

“NOW THAT MR WH GILL HAS MADE OPEN CONFESSION”

W.H. GILL, T.E. BROWN, AND
MANX NATIONAL SONGS (1896)



In 1916, P.W. Caine wrote to Sophia Morrison:

Now that Mr WH Gill has made open confession on the subject of what T.E.B. thought about his & Mr AW Moore’s collections of Manx music, I think that if I had letter No. 45 of the Rydings correspondence in my hands again, I would quote from it more unrestrainedly; but it’s not worth while—perhaps it might be dangerous—to ask Mrs Ryding for it again.

What had moved Caine to comment was the publication in *Mannin*, a small press magazine established and edited by Morrison, of a series of pieces by W.H. Gill, under the running title of “Manx Miniatures.” Caine was referring to the fourth and final piece, “A Plea for Modern Manx Music.” Gill himself had felt that his contribution might be of some controversy; earlier in the year, he had written to Morrison, “[h]ere at last is Miniature N^o IV [...] which I am afraid you will think too personal and plain-spoken.” Shortly after its publication he had written again to her: “I am rather curious to see how our little nation will view my Brown paper and the revelations contained therein.” With these comments it would seem that Gill was in fact courting controversy deliberately.

Before looking at what Gill wrote, what of this letter than Caine had at one time seen and read though clearly made no copy? Given that Gill was writing about T.E. Brown evidently then correspondence between Brown and Egbert Rydings. A batch of their letters is now in the MNHL as MS 1272 A but these are not numbered in the manner that Caine can readily refer to “letter No. 45.” One assumes that Caine was quoting from this letter in earlier correspondence with Morrison for her not to be puzzled by his comment. In this case, the letter is not now amongst those of his to be found in her own papers. And on a final point, how exactly could it be “dangerous” to ask to read once again a letter from Brown to Rydings?

At present there is no answer to these points and so it is best to turn to Gill and his “Manx Miniatures” and see what he was on about there. Gill’s fourth Miniature was the last in the series and for which one should be grateful that there were not to be more. The first two pieces, “Facts and Fancies of Fairy-Land” and “More about the Fairies” were tedious and mannered, the third, “In Touch with Tom Brown,” trivial. It is only with the final one that there is anything of substance to deal with. What then was its import?

The topic is T.E. Brown and the projects that were to become *Manx Ballads and Music* and *Manx National Songs*, both published in 1896. The main charge to which Gill seeks to answer is as he wrote himself that “it is only right that our little Island should know (1) why our National Poet’s own work is conspicuous by its absence from *Manx National Songs*, and (2) what was his own opinion of the intrinsic value of that book.” The answer to the first: “To the *Manx National Songs* he had been repeatedly asked to contribute words for some of the songs, but presumably for conscience sake, i.e., as one already pledged to another cause, he had deliberately though regretfully declined.” To the second, he quotes from a letter Brown had written to Sidney T. Irwin and published by him in a selection of Brown’s correspondence he edited in 1900: “My time has been given largely of late to my friend’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.” Gill returned to his first theme in the concluding paragraph:

In concluding this paper, it is only right that our little Island should know what was our beloved Poet’s candid opinion of a work which he had for a time mistaken as in the light of a rival to Mr Moore’s Book. The fact is, that repeatedly, and on bended knees, he had been asked to contribute; but that regarding himself as already pledged to another cause, he had, as in honour bound, deliberately, though regretfully, declined.

Wherein then lies the ground for Caine to be so upset about what Gill wrote? He clearly feels this account to be either disassembling at best or dishonest at worst. Also, Gill himself as seen in his comments to Morrison and as already remarked was also out to cause in his own mind controversy. And in the case of Caine he clearly did so. We do not have the full correspondence between Brown and Gill (though fragments of at least three letters are quoted in the piece) and, moreover, the elusive “letter No. 45” to guide us to towards some form of understanding.

What is known of Brown’s involvement with Moore was that he was asked to produce texts in his Anglo-Manx to sit alongside the originals in Manx, exactly what Gill sought from him. He refused Moore and on the evidence here refused Gill as well. It was nothing to do with a supposed favouritism for the A.W. Moore camp as Gill saw it—he refused Moore as well as already stated. Clearly, the letter that Caine read had a sentiment that was not in accord with what Gill was putting forward and would narrate a different view. One can only think that within it pages was not just a simple refusal to become involved with Gill and his *Manx National Songs* but a sustained critique as well.