

## “JOHN KELLY THE FISHERMAN OF BALDRINE”



Mona Douglas was always mindful to name names when it came to mentioning those from whom she collected whether it was folklore, song, or dance. To follow up on these individuals is, however, difficult. Unlike the singers found in the 1890s by the Gill brothers, Dr John Clague, and A.W. Moore, and those later by Sophia Morrison and Josephine Kermod in the 1900s, where the census records for that period is available, with Mona we are pitched forward into the 1920s—and arguably the 1930s as well—for the period in which she was active in collecting. As the latest census to which there is access is the one for 1911 there is a clear problem then in trying to identify just who her informants were.

“I got to know another man who proved a rich source of material, especially dance material—John Kelly the Fisherman, of Baldrine” She went to describe him as “a merry, practical sailor-man and one of the best dancers in the Island, with an astonishing flair for natural history and a fine collection of sea birds and beasts captured and preserved by himself over many years and proudly displayed in cases in his little parlour.” He should then be easy to find as there is a full name given, an occupation, and a place of residence. But here one hits the wall of the 100 year moving wall of access to the census and so the obvious question then is what records are available in the Island which can substitute for the detail of the census? One’s first thought is the electoral register—but there are no *Voters’ Lists* between 1919 and 1988 as they have simply been destroyed, an astonishing and shameful act of vandalism of the Island’s historical record. So the use of these was clearly a non-starter not at the end of the day but at its start....

With Kelly the clue as to who he was came from a car accident in 1931 with the resultant claim for damages against him decided in court in 1932 and reported in the *Mona’s Herald*. A “John James Kelly, of Baldrine” had knocked down and badly injured a member of the Boys’ Brigade when three of them were out for a run early in the morning. They were part of a party visiting the Island and camping at Onchan and the accident happened near the bottom of the Whitebridge. It was recorded that “[t]he driver of the car [...] said on the morning of the accident he was returning from a boat run to Garwick.” Curiously, Kelly was to be involved in 1935 in an incident with a car where this time he was the injured party and compensated as a result.

John James Kelly died in 1938 at the age of 78; his wife, Hannah, had died in 1936 and she was mentioned in a brief notice of her husband’s death that “[s]he was a much-loved old lady, and was a well-known figure for many years, driving a little pony and cart into Douglas to deliver the catch of the fishing boat manned by the ‘old salt’ and his sons.” At the time of their deaths they were living at “Baldrine

Cottage” on Baldrine Farm Road in Garwick (later sold by auction in 1939). Kelly was an enthusiastic naturalist and contributed pieces to the newspapers on the topic as well as given evidence before official committees of Tynwald on issues concerned with the fishing industry. In the 1901 census, he was living at Ballig and enumerated as a general labourer with his wife and seven children (aged from fourteen down to two, four boys and three girls). They were to have thirteen children in all and in 1933 it was reported that they had fifty grandchildren and great-grandchildren. That same year they celebrated their 53rd Wedding Anniversary in novel fashion (hence the newspaper report) by taking a trip on a flying-boat, the “Cloud of Iona” from Douglas Bay (presumably in a circuit around the Island though that is not stated).

Both he and Hannah were Manx speakers. In 1891, they were living on what is described as “Baldrine Hill” and just up from the Cloven Stones. Again he was listed as a labourer. It is only in 1881 when his occupation is given as a fisherman and they were then resident in Laxey. In 1871, he was 11 years old and living with his parents, John and Eleanor Kelly, at Barrose in Lonan. He was the eldest of his six siblings, all bar Robert (aged 9) of whom were born in Lonan as was his mother, his father being born in Michael.

Kelly clearly had roots in Lonan but as seen here even the snapshots that the census provides show him moving around the parish and even when living at Garwick itself; also, the occupation of fisherman for which he is best remembered figures just the once in the census enumeration. This is in itself not surprising when one considers the seasonal nature of fishing as well as work on the land itself. It does not as a result make individuals easy to find.

But how important an informant was Kelly to Mona Douglas? To quote her at some length:

From Kelly I noted many songs and dances, and many a happy hour I have spent in his house practising steps, learning body movements, and going through intricate figures again and again until I was sure that I could follow my own written descriptions. For these practices his wife and young niece, and anyone else who happened to be in the house, would be pressed into service, and as by no means all of these folk were habitual dancers, the result would sometimes have appeared very funny to an observer. However, the impromptu demonstrations served their purpose, for without Kelly’s help I could never have noted down or taught, for instance, “Mylecharane’s March,” or the still more difficult and dramatic “Boaill Baccagh,” sometimes known as “The Fishermen’s Walk.”

That he was a key helper is shown by the dances recorded by her in the notebook now amongst her personal papers in the MNHL. Of the fourteen dances noted down, Kelly is credited with help for seven of them: Car Juan Noa, Cum yn shenn oanry cheh, The Frog Dance, Yn Guilley-Hesherene, Helg yn Dreean, Jemmy as Nancy, The Stick Dance (Mylecharane’s March). More importantly, he is the sole authority for four of them, namely Car Juan Noa, Yn Guilley-Hesherene, Helg yn Dreean, and

Jemmy as Nancy. There are just two other dances in the notebook attributed to a single individual—Eunysagh Vona, recorded from John Caine of Jurby, and the Sword Dance, taken down from Jackie Kermode of Port Mooar in Maughold.

The accounts of Kelly's life give two intriguing views—that of his wife making her way to Douglas with horse and cart to sell the fish caught by her husband and he making that same journey but in a motor car. The latter gives a jarring note of Modernity and should cause us to reflect that one can indeed be a folk dancer—and still drive a car at the same time....