

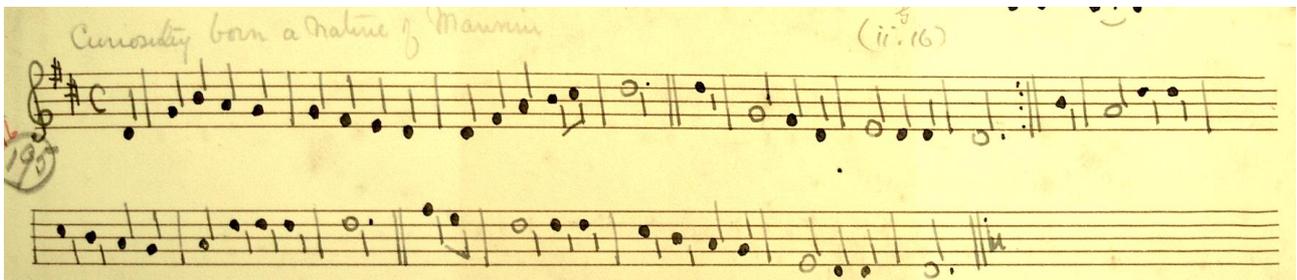
# Histories and Mysteries – the secret life of traditional music in the Isle of Man

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 seventh 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.

## Curiosity Born a Native of Mannin (The Green Linnet)



*The Manx version of the Green Linnet tune in the manuscript music books (Copyright Manx National Heritage)*

We have seen so far in this series that the Manx music collections contain a number of ballad tunes from Ireland and Britain that are interesting in ways other than just the fact that they found their way into the traditional music of the Island. 'Curiosity born a native of Mannin' is in the Clague manuscript (shown above) and is a variation of that used for the early 19th century ballad the Green Linnet, known in Ireland and Britain.

Ballad sheets, known as broadsides, mostly allowed singers to choose a suitable tune known to them by not naming tunes. As this tune was used for a particular ballad before it arrived in the Island (the Green Linnet), it is probable that it was learned elsewhere and brought there by an individual, the process of it being passed on producing a variation of the more widely known tune (which itself has other variations, but all modelled on the same basic melody).

Anne Gilchrist, in her articles on the Clague music manuscript, mentions this tune and ballad (*Journal of the Folk Song Society*, 28, 1924). She notes that the Manx tune "is very close to the Irish tune, though without its 'flat seventh'". By this she means the tune known in Ireland is in the mixolydian mode, sometimes called the [bag]pipe scale (this is mentioned in the second 'Histories and Mysteries' article on Mona's Delight). It is like the ionian, or major, scale but made distinctive by the seventh note being two semitones lower than the octave note rather than one, the 'flat seventh'. The Manx tune is in the ionian scale in 4/4 time.

There are two other points worth mentioning about the tune. Firstly, as it appears in the manuscript, its structure is different to the related tunes, making it impossible to fit it to the verses. The related tunes have an AABA structure (the first part, or 'a' tune, being repeated, followed by a second part, the 'b' tune, finally returning to the first part). However, the version in Clague has a repeated 'a'

tune and a single 'b', making it AAB. Gilchrist felt that this would have been a mistake and revised it in her article by writing it in an AABA structure.

A second point, not mentioned by Gilchrist, is that there are only seven bars in the 'a' tune, where there would normally be eight. This seems unusual but in listening to recorded versions in 4/4 time, seven bars completes the verse. There is at least one version in 6/8 that adapts the melody to that time and completes it in eight bars. It may be that it was originally a 6/8 tune, the rhythm does seem to scan better in triple time, or just that the verses have an odd meter that in the 4/4 tunes has resulted in an odd number of bars.

The ballad itself is about Napoleon Bonaparte, the "Green Linnet" apparently referring to his appearance in a green uniform (Gilchrist notes there is a coloured print of him at St Helena wearing a green uniform, but that "he looks more like a very rotund Robin than a Greenfinch").

The words are, as traditional ballads can be, strangely confused and obscure. It's main theme is the yearning for a lost leader (Napoleon Bonaparte), but expressed in a way that seems like mourning a lost lover. The initial character in the ballad is the "young native of Erin" (not Mannin) who is born

by curiosity (not born in Erin, or Mannin) to the banks of the Rhine. There, the young Irishman sees an "Empress", a "Goddess" in splendour, who tells the tale of her lover's achievements and downfall, and how she will search in vain for him.

**Maria Louisa's Lamentation  
THE GREEN LINNET**

Curiosity bore a young native of Erin;  
To view the gay banks of the Rhine, (singing)  
When an Empress he saw and the robe she was  
All over with diamonds did shine,  
A Goddess in splendor was never yet seen,  
To equal this fair one so mild and serene,  
In soft murmur she says my sweet linnnet so green,  
Are you gone, will I never see you more?

*Extract from an early 19th century broadside containing the Green Linnet (Copyright Bodleian Libraries)*

Who is the lover-empress? Napoleon had divorced his Empress Josephine in 1809 and he was still Emperor of France: to mourn his downfall would be premature, even if she were still in love with him. He married Maria Louisa of Austria the following year in what was seen as a marriage of convenience, not love. No reason for

casting her as the Empress, even though the ballad was sometimes called *Maria Louisa's Lamentation* [for] The Green Linnet.

And why are some facts incorrect or unclear? Napoleon was exiled in Elba, off the coast of Tuscany in the North of Italy, not "Elbe on the Rhine" as the ballad says.

Another line reads: "That Marengo, Saloney, around you did hover, And Paris rejoiced the next day". Napoleon's forces met the Austrians at Morengo near Alessandria, Northern Italy, in the Spring of 1800, and Napoleon had marched to nearby Sale (whose inhabitants are known as "Salesi"). But even, with these facts, it is difficult to make sense of the line. Perhaps it was originally "At Morengo, Salonesi around you did hover ...", but even that doesn't make full sense as there is no record of local people taking part in the battle.

Some of the facts recounted later also seem inaccurate. An article titled 'The National Song of Ireland' in Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country, June 1831 (vol. III, number XVII) says the ballad was "sung in the streets of Dublin, Cork and Limerick, about the time of his escape from Elba". This escape took place in 1814 but the ballad refers to the dead at the battle of Waterloo, which took place a year later (possibly the word "about" might suggest it could have been any time around 1814).

Although the tale is obscure it doesn't seem to have become so by oral transmission, details becoming distorted as it was learned by ear. The version (extract shown above) in the Bodleian

library dating from about 1830 contains all the confusing and unclear elements mentioned and was printed within living memory of the events that happened. Still, it is possible this version was a transcription of earlier, distorted versions.

Another reason for the lack of clarity in the words might be that, as the opening of the ballad reveals, the story is related from an Irish nationalist standpoint at a time when Ireland was part of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland. The “native of Erin” has figuratively been transported to the banks of the Rhine, where he sees the Empress in her splendour (in this context, her historical identity is unimportant). It is her voice that tells us (seemingly through that Irish person) of the downfall of the “Green Linnet”.

The title “Green Linnet” is allegorical, avoiding naming Napoleon directly, or implying any sympathy for his cause. Neither is his name mentioned elsewhere in the ballad, and, although it is historically muddled, it would be understood by listeners to be about Napoleon Bonaparte, and sympathetic to his cause. To the Irish, or at least, Irish factions, Napoleon represented an opportunity to break free of English rule, so the sympathetic tone was a very real and politically subversive sentiment to express.

Of course, both the Irish and Scots had reason to rebel against English domination of their affairs, and other ballads referred allegorically to real political leaders, a good example being the Blackbird (James III). But did the ballad have any political significance to Manx people and why does Clague seem to appropriate the ballad for the Island by changing the title to “Curiosity born [sic] a native of *Mannin*”?

On the first point, a few Manx tunes are versions of tunes used for Irish rebel songs, such as *Yn Speiy er my Gheaylin* (the Pick on my Shoulder), a variation of the Boys of Wexford, and *Inneen Kilkenny* (the Kilkenny [Farm] Women), a variation of Boolevogue (or Father Murphy), both being ballads about the Irish rebellion in 1798. Another possible example is the Manx tune called the *Wind that Shakes the Barley*, being the title of a rebel song of the mid-19th century. Lastly, there was political unrest in the Island following its purchase by the British crown in 1768. This was to such extent that, for many years (generations even), there was an antipathy towards English authority. Ballads such as *Thurot and Elliot*, discussed in the fourth ‘Histories and Mysteries’ article, would no doubt have fed on such antipathy. Would *Thurot and Napoleon* have been viewed like martyrs by some Manx, or least with some sympathy?

And what about appropriating ballads? Dr John Clague, Deemster Fred Gill and his brother W H Gill, with others, made the collections of traditional music and song fragments in the Isle of Man in the latter part of the 19th century. There are some examples in their notes and manuscripts that seem to imply there was an intention to publish some ‘Manxified’ versions of popular ballads. For example, the *Curragh of Kildare* is recorded in one transcription as ‘The Curragh of Lezayre’. Was there another Manx music book planned that was never finished?

As with so much relating to the music collections, we will probably never know with certainty the answers to these questions. However, this uncertainty makes for some fascinating speculation about what might have been.

### **Acknowledgments**

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*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](http://manxheritageshop.com)).*

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