

ISLE OF MAN CONFERENCE: 2 – 8 APRIL 1977

Ian Keillar

Thirty five miles long by some ten miles broad, the Isle of Man lies in the Irish Sea, approximately equidistant from Scotland, Ireland and England. Part of Great Britain, it is not part of the United Kingdom. The climate is maritime and the New Zealand cabbage tree, masquerading as a palm, grows everywhere and gives Man the spurious appearance of an island in the sun. Income tax is about 20 per cent. Rates vary from 24p in the £ at Onchan to a rack rate of 56p in Castletown. The average car licence costs £10.

The weather was unpleasant. There was no rain but high winds and it snowed once or twice. The hotel bedrooms were cold, damp and uncomfortable. The Scandinavians were once more confirmed in their belief that the British are mad. The English suffered in silence while this Scot took to the bottle; purely for medicinal purposes, of course. The Japanese member was polite about the primitive conditions while one of the Americans admitted that her appearance of comfort was due to wearing a liberty bodice. The food was plentiful if unimaginative, high in cholesterol and carbohydrate. Greens were beaten and boiled to death while the usual sweet was cake and custard, washed down with hot drink, vaguely tea or coffee flavoured. The plain living encouraged us to concentrate on the high thinking.

High thinking, interspersed with bouts of strenuous sight seeing, was the order for six days. Some of the lectures and excursions were shared with a group from Liverpool University. The first lecture by Dr. L.S. Garrard covered "The Manx Environment". She pointed out that little of the original woodland cover remained and that the red and roe deer are now extinct. Mr. A.M. Cubbon, the Director of the Manx Museum, spoke of the "Archaeological and Historical Background" and also of "The Manx Crosses". Mr. Cubbon's love and enthusiasm for the antiquities of Man was most inspiring and whetted our appetite to see more of the historical sites and crosses. Mr W. Clark, also of the Manx Museum, spoke on fishing and Manx fishing vessels.

The first excursion was to the 120 year old Laxey water

wheel. This truly enormous structure pumped water from the 1000 ft. deep Laxey zinc mine. From the modern we went to the neolithic megalithic site of Cashtel yn Ard. This looked a bit odd with an obviously added gate post here and there. While we gaped and tried to comprehend, Professor R. Miller confessed that, as a student, he had helped Professor Fleure to raid the neighbouring dykes and farmyards for suitable stones to rebuild the monument. At Maghold, near Ramsey, we saw magnificent crosses and inside the church of Andreas we saw more crosses including the famous Norse cross showing Sigurd killing the dragon and roasting its heart. The other side shows Gunnar, Sigurd's foster brother, being bitten to death in the snake pit.

Next day we went to Castletown where we were shown over the Nautical Museum by Mr. Clark. Dr. Manson was especially pleased to see in the Museum a model of a Manx Squaresail, made by the late John Shewman of Lerwick. Pride of place, however, was taken by the schooner "Peggy". No model this, but a real full sized yacht, built in 1791, and still as seaworthy as when she first took to the water. The Christian and Norse burial sites at Balladoole were visited and then we examined the Cregginish Folk Museum with its thatched cottages, old farmyard and smithy. The magnificent castles of Rushen and Peel were both worthy of a longer visit. The custodian of Rushen was one of the most charming and witty ever encountered.

That Monday evening, Miss A. Henshall spoke on "Manx Megaliths". In many ways the Manx ones are unique and search as she could she found no exact parallel elsewhere to the six paired circular chamber site of Meayll near Rushen. Next morning, Mr. P.J. Davey of Liverpool showed how Bronze Age metalwork could be date classified by metallurgical analysis. Very early bronze in Man was substantially copper. Then came bronze with about twelve per cent tin and later, bronze with twelve per cent tine and five per cent lead. Mr. P. Gelling of Birmingham described his excavations at the pre-Viking sites of Kiondroghad and Port-y-Candas, while Miss S. Cregeen, of Man, gave an interesting talk on early Christian "Lintel Grave Cemeteries".

Further excursions were to the magnificent Manx Museum in Douglas. The spacious layout and the wonderful material so

excellently displayed were all admired. A big queue formed at the counter and the cheap and high quality booklets and books sold like the proverbial hot cakes. Tynwald was visited and duly climbed, the tiers being made "by taking a sod from each parish". Kronk ny Merriv was admired, both as a simple promontory fort and as the site of a later Viking house. Peter Gelling, the excavator, looking a bit like a Viking himself, explained the site. He also explained, to a somewhat sceptical audience, that the stone circle at Braaid was once a Celtic round house, lying cheek by jowl with a Norse homestead.

The Tuesday evening was to be the scene of a set piece battle. Dr. Margaret Gelling was to continue another round in her epic battle with Basil Megaw. We settled expectantly into our seats. The cognoscente nodded and winked at each other. The usual pleasantries took place, then Mrs Gelling fired her artillery. We could hear the ammunition being slammed into the breach. See the jerk of the lanyard and hear each meticulously aimed shot whistle over the heads of the audience to land, presumably, somewhere. If the target was Basil Megaw, the barrage did not appear to upset him. Mrs Gelling's basic proposition was that Gaelic was used in Man prior to the arrival of the Norse. Subsequently the peasant population spoke only Norse and then, after the breakdown of the Norse kingdom, Gaelic was re-introduced. At the end of the attack on Basil Megaw's views that both Norse and Gaelic were spoken, Alan Bruford of Edinburgh pointed out that there was no evidence whatsoever that Gaelic was spoken in Man prior to the Norse invasion.

On the Wednesday there was a joint excursion with the Liverpool group to see the Braddan crosses and the chapel site of Eary Cushlin. Professor D.M. Wilson, Director of the British Museum, led this excursion. "Led" is perhaps the wrong word, he charged ahead and we had a vigorously airy two mile trot along the cliff side to the kecill. We visited the once proud Cistercian Abbey of Rushen, now prostituted into some money making enterprise, and walked over the old pack bridge, built by the monks about 1350.

Earlier that same day, round two of the Gelling-Megaw battle took place. Mr Megaw, of the School of Scottish Studies, gave an interesting anecdotal account of the "Kingdom of the Isles" and

in the absence of his opponent he wisely kept his powder dry and did not waste his ammunition. Mrs S.M. Megaw argued that the "erg" place names of Northern England could not possibly represent shieling sites as most of them were below 600 ft. However, Professor Miller pointed out that shieling sites are not necessarily at a high level and he quoted examples of low level shielings from all over Europe. In his well illustrated lecture, "The Isle of Man in its Western Context in the Viking Age", Professor D. M. Wilson gave a brilliant explanation of the rise and fall of the Western Norse Empire.

Thursday was a day of lectures. Professor M. Dolley of Belfast gave a very scholarly yet humorous "Numismatic History of the Isle of Man". He showed that some Hiberno-Norse coins were minted in Man and he reinforced David Wilson's thesis that the loss of Dublin to the English in 1165 resulted in the decay of the Norse empire and trade routes in the West. Mrs E.M. Megaw gave a very competent lecture on "Manx and Galloway Shielings" while Miss E. Killip spoke on "The Development of the 19th Century Manx Field System". Mr. D.E. Allen of London and Cambridge opened out eyes to the possibility of the fauna and flora being used as "Pointers to the Past". This was a most interesting lecture but it would have been even better if slides had been shown. How we would have appreciated being able to see the difference between *Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum* and *Rorippa sterilis*.

There was a discussion in the evening but this degenerated into an esoteric exchange of views between the experts. After an hour or so it was announced that the entertainers had arrived and we were all invited into the bar of the Palatine Hotel. Most of us drifted next door to the bar and enjoyed a most delightful evening with music provided by a small group of Manx musicians and excellent snacks provided by courtesy of the hotel. The experts declined to come and enjoy the entertainment. Instead they continued their discussion in their ivory tower. This was a pity. They missed hearing some excellent songs in Manx, Gaelic, Scottish and Norwegian (sung by Adam McNaughton). They also missed the opportunity to talk to and explain their ideas to an interested and sympathetic lay public. Scholars in subjects which produce no monetary return to society must never forget that it is the efforts of the productive members of society which enable

them to pursue their fascinating researches. Accordingly, the academic is under an obligation to the lay public to explain what he is doing. If the academic considers that this is beneath his dignity and retreats into his ivory tower, he must not be surprised if he starves to death.

The academics who, on Thursday evening in Man, stayed in their ivory towers did their specialisations a grave dis-service. The minority who mixed with the members in the communal merry making did not demean their scholarship. They may even have learned something. It is to the credit of those speakers from the Isle of Man who were present that they mixed with the lay public. In fact, the undoubted success of the Isle of Man Conference was in no small measure due to the scholarship, friendliness and helpfulness of the members and staff of the Manx Museum and National Trust.

A DESCENDING GRACE

Derek Bowman

Erik Frykman: *"Unemphatic Marvels". A Study of Norman MacCaig's Poetry*, Gothenburg Studies in English 35, Göteborg, Sweden, Sw Cr. 50—, 70 pages.

Mr Frykman's study consists of an introduction and six chapters, entitled 1. The Poet and his Art, 2. Landscape and Mind-scape, 3. People, 4. Love, Myth, History, Space and Time, Death, 5. Metaphorical Devices and Patterns, 6. "A Man in Assynt", followed by a list of Norman MacCaig's books of verse to date and an index of poems quoted or referred to. With a quiet carefulness which the critic shares with the poet, Mr. Frykman clearly and judiciously describes the main characteristics of Mr. MacCaig's poetry, wisely omitting the latter's first two collections. In the process Mr. Frykman makes many cogent points, always clinching them with pertinent examples.

First he singles out Mr. MacCaig's modesty, the restraint of his tone, his remaining within certain self-prescribed limits, that "natural decorum" which pervades his work. As the poet