

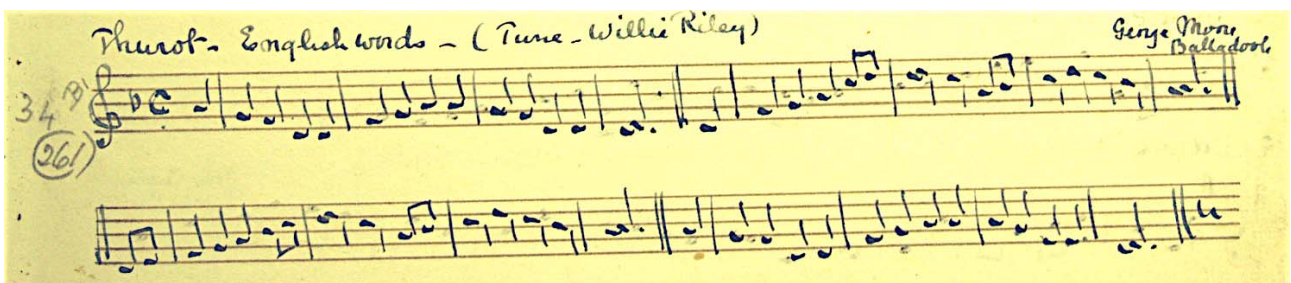
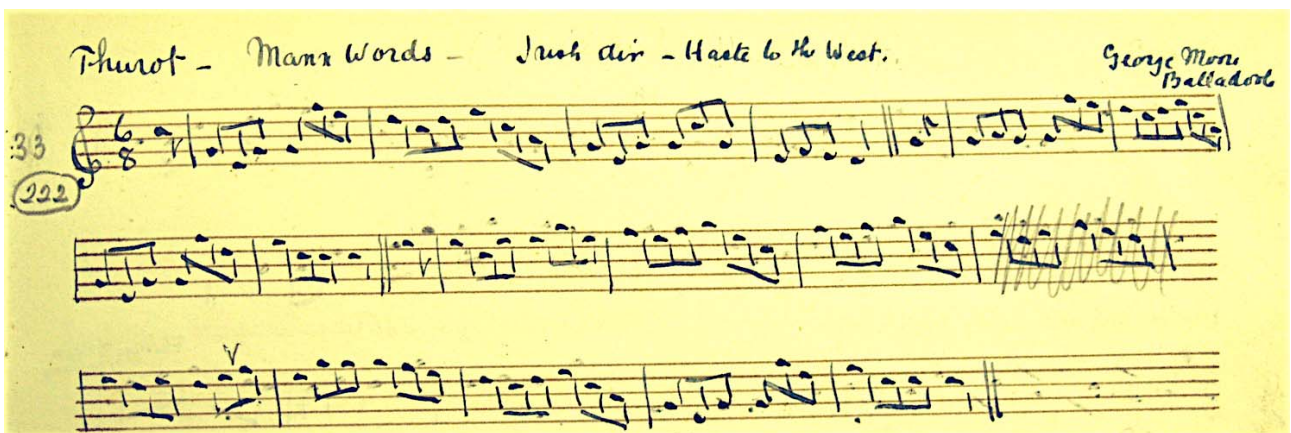
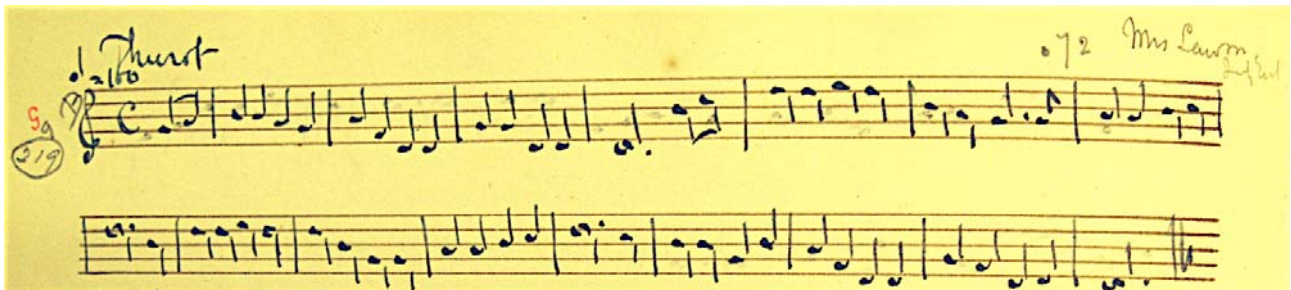
Histories and Mysteries – the secret life of traditional music in the Isle of Man

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 fourth 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.

Thurot



Three of the Thurot ballad tunes from the manuscript music books (Copyright Manx National Heritage)

The manuscript music books contain a group of six tunes, three of which are shown above, that have the title Thurot, a French naval officer and sometime smuggler. Two of these tunes are in a fourth manuscript music book in the Clague collection. Although the major part of the traditional music collection is in the three books looked at so far, there is a fourth book mainly containing

arrangements of collected tunes. However, it also contains some tunes in “fair copy” (those noted from informants and copied out, or inked over, in a neat hand).

Two of the six tunes are in triple time (6/8), the other four being in quadruple time (4/4 and 2/4). They were all tunes used for a ballad about Thurot, but a ballad line sung to a 4/4 (or 2/4) tune would be a different metre to a line sung in 6/8 - one set of words probably wouldn't fit tunes in two different timescales. Was there more than one ballad, and if so, how many?

Even without the differences in time signature, the manuscript makes it clear there was more than one set of words. Two of the tunes are noted above the stave as having “English words”, one in 4/4 and the other in 2/4. One of the tunes, this time in 6/8, is noted as having “Manx words”.

Anne Gilchrist, writing about the Clague manuscript music collection in the *Journal of the English Folk Song Society* in 1925, mentioned there were several different ballads attached to the Thurot tunes. Much of the information about the ballads comes from: *Popular Songs Illustrative of the French Invasions of Ireland, Part II, The Capture of Carrickfergus by Thurot in 1760*. This was published by the Percy Society in London, 1846, and contained accounts edited from various sources edited by T Crofton Croker, a member of the Percy Society's Council (the Percy Society was formed in 1840 to publish rare and limited edition books and documents).

The first ballad about Thurot's exploits is the *Siege of Carrickfergus*. According to one of Croker's correspondents, a Mr MacSkimin, this was written by William Magennis just after Thurot's death in 1760, and sung to the “well known melody *Haste to the Wedding*”.

The second ballad noted by Croker is *Thurot's Dream*, the title of which refers to a story obtained from the cleric John Wesley's journal of 5th May, 1760. This reads: “the next morning [the day of the battle] he [Thurot] was walking on deck. He frequently started without any visible cause, stopped short, and said ‘I shall die today’”. In the ballad, this is elaborated to include his dream the previous night in which his grandfather Farrel came to him and chastised him for lying too long in Carrickfergus when English warships were approaching.

The third ballad, the *Battle of Ramsey*, appears in the *Manx Society*, volume xxi, 1873. It was noted down from the singing of “a person in Baldwin, who stated that he had often heard his old father sing it, but did not know the author”. The reference to Baldwin, in the centre of the Island, suggests the correspondent was Philip Caine (“Phillie the Desert”) of East Baldwin. He supplied one of the tunes to the ballad in around 1896, aged 75.

The first two lines of the *Battle of Ramsey* were quoted by a Mr Jerdan, another of Croker's correspondents and member of the Percy Society's Council, who recalled from his childhood that it was sung in Kelso in the Scottish borders.

The fourth ballad, *The Naval Battle of Thurot and Elliot*, was printed for the first time in the *Manx Society* volume mentioned above, apparently taken from a manuscript copy in Manx. A translation into English is also given and a note says the whole ballad was “considerably enlarged” from the traditional version by J T Clarke, chaplain of St Marks in the parish of Malew.

This ballad is in a metre that would suit a 6/8 tune. As the first ballad (the *Siege of Carrickfergus*) was noted by Croker as being sung to *Haste to the Wedding* (in 6/8 time), and the other tunes are in 4/4 or 2/4 time, it is very likely this one was sung to the other double jig (that sung by W Corlett, a miner of Laxey, aged 79).

Of the four 'different' Thurot tunes (three of the six in the manuscript books being close variants of each other) two are known elsewhere.

The first of these, collected from George Moore of Balladoole, Castletown, is called Haste to the West in the manuscript, but is more commonly known as Haste to the Wedding. It is a 6/8 double jig in the ionian mode (major key). As mentioned above, it was used for the Siege of Carrickfergus ballad.

It was also well known as a dance tune, probably of Scottish origin, also appearing in the 1927 edition of the Roche Collection of Traditional Irish Music as a long, or contre dance, alongside others such as the Waves of Torey and the Walls of Limerick. And in England, The Court Journal, Gazette of the Fashionable World, January 12th, 1833, records it as being danced at Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire by the Dukes of Rutland and Wellington, amongst other members of the aristocracy.

However, it seems from the history of the Siege of Carrickfergus that the tune travelled to the Isle of Man with the ballad. The 'b' part of the Manx version is different from the commonly known tune still played at ceilis and traditional music sessions.

The second Thurot tune known outside the Island is called Willie Riley in the manuscript and also collected from George Moore. It seems to take its title from a ballad printed around 1821 called The Trial of Willy Reilly for Running Away with Coolen Bawn. The tune is in 4/4 time and aeolian mode (minor key) and appears with the Thurot's Dream ballad in Gilchrist's article.

Her article also contains a variant of the tune in the dorian mode that doesn't appear in the manuscript books, bringing the total number of tunes, including variants, to seven. This raises another question, also raised by others: how many manuscript music books, other than those in the Manx museum archive today, once existed in the Clague collection?

Another indication that Gilchrist was looking at a different version of the music books is that she mentions that Willie Riley was from "Dr Clague's pencil manuscripts". The surviving books do contain pencil handwriting, some of which has been inked over. But none of them could now be described as "pencil manuscripts". Did Gilchrist have access to different, now lost, music books?

Of the two Thurot tunes not known outside the Island (at least to the author's knowledge) one is a double jig, the other a 4/4 tune. The 4/4 tune is the one mentioned that has three variants (one is actually written in 2/4 but they are all basically the same tune). Two of the variants are in the ionian mode (major key), the third is in the mixolydian mode if corrected (it seems to have an F# key signature missing, also noted by Gilchrist). These three tunes were possibly used for the Battle of Ramsey Ballad.

The final tune not known outside the Island is a double jig in the ionian mode (major key) and is that collected from W Corlett. As with many double jig tunes used for ballads there is only one strand of music, rather than the two, 'a' and 'b' parts normally expected in dance tunes. The Haste to the West/Wedding tune used for the Siege of Carrickfergus is an exception, possibly because it was already a well known dance tune when it was used for the ballad.

Although this tune is in 6/8 time, the version Gilchrist gives has pauses (fermata) over some notes that break up the rhythm and makes it more song-like. The manuscript version doesn't have these pauses.

All six of the Thurot ballad tunes in the music books, seven if the extra Willie Riley tune in the Gilchrist article is included, come from widely different parts of the Isle of Man: Castletown to Jurby; Baldwin to Laxey. They were collected from five different informants, two of whom were noted as being in their late 70's, in other words born about 60 years after the events in the ballad and just after the wars between England and France had finally ended.

The tunes were used for four ballads, which used both the English and Manx languages. They may not have been sung for 20 (or more) years before being collected, but even so, this means that the death in battle of Francois Thurot was being sung about 100 years after it happened. What lies behind the popularity of the tunes and the ballads associated with them? Who was Thurot and why did his story have such widespread appeal in the Isle of Man and elsewhere?

The accounts given by Croker reveal that Thurot was born in Boulogne in about 1734 (other accounts have him born at Nuits-St-Georges in 1727). His grandfather was an Irishman named Farrel who was a captain in the Irish army and later a member of James II's household.

An amusing anecdote about Farrel and King James tells that the king lost his hat while boarding a boat at Waterford after losing the Battle of the Boyne. The wind blew the king's hat into the sea and, not wishing to lose time retrieving it, carried on boarding. Farrel offered the king his hat as a replacement, to which the king apparently quipped that 'if he should lose a crown in Ireland, he certainly would remember that he gained a hat there.'

When Thurot was fifteen he went to sea with a descendant of Farrel who was in the smuggling trade. During the 18th century smuggling became big business in and around the coasts of Britain and Ireland, and also France. The chief aim of the smuggler is to avoid paying high duties on imported luxury goods (brandy, wine, silks, and so on). Both England and France levied such duties at various times during that century to help pay for their struggle to dominate the growing trade from the "new" world and the far east.

This made it a worthwhile risk to to bring goods to a safe place close to their eventual market and smuggle them on. The Isle of Man was one of those places (as were the Channel Islands) being able to levy its own duties. Any goods imported there legally could be stored before being (illegally) run with fast boats to neighbouring shores.

Thurot's introduction to this trade meant he became familiar with the north Irish sea, learned English and Gaelic and (according to local tradition) had a cottage in the Isle of Man. According to Durand's account, he also lived for a time in London, where he gained a reputation for being charming, honourable, fair minded and keen to learn about the sciences and new technologies.

So, he was well known and popular amongst gentry and ordinary people, especially those connected with sea trade.

Later in his career, he was arrested in France for smuggling but used his charm and connections to gain his freedom in exchange for using his knowledge and skills to help the French king in the escalating conflict with the English. This led to his fateful last voyage. He was given command of a small fleet of six ships, carrying 2,200 or so French army troops, augmented with Irish and Scottish regiments.

His orders were to attack Irish ports to weaken any will to join the English fight against France, while a much larger French force would attack further south. He did this by first sailing to Gothenburg in Sweden, where his ships were modified to look like English warships. After taking on provisions, they left for Ireland around the coast of Scotland.

It was November, and the sea conditions were very poor for the heavily laden ships. During the storms of the next two months the squadron was scattered, with some ships having to return to France as best they could. Thurot led the remaining three ships carrying, according to Captain Elliot's account written later, about 1,245 troops. They sailed on to the north east of Ireland and eventually to Carrickfergus. By this time, their provisions were scarce and the crew and troops beginning to starve.

This, then, is the background to Thurot's 'invasion of Ireland'. The invaders were numerous and well equipped but in a desperate condition; the defenders were poorly equipped and outnumbered. The troops were apparently ordered to obey Thurot's wish that the town and its people were not harmed. Having shown their superior numbers, Thurot planned to bargain for provisions so they could return to France. The order wasn't fully obeyed and stories of drunkenness and intimidation by the French were spread, though others recall restraint and discipline.

The town leaders played for time, saying they needed to send to Belfast to make up the stores demanded of them, meanwhile the local militias were being mustered and resistance organised. To add to the danger to the French, an English navy squadron under captain John Elliot was heading north towards from Kinsale in his ship *Aeolus* with two others.

Thurot had waited for the promised provisions but he must have realised the longer he stayed the more likely he would be attacked. The sense of foreboding created by this situation no doubt lay behind his dream, and the ballad (*Thurot's Dream*) that described it. So he gave the order to leave with what they had taken and purchased and headed for the channel north of the Isle of Man. It was here that the sea battle took place (being the main subject of the *Naval Battle of Thurot and Elliot*).

Thurot's ships were outmanoeuvred and outgunned by Elliot's with around three hundred French killed, including Thurot. He was said to have acted bravely, having lost an arm he continued to command but was killed by grapeshot to his chest.

The battle was watched by Bishop Mark Hildesley from Bishops court on the north west coast of the Island, and it seems that many others on the Island also watched it. Hildesley later created a commemorative feature in the glen opposite Bishops court called *Mount Aeolus* after Elliot's ship.



A print of the battle off the west coast of the Isle of Man (Copyright The Maritime Collection)

Thurot's body, his broken ships and the surviving French troops and sailors, were escorted to Ramsey where his funeral was held (though another account has his body washed up on the Scottish coast sewn into the carpet from the captain's cabin, along with many other bodies).

The amount of detail about Thurot's life and death included here perhaps outweighs the details concerning the music. However, the reason for including it is to give a clear impression of the events that produced the ballad tunes noted in the Isle of Man nearly 140 years later.

Thurot was thirty three when he died. In that short life he had become "king of the smugglers" and French invader. On a personal level, according to Croker's sources, Captain Elliot praised his courage and mourned his loss. On an international level, France's ambitions had been dealt a blow.

The events Thurot became embroiled with reverberated throughout Britain, Ireland, France and the rest of Europe. This manifested itself in Britain and Ireland in newspapers and magazines, and in ballad sheets.

But in the Isle of Man Thurot was known personally. He was involved in the trade that was responsible for much of the Island's wealth and employed many people there. Six years later, the same trade brought about the purchase of the Island's customs rights by the British Crown. It was an attempt to stop the loss of revenue that dented Manx pride (and hit their pockets).

Although the Manx would not have sympathised with the French cause, the events perhaps had a different resonance there, reflected in the popularity of the Thurot ballads and music over such a long period.

Acknowledgments

Manx National Heritage for the images of Thurot tunes from the Clague MS.

The Maritime Gallery for the print depicting the sea battle between Thurot and Elliot.

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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Published April 2014