

Yn Chruinnaght 2004
Manx National Songs
Tuesday 20 July
St Paul's Church, Ramsey, 7.30pm

Marlene Hendy, Jane Mayne, Andrew Williamson
Bob Carswell and Charles Guard
Fenella Bazin

Since its publication in 1896, W. H. Gill's *Manx National Songs*, the main source of Manx songs for singers and choirs, has never been out of print. Tonight's concert celebrates both the publication and the work that went into its preparation, with performances of some of the less well-known songs and extracts from the correspondence between Gill, his brother Deemster Fred, Dr John Clague, Speaker A.W. Moore and T.E. Brown. On the surface, relations between the men seemed courteous. Under the surface, however, things were not always so gentlemanly.

The Awakening

Narrator:

In the spring of 1895, William Henry Gill presented a paper to a Musical Association in London. He described in some detail a project that had been mooted in the Isle of Man the previous autumn and that was to lead to the publication of two important collections of Manx songs.

Gill:

It is strange but true that, so far as the general British public is concerned, the Isle of Man, notwithstanding its great antiquity, its unique political constitution, its ancient statutes and venerable customs, its invigorating climate and charming scenery has only recently been *discovered*.

But the latest, and perhaps not the least interesting, feature of the discovery is the fact that this little Manx nation possesses a native *music* of its own.

This is a short account of the writer's recent quest for Manx music, and to submit to the present audience, and through it to the musical world at large, some specimens of this hitherto unknown quantity. The material was collected for the most part at first hand, from the natural intonation of voices unspoilt by modern instruments; on the spot; with his own hands; and (*significantly*) in the presence of competent witnesses.

98 As I went out one morning clear

Marlene Hendy

42 Robin and Betsy

Narrator

Once these songs were transferred from the lips of the unspoilt singers into Gill's sophisticated arrangements, they often became unrecognisable. The transformations shocked some but, for the majority of the population, they opened for the first time a route into Manx music. One of Gill's great talents was to identify and provide music that would have a widespread appeal. Just think of the success of 'The Manx Fishermen's Evening Hymn'! After all, the whole object of the exercise was stated

very clearly in the Preface to the Song Book.

Gill

The object was twofold – first, to record and hand down melodies as they are now known, with the variations and imperfections due to oral transmission, and secondly to put some of these melodies into a form adapted for modern performance, vocal and instrumental.

Narrator

Although the songs had been collected on the Island, most of Gill's work in preparing them for publication was carried out in London, where he lived and worked. As a result, his recently-discovered correspondence provides an invaluable record of the project. Distance also lent enchantment to his view of Island life. His interpretation was also influenced by the songs of the Irishman Thomas Moore, songs such as 'The Last Rose of Summer', and the texts he chose for the Song Book showed Manx history and contemporary life in soft focus.

110	Home	Jane Mayne
55	Fair maids of Mann	

Reclaiming the past

Narrator:

Gill was aware of the scholarly work that was being done to reclaim the past and he paid tribute to the achievements of the Manx Society as well as to individuals. But is there just a hint of distancing himself from their efforts and a whiff of patronising criticism in his comments?

Gill

Thanks to the members of the Manx Society, they have done good work, each in his own line, in preserving in their publications some at least of the characteristics of their nation. To these must be added the names of four notable Manxmen. Mr Hall Caine's romances have earned for himself and his country a great, if not altogether irreproachable reputation. My old friend and master, Mr T. E. Brown has, in his *Fo'c's'le Yarns*, gathered up the fragments that remain of the Anglo-Manx dialect – the transition from Manx to English – and embalmed them in the amber of his inimitable verse. Haply his poetry will live when all traces of the original Manx language and Manx character have passed away. Mr A. W. Moore, in his *Manx Note Book* and *Manx Surnames*, has gathered and handed down to posterity much that is interesting and valuable in the insular folk-lore and Mr P. C. Kermode is rendering valuable service in connection with the beautiful Runic crosses and other antiquities of his native land.

Narrator

Gill's own view of Manx history and nationalism was to find its way into the public consciousness in songs like these.

36	Illiam Dhone No. 1	Andrew Williamson
58	Manxmen we'll remain	

Narrator

Manxmen we'll remain, indeed, although perhaps not as united as a letter from T. E. Brown suggested in a letter to a friend in the summer of 1896.

Brown

'My time', he wrote, 'has been given largely of late to my friend W. H. Gill's Manx Song-Book. He spent last Friday with me and 'from morn to dewy eve', we dwelt in a perfect bower of melody. It will be a very charming book. He writes excellent English, and is something of a scholar'.

Narrator

Under the surface, however, feelings were not so happy. A. W. Moore was also working on a publication of Manx songs and, although Gill denied it, there was clearly underlying rivalry, as is clear from an article he published ten years later.

Gill

Although working in the same field, our aims were different. One book was purely antiquarian, the other a quasi modern arrangement of the old airs; one a book for the learned few, the other for the unsophisticated many; one for the student in his library; the other for the recreation of the general public.

Narrator

One of the oldest and most popular songs in the Manx repertoire is 'Mylecharaine'. It's also an prime example of a tune that had appeared in many guises over the centuries – as a ballad sung in the minor key, as a dance-tune in the major and most recently and famously, in Gill's arrangement that was to be adopted as our National Anthem. The story of the conflict between the dyed-in-the-wool farmer and his breakaway daughter points up nicely the differences between Moore's scholarly and, in Gill's eyes at any rate, old-fashioned attitude, as opposed to Gill's modern, open-minded approach.

48

Mylecharaine

Marlene Hendy

Narrator

The division between Gill and Moore deepened as the summer moved on. Relations between the supporters of the two parties worsened. The seeds of dissent had been apparent some years earlier. At the beginning of 1893, Brown added a postscript to a letter he had written to Moore when he described Dr John Clague and the Gills as 'wholly desperate'. At this stage, it appears that the two projects might have been very similar – a collection of melodies found in the Island, with modern English lyrics where considered appropriate.

Not surprisingly Brown had firm ideas about the lyrics. At Moore's invitation, he had considered writing completely new verses but his proposal reflected his doubts about translating the Ballads. At the end of 1892 he wrote to Moore, suggesting: 'An extremely close prose translation is what is wanted. It is enough for the present to say "Hands off!" to all bards and versifiers.' In the event, this was the policy adopted by Moore for his publication. Gill was much more catholic in his choice of texts, browsing through modern and classic poets as well as commissioning contemporaries and writing his own. Gill had approached Brown for texts, explaining that he was trying to do for Manxland what Tom Moore did for Irish melodies. In the autumn of

1895, Gill had to write to his brother Deemster Fred Gill, that his invitation had been spurned in no uncertain terms.

Brown

'An adequate libretto for the dear old melodies? I cannot, I dare not... Tom Moore and his prettinesses, his pettinesses, simply terrify me. The Atmosphere of the Drawing-room? No, no! It won't do... 'Tara's Halls', 'The Last Rose' settle the question for me.'

Narrator

So Brown had made his feelings very clear. That door was very firmly shut. As a result, many of the poems had to be drawn from sources that Gill described as:

Gill

most disappointing and a national calamity. We shall have to depend upon **aliens** to interpret our Manx songs.

Narrator

One of his contributors, though hardly an alien, was A. P. Graves – a regular visitor to the Island in his capacity as a schools' inspector - who contributed a number of texts, including the words for the 'Lament of the Duchess of Gloucester'. Already a well-known librettist associated with the national airs of Ireland, he turned out to be a man who was commercially grasping and a fine self-publicist. However, meeting with Graves was to steer Gill's publication on to its final course – as a complete book of songs and in a format standard to that of other national song books, to be published by Boosey and Company of London.

38	Lament of the Duchess of Gloucester	Jane Mayne
75	The Good Old Way	

INTERVAL

Loss and exile

89	False Isabel	Andrew Williamson
152	The Manx Exile	

Narrator

The differences between the two factions – Brown now allied with Moore, and Dr Clague with the Gill brothers – was poignant. Gill had first encountered Brown, a respected boy nine years his senior, at King William's, and had come to regard him as a friend and mentor. Lack of co-operation between them appears to have been a bone of contention, especially as Fred Gill and John Clague had been against Brown's involvement in the first place. After Gill had received Brown's rejection of the invitation to contribute to the song book, he had written from London to his brother Fred:

Gill

I had certainly counted on Tom Brown's cooperation and it is heartbreaking to have to regard him as an opponent. I foresee that the opposition – if such it unhappily proves

to be – will be disastrous to our project.

Narrator

Fred Gill's reply, while not suggesting conciliation, certainly advised caution although the rift had clearly been major.

Fred Gill

First – it would be well if possible to avoid collision with others – although we were first in the field. Neither Brown nor Moore have spoken to me for a very long time on the subject and then it was only as a means of squeezing material out of the Doctor. At the present juncture I don't care to speak to either of them unless first spoken to. I don't know what you could do with Brown without showing too much of our hand... Perhaps we had better ignore them. Avoiding words will probably prevent collision with the enemy.

54	I saw thee weep	Jane Mayne
148	An Autumn Song	

Narrator

The rivalry was out in the open. The race was on and there were to be few holds barred. Gill even seemed to relish the fight!

Gill

My chief object is of course to **start** the project and so be even with Moore and company and retain a free hand. I should like greatly to know if possible when Moore's book is likely to be out. It would be well for ours to come out first but not too soon. There is brand new matter in ours which they might take a fancy to!

Narrator

Unfortunately some correspondence is missing but there had obviously been some sort of approach by 'the opposition'.

Gill

What extraordinary fun we are getting out of this little business. As good as a play! Clearly the situation is ours. Moore comes to you, Brown to me. If this is not surrender I don't know what is.
Do you think Moore is coming to fight me in London?

Narrator

It was this move that seems to have sparked the paper given to the Sidcup Music Society, the paper that is reproduced in full as the preface to *Manx National Songs*.

Gill

The Sidcup lecture had been reported in a little paragraph in the *Times*. Unfortunately, it omits the reference I made to Moore – disclaiming opposition and explaining the difference in our plans and aims. You might mention this to Moore if you have the chance. The only objection is letting Moore and Brown see our aims and plans but I think they must already know what I have said in the paper. On re-reading the thing, I can't see anything that anybody can object to and its publication will certainly add to our notoriety and proclaim us **first in the field**.

Narrator

Gill was anxious not to hurt Moore's feelings. In 1895, he wrote to his brother Fred, who has collected some of the songs:

Gill

You had suggested offering the large residue of material to Moore. If this to be done at all, could we not devise some graceful way of doing it – I mean by some sort of mutual arrangement so as at least to avoid the idea of giving him sucked oranges? To publish our melodies other than in arrangements would be breaking faith with Moore by doing very much what he is doing. Can you see your way to meeting Moore and Brown over a cup of tea and talking the matter over in a friendly way?

Narrator

Gill identified various characteristics of Manx music. One in particular appealed to him, perhaps because of his own background: Manx by descent, born in Sicily, schooled at King William's College, and living all his adult life in the south of England. He even refers to one tune as

Gill

So much in the style of a Sicilian pastoral melody as to raise the suspicion that it may have been imported into the Island with its national arms, which certainly come from Sicily.

Narrator

Does his enthusiastic need to connect the Isle of Man and Sicily stem from his insecurity in both countries? And does his identification with the sadness of Manx music reflect his own feelings of exile? Are these comments as much about William Henry Gill as they are about the island and its music? Perhaps the search for Manx music was also a personal journey..

Gill

One element in the Manx tunes, be they native or only adopted is very conspicuous – viz., their sad and plaintive character. The dance tunes are bright and merry enough, but the songs are, for the most part, as melancholy as music can make them – sad, and yet not morbidly so. They sound like the wail of the Babylonian captives. For ages past, the Isle of Man was a battleground, as it is now the playground, of the surrounding nations. Its simple people have gone through the various stages of a conquered nation. Happily, they have passed through the furnace, and have emerged a free people. Though the marks of fetters remain impressed upon their music, the fetters themselves have long since fallen into the sea. The cloud has passed away, brighter days have come, and freedom reigns supreme.

81 We'd better wait a while my dear Jane Mayne

90 O hush thee, my baby

Narrator

Gill's confidence and optimism had returned. The race speeded up. For some time, it looked as if Moore would win. But his publisher had dragged his feet to the extent that, at one point, Moore even expressed the belief that he would not live to see the project completed. In 1896 the two books appeared within weeks of each other. Moore's took its place on the library bookshelves of the cognoscenti. Brown wrote to congratulate Moore:

Brown

What a beautiful book! It has its place and will hold its own. Willy Gill's has great merit, but the condescension to the mob (genteel or otherwise) leans towards vulgarity. I fancy your book will be a very taking one... The swan-song of Manx music having been sung we shall listen to its faint reverberations as they die away in the distance, and dream.

Narrator

In spite of Brown's reaction, Gill's publication, recognisably a music book designed for performers, proved so popular that it went into many editions. It is still in print almost 110 years later – not many authors can claim that!. Moore's publication is now regarded as a rare book, familiar only to a handful of enthusiasts. For performers, Gill's *Manx National Songs* is their first and sometimes their only introduction to Manx music. It has provided the staple diet of Manx songs for generations of children and adults alike. How many girls have made their public debut singing 'Hush, little darling'!

Oh yes, in spite of Brown's doubts, one of his texts – 'The Manxman and the King' - **did** find its way into Gill's publication.

104	The Manxman and the King	Andrew Williamson
136	The Ploughman's Song	
107	Ramsey Town	Verse Andrew, Chorus, everyone
84	Ellan Vannin	Everyone