day till half-past three,
Instead of dinner from twelve to one.
We had started at seven that mornin' bright —
The women and gels was a thrate to see!
With their putty washed prints and stockins so tight —
'Pon me sowl, I was full of glee!
With bright hooked sickles in oxther placed,
An' them rale owl sun-bonnets, bless their hearts!
Along the dewy hedges their way they traced —
They defied, for freshness the finest arts!
The sun was rising over Ramsey Bay,
And he shone through millions of cobwebs bright
That trailed o'er the stubble along our way —
Fairy carpet as wov'n overnight.
The breeze came softly in from the sea,
Just kissing the dewdrops off the corn;
A feathery mist hung o'er the lea,
Presaging the older day to be warm.
A new-mown mead was on our left,
The fleecy mist couldn't hide it there,
For, unless to one of all sense bereft,
It breathed its presence in luscious air.
The refracting spar of old Clough-veddin
Shone bright, like a star in emerald green,
On the Fanks hard by was Phil's bock-beddin
Nipping close, as that grass is short I ween.
On the right, standing high, with feathery cap,
Loomed bold Barrule in the distance, blue,
While down her slope, as 'twere in her lap,
The tower of Albert peeped in view.
The smoke of Ramsey in lazy curls
Crept slowly up the mountain's side,
While a yacht off the harbor her sail unfurl
As she leaves on the morning tide.
That lovely bay like a silver sheet
So placid now; with outspread arms,
Holds wide its welcome to the passing fleet
To shelter on its bosom in storms.
This morn it is crossed by a golden stream,

Thus mirroring the glorious sun;
A shelt'ring vessel appears to dream
She will weigh and continue her run.
The sombre shadows of Maughold Head
Seem to bathe themselves in the bay,
Diving down, as it were, to the mermaid's bed,
Picking sharply out their downward way. —
“Now then,” says Jem, as the field we rache
(That field was far Jem Matts),
“Nan an' me to the forerigg! you brats to tache
To follow behine in our thracks.
Put Pitts on the ghart, an' if he can't keep up
Ler him go wi' the gells to make bans.
If he can't do that, ler him help to stook
Where he'll ger a few tissles in his han's.
An' as thrue as 'am here if he doesn't look out
An' work his siggle like a man to-day
At the Melliah he'll get the dirty ger out,
I'rnt care wharever he may say!”
Then up to Jem waddled spagaugh Pitts,
And he swung his sickle right round his head;
He swore till it all flew off in spits,
He'd any day work owl Jem into bed.
“Keep yer win to cool porrage wis Pitts ya bough!
Ye could do wis Bill Boyd's bellows for such!
'Is a pity y'll not want to cool y'r jough,
Then to-night y' wouldn't get too much!”
Then Jem made his back a little more bent
(It was bent nearly plenty to start);
The sickle made a gling and a grunt as it went
Through handfuls of corn like a bart!
“And a notin' we will go, my boys,
A notin' we will go,
Wi' the white cockade stuck in our hats
We'll cut a gallan' show.”
Such was the only verse Jem ever sang,
He called on his wife for a ban;
Ses he, “If the Melliah's to be took to-day,
Ye mus' follow meself and Nan!”
Then into it goes a couple from the 'roads,'
The Nimples, Margate, and 'Riar,
Owl Nannie said Margate would shear wis her,
But Margate said, “Ye're a liar!”
She left her daughters to do their rig,
But she found a partner in Ned;
Ned was a sailor, but fond of a jig
So the Melliah got into his head.

Then owl Bill Quayle with many tight coughs
Flung his sleeve-waistcoat some yards away,
An' with a spit in his han's, said he was as tough
As the fust day he'd gone to saal!
The 'herrins' was the length of Bill's sailing rope,
But the yarns he spun was a show —
He must have doubled capes Horn and Hope
And passed the Indy Islands in a row!
"All hands to the pump!" cries Bill with a song,
As he hitched up his breeches in his belt,
"Weigh anchor! chit reesh Jinny Veg, ding, dong!"
We'll work gell while there is a welt!
Lin a han' wi' the jough me little Gilthabeg;
Man, alive! sho'ra seen us at saa;
Seen us dhrink jough by the froughin keg
Ay, till our waiscad buttons flew away."
Betty Howland joined with her sister Ann,
A cleaner pair of shearers never stood;
They bent to a rig — for fun they would run
Ahead of the fore-rig, as they always could.
"Now then, Clarke Beg, keep your eye off me,"
Ses Jem "An' thry to bin' yer back.
There's Betsy, too man, a thrim little three,
If I was younger I'd know my tack!"
Now Cannan cuss the eyrish and do yer bes',
There's Kirry Bill Quayle will do for to-day,
Ye would rather we know follow Captain and Jess
And be turnin' a bit of lay.
"Howl her boy," cried a voice from Kinlough hedge,
An' we looked around, though we knew
Whose "rolding motion" as Jem called his trudge
Brought stout big Corkhill to view.
"Howl her," said Bill, "or her bilers will bust,"
An' he laughed like an earthquake's rowl;
It was Margate he saw, the Nimples were fust,
"Steam is up," said Bill, "be me sowl."
If they go like this there'll be shaves be goch,
Enough for a dozen to stook!
But come on, Bob Clague! have a pull of jough,
And never behind us look.

The ring of the sickle in the rustling corn
"Was all you heard now far and wide.
Like close lined infantry in the act of storm
They felled their thousands on every side.
To name these warriors with crooked swords
(Two score there were short two)

Is more than time or paper affords,
Besides we've the Melliah in view.
Tom Dug on a rig with swivvle Ann Yack,
We couldn't however so very well pass.
Tom wheezed but spit in his han's with a whack
Sayin' the Dug was the bully of all Kewn-jas.
He had floor'd Jack Quayle an' Billy the Square,
"While he hoult Bill Pherric in his fis' like a meg;
Wis one han' claned a whole tent at the fair
An' shook the guts ou'ra the Ballabeg!
Etty Colquet smart and spruce as any
Looking grave as ever and very quite,
Was shearin' her rig with Corkhill Nanny,
Looking both the picture of doin' right.
Bill Beg too — "Bollah," ses Bill,
An' he cocked one eye up in wondther,
Smelling high with long hooked nose an' quill
Eksackly like a duck in tondther.
The Baath was slowly commin' with a scythe,
"In the name of Tommy, wha's this?
Death himself is come at last for his tithe,"
Ses Bill, "An' am sure it is."
The Baath, however, made no such demands
(Tho' Juan was charged with butcheraugh enough)
He began all silent to carry out commands,
In mowing a part for the sickle too rough.
Well the sun hung just o'er Gobavothy's nose
When the fore-rig and ghart in warfare met.
The Harvis was therefore nearin' the close
With hackin' and blowin' and plenty of sweat.

And now the crop of fifty-eight
The remaining ears on their stobbs
Stood manfully up a han'ful or wisp,
Nodding brave defiance to the odds.
The attacking forces here withdrew,
According to the good owl fashin,
Then into the wisp every sickle they threw
With hooray and jingle an' slashin.
But also followin the Melliah day laws
Owl Nannie our senior with dignity grand
Steps up an' a weapon from the pile she draws
And strikes the last ears from their legs to the land.
Then hooray for the Melliah! the Melliah is took!
Shouted Sthuggas far over a score.
Poor Aasther carry'n Bob-a-loo on her back
And Billy an' Veg, an' many more.

The Melliah was carefully gathered up
And tastefully plaited into shape,
A trophy dainty to grace Melliah Cup
And the dinner, well tied with a tape.
Then home they went to their several cots
For a wash an' to brighten their faces,
The young men racing and jumpin' over stooks,
The gels making bets as to waises.
But shlow'n an' sogaraugh Tommy Gale
Came soldierin' an' pushin' the gells
He's snaiken about as sure as the mail,
An' something nice to the young ones tells.

THE DINNER

Bill Beg said atin was nothin' else to him
But filling up a sack that was impty,
Whether porrage an' dhry lumps, thick or thin,
Or beef, he only asked plinty.
Barley bonnag was harder than loaf to chow,
An' clap-cake took mortal chaps to soffen.
But to him the differing in mates wasn't much
The diff'rance boys is 'twixt somethin' an' nothin'.
But the Melliah was a day of unfain'd cheer;
Ther' was plenty as well as choice,
Why the broth itself from far and near
Brought praises like a single voice.
That broth was broth now! cooks take a hint,
A hundred gallons, there'd be no less;
From beef, and mutton, and barley, no stint,
And a ham or two, all of the bes'.
Of the bes', ay lad, in that mighty pot,
How fat was the bubble, and glug!
Where the big, heavy, lazy waves showed a lot;
Why their names would tickle yer lug.
Apple dumplins like perkhans went rowlin about,
Playin' hiden go seek with the hams;
While a shower of greens and barley showed out
Through the waves like a silver strand.
But enough! we all know an' no mistake,
That nothin was ever left wantin at dinner;
From the steamin white spuds to the crowning plate;
"Rice puddin and currans in her."
Ask farmers how the last dish always proved
A reminder of the Melliah like a charm;

Why, in this field or that wherever you moved,
Ay for weeks all over the farm!
Well, few words are best at dinner time;
We sup, an' ate, an' are filled,
No speeches — no bosh — and no bad wine,
No spirits by the d—— I distilled.
The old lot done an' adjourned to the loft;
A hobblin' stream of little ones follow,
Such brown little faces, an' eyes so soft!
Little youngsters soon fill every hollow,
With mirthful eyes but respectful looks,
They answer their master and mistress's queeries,
How Kitty isn't here, or Billy is took
Very bad indeed with the measles.
They talk quietly and low when master is by;
And they worship the mistress whatever she says;
They are taught at school the reason why
Masters feel kindly for their little ways.
Heaven bless their natural and lovely trust,
How well I know their faith was returned!
In those days capital nor labour wished,
Nor had no demagogues in hell should be burned.
No stupid traversing of nature's laws,
Teaching no man should follow after;
That Jack although good wages he draws,
Is as good or better than his master!

TO THE LOFT

In harvis the storker was lob-lolly-bhoy —
He watered the cows and cut the fitches,
Drove pigs to the stubble in Machenthreigh,
Or in Dhremeshuggle he cleaned the ditches.
If the colts took the dog mill-road like streevaughs
Or poor blind Fanny down the Ochthaugh fall,
Or sheep fell over the brews at the Reelthaughs,
The storker was to blame — he must right it all.
So this jicker-about was expected to hice
High up on a powl by twelve o'clock,
The Melliah-day colour, without device
A couple of brats or bit of a frock,
And p'raps tacked to was a long cravat,
A rale big red one, borrowed from Mat.
This from the top of a thirty-feet powl
Stuck fast in the hedge at the Lherghy top,

Both far and near the Melliah-day towl,
From Cronk-a-voulan to Penny-pot:
But the Crennels got a wef and on Shallag brews
They ran and capered like hop-the-naa,
Giving bhoys a sign, better telling the news
Than flag on Cronk-e-neeri laa.
Bowl flag is throe flung welcome right
To mortal lots from lef to right,
From the ling in Craansthal edge of the Ayre,
Right over to Jurby and even Lezayre.
“But nearer Creggans,” as some people think,
“May have hedgehogs very likely” ses Christian Lewaigue
There may be a very stout bhoys at Ballachrink,
Or stouter still at Ballayonague.
If Maggie thought that, Maary thought this,
And the great big harvest moon laughed in his sleeve
And Cannan was singing of a “wrinkle in her twiss,”
To a lot an the laver without their leave.
Then a game “but-thurran” was suddenly started,
And away they flew among the stacks,
Girls one way bound, bhoys after darted –
The catching always ended in smacks.
But many a multhag, collane, callour,
That night came to grief as round she wheels,
For soghane was set like a loob with power
To send them rolling head over heels.
Not for gels alone did the Dug and Tommy
Tighten their rope as their victims passed,
But tripped up the biggest like Willie and Johnnie,
Who thought their very prinjaigs were lost,
They fell with a glunkse enough to bust,
But up with a sprhet and away like the dust.
Never dhramen the cause, unless a bogane,
But all they said was “D— — —n the soghane!”
Who will ever forget this glorious fun
Who has seen it played in the moon’s full face,
With gels fit to wrestle, or jump, or run,
Nineteen in a score of the human race!
See a clerk or doctor on a visit this day
Join heartily the game (they were bachelors sure)
Seize hold by the waist to catch Annie Ray
Me-yee-kin-flump he’d go to the floor.
One vigorous grip from Annie’s red arms
The poor toot doesn’t understand at all –
She seems to scatter him like chaff in the barns,
Clean out of her way like nothin’ at all.
But now for the barn bhoys, let’s come on,

Lis'n now! be gough there's a clar'net theer,
There's no batin' Dawsey — he's music to the bone,
And he's left Ballyaugie to play for us here.

The barn was theree I tell you thoh
With lamps and candles plenty boh,
The candles stuck with grace, be gough,
To morthar wall;
With furrums round and plenty jough
Like baron's hall.

Greigh vannaugh man! O goch anye!
Theer's scores of peeble! Shee tha vie!
"Oh no a'll not," said Kerry shy,
"Go in at all;
Jus-loog-on-me-close! am like to cry!
For, faith, I came to dance or thry,
But this bates all!"

Where furrums failed and stools were short
Full sacks of whate made good support,
But straw house end saw mighty sport
Among the brock.
Not candle there of any sort,
But sounds like "Lave me," "Grei yee ort,"
"Don't tear me frock."

Now Dawsey's pipe was not alone,
Old Collin's fiddle swelled the tone,
And dancin' now in form begun.
The Mistress came.
With grace she made them feel at home,
And lightly stepped with Jem alone
The dance we'll name.

That swivvle hornpipe — Manx was named.
The "jig" and far away was famed
To Edinburgh's flowers framed,
It went like smook.
Clane dancin' off yer han it claimed
Not puzzled look.

No bhoy bough hobbles at the sides
Nor sthroogin' out of tune in slides
With ugly sprehts and shame besides,
At being wrong,
Like in quadrilles each man betides

However strong.

But hit the floor with heel and toe,
Till heaven help the boards below,
And suit yourself you come or go
To music's time.
Not bob about like diddle doe
Nor sense nor rhyme.

And see the gells, these sthrippers rare,
No blanket trains to thrip you there,
But ankles clane and calf near bare
They foot it lightly.
Why shut their legs or arms from air!
They argue rightly.

The fun was now diversified,
As Nannie from the door we spied,
Limping up soghane betied
She thus went past me,
Flooring a clout she jumped aside,
Took fright, and sang, or rather cried
Keerie fu Snaighthee.

Then jig on jig and reel on reel
Followed each quickly heel to heel.
Sweat must flow unless by steel
The springin's done.
But shirts are damp, and sthrippers feel
Wet to the bone.

The fiddlers barely get their breath
When music's loudly called for Baith,
And there he is as sure as death
With kick and prance.
Low on the floor doin' well my faith
The owl Frog dance.

Then reel on reel and jig on jig
Away they went again full rig,
With jough and fiddles, who cares a fig
About to-morrow!
Leave afterclaps to common prig
Who looks for sorrow.

But time will go and fun to boot,
And Melliahs end and follow suit,

This night wound up with good salute
“Hip, hip, hooray.”
These were the days of Gobnasehute
And hop tua naa.

Away, alone, apart and sad
The “*Master*” mused: How could it be
All ranks beneath him pleasures had,
And all, he thought, have joy but me.
He wandered lone by moonlit path,
Ambition oft his guide as now
Would lead his steps to dear Kinlough
To view the sea from grassy brow.
His pictured home was nestled there,
On soil his own by noble right.
He saw his farm and buildings fair,
All reared by strong and honest fight.
Thus musing gazed he at the sea,
Sweet murmurs ever soothing power,
When, lo, he heard — but, could it be
A song at this, the midnight hour?
From deep Glewnundtha mournful strain
Came trembling soft, then weird and wild
Then song was hushed in sweet refrain
Like lullaby for sweetest child.

THE MOTHER’S LAMENT

Noble son, O cease thy toiling,
Hear a spirit mother’s prayer,
Earth thy purest soul is soiling,
Seek not joy, it is not there.
Man in thought while boy in stature
Storms thy very cradle rock’d,
Storms e’en fierce to rugged nature,
Yet thou faced them all unshock’d.
Well thou’st borne the heavy burthen,
Braving fiercest solar ray,
Go not further, all is earthen,
All is sorrow, all decay.
See this earth thy foot is treading,
Noble deeds have made it thine.
Tremble not, but earth is spreading,
Sorrows with thy life to twine.
Sons about thee now seem gladness,

Dearest hopes they are to thee,
Yet by them will first come sadness,
Bitter fate thy lot to be!
Friends will die whom thou art trusting,
Friends still living hollow prove,
Rotten hearts and friendships rusting
Quit the sight for things above!
Doubt me? No, I see thee bending
Proudest head on manly breast.
Even now thy soul is rending!
Fain I'd spare my son the rest.
Yet my heavy spirit-mission
Comes from far and fairer lands,
Brooks not feeling or omission
Bring I't yet with tender hands!
Other hands, oh hands how ruthless
See I raising this your home!
Ugly nightmare — heart so truthless!
See him tear it stone from stone!
Oh, earth — cold earth, what has man in thee
Short life — all strife. Come, my son, to me I
Now my heavy task is done,
Oh I hate my very shade!
Prophecy damnation made!
Oh my gentle, ruined son.

Dismayed, confounded, sore distressed,
The "*Master*" thus heard mother's voice,
But quick upon the sound he pressed,
Remembering only earthly choice,
He flung his arms to embrace that form,
As stately stood she tall and fair,
His arms were met by prickly thorn,
From neath the thorn there limped a hare.

This poem is taken from *The Melliah Boh!* This is available in full on www.manxliterature.com

More information about the Mheillea traditions in the Isle of Man is available here:
<https://culturevannin.im/manxfolklore/yn-mheillea-491585/>