

# Manx Folklore - a changing or continuous tradition?

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## Introduction: Manx Folklore today...

To ask the question whether Manx folklore is subject to continuity or change and whether it is a changing or continuous tradition, presupposes one major factor, that Manx folklore still exists in any shape or form at the present day.

To many people on the Isle of Man, the answer to this question would be self-evident: that folklore does not exist and if it does, it is a very poor shadow of its former self. This view would be supported and vindicated by a wealth of literature written on the parlous state of Manx folklore over the past hundred years. Each generation of folklorists has bemoaned the fact that they are 50 years too late to collect anything of any real importance. For each successive group the opinion is voiced that only an earlier generation had access to an *authentic* and *genuine* corpus of Manx folklore (Moore 1891, ii; Killip 1975, 15-6; Paton 1942, v-vi).

This was, and in some cases still is, the complaint of most folklore collectors throughout the British Isles. This viewpoint is based on a particular concept and definition of folklore. It is perceived as a series of beliefs, customs and rituals that have survived, largely unaltered, over the centuries (potentially even millennia) until their rapid decline during the agrarian and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (Baker 1974, 9-13).

The definition of folklore as a random collection of survivals and relics of an earlier and more complete body of customs and beliefs, usually of pagan if not pre-historic origin, implies that folklore and its subject matter is a dying field of enquiry (Simpson & Roud 2000, 134-5, 253-4; Georges & Owen Jones 1995, 59-67).

Therefore the definition of folklore and its subject matter needed to be radically revised if there is to be a body of evidence for future study. This has in part been achieved by revising the interpretation of the evidence for folklore. It is no longer perceived as a timeless and stable body of unchanging beliefs, rituals and customs.



Figure 1: Painting by Beatrice Fairless of the *chiollagh* (open hearth) of Coil Bane, Sulby, c.1910.



Figure 2: Manx spinning wheel.

Instead folklore is increasingly considered to be dynamic with change and evolution an essential part of its development over time. Therefore change and/or decline in the practice of specific customs does not indicate overall loss and disappearance of folklore but is indicative of and evidence of its dynamic nature (Toelken 1996, 19-54; Dundes 1980, 1-9; Simpson & Roud 2000, 131; Hutton 1996, 426-7).

The revised definition means that news of the death of Manx folklore has been exaggerated over the twentieth century. It can also be considered somewhat premature since folklore can still be found on the Island if one accepts it is not necessarily in the same form as it appeared in previous decades or centuries. Once one accepts that Manx folklore still exists in some form, to be discussed and considered later, the question can then be asked as to whether Manx folklore is developing in terms of change or continuity from past folklore traditions.

## Overview of Manx Folklore

### Hearth and Home

For the majority of the rural Manx population, whether one lived in a one roomed thatched cottage or a large quarterland farmhouse, the heart of the home was the large *chiollagh* (open hearth) in the *thie moar* (kitchen/large room). The turf fire in the *chiollagh* provided all of life's necessities from heat for the main living room in the house, heat for all one's cooking and hot water, and it even provided a semblance of light on dark evenings to work by, so as not to waste valuable tallow candles or rush lights (Figure1).

The *chiollagh* was a central feature of domestic folklore. When sweeping the floors one never swept the dust out of the doors but rather swept in towards the hearth. This meant that luck would be kept in a household rather than metaphorically (and literally) sweeping it away.<sup>1</sup>

The desire to keep luck within a family and within a house is also shown by the need to have all the jugs hanging on the dresser facing towards the *chiollagh* and not towards the door.<sup>2</sup>

Although recorded historically, these two customs are today observed on the Island by people still having jugs facing the fire and away from the door and by emptying the vacuum cleaner bag in the fire.

The importance of the *chiollagh* was traditionally reinforced by the nightly ritual before one went to bed of putting a small bowl of *pinjane* (milk rennet pudding), *cowree* (steeped oats) or some *bonnag* (soda bread) out for *themselves* (the fairies) at the side of the hearth (Roeder 1897, 148; Roeder 1904, 27-8).<sup>3</sup> One also took the band (strings) off the spinning wheel to make it inoperable. The reasoning behind these rituals was to placate *themselves* and to prevent them being mischievous, or worse, malevolent; therefore a small gift of supper would be made to them. The only problem

<sup>1</sup>Manx Folklife Survey, KJ-B19 (Mr J Kneen, Ballaugh Curraghs, 1950).

<sup>2</sup>Manx Folklife Survey, FCE-A4 (Mrs E Flanagan, Douglas, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>Manx Folklife Survey, K22-2 (Mrs Keig, Andreas, 1964).

was that if they wanted to be helpful, they might consider doing some spinning for you but 'though their meanins' well enough, the spinnin' they're doin' is nothin' to brag about' (Morrison 1911, 5). Therefore to remove temptation, one removed the band off the wheel (Figure 2).

One interpretation of this belief and associated ritual is that the hearth and chimney represents a liminal space between the physical house and external environment. Liminal areas in time and space, junctions between one world and another, are often considered dangerous unknowns (Narváez 1997, 337-8). It would appear that it was accepted that *Themselves* could gain entry to the home at night and that to render them harmless, a gift was made to ensure that no harm befell either the home or its occupants.

Another interpretation that one may make of the story of fairies inhabiting the *chiollagh* at night (it appears in Sophia Morrison's *Manx Fairy Tales* 1911 as the story *Themselves*) (Morrison 1911, 3-5) is that parents living in cottages with cock lofts (open lofts where the children slept) were telling moralistic warning stories to their children to ensure their safety. One might want to guarantee that one's children, if they awoke in the night, were never tempted either to wander around the open loft or down the step ladder into the *thie mooar* and near the unguarded open turf fire. In keeping with other aspects of fairy belief, this may be an example of an explicit belief in fairies and their malevolent potential or a form of the verbal control of children and of ensuring their safety at night, or it may be a combination of the two belief systems.

The hearth was also of great importance at New Year, both at *Hop tu naa* (31 October – traditionally considered the Celtic New Year) and New Year's Eve (31 December) when rites of divination were practised. Having spent all year carefully sweeping the household dust into the hearth, on New Year's Eve one would sweep the dust and ashes out from the hearth into the room. Once done the household would retire to bed and wait until morning to forecast the household's future for the forthcoming year. The signs looked for were small v-shaped footprints in the ashes. If the footprints went in towards the hearth, they heralded a new addition to the family, but if they were pointing in the direction towards the door, they foretold of a death in the family (Gill 1932, 112-9; Train 1845, 115-6). Interestingly it was noted by contemporary folklorists that no mention was made of either who or what were thought to have made these footprints (Rhys 1901, 318-9). This was a question left unasked and unanswered, as it was felt to be as well not to know or enquire too closely.

The rites of divination developed with the introduction of new domestic technology, since the folklorists also recorded people placing nuts on the fire grate. This was not to determine who would die during the year but rather to determine who would be 'sweethearts' and/or who would be compatible and faithful (Paton 1942, 77). To be noted is the fact that this is obviously associated with the introduction of cast iron fireplaces and ranges. This occurred later on the Isle of Man than the rest of mainland Britain, because the cost of importing coal had to become sufficiently low to outweigh the effort of digging one's own turf. On the Island this was between 1860 and 1890, if not later in certain places.

## Agriculture

The highlight of the Manx agricultural year was the bringing in of the harvest. The climax of this was the cutting of the final sheaf, the *mheillea* (Killip 1975, 174 - 5; Moore 1891, 121; Gill 1963, 272 - 4; cf. Fenton 1978, 356; Fenton 1987, 124 - 5). This entailed much ceremony with the last sheaf being cut and then shaped into a *babban mheillea* (which may be translated as a harvest baby or even a corn dolly). Then it would be wrapped in a shawl and carried high, at arm's length, above the harvest gang as they made their way back to the farm for the harvest feast, to celebrate safely gathering in the harvest. A large spread would be laid out in the barn and there would be singing and dancing until the small hours of the morning. The *mheillea* would then be put up either in the barn or in the kitchen until the following harvest to ensure the success of the following year's harvest (Clague 1911, 79; Moore 1891, 122). The *mheillea* is a near universal custom found throughout Europe and beyond, and one that has caused considerable speculation on the part of generations of folklorists. Theories and speculations have been made that it involves the capture of the spirit of the Grain God and it was frequently cited as evidence of the pre-Christian/pagan and archaic origins of folklore, of which this was a relic survival, although this is now generally discredited (Baker 1974, 28- 33; Hole 1978, 135- 9; Hutton 1996, 335- 9).

The original Manx *mheillea*, based in the fields and on the farms, began to evolve and develop during the nineteenth century in response to the fears and concerns of the Methodist Church regarding the moral (and potentially immoral) tone of the festivities. The *mheilleas* have moved to the Chapels, becoming a Manx harvest festival with a concert and auction of produce to raise money for local charities. The transformation of the *mheillea* from a festival of active participation by the farmworkers to the predominantly passive involvement of the Chapel-goers cannot entirely be blamed on the temperant Methodist Church. The transition mirrors the wider social and technological changes taking place in agriculture as the men and women with scythes and sickles were increasingly replaced with mechanical reapers and binders.

The farm-based *mheillea* has evolved in other ways as well. Originally, before reapers and binders, the bulk of the harvest labour was expended in the cutting of a crop whilst the stooking (stacking sheaves) and drying of the crop, before it was brought into the barns, was the less labour intensive part of the process. Since the introduction of mechanised harvesting techniques, the cutting of the harvest is now less labour intensive and the physical gathering in of the harvest is relatively more labour intensive. Therefore on modern Manx farms, the *mheillea* will now be celebrated (if at all) as the last sheaf is gathered into the barn. The *mheillea* is therefore still an opportunity for a communal gathering, when the largest number of people are involved, to celebrate the safely gathering in of the harvest, whether in the field or as now in the barn.

The increasingly mechanised nature of the harvest means that most churches and chapels have problems now even acquiring a 'harvest' sheaf for the Harvest Festival service. As a result, Cregneash Open Air Village Folk Museum, where a horse drawn binder is still used for the harvest, is annually inundated with requests for sheaves.

The chapel *mheillea* has also undergone a period of transformation as the chapel ceases to be a focal point of community life. The *mheillea* concert is still celebrated in some chapels but is more likely to be a non-denominational concert held in the local



Figure 3: Group of Manx Fishermen.



Figure 4: Manx Pixie charm.



Figure 5: Herd of Shorthorn cattle at Cregneash.

village hall or, even more likely, an auction of produce for local charities held in the village public house. The auction will contain everything from bags of potatoes and vegetables from local farms through to novelty items, which have included a chocolate penis. The bidding can become extremely competitive, with success becoming a matter of honour and pride as witnessed by the prices achieved by certain people's home-made apple pies and fruit cakes.

Although the form of the *mheillea* has altered dramatically in terms of participants, location and apparent function, at another level it can be considered to have altered very little. The *mheillea* is still a communal festival, and it continues to contain elements of the 'feast of misrule'. In modern rural society where the majority of the community is not involved with work on the land, it provides an unique opportunity for the community to gather and celebrate together.

## Fishing

The fishing industry underwent as significant a transformation as agriculture during the nineteenth century with the introduction of new technology and full-time employment for fishermen. Of all quarters of Manx life, economic and cultural, the fishing community has always been considered to be the most 'superstitious' and to hold the largest single body of folklore (Cashen 1912, 27 - 43) (Figure 3).

The most significant and obvious folklore associated with 'the fishing' is the prohibition of certain words which were not to be used in general conversation and definitely not whilst on board ship. The proscribed words for which *noa* (new) words had to be substituted were generally the names of creatures such as rats, rabbits, pigs and cats.<sup>4</sup> In the case of rats, these were known as 'longtails', 'ring tailed gentlemen' and 'ringies'. The use of proscribed words on board would be punished with the use of *could iron* (for example, the removal of a hot nut off the ship's boiler with one's teeth), a punishment that ensured that the misdemeanour would not be repeated.<sup>5</sup> The concern over the use of proscribed words on board fishing vessels is still prevalent in the modern Manx fishing fleet, although the punishment is less exacting. The use of *noa* words certainly develops and evolves since salmon are no longer known as *Red fish*<sup>6</sup> but as 'john westies' (after the well-known brand of tinned salmon).

The proscription of the use of the word 'rat' has changed from being a custom specifically observed by fishing communities (and certain rural communities) to an Island wide phenomenon. Since the major influx of immigrants to the Island in the 1960s, each successive wave is told during their first few months of residence that various terms cannot be used, for example: the Isle of Man Steam Packet vessel is the 'boat' not a ferry, the adjacent landmass to the east is referred to as 'across' not as 'the mainland' and most importantly there are no rats just 'longtails'. This informal Manx induction course means that the use of the word 'longtail' is now almost universal and is considered to be an *authentic* Manx tradition of long-standing. As a result older Manx-born residents who use the term 'rat' are not now considered by the wider Island community to be 'truly Manx'.

<sup>4</sup>Manx Folklife Survey, ME-A1 (Mr E Maddrell, Glen Chass, 1944).

<sup>5</sup>Manx Folklife Survey, KM-A4 (Mr J Callister, Laxey, 1950).

<sup>6</sup>Manx Folklife Survey, G22 (Mr L Greggor, Peel, 1958).

The preservation of a fishing boat's 'luck' was essential together with maintaining safety at sea. As a result great care was always taken to ensure that there were no white stones, in particular white quartz pebbles, in the stone ballast of a vessel (Gill 1963, 282-3; Rhys 1901, 344-5). Even though no specific reasons were given to Folklore collectors for quartz pebbles being unlucky, their inclusion in Early Christian and Medieval graves on the Island almost certainly meant that they were associated with death. Changes in boat design and ballast have made this particular belief generally obsolete, although it is interesting to note that when a traditional Manx fishing boat was recently restored and by mistake quartz pebbles were put in the ballast, no-one was surprised when her mast broke in a subsequent rough Irish Sea crossing.

There were several ways that fishermen could ensure that the luck of their vessel was maintained, but they also had ways in which it could be increased. This was done by 'stealing' the good luck of another fishing boat, an act that was particularly prevalent when in port and one could gauge the success of other vessels by the size of the catches they were landing. To 'steal' the good luck one needed to take an item of little worth or consequence from the other boat, a particularly effective item for transferring good luck was a dish cloth (the older and dirtier the better). Therefore if one's own vessel was doing well, one had to be particularly vigilant against other fishermen trying to steal things from the boat. Together with trying to avoid the use of prohibited words (and the associated penalties), the young cook, often a lad no more than 13 or 14 years old, also had to ensure that nothing was stolen from the vessel whilst in port.<sup>7</sup>

## Supernatural Creatures

Folklore beliefs, customs and rituals surrounded and influenced one both at home and work but they were also an important part of the wider physical and mental landscape in which one lived. The Manx farmer and his family occupied an enlarged cosmos which was inhabited by a whole bestiary of supernatural creatures ranging from *themselves* (the fairies) (Evans Wentz 1911, 117-135), *phynodderrees* (similar to hobs and brownies), *bugganes* (similar to hobgoblins and trolls) through to the *moddey dhoo* (black dog), *glashthin* (water horse) and *tarroo ushtey* (the water bull) (Moore 1891, 33-62; Rhys 1901, 284-93).

Each of these creatures populated specific locations on the Island and were known for their particular personality traits and behaviour, malevolent or benevolent. Therefore the stories told about them could be viewed primarily as cautionary tales about how one should treat them (or not) for one's own personal safety and well-being. *Themselves* were seen as members of an alternative culture that occupied a different dimension and only occasionally came into direct contact with human society. As with the fairies themselves, to have contact with them was considered an ambivalent blessing. Although they could bestow gifts, both material (money) and non-material (music and powers of healing), they could also cause great mischief or even worse steal a baby and leave a changeling in its place (Moore 1891, 43-7).

But for all the ambivalence felt by the Manx towards their supernatural neighbours, the stories relating to their passing illuminate feelings of a greater loss. There are

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<sup>7</sup>Manx Folklife Survey S16-B3 (Mr J Smith, Peel, 1950).

several stories relating to *themselves* leaving the Island. In some they were driven out by the Methodist Chapels that sprung up in every remote corner of the Island (Killip 1975, 30-2). In others it was by the noise and clamour of the new textile mills (specifically a tuck mill with its heavy fulling hammers) and the lead mines (Killip 1975, 39-40). The impression left is that in the new hustle and bustle of the nineteenth century with its Evangelical Christianity and Industrial Revolution, there was no space left for the 'old ways'. It may be speculated that the 'old ways' may have been defined in a variety of ways in the listener's or teller's mind. These could range from a simple straightforward belief in fairies, to a Christian faith that included fairies and other creatures within a cosmos learned from the Book of Genesis, from a Manx Gaelic speaking rural population who lived and worked closely with the land around them, to an English speaking population increasingly associated with towns, villages and industry. Whatever aspect of the 'old ways' the listener was thinking of when he heard these stories, it appears that the central theme was that a whole way of life had disappeared together with the fairies.

Interestingly although an apparently literal belief in fairies has disappeared, and it should be remembered that it is almost impossible to prove that people did literally believe in physical entities called fairies rather than hold other less literal forms of belief, themselves are still an important part of Manx life in the 21st century. The Fairy Bridge (on the main road between Douglas and Castletown) is still where every visitor to the Island is told by their taxi driver or coach driver and every child is told by their parent to say 'hello' to the fairies when crossing the bridge. The purists insist that this is not the actual Fairy Bridge, which is on an older Douglas to Castletown thoroughfare. Historians will tell you that the Fairy Bridge marks the boundary of the old Medieval Abbey estates and one is saying 'hello' as one enters and leaves the Abbeylands (Killip 1975, 99-100). The reality is that the Fairy Bridge has grown immensely in popularity with the growth of tourism on the Island with generations of charabanc and now coach drivers telling their passengers to say 'hello'. The ritual is also popular amongst the Manx population with many stories circulating about the ill fortune, in particular relating to vehicles breaking down, that befalls people who do not acknowledge *themselves*.

In the local souvenir shops one can buy postcards of the Fairy Bridge and even small pixie figures for charm bracelets (which have been dipped in the stream at the Fairy Bridge to make them more effectual) (Figure 4). The folklore surrounding the Bridge is evolving all the time and a recent development has been the hanging of small messages and plaques on the thorn tree adjacent to the Bridge. On closer inspection these are requests made to the fairies for good luck, in particular success with the Lottery. This is an interesting development of an older folkloric tradition of hanging rags on a thorn tree by a well or spring known for its healing properties. The logic behind the use of sympathetic magic is that having used the water on a particular ailment and left a rag on the thorn, as the rag rotted away so one's ailment would also disappear. In the case of the Fairy Bridge, several of the messages and requests are written on plastic plaques or sheets of headed notepaper put into plastic bags so they will not rot with the weather. The tradition seems to date from about 1997-8 with a dramatic increase being witnessed during the Tynwald period (the annual open-air

sitting of the Manx Parliament on Old Midsummer's Day), and several of the messages were written on hotel notepaper and apparently by visiting overseas delegates of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. One assumes that it began with one specific group and is now becoming more universally practised, although many local residents disapprove of the custom and think the notes should be removed.

Although a general belief in entities called fairies has all but disappeared, both on the Island and elsewhere, it may be noted that a belief in small green creatures has not been entirely lost. These creatures have an ambivalent reputation, are associated with strange lights at night, are able to change and disorientate one's perception of both time and space and are even 'known' to abduct people. Our forefathers would have instantly recognised such behaviour as being that of fairies, although in the rational and scientific 21st century some may prefer to call them aliens from space (Rojcewicz 1997, 479-514). Interestingly, although a significant proportion of the population do believe in them, due to their prevalence and popularity in the mass media and perhaps therefore our consciousness, the majority of us accept them as part of a symbolic or cultural cosmos, if not as a physical and literal reality. This may explain the role and position held by the fairy in the perceptions of individuals and communities in the past. Paraphrasing the creed *I want to believe* from the popular Science Fiction series 'The X-Files', we may wish to believe but that does not necessarily mean we do believe.

Strangely for a culture that held fairy belief as a core element of its folklore, aliens and UFO sightings are absent on the Isle of Man, unlike some other parts of the British Isles. But although Manx fairies do not appear to have been resurrected as aliens, they may still survive in a modified form on the Island. General conversations about Manx folklore have brought, in passing, unsolicited comments about angels and personal beliefs in the existence of one's own guardian angel. So the old household fairy, the *phynodderree*, may still exist but be transformed into a guardian angel.

## Calendar Customs

Manx calendar customs highlight the variety of ways in which the Manx perceived the world around them and responded to it; they also show the many ways in which the Island's folklore has developed and evolved over the past two centuries. From the many customs and festivals that could be considered, the one chosen for this paper is:

### May Eve

For the pastoral farming regions of Britain, May Day was a pivotal point in the farming calendar. This was the official beginning of summer and was often the time when stock that had been housed throughout the winter months could be put out onto the pastures to graze (Hutton 1996, 218; Killip 1975, 172-3).

Its title as a Celtic quarter day was Beltane and there has been considerable discussion over the decades as to whether this is derived from Baal and thereby illustrates its pre-Christian origins and links to sacred fires (Hutton 1996, 218-25). What is known is that the rational concerns of the farmers concerning the well-being of their livestock are then expressed in a series of apparently irrational actions (rituals

and customs) practised on May Eve, to provide some degree of protection against dangerous and malevolent forces.

The degree of importance bestowed upon the date is mirrored in the associated concerns and anxieties expressed regarding the cattle (Figure 5). As previously noted, liminal times and spaces were considered dangerous junctions between the known and the unknown, this world, its reality and the next. The time between the death of winter and the rebirth of summer was therefore particularly dangerous and midnight on May Eve was a time when witches and fairies were considered to be at their most potent and potentially most malicious (Moore 1891, 110-1; Clague 1911, 47; Baker 1974, 114-5). Therefore although seemingly a time of celebration, the coming of summer was perceived as a dangerous time when one sought protection from whatever was abroad. A distinct contrast may be drawn between arable lowland Britain, where May Day was celebrated with gusto as a time of fertility, with the peripheral pastoral regions of Britain where the emphasis was on May Eve/Beltane and the need for protection.

The paradox of the rebirth of summer and the need for protection can be considered further when one compares and contrasts May Eve with its opposite, but intrinsically linked, festival of Samhain/ All Hallows (31 October), known on the Isle of Man as *Hop tu naa*. This was a time when summer died and winter was triumphant, the cattle were brought in under cover for the winter and again witches and fairies were thought to be exceptionally powerful. Although perceived as a festival associated with death, the activities engaged in were ones of divination (looking into the future - often for a husband) and communal and familial enjoyment including making turnip lanterns and going from house to house singing songs (in hope of treats such as sweets or pennies). The good-natured enjoyment and fun that characterised descriptions of *Hop tu naa* festivities contrast with the apprehensions and concerns apparent in descriptions of May Eve with its desperate need for protection of one's home and livestock.

To allay fears on May Eve there were various forms of protection that one could employ. The principal one was the making of *crosh cuirns* (rowan/ mountain ash crosses) to be attached to the lintel above the doors to the house and the cow byre (to prevent 'anything' unwanted crossing the threshold) and to the tails of the cows. The *croshs*, to be effective, had to be made in a particular way, with no iron being used to cut the twigs and handtwisted/ spun wool being used to tie the two twigs together in the shape of the cross. The combination of the use of the cross and of rowan (traditionally considered the 'witch tree' that gives protection against witches) was felt to be particularly effectual. As an added layer of protection, yellow flowers (usually primroses but sometimes buttercups) would be gathered and strewn across the threshold as a further deterrent to anything 'unwanted' entering the house (Moore 1891, 110; Roeder 1891, 292; Roeder 1904, 13-4). Older people will tell you that the more 'authentic' and 'traditional' way is to gather *blutan* (yellow Kingcups) to strew on the threshold (Killip 1975, 173). Those who know where to find this increasingly rare flower keep that knowledge well hidden, so that only a 'privileged' few are able to maintain this ritual in its 'authentic' form.

The final part of the May Eve rites to ensure protection and safety for one's household and livestock, involved the younger members of the community setting light to the gorse bushes to drive out the fairies and/ or the witches (Rhys 1901, 308). Of note is the fact that whilst the majority of the activities engaged in on May Eve were

domestic or family orientated and predominantly involved parents and young children, this last aspect was communal and involved adolescents. Traditionally this would be seen as the last relics of an age-old rite of sacred fire. In contrast a modern interpretation might be that it was an opportunity for the community's young people 'to let off steam' and enjoy themselves in a manner that was both sanctioned and approved of by the wider community, not as an everyday occurrence but an annually accepted one. A more pragmatic view might be that the burning of the gorse served a highly practical function by burning off the old woody growth and the carpet of gorse needles that build-up over time and smother any potential new growth. The promotion of new tender gorse shoots would provide a better harvest that could then be used as valuable animal fodder during the subsequent winter months. The burning of gorse was originally associated with the ritual of cattle being driven through the dying embers of the fire, this has been interpreted as being part of a symbolic purification ritual of the livestock before they are put out into the summer pastures (Killip 1975, 173). It may be speculated that the 'purification' was not necessarily purely symbolic and may have served a practical purpose. The potash in the gorse ashes will have had an antiseptic effect on the hooves of the cattle and may have been part of a cleaning process to prevent, or even help cure, foot rot in livestock that had been housed inside over the winter and were about to be put out to pasture. The smoke and heat from the dying fire may also have been important in ridding animals of parasites, such as warble fly, and in 'cleaning' their coats. To be noted is the fact that when folklorists witnessed these practices, they recorded them and subsequently defined them in terms of archaic and Pagan rituals, whose origins were lost in the mists of time, but whose primary *raison d'être* was symbolic. The general assumption that the practices were purely, or even merely, symbolic means that no consideration is given to discovering the practical and more pragmatic reasoning that may underlie the practices and why they might be effective. In the past there was a tendency not to ask participants why they performed certain rituals and even now the question is rarely asked, *Why did or Why should a ritual be effective?*

Interestingly only specific aspects of the May Eve rituals have survived and been maintained. The burning of gorse is no longer performed by young people on May Eve (but rather is done as a controlled exercise on a sporadic basis by farmers) and paradoxically in our apparently more liberal society, it would be viewed as vandalism and considered symptomatic of an 'out of control' youth culture. Therefore the youthful high jinx of the past, condoned and legitimised as being traditional and of long standing, would now result in court cases for criminal damage.

The putting up of *crosh cuirns* and the strewing of yellow flowers (primroses and Kingcups) is still done in a large number of households on the Island on May Eve. But although the action and the ritual have continued with almost no change, the belief underlying it and the context in which it is performed have changed dramatically. The initial belief was one of protection and the context one of dairy farming, the protection of one's home and one's house cow (or small herd of cattle). The degree to which this was a literal belief is now difficult to ascertain, as is the time-scale for its transformation. The custom today may be considered as appertaining to an expression of Manx national and cultural identity. Its prominent display in some households is significant as it would be viewed as an explicit declaration by the occupants of their perceived cultural identity. Therefore the custom is frequently found practised in

households where members are involved in other explicit assertions of a Manx identity such as participation in the ongoing revival and maintenance of the Manx Gaelic language, dance and music and also Manx Nationalist politics, although not exclusively so in regard to the latter. Another significant group who practice the custom are older Manx-born Island residents, who would consider themselves to be 'truly Manx born and bred'. They frequently express a proactive desire to maintain 'traditional' Manx customs which were previously observed by their parents and grandparents. Again the custom may be considered as representing a symbol of one's own Manx identity and heritage and therefore as a 'badge of cultural identity'.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Manx folklore may be considered to be a tradition that is both changing and continuous in terms of its development over the past hundred or more years.

Certain aspects such as the *crash cuirms* put up on May Eve, represent a tradition that has not altered at all in either form or practice throughout the time that it has been recorded. But although the execution of the practice has remained unaltered, the context in which it is performed and the reasons for which it is performed have changed dramatically. The original context and function of protection of one's home and livestock, thereby making it a rural and pastoral tradition, have been replaced as it has now become a symbol and declaration of an individual's cultural identity and allegiance. This is significant at a time when considerable public and political debate is taking place in the media over the question of Manx-born residents being a minority of the Island's population

In contrast the *mheillea* (harvest celebration) has undergone dramatic and significant changes over the past 200 years, in terms of its context, its apparent function and its participants. At a more fundamental level, although it has undergone superficial changes, it is still a celebration performed at the end of the harvest season where a significant proportion of a community can gather together. Therefore in comparison with May Eve where the practice stays the same but the context and function changes, the *mheillea* represents a tradition where the practice undergoes dramatic alteration and change but its function stays the same.

This pattern of continuity and change can be found throughout Manx folklore, in a wide variety of calendar customs, rites of passage and belief systems. As well as showing the dynamic nature of folklore and the role it plays within a society, it brings into question whether folklore has always been subject to ongoing evolution, that at times expresses itself as continuous development and at others to radical change. The degree to which these patterns can be traced over 100 or 200 years through recorded accounts and oral history, leads one to speculate as to how much change had previously taken place and gone unrecorded in past centuries. Even considering the major cultural and societal changes that have taken place over this period and the effect that they would have had on the development and expression of Manx folklore, previous centuries will have experienced some degree of continuity and change. Therefore the concept of a timeless and unchanging folklore tradition, that is considered to be dead or dying or irretrievably contaminated by foreign influence if it experiences or

expresses any degree of change, is shown to be an unsustainable fallacy. Instead folklore is a dynamic entity and one that is forever regenerating itself, to thereby maintain its relevance and significance to the society in which it exists. This process of regeneration was both recognised and celebrated by the Manx in the proverb *Mannagh vow cliaghtey cliaghtey, nee cliaghtey coe* (if custom be not indulged with/ beget custom, custom will weep) but it also acts as a warning that apathy, rather than development, is folklore and culture's true enemy.

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