

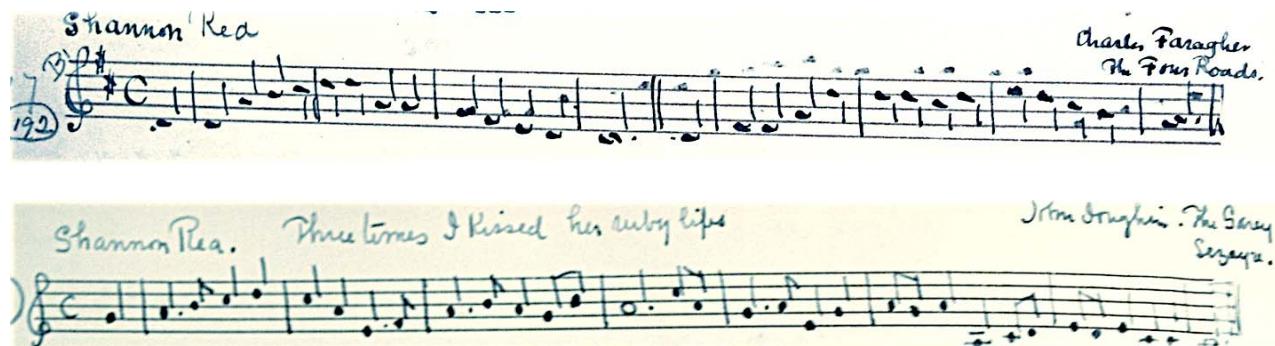
Histories and Mysteries – the secret life of traditional music in the Isle of Man

by David Speers

The tunes in the three manuscript music books that are part of the Clague Collection, held in the Manx Museum Archive, form the bulk of the traditional music recorded in the Isle of Man in the 1890's. They have not been arranged or changed in any way and are the best record of how the music sounded when it was collected.

This is the sixth in a series of articles that sets out to explore some of the links between the traditional music collected in the Isle of Man and that found in Ireland and Britain, to discover some of the hidden histories behind our traditional music, and to show that the Island has produced beautiful music to match any found elsewhere.

Shannon Rea, Three Times I kissed her Ruby Lips (the Shannon Side)



The two ballad tunes called Shannon Rea from the manuscript music books (Copyright Manx National Heritage)

Shannon Rea

A musical transcription of the first 'Shannon Rea' tune in G major and common time. It consists of two staves of music with sixteenth-note patterns and eighth-note chords.

Shannon Rea as it appears in the fourth Clague music manuscript book

Two different ballad tunes with the title Shannon Rea appear in the three manuscript music notebooks from the Clague collection (copied above), with a further tune in another Clague manuscript book mainly containing arrangements of tunes (transcribed above). The title refers to the Irish ballad generally called The Shannon Side, set next to the Shannon river in Ireland, but with the universal theme of false love and abandonment.

The second tune has an additional title Three Times I Kissed her Ruby Lips, recalled by the informant, John Joughin, The Garey, Lezayre. This additional title is taken from the words in one version of the ballad:

*Three times I kiss'd her ruby lips as she lay upon the grass
Then coming to herself again - oh, then she said, alas!*

The third tune is similar to another ballad tune in the collection called I am a Youthful Lady and my Troubles they are Great. This title refers to different 19th century ballad called the Victory, about a woman whose lover is press-ganged into service on Admiral Nelson's ship. It was collected from a John Quayle (no details were given on where he lived) but seems to have been wrongly transcribed, or wrongly barred. The stress on the first note (E) means that, if the beats are counted to the end of the first phrase (the dotted E), there are only six. For words to fit, and for musical completeness, there should be eight, and the subsequent phrases are also short as a result.

Not for the first time in this series, we have several tunes for one ballad that are very different from each other. All are in 4/4 time, but tune 1, from Charles Faragher, of the Four Roads (on the outskirts of Port St Mary), is in D major and tune 2, from John Joughin, of The Garey, Lezayre, is in A minor. Tune 3, from John Quayle, is in the E dorian mode.

Tunes 1 and 2 are unusual for traditional tunes in that neither ends on its tonic note. In other words, in the key of D major, a tune would commonly begin and end with a D note. Likewise, a tune in A minor would begin and end with an A. However, the second part of tune 1 (in D major) begins with a D but ends with an A, and tune 2 (in A minor) begins with an A but ends with a C.

Although there are similar examples in the various collections in Britain and Ireland, there is a possible explanation for this tonal asymmetry. The article about the Clague music manuscripts edited by Anne Gilchrist in the Journal of the Folk Song Society (number 28, 1924) provides a possible explanation and a puzzle.

The article reproduces the first two tunes from the manuscript, except that tune 1 doubles up the second part and finishes with a variation of the first part of the tune. This means the tune conforms to an ABBA format, with the first part (A tune) appearing at the beginning and the end, and the second part (B tune) being repeated in the middle:

SUNG BY CHARLES FAR FISHER, THE FOUR ROADS.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff begins with a quarter note followed by a series of eighth notes. The middle staff starts with a half note followed by eighth notes. The bottom staff begins with a half note followed by eighth notes. All staves are in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time.

Tune 1 to Shannon Rea in the Journal of the Folk Song Society (Copyright English Folk Dance and Song Society)

This musical format is common in ballad tunes, and makes sense when the words are sung to it. Perhaps tunes 1 and 2 were copied down with an A tune and a B tune but were in fact sung in an ABBA format? This would work for tune 1 (in fact, it best explains how this tune was sung) but not for tune 2. The asymmetry in tune 1 can, therefore, be explained but tune 2 seems to shift, or modulate, from Am to its relative major: C, very uncommon for a traditional tune.

Also not for the first time in this series, a tune (tune 1 here) reproduced by Gilchrist is different from the same one that appears in manuscript music books now in the Manx museum. More puzzling is the fact that tune 2 is the same in the manuscript books and in Gilchrist.

Tune 1 appears on page 6 of the first Clague manuscript music book, whereas tune 2 appears on page 42 of the *third* book. Perhaps, as some researchers have speculated, the three notebooks now in the museum are the remains of a number of replicated music books, some containing first-hand rough notes taken down with informants, and others being ‘fair copies’ of rough transcriptions.

It is certainly true that Dr John Clague made copies of his notes and was disappointed when some were lost whilst on loan. We cannot be sure which copies now survive or how many existed. But, in this case, it seems Gilchrist was looking at a different version of book 1 but the same book 3 as we now have.

To complicate this further, Gilchrist in her 1924 article mentions the fact that Clague supplied another Shannon Rea tune to W H Gill that was included in Manx National Songs (1896). She said of this tune that it “*seems to be wrongly barred for the accent, both in his [Clague’s] manuscript and as transcribed in Manx National Songs*”. This is the same observation made above about our tune 3; that something isn’t quite correct about it and that is to do with the barring.

If the first bar line is moved back two notes, and each successive bar line moved accordingly, the tune makes perfect sense:

Shannon Rea (Re-barred)



It also becomes a close variant of the other ballad tune mentioned, I am a Youthful Lady and my Troubles they are Great, rather than a tune that has similarities.

From this exercise it seems Gilchrist’s third tune is the same as our third tune and they are both incorrect. It is this tune that made its way into Manx National Songs uncorrected and should have appeared as re-barred above.

The title “Shannon Rea” differs from the title mostly used in Irish and British ballad sheets. It translates from the Manx Gaelic as the ‘smooth’ (calm) Shannon and implies that there was a Manx version of the ballad in the same metre and time scale. Other British and Irish ballads found in the Island (such as the Thurot ballad, discussed in the fourth article in this series) had Manx versions made for the Gaelic-speaking listeners alive when they were popular in the Isle of Man of the mid-19th century and earlier.

Numerous variations of the Shannon Side ballad, and tunes associated with it, were collected in Britain and Ireland during the 19th century. This shows it was popular, spawning versions that had different twists and turns to the story, and this includes a different location for the story. For

example, in her article, Gilchrist gives a version of tune 2 collected in Dorset and called The Shermont Side.

Most of the surviving ballad sheets for this ballad were printed in Britain but the subject matter is Irish and the Dorset version was probably adapted for local consumption. This shows there was a market for ballads with Irish subjects in Britain, both amongst British people and Irish immigrants (in fact, even a quick look at the subject matter of 19th century ballads printed in England and Scotland shows this to be the case).

It is not definitely known how this ballad (or any other ballad) arrived in the Isle of Man. We don't have words collected in the Island to compare with other versions. One route would have been by someone acquiring a ballad sheet with the words on it and putting locally-known tunes to it. However, the link between tune 2 and its Dorset variation means there is no single process at work and no single route from one singing tradition and another.

We have seen that this once-popular ballad was sung to three different tunes in the Isle of Man; that tune three was wrongly copied down; that the incorrect version appeared in *Manx National Songs*; that a variation of the third tune was also used for a different ballad in the Island (the Victory); that tune 1 was probably sung with an ABBA structure; that ballads with Irish themes were popular in 19th century Britain; and that tune 2 is of an unusual, asymmetrical type of traditional tune.

Acknowledgments

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David Speers is the author of Manx Traditional Music for Sessions, which discusses history and revival of Manx traditional music and dance (available from the Manx National Heritage Bookshop, manxheritageshop.com).

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