

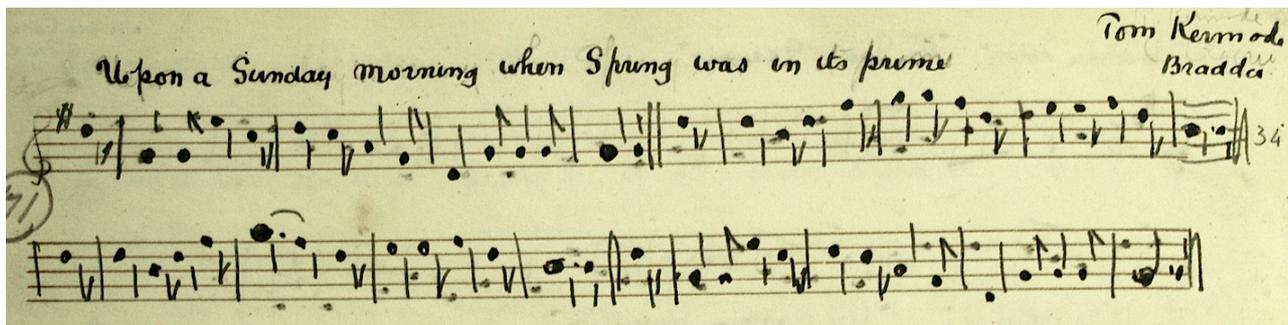
# Histories and Mysteries – the secret life of traditional music in the Isle of Man

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 and earlier. 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 eighth 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.

## Upon a Sunday morning when Spring was in its prime



*Upon a Sunday morning when Spring was in its prime, from the manuscript music books (Copyright Manx National Heritage)*

As we have seen so far, many (but by no means all) of the ballad tunes in the Clague manuscript books are variants of tunes found in Britain and Ireland, or have been used in the Isle of Man to sing ballads from Britain and Ireland. This tune illustrates both of these categories.

The title shows links to a ballad found in the English Folk Dance and Song Society's Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. This ballad is called *The Letter* and begins: "Twas on a Sunday morning, before the bells did peal". Although this opening line doesn't correspond exactly with the title in the Clague manuscript, the two are almost certainly linked with the Manx title reflecting a variation in the words of the ballad.

*The Letter* was collected by Sabine Baring-Gould and appears in his *Songs of the West*, 1905 edition. Baring-Gould, a clergyman and landowner, was born in Exeter and collected traditional ballads and music in Devon and Cornwall. The words of *The Letter* are what we would now regard as corny and overly sentimental:

*'Twas on a Sunday morning, before the bells did peal,  
A letter came through the window, with Cupid on its seal,  
And soon I heard a whisper, as sweet as breath of Spring;  
'Twas on a Sunday morning before the bells did ring.*

A tune was collected by Baring-Gould but it doesn't correspond with the tune in Clague. However, the ballad words and phrasing fit Upon a Sunday morning very well, making it more certain that the Letter was sung to the Manx tune and gave it its title.

The Manx tune has links outside the Isle of Man. A variation of it was popularised in the 1970's by traditional folk band Planxty with their recording of the Lakes of Pontchartrain. This was followed by a number of other recorded versions, which in turn made it popular in folk clubs. Planxty credited their source as being the English folk singer and songwriter Mike Waterson (1941 - 2011), however the ballad and the tune appear to have originated in the mid-19th century.

The ballad is about a traveller who falls in love with a woman who has given him shelter. She refuses him saying she is promised to another, so it is a story of unrequited love. It is set in the southern United States, the woman being a Louisiana Creole (of mixed European and African descent). A reference to taking the railway to Jackson Town seems to place the ballad after the 1860's, when the line was opened, and possible references to the American Civil War (1861 - 1865), with the traveller's "foreign money" being "no good", seems to support this (Confederate and United States currency would be refused outside their respective territories, which would have changed as the war progressed).

It isn't clear how the ballad came to England from the US but sufficient trade and travel existed between the two countries to have made it possible. The tune is in 3/4, but a 4/4 variation from the Scottish Borders, known as Jock O'Hazeldean (a version of which was collected by Anne Gilchrist), possibly makes it originally a Borders tune.

Both the English and Manx tunes are ionian (major) scale in 3/4 time, with an ABBA structure. Its most distinguishing feature is its settling on the seventh note of the scale in the 'b' tune (bars 6 and 10, the note in the Clague version above being F#).

The tune was also used for a ballad that became well known in the 1960's, Lily of the West sung by Bob Dylan (who later sang the Lakes of Pontchartrain to the same tune). This ballad pre-dates The Lakes of Pontchartrain and also has an American connection. Published broadsides of Lily of the West (also: Flora, Lily of the West) in the Bodleian Libraries collections are dated as early as 1819 and the words indicate an Irish or Scottish origin, the story being of a young man who goes to England:

*It's when I came to England some pleasures for to find  
Where I espied a damsel most pleasing to my mind*

There are American versions. One, dated 1860, begins:

*I just came down from Louisville, some pleasure for to find;  
A handsome girl from Michigan, so pleasing to my mind*

Although Bob Dylan sang the Lily of the West to the same tune as Lakes of Pontchartrain/'Twas on a Sunday morning, it is not certain that the 19th century versions were sung to the same tune. For example, a printed American version of 1860 (unusually for a broadside) mentions the tune to be used: Caroline of Edinburg-Town, an unrelated tune.

In or around 1896, Dr John Clague obtained the tune from Tom Kermode of Bradda, Port Erin (who supplied many traditional tunes, including Barbara Allen, featured earlier in this series). As with other tunes we have looked at, we will never be certain about parts of its history. Where did Tom Kermode hear the tune? Who paired it with the Letter? Was that done in the Island or before it arrived? Did it go to America or did it originate there?

These are the mysteries that make the study of connections between traditional music from different places fascinating.

### **Acknowledgments**

Manx National Heritage for the image of 'Upon a Sunday morning when Spring was in its prime', from the Clague MS.

*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)).*

*If you wish to contact the author about anything in these articles please email:  
[manx\\_trad\\_music@yahoo.com](mailto:manx_trad_music@yahoo.com)*

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