

'Fiddles at dawn': the three ages of Manx fiddle music

Fenella Bazin

Excerpted from:

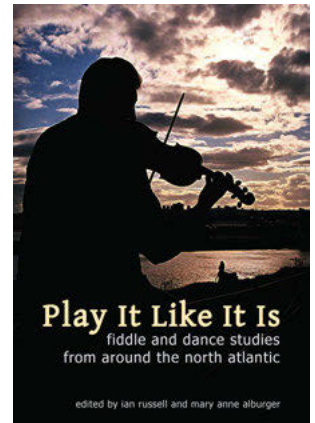
Play It Like It Is

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger

First published in 2006 by The Elphinstone
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-3-0



About the author:

Fenella Bazin, former Director of Postgraduate Studies at the University of Liverpool's Centre for Manx Studies, is currently researching the musical links between the Isle of Man, Scotland, and Norway. Her publications include a collection of Manx hymns, *The Everlasting Hills* (2006), and anthems of Edward Quayle, *The Promised Land* (2000), Volume 5 of the *New History of the Isle of Man*, illustrations editor (2000), and chapters and articles on many aspects of Manx music in journals and other publications, including *New Grove*.

Copyright © 2006 the Elphinstone Institute and the contributors

While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Elphinstone Institute, copyright in individual contributions remains with the contributors. The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of their work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



'Fiddles at dawn': the three ages of Manx fiddle music

FENELLA BAZIN

As early as the 1650s, visitors to the Isle of Man were commenting on the islanders' love of the fiddle.¹ Why, they asked, was there an absence of harps and bagpipes, when there were such strong traditions in the surrounding countries?

The importance of the fiddle to the Manx tradition can be illustrated by 'Mylecharaine's March', a dramatic and sometimes dangerous stick dance performed by a team of men accompanied by a fiddler. At the end of the dance, the musician's head is 'cut off' but the fiddler is resurrected and the head becomes an oracle, consulted particularly on matters of love.² Could this perhaps be the Manx version of the tale of Orpheus, also traditionally a string player, whose head continued to sing even after he was decapitated? Folk tales also tell of the survival of their music after the deaths of string players, even as recently as the 1930s.³

Manx traditional fiddle music falls into three distinct periods. Up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, the traditions surrounding Manx fiddle playing seem to have had much in common with the fiddle music of Shetland and Western Norway. By the end of the century the modern fiddle had been adopted and musicians were equally at home performing music from mainstream Europe or from the Manx tradition. The old style had generally died out by 1913, although there was a strong antiquarian interest and composers such as the brothers Harry and Haydn Wood were using the tunes in orchestral arrangements. During the 1970s there was a renewed interest in traditional music, fuelled by the re-establishment of the interceltic festival *Yn Chruinnaght*,⁴ so that by the 1980s it was clear that a new, distinctively Manx style of fiddle playing was emerging.

In this paper I shall be exploring the social and cultural upheavals that led to these significant changes. The three ages of Manx fiddle music were shaped by musicians who crossed language, social and stylistic boundaries and who consequently enriched the island's musical life.

Nowadays, the Isle of Man has a population of around 80,000, far higher than at any time in the past. It has been growing steadily since the 1980s and for some time it has been found necessary to build a new primary school each year, reflecting the increasing proportion of young families. Unemployment is low; in May 2006 it

stood at less than 1.5%. Thanks to the Viking colonization of a thousand years ago, the island has its own parliament, Tynwald. It is not part of the United Kingdom and has only an associate membership of the EU. Tynwald makes its own laws and raises its own taxes and receives no outside funding. Until 150 years ago, most of the population would have been bilingual, with Manx as the language of the home and English as that of commerce. Even today, the laws have to be promulgated in Manx and English at the open-air ceremony on 5 July, the old Midsummer Day.

Before 1650

Nowadays we regard the sea as a barrier; in the past, water, whether oceans or rivers, was a highway that linked island to island and continent to continent. High ground, scrubland, and marshes were the real barriers. So it is hardly surprising that a thousand years ago the Isle of Man came under the rule of Scandinavians, who swept across the North Sea from Western Norway, then island-hopped along the Hebrides, finally settling on the fertile plains of the Isle of Man, from where they could control the northern part of the Irish Sea. Their influence lasted around 450 years and their legacy is in the island's parliament Tynwald, personal names such as Corkill, place-names like Colby and Snaefell, Viking ship burials, and a remarkable collection of carved crosses, many with runic inscriptions. It would therefore not be surprising if strands of Norwegian music had also survived the centuries. The island's traditional music still retains elements that I am almost sure date from this period. One of the greatest tunes is remarkably similar to that sung at the wedding of King Erik Magnusson and Margaret of Scotland in 1281.⁵ But those most closely resembling the fiddle music of Western Norway are also linked with folk tales. A variant of the Manx tune 'Bollan Bane' is very like a melody that Heinrich Meyer reported hearing in Norway in 1695.⁶ Both are linked with similar 'netherworldly' stories, of powerful music heard in mountain regions. The Manx version also belongs to a popular fiddler, who, for all his undoubted talent, had difficulty in memorising a tune, perhaps suggesting that it was in an unknown idiom. This same experience became only too familiar to those who attended the workshops during the 2001 NAFCo conference.

The result of this early Scandinavian influence is one way to interpret the comment made by the seventeenth-century writer. Although this was a period when the modern Italian violin had hardly made an impression beyond southern Britain, the writer was struck by two things. In spite of the strong instrumental traditions of all the surrounding countries, there were in the island no harps or pipes, but, he goes on to say, 'there is scarce a family but can more or less play upon [the Violyne].'⁷ Could the Norwegian connection be a way of explaining this curious situation? It is, in fact, a boundary of knowledge that I hope to cross in future research.

1700–1950

Whilst magic continues as a recurring theme in stories related to fiddle music, the fiddler's important role in major life events such as births, weddings, and deaths

is much more clearly documented and accessible after 1700. In addition to music manuscripts, there are newspaper accounts and literary sources which have details of names, anecdotes, published compositions, descriptions of performances, and, for the twentieth century at least, recordings.⁸ Manx musicians were living through great social and political changes. The English influence, which the Earls of Derby had exerted on the island from around 1400, was considerably weakened by the Dukes of Atholl, who from 1736 until 1765 and again from 1793 until 1830 ruled the island as Lords and, later, Governors of Man. Documentary evidence in the form of a manuscript from 1804 shows clearly that the Atholls' political presence had a strong influence on the island's music, at least at the level of those in the groups that mixed socially with the Atholls and Murrays.⁹ The Manx traditional repertoire of tunes also shows a strong Scottish influence, though this could be due to any number of other causes. In favourable conditions the island is only a couple of hours' sailing from the coast of southern Scotland and there were as a consequence a variety of trading and personal connections. The popularity of Scottish music during the eighteenth century would also have had an important effect on professional and amateur musicians. A study of the Scottish content of the Manx traditional repertoire would be a useful and interesting research project.

By the nineteenth century, many Manx men and women were bilingual, as Gaelic was still the language of most homes with the increasing use of English as the language of commerce. This was reflected in their choice of music. Until the early 1800s, there is little evidence that the musicians themselves distinguished between Manx and non-Manx music. There were certainly tunes like the all-pervading 'Mylecharaine',¹⁰ that had an underlying political meaning but, on the whole, melodies were played simply because they fitted the occasion. Fiddlers then, as now, were very adaptable, happy to play at a village 'hop' one evening, an Assembly Ball the next, as part of a church band for psalms and anthems on a Sunday morning, and in the *Messiah* in the evening. This versatility indicates not only the ability but the willingness to cross any number of boundaries: stylistic, social, language, and religious. They were happy to play country tunes to an audience that might well be Gaelic-speaking Methodists, then move to the music of the high Baroque, playing to an audience that consisted largely of English-speaking Anglicans.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the island was flooded every summer with tourists from the industrial areas of northern England and central Scotland. They brought with them new musical demands, offering yet more boundaries for the musicians to cross. The visitors were hungry for the popular tunes of the music halls and dance palaces. Suddenly there was a demand for full-time musicians, who were needed to play in bands and orchestras during the season and were able to earn a living by teaching during the remaining eight months of the year. A steady stream of musicians from Britain and further afield arrived in the island, simultaneously creating a fashion for new music and meeting the needs of increasingly sophisticated audiences. Fashion demanded novelty. In the island's new capital of Douglas, traditional music was edged out by international styles and melodies. These changes

can be charted by trawling through Manx newspapers of the period, by analysing the advertisements for new music, new teachers, assembly balls, concerts – a deluge of musical activity which overwhelmed the music making of earlier in the century.¹¹ The activities of these musicians are well documented.¹²

For descriptions of the 'old-fashioned' country fiddlers we have to rely on contemporary observers such as diarists and novelists. They have left us some wonderful descriptions of instinctive musicians who were able to move audiences to tears, and of less accomplished players whose attempts were 'half dance, half hymn'.¹³ We also have accounts of town fiddlers, who, like Tommy Nichol, roused the populace at dawn on Christmas Day and were generally rewarded for their efforts with gifts of wine and meat, though occasionally with abuse by those who had celebrated not wisely but too well the previous night.¹⁴

The memory of the island's old fiddle tradition gradually began to fade, although it was still kept alive in an unexpected area. Harry Wood was a fine Yorkshire-born musician who dominated Manx music for half a century, until the 1930s. His arrangements for string orchestra of Manx traditional tunes were heard by hundreds of thousands of summer visitors. But it was his brother Haydn, composer of such popular songs as 'Roses of Picardy', whose versions of Manx fiddle music have crossed more boundaries than could have been imagined a hundred years earlier. In his orchestral compositions *Mannin Veen* and *A Manx Rhapsody*, he used traditional fiddle tunes such as 'Bollan Bane' and introduced a tune called 'The Manx Fiddler', which I think might have been his own variation of a medieval carol, '*Tra va ruggit Creest*' ('When Christ was born'), still popular in the island today. This music crossed yet another boundary when it was taken by emigrants to North America, where the band arrangement of *Mannin Veen* has been much played and recorded.¹⁵ Descendants of Manx emigrants still draw on the Manx repertoire, clothing the traditional tunes in new styles.¹⁶

1975 to the present

By the time of Haydn Wood's death in 1959, it appeared that Manx fiddle music too had more or less died out. With the exception of a few players who were called upon to accompany Manx dancers, most island violinists were involved in dance or show bands. But, towards the end of the 1970s, the charismatic and determined Mona Douglas revived the *Chruinnaght*, a festival of Manx performing and other traditional arts.¹⁷ Although almost eighty years old, Mona managed to inspire or cajole a number of people to support the revival, which began in a relatively small way in 1977 with a re-enactment of a Manx wedding. This was not a real wedding but an entertainment that included a procession with music (traditionally a fiddler on horseback, as in Norway and parts of Scotland) and a wedding 'breakfast', shared by the participants and audience alike.

The following year the festival expanded to become 'interceltic' and welcomed musicians from Cornwall and Ireland. This year also saw the introduction of competitions for music and dancing, events that were held in relaxed, informal

settings but, nonetheless, resulted in increasingly higher standards of performance. The *Chruinnaght* coincided with several developments, including the publication by Colin Jerry of traditional Manx tunes, the collection of which was attributed to Dr John Clague (1854–1908),¹⁸ and the quiet but far-reaching work of Mike Boulton, a teacher at the primary school in Ramsey, where the festival was held. The first year saw only a dozen or so young instrumentalists competing but, as the years have gone on, the numbers have expanded dramatically. To begin with, the young musicians were mainly devoted to tin whistles and guitars, but other instruments gradually emerged, including fiddle players, many of whom were the product of the Isle of Man Board of Education's scheme for instrumental tuition. These youngsters were uninhibited by the sort of boundaries that had arisen in earlier decades, where there had been sharp distinctions between 'classical' and 'popular' music. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, these fiddlers were equally happy playing in symphony orchestras or at sessions. Initially greatly influenced by Irish groups such as the Cassidys, they gradually developed their own styles, incorporating a range of influences including jazz, so that by the late 1990s there was a whole new generation of fiddle players still in their teens, who were composing new material and making exciting new arrangements of old tunes.

Through their music-making they have crossed all sorts of boundaries. Because of the progress of the 1970s and 1980s, they have succeeded in breaking through yet another boundary. During the severe economic recession of the 1950s and 1960s, when the tourist industry began to fail and emigration appeared to be draining the island of its talent, some Manxmen and women rejected all things Manx. In a situation familiar to many islanders, it was felt that the future lay in adopting other cultures. However, beginning in the 1990s, there has been a marked revival in enthusiasm for the island's culture and language and, through their music, young people are conveying their enthusiasm to audiences of their contemporaries who are excited by the music itself, and not just because of what it represents. Adam Rhodes, David Kilgallon, and Katy Lawrence have all shown determination and originality in their approach to the tunes and the techniques.¹⁹ But fiddle-playing is not confined to this young generation. Bernard Osborne, former head of the island's peripatetic instrumental service, has long played traditional music. David Callister,²⁰ Mick Kneale, Phil Gawne, and Robin Boyle are also making a significant contribution to the new tradition.

Conclusions

Of the three ages of Manx fiddle music, the first might well date to the Norwegian settlement in the island. The second owes its origins to an instrument and, to some extent, a repertoire that also belongs to mainland Europe. The third era, less than two decades old, is perhaps too new for it to be possible to stand back to assess its real origins and impact with any confidence. But there is no doubt that it owes its existence to a complicated series of factors. A flourishing economy enables continued government support for free instrumental tuition in schools. There is a widespread

revival of interest in Manx culture, based mainly on the work of the nineteenth-century collectors who recorded a rich heritage of traditional music. Today's musicians also travel to many countries to hear other musics live. They can also access music on disc, or over the Internet, or learn new tunes from publications possible only because of the availability of comparatively low cost modern technology.

The present revival of interest in fiddle playing is unexpected. The Isle of Man has always had a wealth of musicians, but the greatest emphasis has always been on the voice, a tradition that still thrives today. For many years, all types of instrumental music, except perhaps piano-playing, wallowed in the doldrums. Then in the 1980s, among traditional musicians at least, instrumental music resurfaced, initially focusing on whistles, guitars, harps and uilleann pipes, instruments notably absent from the island in the seventeenth century. Fiddles soon followed and now there is, not a revival, but a renaissance of Manx music.

Thus, over the centuries of Manx fiddle music, many boundaries have been crossed. Cultural boundaries have certainly been overcome. Music could well have been an important factor in the final shift from Manx Gaelic, as the introduction of new music encouraged the use of English. Interestingly, this move has been mirrored in modern times, when many people have been encouraged to learn Manx Gaelic through their discovery of traditional music. With the introduction in the early 1700s of compulsory education, literacy became highly prized. Music was an important route through which a miner or farm worker could aspire to self-improvement. Social boundaries, though much less important in the Isle of Man than, say, in England, were broken down still further by music. Instrumental skills, too, meant that many could supplement their income and find themselves in situations where they could improve the physical as well as the cultural quality of their lives. Political boundaries were crossed, too. Amateur musicians, many of them fiddlers, became local preachers, learning skills that enabled them to influence large crowds and lead labour reforms in the early twentieth century.

Many of the papers in this volume have referred to cultural revivals. The Manx antiquarian movement in the nineteenth century was principally literary and historical. There were, of course, eminent collectors of Manx music, but I wonder if they might have unwittingly actively discouraged the traditional musicians. The reasoning, I suggest, could well have gone along these lines: 'If what we are doing is of interest to antiquarians, it follows that we must be old-fashioned and need to be more modern in our approach'. The custodians of the past erected a barrier that any modern Edwardian of the new twentieth century simply ignored. The traditional fiddlers and the ageing singers were suddenly made self-conscious and, like Adam and Eve, felt that they had to cover their nakedness. Manx Gaelic was abandoned at the same time. The opportunities for progress and prosperity rested in the new culture that emanated from Great Britain and the British Empire. Where once barriers had been crossed by music, the antiquarians had suddenly created one that was almost insuperable. New music had swamped the old and it would take almost a century before it could be reborn.

Notes

- ¹ James Chaloner, *A Short Treatise on the Isle of Man in Daniel King's Vale Royall* (London: John Streeter, 1656), p. 5.
- ² For a more detailed description of the dance, see Mona Douglas, 'Manx Folk Dances: Their Notation and Revival', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 3 (1937), 110–16 (p. 114).
- ³ Fenella Crowe Bazin, ' "The devil once a fiddler made": The Connection Between Manx, Scottish and Norwegian Music' in *Mannin Revisited: Twelve Essays on Manx Culture and Environment*, ed. Peter Davey and David Finlayson (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 2002), pp. 151-160.
- ⁴ Re-born in 1977, this festival of traditional music, dance, arts, crafts and literature was inspired by the energetic Mona Douglas (1898-1987). In its present form, the event embraces contributions from the other Celtic countries.
- ⁵ Nils Grinde, *A History of Norwegian Music*, trans. W. H. Halverson and D. Johnson (Lincoln, Nebraska; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 22.
- ⁶ Grinde, p. 95.
- ⁷ Chaloner, p. 5.
- ⁸ Fenella Crowe Bazin, 'Music in the Isle of Man up to 1896' (PhD thesis, Liverpool, 1995), pp. 161–95 and 225–74.
- ⁹ John Moore's 1804 manuscript is a collection of 97 tunes, of which at least half are to be found in Scottish sources. Many of these are scored for what appears to be two violins (or violin and flute) and cello. The results of this research will be published in 2006 by the Centre for Manx Studies in its Research Report series, in collaboration with the Manx Heritage Foundation.
- ¹⁰ Fenella Crowe Bazin, ' "Mylecharaine": A Forgotten Call to Nationhood' in *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, ed. Ian Russell and David Atkinson (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2004); and ' "The Promised Land": Music in the Isle of Man as a Weapon for Social, Political and Religious Reform in the 19th Century', in *Islands: Dream and Reality*, ed. P. J. Davey, A. Hamer and F. C. Bazin (forthcoming).
- ¹¹ Bazin, 1995, p. 225–38.
- ¹² Bazin, 1995, p. 225–38.
- ¹³ John Quine, *The Captain of the Parish* (London: William Heinemann, 1897), p. 346.
- ¹⁴ *Isle of Man Examiner*, 24 December 1926, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ For example, *The Northern Illinois University Winds and Percussion*, Vol. 2, Music Educator's DR Inc. CD, DIDX 035719, 1995.
- ¹⁶ For example, The Beehive Band, *Hymns, Songs and Fiddle Tunes of the Utah Pioneers*, Honeybee Recordings, CD HBCD3024-1, 1997.
- ¹⁷ Fenella Bazin, *Mona Douglas: A Tribute* (Isle of Man: Manx Heritage Foundation, 1998), pp. 96–113.
- ¹⁸ Dr Clague's Notebooks, Manx Museum Library MSS 448A/448B and J66/7270-3. These have traditionally been attributed to Dr John Clague but recent work by R. C. Carswell (forthcoming) and the author show conclusively that the collection owes its existence to a number of people, including W. H. Gill and his brother Deemster Frederick Gill.
- ¹⁹ Examples of their styles can be found on *The Light House: Contemporary Manx Music*, Manx Heritage Foundation, cassette tape MHFC4, 1998).

FENELLA BAZIN *'Fiddles at dawn': the three ages of Manx fiddle music*

²⁰ Of particular importance was the recording made by Mactullagh Vannin, cassette tape, Dirt Music, 1986. This was a seminal recording which was to profoundly influence succeeding generations of Manx musicians. The group has recently re-formed and reissued most of the tracks, plus an additional six, under the title *Twisted Roots*, Manx Heritage Foundation MHF CD4, Isle of Man, 2004.