

Manannan, the god of Man

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ON WEDNESDAY of this week the Tynwald assembly took place at St John's in the Isle of Man, as it does on 5 July every year. Tynwald is the name given to the Manx Parliament; it is a Norse word, the same as 'Dingwall', but that does not mean that the ceremony or the institution itself is Norse. It is believed to represent a thread of continuity running back into the island's Gaelic past.

Why 5 July? Well, 5 July is 24 June Old Style, in other words the ritual remained on the old day when ten days were dropped out of the calendar in 1752. And as I pointed out in my last article, 24 June is St John's Day.

What exactly happens at the Tynwald assembly? The Manx Parliament normally meets in the modern capital, Douglas, but on this one day of the year it returns to the ancient artificial mound close to St John's Church on the west side of the island to renew its legitimacy. I will take a description of it from a bilingual work by Dr John Clague published in 1911, called 'Cooïnaghtyn Manninagh: Manx Reminiscences'. Manx is very like Scottish Gaelic badly spelt, and I will put in Clague's Manx words here and there for the benefit of readers who may be able to recognise them.

"The *Chiare as Feed* ['Four-and-Twenty', known in English as the House of Keys] held their meeting at Tynwald at St John's (*Feailleoin*), when they wore St John's wort about their heads, on the fifth day of the last month of summer . . . All cases were settled at that Court by the deemsters (*briwnyn*), and all breast laws (*leighaghyn cleeau*) read out to the people three times, and they are not law yet until that is done. The Four-and-Twenty are called 'Keys', for they made the *keeshyn* or taxes. At the present time the service is held in St John's Church (*ayns Keeilleoin*). Then they walk in this order, two and two (*jees as jees*), from the Church to the Tynwald Hill (*gys y chronk Tin Vaal*).

Four sergeants of police,
The Six Coroners (*toshee yioarree*),
The Captains of Parishes,
The Clergy (*saggyrtyñ*),
The High Bailiffs (*briwnyn beggey*),
The Keys (*Yn Chiare as Feed*),
The Council (*Ny fir coyrlee*),
The Sword-Bearer (*Yn er cliwe*),
The Governor (*Yn Chiannoort*),
The two Government Chaplains,
The Surgeon to the Household,
Soldiers (*Sidooryn*),

and then as many people as wish to go after them. Rushes (*shuinyñ*) were spread on the steps of the Tynwald for a sign of giving obedience . . . The six old coroners deliver their rods (*ny slattyn oc*) to the Governor, and the first Deemster swears the new coroners in. Then every coroner kneels down before the Governor, and takes his rod (*yn tlat echey*) from the hands of the Governor. The coroner of Glenfaba (*toshiagh-jioarey Glenfaba*) reads the laws in Manx (*ayns Gaelg*)."

It will be noticed straight away that the participants in the ceremony bear good Gaelic titles, words like our *breitheamh* and *fir comhairle* and *toiseach deòraidh*. Then there are those 24 'Keys'. They are a relic of Goraídh Cróbbhan's Norse-Gaelic Kingdom of the Isles, which stretched from Lewis to Man, and was, it seems, divided into five districts — Lewis, Skye, Mull and Islay each sending 4 representatives to Tynwald, and Man 16, totalling 32. Somerled's victories in the 1150s brought about a cut in the Scottish isles' representation to 8, which left 24. Even when the Scottish isles were lost to it, Tynwald seems to have kept appointing 8 Manxmen to represent their interests, and the number has remained to this day. But what is mainly of interest to me is those rushes that were (and still are, as would have been seen on Wednesday) spread on the steps of the Tynwald "for a sign of giving obedience". Obedience to whom?

Well, other books give the answer. R H Kinvig, in his 'History of the Isle of Man', says, "The practice of strewing the pathway from St John's Church to Tynwald Hill with rushes goes back to pagan days in the Island when Manannan, the Celtic sea-god, received rushes as his annual tribute." And if we dig deeper into this custom we find Manannan and St John the Baptist thoroughly twined together in the popular consciousness. Not only were green rushes strewn over the pathway from St John's Church to Tynwald (and also over the floor of the church at one end and the surface of the hill at the other), but seemingly at one time a quantity of grass or rushes was laid out for Manannan at two mountain peaks in Man every Midsummer's eve — that is, on the eve of St John's Day. A Manx ballad printed in 1768 states that on the eve of St John's grass was taken to the top of Barrule (probably South Barrule) or left with Manannan above Keamool. The location of Keamool is not known; nor is that of Mame, as this second mountain is called elsewhere, but at least it looks like what we would call in Scottish Gaelic *Màm*, a cleavage, gap or ridge between mountains. Elsewhere we are told that the people "bore green meadow-grass up to the top of Barrule in payment of rent to Mannan-beg-mac-y-Leir".

This, as John Rhys pointed out, was very clearly a custom of Celtic origin. Manannan, son of Lir, was a Celtic god whose name probably derives from that of the Island. His father, Lir, gave us Shakespeare's King

Lear and the Gaelic expression *thar lear* ‘over the sea’. Manx tradition made Manannan the first Manxman. As the Landsdowne Manuscript puts it: “Be it remembred that one Manaman Mack Clere, a paynim [pagan], was the first inhabitour of the ysle of Man, who by his Necromancy kept the same, that when he was assaylid or invaded he wold rayse such mystes by land and sea that no man might well fynde owte the ysland, and he would make one of his men seeme to be in nombre a hundred.”

A W Moore, in ‘Folk-Lore of the Isle of Man’ (1891), refers to “a letter written in 1636, by Bishop Parr to Archbishop Neile, in which he states that on St John Baptist’s Day he found the people in a chapel dedicated to that Saint ‘in the practice of gross superstitions’, which he caused ‘to be cried down’, and in the place of them ‘appointed Divine services and sermons’. We can only wish that the good Bishop had informed us what these ‘gross superstitions’ were. We have already seen . . . that Manannan received his tribute of rushes on this day, and it is curious that the pathway leading up to the chapel is still covered with rushes supplied by a small farm close by [Ballaleece], which is held on the tenure of doing this service.”

On the face of it, there are good reasons why the pagan Manannan should have turned into the Christian John. Manannan is associated with all water, wisdom, and the sun; John, too, is associated with water and wisdom, and his feast day is at midsummer. Manannan is a tutor/donor figure associated with wisdom and creation; there was a miraculous element in John’s birth, and he was certainly the tutor of Christ. Manannan is the otherworld patron of heroes, John is the wilderness patron of Christ. Manannan was fosterfather to the god Lugh, John in Gaelic tradition was the fosterbrother of Christ. In Irish legends Manannan “stirs the sea”, in Scottish tradition Manannan/John sends seaweed to provide fertility for the land.

Which brings me back to the Scottish customs mentioned in my last article. A Lewis reader has pointed out to me that the “sea-god” sacrificed to in Ness was called not *Seonaidh* but *Seònaidh*, with long ò. This points to a derivation directly from medieval church Latin *Iohannes*, so I withdraw my suggestion that they got the name from Fife fishermen. The same reader recalls that the Siadair a’ Chladaich people used to put something into the sea, but he cannot remember what.

I wonder if it was porridge? An account from Lewis, contributed by the Rev. Malcolm Macphail from Bragar to ‘Folk-Lore’ in 1890, tells how a ‘sowing porridge’ called *lite cuire* or *lite Mhanntain* was quickly made with the help of the quern from whatever seed was left over at the end of the sowing. The thicker and richer the porridge, the thicker and richer the crop would be in harvest. *Manntan* is certainly Manannan. MacPhail had a rhyme that went like this:

*Latha lite Mhanntain,
Latha as fhearr air bith —
An coire ’s an cròcan
'S am maide crom air chrith.*

(‘The day of Manntan’s porridge, / The best day of all — / The kettle and the crook / And the crooked stick a-shaking.) It is surely no coincidence that Bragar had a Church of St John the Baptist. And if we look for further possible links, we find them. A little further south, in Uig, there was a surname MacMhannain, which was anglicised as Buchanan. This would appear to reveal Manannan being used as a forename. Alternatively, if Manannan was regarded as a saint’s name, the secular forename would have been Gille Mhanannain, giving MacilleMhanannain, shortened to MacMhannain. This is quite possible, as there is a place Kildavanan in the Isle of Bute — Cille *Do Mhannain*, the Church of St Manannan. So it seems that Manannan might be christianised sometimes not as John, but as himself.

What, finally, of the grass and rushes sacrificed to Manannan in Man? They appear in Scotland in the form of reeds. Alexander Carmichael tells us in ‘Carmina Gadelica’ of a “sacrifice” in which reeds bound together by cords, called a *cliar* (a word usually meaning a group of poets or clergy!) were burnt by fishermen on *oidhch’ Fhéill Eathain*, St John’s eve. This was usually done on the seashore, but sometimes in the boat at sea, while a verse of incantation was intoned to *Rìgh na Mara* (the King of the Sea) to send fish. “No word of this curious hymn is now available,” says Carmichael, but it is probably similar to the one from Iona quoted last week.

*A dhé na mara,
Cuir todhar san tarraing . . .*

(‘O god of the sea, / Put weed in the tide . . .)

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