

Manx Singers and the BBC

by Maurice Powell



This is the first in an occasional series of articles about popular Manx singers who, for various reasons, chose not to develop their careers beyond the Isle of Man, but were nevertheless heard on the radio from time to time performing traditional Manx songs together with popular songs and arias from the worlds of opera, operetta and oratorio.

'Our May'

May Clague, 'One of the finest voices the Island has ever produced', and arguably 'Manxland's favourite soprano' throughout the 1920s and '30s, possessed a 'glorious soprano voice' and could have enjoyed a career as a concert artiste, 'but was content to use her rare gift in bringing

joy to the people in her own native Island'. Long after she had retired many still recalled her singing *The Pipes of Pan* from Monckton's *The Arcadians* in her palmy days* '... delivered with real charm in a voice of unusual clarity, (with) a beautiful tone across a fine range'.

* *Mona's Herald* 30.07.46.

She was born Mary Louise Clague on 9th February 1890, the eldest of three daughters of William Joseph (a butcher) and Margaret Louisa Clague in Onchan. Her mother was a respectable pianist; her grandfather, a singer 'who sang all day as he followed the plough'; an uncle, Thomas Clague, was 'a fine tenor' and gold medallist at the Manx Music Festival. May's youthful talent was first noticed by Mr Fielding, the headmaster at Murray's Road School, and a neighbour, who gave May her first singing lessons before she was ten years old. The first song she sang in public was a setting of Tennyson's *Song of the Brook*. She was a lifetime pupil of Bella Cannell.*

* The three Cannell sisters were well known in Island musical circles. Bella, a medallist of the Royal Academy of Music, was a highly respected teacher of voice production and singing, choir trainer and conductor; Lizzie Cannell, LRAM, a piano teacher, and Miss E. Cannell, a violin, banjo and mandoline teacher. Their pupils' concerts were a part of the Island's concert calendar for many years.

The earliest references to May in the local newspapers came in 1903, when she gave a recitation at a concert in Agneash Primitive Methodist Chapel, and in 1906 when her name appears twice after she sang at a St. Matthew's Mutual Improvement Society entertainment, and later when she sang Frank L. Moir's *Down the Vale* at a St. Matthew's tea concert.

The next reference to May in the local newspapers was in 1910 when she was placed 1st in the Special Soprano Class at the Manx Music Festival (with 59 marks, only 1 mark below the maximum), and first revealed as ‘a young talent to watch’ after her performance of Ketélbey’s *Heart’s Awakening* which impressed the adjudicator Mr John Ivimey - the organist of Dulwich College, London - by displaying ‘rather more brilliance’ than her fellow contestant. The following year she was again placed 1st in the same class (with 58 marks), which led the same adjudicator to compliment her on an ‘excellent performance’ with the ‘spirit of the song fully realised’. May was also placed 1st in the soprano and alto, and the soprano and tenor duet classes, and appeared in the Festival Concert.

That same year ‘the youthful and brilliant Douglas soprano’ took part in the Jubilee Carnival Music Festival and won 1st prize with Edward German’s *Oh! Love that Rulest* with a performance which drew the following comments from the adjudicator Dr. W. G. McNaught: ‘. . . her interpretation was fresh and bright (and) she sang intelligently and with a beautiful, glorious, refreshing young voice . . . I think we have discovered the Manx nightingale’.*

* Dr. William Gray McNaught (1849-1918) was a highly regarded musical educator and choir trainer. He founded the Music in Wartime Committee, a member of the Association of Competitive Music Festivals and associated with the Tonic Sol-Fa College and Tonic Sol-Fa Association.

May was placed 1st in the Special Soprano Class at the Manx Music Festival again in 1912, when she sang *Oh! Had I Jubel’s Lyre* from Handel’s oratorio *Joshua* (achieving the maximum 60 marks), and 1913, when her ‘. . . charming voice and production’ in her performance of *With Verdure Clad* from Haydn’s *Creation* was especially noted. In June that year the ‘popular Manx soprano’ appeared at a Palace Sunday Concert* with the Palace Grand Orchestra under Harry Wood, when her ‘. . . splendid singing, full of sweetness and sympathy, given in those rich and thrilling notes which never fail to captivate her audiences . . . won the hearts of all those who listened to her’. In 1914 May sang a solo role in Elgar’s *The Banner of St George*, conducted by the composer, who was an adjudicator at the Manx Music Festival that year, in the Festival Concert.

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 08.06.1912.

In 1915 May left the Island to stay with a sister in Bedford and was introduced to Dr Harry Harding, the organist at St. Paul’s Church, Bedford, and conductor of the Bedford Musical Society, who in turn introduced her to the managers of the Corn Exchange, the Royal County Theatre and the Picture Palace where Sunday concerts for soldiers on leave were given.* She was also introduced to the Duchess of Bedford and Lord and Lady Amptill whose homes were turned into hospitals and convalescent homes for the duration of the war, and where she was able to engage in a series of recitals with such eminent singers as the baritone Charles Tree, the bass Herbert Brown and Australian baritone Harold Williams. She was about to embark for France with Lena Ashwell’s concert party when news of the death in action of her brother resulted in her returning to the Isle of Man to be with her father.

* *Isle of Man Times*, 16.11.1940. At one concert a distinctly Manx voice rang out from the back of the hall: ‘Give us Ellan Vannin, gel!’ It was Billy Cain, an old friend from home.

‘Her lovely voice rang through nearly every church, chapel and schoolroom on the Island’.

Although frequently urged to embark on an operatic or concert career May decided to stay on the Island and throughout the next two decades frequently appeared in pantomime, musical comedy, minstrel shows, operetta and opera, and her chief love: oratorio. She was a guest soloist in the first Douglas Amateur Orchestral Society* concert in November 1918 together with Charles Tree, baritone, and ‘cellist Miss Nancy Cowell. In November 1919 she married Robert Bridson,** a plumber with Douglas Corporation, and well known as a football referee.

* The ancestor of the present-day Isle of Man Symphony Orchestra.

** Robert (Bobby) Henry Bridson (c. 1888 – 1959), was a member of the Isle of Man Referees Society, and a champion bowls player.

Devoted as she was to the Isle of Man, May Clague may not have regarded her broadcast concerts as the peaks of her career, but in 1926 she had the honour of being the first Manx singer to be heard on the radio in a selection of Manx songs as part of a concert of Manx music from the BBC Manchester, on Tynwald Day, 5th July. The radio orchestra was conducted by Harry Wood in performances of his own *Manx Airs*, J. E. Quayle’s *Mannin*,* and a *Manx Suite* by F. W. de Massi-Hardman.** ‘Great numbers of Manx people “listened in” to the Island’s loveliest soprano’ in her selection of Manx songs mainly taken from Manx National Songs and specially arranged for the broadcast by Mr J. Cowell: *Mylecharine*; *Ne Kirree fo’n Snaightey (The Sheep Under the Snow)*; *Bollan Bane*; *O what if the Fowler my Blackbird has taken*; *When Childher Plays*; *Hush, Little Darling*; *The Fairies Dance*; *Land of Our Birth*; *Ellan Vannin*. ***

* See Maurice Powell, John Edward Quayle, manxmusic.com.

** Born in Ramsbottom, Lancashire, F. W. de Massi-Hardman was the composer of *Silhouettes* for piano; *Caravan*; *Humoresque* and the song *The Vow*; the orchestral tone poems *The Northwest* and *The Song of the North*; a *Manx Suite* (in five movements), and a *Manx Rhapsody* for piano and orchestra, which are unknown today.

*** *Mona’s Herald*, 23.06.26; *Isle of Man Examiner*, 02-07-26 and 16-07-26.

During the broadcast Mr A. H. Teare MHK gave a short talk entitled ‘The Lil’ Island’ and Mr Goldie-Taubman, the President of the World Manx Association, broadcast a message of greeting to Manx listeners everywhere. May’s name was added to the BBC’s list of performers for the future.

May’s voice was next heard over the air waves in a broadcast of Manx songs on Tuesday 26th April 1932, between 8.00 and 8.15 pm on the North Regional Station.* The original suggestion for the broadcast was for a selection of Haydn Wood’s songs, but the BBC decided in favour of recital of Manx songs, with the promise that ‘at a later date’ May would be invited to broadcast a further recital including songs by Haydn Wood.** The *Examiner* recorded that ‘she sang with great charm . . . only a singer with a real Manx heart could sing the dear old Manx songs as Miss Clague sang them with such a depth of feeling’. People stood in their homes and joined in ‘with tear-dimmed eyes’ when she sang *Ellan*

Vannin, and she received countless letters of appreciation following the broadcast. As the broadcast coincided with the Children's Festival at the Manx Music Festival it was suggested that loudspeakers could be installed at the Palace so that the recital could be heard as part of the festival. It is not recorded whether this idea came to fruition.

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 22.04.32.

** May Clague did sing Haydn Wood's *A Brown Bird Singing* at the opening Sunday Concert of the summer season at the Palace in May.

In June 1934 May gave an interview to the Woman's Realm column of the *Examiner** in which she discussed her life and career and reported that, sadly, a current throat problem would prevent her from giving a broadcast recital of Manx Songs for an Empire programme in June.

* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 01.06.1934, Woman's Realm no. 14.

May's name is absent from the local newspapers between 1935 and 1945 except as a regular subscriber to the Manx Music Festival Prize Fund, but in July 1947 her name appears in the *Mona's Herald* as the teacher of a young talented singer who had appeared the previous year at a Palace Sunday Concert, eighteen-year-old Elsie Jackson,* a Palace usherette, who had been 'discovered' by the Polish tenor Herman Simberg just a week earlier. The 'golden-haired girl with a golden voice', a charming personality, remarkable self-composure and a confident stage presence, made her debut before an audience of three thousand people with *The Pipes of Pan* from Lionel Monckton's *The Arcadians*, the aria *One Fine Day* from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and Eric Coates' *Birdsong at Eventide*, which 'truly crowned delightful performances' and received several 'spontaneous bursts of applause'. It was hoped that the management of the Palace & Derby Castle Company would sponsor Elsie Jackson to travel to London for further tuition and auditions.

* *Mona's Herald*, 30.07.46. I have been unable to unearth very little about Elsie Jackson and any career she might have pursued. In November 1946 she appeared at a British Legion Concert at the Villa Marina with the Wanders Male Voice Choir and other local vocalists. The last reference to her in the local newspapers is a report in the *Ramsey Courier* on 23rd January 1948 when she took a leading role in a successful run of the pantomime *Dick Whittington* at the Pavilion, Torquay. The report confirms that after leaving the Island she became a pupil of (Madame) Vera Garbutt in Brighton - a prominent dance teacher, who produced large-scale musical shows for various amateur societies - and had given 'many concert performances in the South of England'.

At the time when Joe Loss and his orchestra were commencing their first summer season at the Villa Marina, the triumph of May's young protégé will have brought back memories of her own humble beginnings and early triumphs as a young singer in Douglas during the years when an artiste of a quite different calibre – the great chorus singer Florrie Forde – was embarking on the decades when she dominated the stage at the Derby Castle.

May Clague died on 8th May 1970 aged 80 years.

Ramsey, November 2021.