

JOHN CALLISTER  
(1833–1912)

A JURBY FOLK SINGER



John Callister is one of a number of folk singers in Jurby who were photographed in 1897 by the Rev. Frederick W. Stubbs, the incumbent of the parish at that date. The one surviving photograph of Callister is not of the best as regards its quality or state of preservation, but it at least has the virtue of existing and so allowing us to see a likeness of the man at the remove now of well over a century.

In the 1891 census, Callister was aged 58, born in Jurby, and farming Ballachonelly at Jurby East.<sup>1</sup> The 1881 census records it as being 130 acres in extent.<sup>2</sup> He was married to Jane Callister (60), born in Michael, and they had four children living with them: John (34), a farmer's son, Christina (28) and Catherine (24), both school teachers, and Edith (16), down as a farmer's daughter. All were born in Jurby. There was a servant too, Elizabeth Gawne (24), also born in the parish. Callister was enumerated in 1901 as a Manx speaker though no one else in the household spoke the language.<sup>3</sup> He died in 1912 at the age of 79.

It was the Gill brothers, Deemster J.F. Gill, and W.H. Gill, who came across Callister, visiting him on two occasions, once in 1895 during their second collecting tour that year, and again in the autumn of 1898 on what was to be their final bout of recording. Whilst Callister resided at Ballachonelly, both recording sessions took place elsewhere. That of the 6 August 1895 was at the West Nappin in Jurby, farmed by Daniel Clarke.<sup>4</sup> The one on 12 October 1898 took place in Ramsey, in Parliament Street, the number not given, but with the Gills noting "Dr Tellet present."<sup>5</sup> Dr Frederick Tellet was a surgeon and doctor in Ramsey and clearly interested enough to be invited along. John Craine, who was one of the Deemster's circle of helpers, interestingly enough lived at 44 North Parliament Street, and this must be where the session took place.

What though did they record from Callister? In 1895, it was three tunes, 'The Farmer's Daughter,' 'Lord Bateman,' "Twas once I loved a lady fair."<sup>6</sup> Then there

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<sup>1</sup> *Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1891, RG 12/4684, fol. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1881, RG 11/5599, fol. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1901, RG 13/5302, fol. 74, sch. 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Jno : Collister at Clarke's West Nappin Jurby" (6 August 1895), *Orig. Coll.*, 1/2 (O.54).

<sup>5</sup> "Jno : Callister (æt 51) Jurby Bridge 12 Oct 1898—Sung & taken down in Parliament St : Ramsey—Dr Tellet present" (12 October 1898), *Orig. Coll.*, 48/1 (O.91).

<sup>6</sup> In the order given in the transcript: 'The Farmer's Daughter,' *O.C.*, 1/2 (O.54); 'Lord Bateman,' *O.C.*, 1/3 (O.55); "Twas once I loved a lady fair,' *O.C.*, 1/4 (O.56).

was just the one tune from 1898, ‘On a fine Sabbath morn.’ It must be pointed out that this was the pattern of their collecting, tunes only, and rarely (very), parts of the words. Even with just the first line alone, or when the first line is used as the title, identification can be and is difficult. Here though, there is one easily recognisable title, namely that of ‘Lord Bateman,’ a well-known and widely-distributed English and Scottish traditional ballad. This is what is referred to as a Child Ballad, it being included in J.F. Child’s monumental *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, i–v (1882–98), where it is Child 53, *Lord Beichan*. In the Steve Roud *Folk Song Index* it is Roud 40.

Turning to the others, ‘The Farmer’s Daughter’ might be ‘A Sailor courted a Farmer’s Daughter,’ a version collected in Hampshire in 1909, having a line that specifically references the Isle of Man (Roud 993). ‘Twas once I loved a Lady fair’ again suggests a number of songs, the words a ready commonplace opener. It is likely connected with the group of songs known as ‘The False Bride’ (Roud 154). ‘On a fine Sabbath morn[, in the sweet month of May]’ is in full the first line of ‘The Sabbath breaker reclaim’d, or A pleasing history of Thomas Brown.’ This first appeared, twinned with a hymn, the first line of which is ‘Enlisted with Jesus to fight against sin,’ (Roud V14068) on a broadside printed by J.K. Pollock of North Shields between 1815–55. For the broadside itself, see *Broadside Ballads Online* (Bodleian Library) Bodl5019.

Callister is one of the few singers who was recalled by informants in the *Manx Museum Folk-Life Survey*, though very much in passing as here: “Old John Collister [*sic*] was over 80 when he was singing the ‘Wreck of the Tiger’ for W.H. Gill.” This is from 1946, recorded from Andrew Joughin, a former blacksmith at Jurby.<sup>7</sup> As seen, the Gills did not take down ‘The Wreck of the Tiger’ but all of their singers would have known more songs that were collected from them. As a singer himself, Callister needs to be seen within the wider currency of English and Scottish traditional ballads that were evidently sung in the Island as well as their transmission via print. All four of his songs were ones sung in English, a reminder that Manx vernacular music is one made in the Island and not necessarily one sung in Manx.



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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Joughin, former smith at Jurby, interviewed by Leslie Quilliam and Grace Mary Quilliam in 1949. MNHL, MXMUS FLS, JA/F, 3.