

## Dr George Tootell and A Legend of Man

by

Maurice Powell

Dr George Tootell was a pioneering cinema organist of genius – the first British organist to play a genuine cinema organ – with a Europe-wide reputation; church organist, composer, conductor, teacher, secretary of the Manx Music Festival and an important figure whose contribution ‘. . . to the furthering of the musical life of the Island’ was acknowledged to be ‘outstanding’. Furthermore, he was the composer of one of the largest scale choral works ever written by a resident composer and premiered on the Island by a Manx choir and orchestra directed by the composer himself.\*

\* See also Maurice Powell, *Mr Craine's Oratorio* (1894), [manxmusic.com](http://manxmusic.com)

George Ashton Tootell was born in Stanley Place, Chorley, Lancashire, and was baptised on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1886. His father, Richard Ashton Tootell, was variously described as a master joiner, timber merchant, building contractor and coal merchant; little is known about his mother Francis Elizabeth née Bradshaw who died in 1911.\*

\* By the time of the 1901 Census the Tootell family - including three further sons: Richard Ashton, born 1890; Wasley, born 1891 and James, born 1891, and an adopted daughter, Alice - were living at 9 Beach Street, Lytham-St. Annes.

Young George Tootell was educated at Seafield House School, Lytham,\* and Durham University, where he earned his doctorate in music. Although he was destined for a career in music, he joined his father's business for three years before attending university, yet obtained his FRCO (Fellow of the Royal College of Organists) diploma at the age of eighteen having studied under Dr Haydn Keeton, the eminent organist and choir master at Peterborough cathedral, the youngest student to have gained the Fellowship.\*\*

\* See *Lytham St. Anne's Express*, November 1937: 'Seafield boys rose to eminence in all parts of the world'. The school closed that year after ninety years in existence.

\*\* Biographical sketch, *Ramsey Courier*, 12.05.1950.

George Tootell's career in the two decades before he first came to the Isle of Man was varied to say the least. Between 1906 and 1918 he held various posts as church organist in the Northwest including Lytham Parish Church; St James' Parish Church, Whitehaven;\* St John's Parish Church, Keswick; Lund Parish Church; St Thomas Parish Church, St Annes-on-Sea, and Kendal Parish Church. He also held a number of teaching posts during this period principally at Seafield House School, Lytham; Stamford House Catholic Collegiate School for Boys, Lytham; Warwick House, Poulton-le-Fylde; Keswick School, and Cockermouth School, and was the conductor of choral and orchestral societies in Lytham, Keswick, Cockermouth, Whitehaven, Egremont and Kendal.\*\*

\* According to the 1911 Census, George Tootell, was described as a professor of music and church organist, was living at 27, Church Street, Whitehaven, with his wife Anne née Illingworth (1883-1924), whom he married in 1907, and a son, George Ashton, born in 1909.

\*\* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 05.04.1957

In the Introduction to his book *How to Play the Cinema Organ*,\* George Tootell maintained that his early fascination with the cinema and music for the 'silent' films began with a visit to his local town hall to see a travelling cinema show and a film called *Our Navy*, 'which comprised pictures of our warships and naval men doing wonderful things' to the accompaniment of a pianist playing *A Life on the Ocean Waves*, and other nautical songs, together with sound effects of splashing water and gunfire.

\* George Tootell, *How to Play the Cinema Organ, a practical book by a practical player*, London, Paxton & Co., 1927.

In 1912 he was commissioned to arrange music for 'a very remarkable film', *Quo Vadis?* one of the first true epics of the 'silent' era. 'It fell to my lot to arrange a musical setting (for full orchestra and eight vocal soloists) . . . for a tour round a circuit of fourteen theatres, with a week's run at each'. The success of the music led to further commissions, for previous to this, 'I had never heard of an orchestral accompaniment to a film'.\*

\* His philosophy of music for the 'silent' cinema was cited in the *Musical Times*, April 1922: '. . . of the music specially written for the cinema 'much is simply rubbish'. He believed that the best results would be gained 'by engaging a composer to write a special accompaniment to a film' which would then be regarded 'an integral part of the picture.' Whilst he did not oppose the introduction of extracts from 'classical' composers being woven into film scores he deplored the indiscriminate use of 'mangled remains of standard compositions . . . cuts from the works of the masters should be made with a scalpel, not with an axe'.

### **'The pioneer . . . of this new branch of musical art'**

In 1918 George Tootell was appointed solo organist at The Palace Cinema, Accrington,\* where Jardine & Company, organ builders since 1780, had installed the first genuine cinema organ in Britain, to his specifications. Between 1919 and 1921 he was the solo organist at the Stoll Picture Theatre, Kingsway, London, playing once again a Jardine organ built to his design. In 1921 he played the new Jardine 'Orchestral' organ at the Palace, Blackpool. There followed appointments at the Regal Cinema, Marble Arch and at the Marble Arch Pavilion. In 1925 he gave a series of demonstrations on the new Jardine cinema organ at the Coliseum, Glasgow.

\* The Palace Cinema, Accrington, whose distinctive corner entrance was faced with white terra cotta tiles, was opened in 1914; the organ which George Tootell knew was removed to a church in Burnley in 1934.

George Tootell first came to the Isle of Man between 1922-26 as resident organist at the Picture House Cinema, Douglas, playing for the 'silent' movies.\*. The cinema had opened on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1921 as Cinema House with a seating capacity of sixteen hundred and a Jardine 2 manual/16 stop 'straight' concert organ. It was re-named the Picture House and showed the first 'talkie' in Douglas, *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*. A Compton 3 manual/7 rank organ was installed in 1933 and featured an illuminated console and lift; at the same time the audience capacity was increased to 1900. \*\* In September 1925 the *Ramsey Courier* reported on a recital given by George Tootell, 'the eminent organist of Douglas', on the recently reconstructed Waterloo Road Church organ.\*\*\* The music included the Largo from Dvorak's Symphony from the New World, pieces by S. S. Wesley and *The Londonderry Air*.

\* The Picture House Cinema was closed in May 1988 and the auditorium demolished in 1993 so that only the façade above the Superdrug store on Strand Street can still be seen. The organ had been removed to a church in Manchester in the 1950s, and in 1988/9, installed at a private cinema, The Grange, Cannock, Staffordshire. For further details see Cinema Organ Society online.

\*\* The Kathleen Rydings Trio (violin, 'cello and piano) was also engaged, at the nearby Plaza Cinema, under Tootell's supervision to play for the 'silent' films. Some of their repertoire may have come from the library of Harry Wood, the Musical Director of the Palace & Derby Castle Co., but is no longer extant.

\*\*\* The restoration cost £300 and was undertaken by Messrs Fargher & Co., Upper Church Street, Douglas, with George Tootell's assistance.

On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1926 George married Nellie Dyson (1905-87) at Kirk Braddan, and a long and happy marriage ensued which produced two sons, and a daughter, Georgia Rosemary, born in 1927. In June that year a new composition, *Manx Scenes*, consisting of three impressions: *Crag and Sea*, *At the Trysting Place* and *The Manx Wedding* was published by Messrs W. Paxton & Co., Ltd., of London in editions for orchestra and solo piano, and subsequently performed in Eastbourne, Torquay, Bournemouth and Lytham St. Anne's and elsewhere, and broadcast from Belfast, Birmingham and Sheffield. Harry Wood, the musical director of the Palace & Derby Castle Co., programmed the *Manx Scenes* at a Palace Sunday Concert in August.\*

\* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 02.07.1926. According to the *Ramsey Courier* 04.06.1926, *Manx Scenes* was broadcast from Belfast on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> June, between 4.00 pm and 4.35 pm, in a programme partly devoted to Manx music following a short talk on Manx Music. Other pieces included a *Manx Suite* (in five movements) by the Lancashire-born F. W. de Massi-Hardman performed by the Radio Station Orchestra, Manx folk songs performed by the mezzo soprano Kathleen Daunt and the St. Anne's Mixed Voice Quartette Party, and other items. A *Manx Rhapsody* (piano and orchestra) by Massi-Hardman was broadcast on December 7th 1935 from the North Regional Station in a programme entitled 'Contemporary Composers of the North', which also included songs, an unnamed orchestral suite and two tone poems by him.

### **'The cinema organist' is one of the busiest of men'**

George Tootell left the island in 1926 to take up the position as organist at the West End Cinema, Birmingham, a former exhibition hall, re-opened as a cinema, dance hall and restaurant in 1925.\* Between 1927 and 1930 he gave organ demonstrations in Germany, and introduced the first Wurlitzer organ at the Pheobus Palast, Nuremburg, where he spent three months during which time he produced fourteen 78 inch recordings, none of which were issued in Britain. In the spring of 1928, he inaugurated the new Christie organ at the Palace, Bristol, before being engaged at das Konzerthaus Clou, Berlin, a concert hall and restaurant built in 1910, but destroyed during World War II. Later that year he played the Christie organ at the Apollo Theatre, Vienna, the city's premier theatre for many years, and appeared in Cologne, Munich and at the Metropole, Bratislava.\*\* Between 1929 and 1935 he was back in London at the Marble Arch Pavilion – built in 1914 and one of a chain of Pavilion cinemas in London - whose instrument had been updated to a Christie 3 manual/10 rank organ in 1927. He also found time to compose film music for Welwyn Studios, Welwyn Garden City, a studio which operated between 1928-50, and pioneered

the production of British Instructional Films. Between 1931 and 1934 he was living in Hendon, West London.\*\*\*

\* Obituary in the Cinema Organist Society journal, September 1946 and the *Isle of Man Examiner* 19.11.1926. The West End Cinema boasted a Wurlitzer 2 manual/8 rank organ installed in 1926. The cinema was taken over by Gaumont British in 1929, closed in 1965 and demolished in 1967.

\*\* Biographical sketch, *Ramsey Courier*, 12-05-1950.

\*\*\* At number 8 Edgewarebury Gardens initially, then at 89 Whitchurch Lane, perhaps as a short-term lodger as his wife may have returned to the Island during 1934.

George Tootell returned to the Isle of Man as a permanent resident, and resident organist at the Regal Cinema, in 1935. Formerly the old Grand Theatre and Grand Picturedrome owned by the Palace & Derby Castle Co., the new cinema opened in June that year and George Tootell demonstrated the magnificent Compton Organ (a 3 manual/6 ranks instrument built by John Compton Organ Company Ltd, London), with the new Melotone feature, at the opening ceremony.\* With the new range of exciting sounds including cor anglais, musette, krumhorn, chimes, carrillon, vibraphone and marimba, straight sounds or with vibrato, the instrument and George's playing caused a sensation. Thereafter he gave organ recitals before each film programme and during the intervals,\*\* and firmly believed that the cinema organ would retain its popularity with cinema audiences into the 'talkie' era, providing that the instrument was 'the right type' - such as those by Compton, Jardine and Wurlitzer - and providing the performances were in the hands of specialist, expert players.

\* See *The Cinema Organ* online. The Melotone feature was an early form of electronic keyboard fitted to seventy-four Compton organs between 1935 until 1939 to enhance and extend the range of sounds. The Compton Organ from the Regal Cinema can now be seen in a transport museum, Tarleton near Stockport. The Regal Cinema was demolished in 1984.

\*\* During November and December 1936, for example, he gave regular enterprising organ recitals at the Regal Cinema at 3.00 pm which included music by Handel, Lamare, Liszt, Sibelius Landon Ronald, Suppé, Wagner, Puccini, Weber and others.

### **George Tootell 'on air'**

George Tootell took part in six BBC broadcasts from Douglas during the summer seasons between 1935 and 1938, one from the BBC Theatre and, most significantly, from the Festival Concert of the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Manx Music Festival.\* Three broadcasts in the series *Isle of Man Night* or *Isle of Man Night's Entertainment* took place in August 1935, and June 1936 and 1937. The first broadcast was ambitious, with George Tootell 'live' from the Regal Cinema, Florrie Forde from the Derby Castle Ballroom and excerpts from Julian Wylie's revue *Jubilation* starring Dan Leno Jr., relayed from the Coliseum with Doug Swallow's Band providing the music. That same night, George Tootell was heard on the Midland Regional Programme in a show entitled *Beside the Seaside*.

George Tootell was at the organ of the Regal Cinema again in June 1936 when excerpts from Gordon Langford's revue *Moonlight Revels of 1936* relayed from the Coliseum, Frank A. Terry's *The Marina Pleasure Parade* from the Villa Marina with dance music from Phil

Richardson and His Band. In June 1937 George Tootell was heard once again from the Regal Cinema, together with Gordon Langford's *Moonlight Revels of 1937* relayed from Cunningham's Holiday Camp, Douglas.

In July 1936 *Marina Pleasure Parade* was broadcast from the Regal Cinema on the Northern Regional Programme. George Tootell was joined by Doug Swallow's and Phil Richardson's bands. A second similar broadcast took place in September when George Tootell was joined by Syd Mack's Broadcasting Band.

On Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> September 1937 George Tootell was at the organ at the BBC Theatre and played a selection of *Manx Airs* arranged by Harry Wood; *I Hear You Calling Me* (Charles Marshall); *China Doll Parade* (John S. Zamecnik); *Gems of Irish Song* and his own arrangement entitled *Memories of Sullivan*.

\* See BBC Programme Index online.

### ***A Legend of Man***

'A work of outstanding merit . . . if not a *Hiawatha*'

George Tootell's '*A Legend of Man*',\* a dramatic historical cantata in ten stanzas and an epilogue, for chorus and mixed voices, soprano, tenor and baritone soloists and orchestra, received its premier on Thursday April 28<sup>th</sup> 1938, at the 47<sup>th</sup> Manx Music Festival Concert, which was broadcast 'live' from the Palace Ballroom. Tootell wrote both the words and the music, and dedicated the work to W. A. Craine, J.P. the secretary of the Music Festival. The orchestra numbered forty-two players of whom six, and the leader Louis Cohen of Liverpool, were guests. The choir numbered between 120 and 140 singers (reports disagree on this point) drawn from the 'sixty voices and above' festival choral class. The three soloists were local vocal celebrities Norah Moore, soprano, and Douglas Buxton, tenor, and they were joined by the baritone Stuart Robinson, the brother of the film actress Anna Neagle, whose fine voice was heard frequently on the radio between 1928 and 1943. Only one brief rehearsal was scheduled for the afternoon of the concert when the guest musicians and orchestra's guest leader from England were present.

The reviewer noted that in many of the beautiful quiet passages the music was imbued with a mildly Elgarian flavour and especially in the affecting Epilogue. The performance was a triumph, a 'showcase of the Island's talent for the outside world', and the jewel in the crown of what was generally agreed to be ' . . . the most successful Guild since World War I'. One member of the audience, Malcolm Davey, an organist and choral society conductor, had travelled to Douglas especially to hear the cantata, principally because the work was being considered for performance by six Northern choral societies.

\* Published by J. Curwen & Sons, London. The vocal score in my possession was reproduced in 1979 to commemorate the Millennium of Tynwald. The original orchestral material was subsequently lost, but the cantata was re-orchestrated by Simon Parkin of the Royal Northern College of Music for the revival of the cantata by the Manx Festival chorus, conductor John Bethel, for the Manx Heritage Year Concert at the Gaiety Theatre on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> July 1986. The soloists were Ingrid Murray, soprano, Ernest Thorne, tenor and Geoffrey Christian, bass. No orchestra is mentioned in the programme; the accompanists were Wendy McDowell, organ, and Marilyn Kissack, piano.

In the *Isle of Man Times* in April George Tootell claimed that he had devoted two months on the writing of the poem, three months on the composition and two months on the orchestration of *A Legend of Mann*, which for a busy musician was a considerable feat. \* No authentic Manx melodies appear in the score but the themes 'are constructed in the style of the folk tunes'. The text is an original poem inspired by 'some of the old fairy tales of the Island' with some characters from Manx legends,\*\* the Icelandic sagas and even Arthurian legend, skilfully woven into a new legend, which may be briefly outlined as follows:

*The story centres around Culain Macbuin (Loan Macilbuin, the dark smith of Dontheim according to Manx legend), the armourer of Celtic and Norse legends, who had forged the mighty sword 'Answerer' for King Manannan who ruled from Peel Castle, and his adopted daughter sweet Colloo, 'lovely as a morn in May'. She lives with him in Kitterland (a small island in the Calf Sound according to Manx legend), where he forges magic armour. Magnus Barefoot, 'full tall was he, and fair to see . . . and many a fight had won', the son of King Manannan, was compelled to go to Ireland to repel the Viking raiders under Hiallus Hammerhand (Hammer-man, Hallius-nan-urd according to Manx legend), and visits Culian Macbuin to commission a suit of magic armour and a mighty sword, Guardian, 'such as was never seen in Mann', and whilst he is there Colloo falls in love with him, and begs to be allowed to cross the seas with him, 'but that could never be'.*

*Magnus not only secures a great victory against the Vikings but wins a bride, Emerigaid (the daughter of Loan Macilbuin according to Manx legend), daughter of the Irish King. When Colloo hears this, 'with a wild, despairing cry of Magnus!', she throws herself from a cliff into the dark sea below. Time passed; Culian Macbuin's anvil clanged as he continued to forge 'with cunning hand'. King Manannan died, Magnus became King of Mann and returned to Kitterland, 'and thought again on Colloo . . . the little one, a sweet child'. So passed the dream, 'as all dreams pass, at the dawning of another day; a vision of another world – a fleeting thought too sweet to stay'.*

The sentiment expressed in the epilogue certainly struck a chord with the audience in 1938 and may still do so today. The poet reflects that 'in Mann, upon St. Patrick's Isle, Peel Castle stands' a witness to the time when Viking conquerors held sway, and when 'from out the past the phantom heroes rise, Olympian in their majesty':

*They shall not be forgotten, nor  
To sing their deeds shall poets tire;  
Their tale, through ages yet to come,  
Shall men to nobler deeds inspire.*

\* *Isle of Man Times*, 16.04.1938

\*\* Sophia Morrison, *Manx Fairy Tales*, London, 1911.

The musical setting is through-composed (eg not divided into recitative – aria – duet - chorus etc) in substantial scenes, some of which contain set pieces such as 'Magnus' Song'

in scene four, *My sires were the Vikings, who roamed o'er the wide sea*, 'Culian's Song' in scene five, *Culain looked upon him* and 'Colloo's Song' in scene seven, *Oh, take me with you*. The choral writing is adventurous, with vigorous part-writing and effective *a cappella* sections, notably *O soft West Wind so gently blowing* in scene eight. The chorus in scene nine, *Colloo look'd dully on his face; struck dumb, she stood to all things dead*, is highly dramatic and genuinely moving, and ends with her chilling cry of *Magnus!* There are many lyrical moments, and the Epilogue has real grandeur. The cantata opens with a substantial orchestral prelude, and there are other effective and atmospheric orchestral interludes before scenes six and seven, and a suitably martial one at the opening of scene eight.

*A Legend of Mann* is an accomplished work by a fine musician and amateur composer. 'Not a Hiawatha?' perhaps, but not far below the 'pot-boiler' that is Elgar's *Banner of St. George*\* and the two fine cantatas *Lochinvar* (c.1912) and *Ode to Genius* (1940) by Haydn Wood, performed at the Manx Music Festival concerts in 1939 and 1946.\*\*

\* Performed at the Manx Music Festival concert in 1914 with the composer conducting Harry Wood's Festival Orchestra. See Maurice Powell, *Elgar visits Manxland*, [manxmusic.com](http://manxmusic.com)

\*\* *Lochinvar* was successfully revived by the Ramsey Choral Society under their conductor Nigel Harrison in 2015.

George Tootell was delighted with the performance of his cantata and with the critical acclaim that ensued: 'It was an inspiring and wonderful experience for any composer to hear his music so magnificently performed', and generous in his praise for the vocal soloists, Norah Moore, Douglas Buxton and Stuart Robinson, the choir trainers Mrs Axford and Mrs Corris, and Kathleen Rydings who trained the local members orchestra (the Manx Amateur Orchestral Society) in the weeks before the performance '... to whose loyal and most valuable efforts so much of the success of the orchestra is due'.\*

\* See the letter from George Tootell, *Isle of Man Times*, 07.05.1938

George Tootell's name disappears from the local newspapers during World War II. In 1946 he became secretary of the Manx Music Festival, a position he held until 1965. In January 1950 George Tootell's three act children's operetta *Peggy and the Pixies* was performed by Douglas High School for Girls Dramatic Society at the Gaiety Theatre. The proceeds - £44 16s - from the lavish production were donated to Ballakermeen School towards the expenses of new stage equipment. In May that year the DHS Girls Dramatic Society performed excerpts from the operetta and were placed second with 92 marks in the Manx Junior Drama Contest. The adjudicator was impressed with the high standard of both the production with the stage filled with mortals in the land of the Pixies, the King and Queen and evil sprites, and the performances of the various solos, duets and choruses.

During this period the organ at St. George's Church, Douglas was replaced by a fine instrument by Jardine & Co., built to his specification. George Tootell was presented to the Queen and Prince Phillip in Noble's Park during the Royal couple's visit to the Island in 1955. In 1969 he was awarded the Manannan Trophy for his outstanding contributions to Manx and Celtic culture. He died that year on 2<sup>nd</sup> July in Onchan.

**Ramsey, January 2022**

