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dictionary



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PARGYS CAILLIT AND JOHN KELLY'S MANX DICTIONARY

A note on the textual history of *Pargys Caillit*, the eighteenth-century Manx version of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, arguing that the manuscript copy in Manx Museum MS 188A is in the hand of the lexicographer John Kelly and derives from another, lost copy lent to him by Philip Moore in 1776.

In the corpus of Manx religious literature, there is little than can be said to stand out on its literary merit alone. An exception is the eighteenth-century Manx retelling of John Milton's seventeenth-century English epic, *Paradise Lost*. This Manx reworking of Milton's narrative has traditionally been attributed to the Rev. Thomas Christian (1754–1828), the controversial Manx vicar whose serial 'fornication' scandalised the island's clerical authorities.¹ The 4,000-line Manx text, in rhymed verse, appeared in print as *Pargys Caillit* in the late eighteenth century. A more recent scholarly edition by the late R. L. Thomson has made the text accessible to scholars.² The earliest textual sources for *Pargys Caillit* are:

- i. an undated manuscript, Manx Museum MS 188A;
- ii. a printed volume, printed 'by and for C Briscoe' but without a date.

Briscoe had certainly printed the text by the time of John Feltham's tour of the Isle of Man in 1797 and 1798, as Feltham notes that, although undated, the volume was 'probably [printed] 1796'.³ In textual terms, there are some significant divergences between the printed text and the manuscript text in 188A, sufficient to conclude that they are independent of each other.

R. L. Thomson has demonstrated that the Manx scholar John Kelly (1750–1809) made copious use of *Pargys Caillit* in the compilation of his Manx-English dictionary; the poem 'is the largest source of quotations in the dictionary'.⁴ Identifying over a hundred quotations taken from *Pargys Caillit*

¹William Cubbon, 'Notes on Marown Church', *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 3 (1925), 13–22; C. I. Paton, *On Pargys Caillit: The Revd. Thomas Christian's Manks Paraphrase of Paradise Lost* (Douglas, 1947). The identification of Rev. Thomas Christian (1754–1828) as author of *Pargys Caillit* is cast into serious doubt by Max Wheeler, see note 10 below.

²R. L. Thomson, *Pargys Caillit: An Abridgment of John Milton's Paradise Lost by Thomas Christian with the Anonymous Translation of Thomas Parnell's The Hermit*, Centre for Manx Studies Research Report 3 (Douglas, 1995). This edition replaces an earlier edition published by the Manx Society, *Paradise Lost: A Poem by John Milton, Translated into the Manks Language by the Rev. Mr. Thomas Christian* (Douglas, 1874), which was based on a later manuscript deriving from the earliest printing. See Thomson, *Pargys Caillit*, 2, for discussion.

³John Feltham, *A Tour through the Island of Mann in 1797 and 1798; Comprising Sketches of its Ancient and Modern History* (Bath, 1798), 68, 72.

⁴Thomson, *Pargys Caillit*, 3. For discussion of John Kelly's work on a Manx-English dictionary, see R. L. Thomson, 'The Revd Dr John Kelly as lexicographer', *Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 9.4 (1987–89), 443–58.

in Kelly's dictionary, Thomson noted that where there was variation between the two sources of *Pargys Caillit*, Kelly's dictionary invariably agreed with the undated manuscript 188A. The implication of Thomson's observation is that John Kelly had access to this manuscript copy of *Pargys Caillit* rather than the printed text when compiling his dictionary. Given the similarity, as observed by Thomson, between John Kelly's hand and the hand which made the manuscript copy in 188A, it seems safe to assume that John Kelly was the scribe of 188A and that this manuscript or a closely related manuscript was the source of the quotations from *Pargys Caillit* used in Kelly's dictionary.

Questions remain, however, on the date of the Manx text, the circumstances under which Kelly gained access to it, and its use as a source in Kelly's dictionary.⁵ In the preface to his grammar, Kelly states that both the grammar and dictionary were begun in 1766.⁶ For practical reasons to do with Kelly's time on the island, however, Thomson extrapolates that Kelly was likely to have completed the dictionary between 1776 and 1779.⁷

A hitherto unknown piece of evidence indicates that Kelly came to possess a copy of *Pargys Caillit* in 1776. That evidence is contained in a small notebook once belonging to Rev. Philip Moore (1705–1783), the general editor of the Manx Bible. The notebook is now preserved in the Manx Museum as MS 00178A. A very close associate of John Kelly, Rev. Philip Moore had been his teacher in Douglas Grammar School. Moore subsequently employed his pupil and *protégé* as an amanuensis and assistant in the final stages of the translation and production of the Manx Bible.⁸ In this unpaginated notebook, Moore kept a record of his extensive personal library and noted loans of books he made to friends and acquaintances. Many of the recorded loans are to 'J. Kelly' or 'Jack Kelly', including one entry, 'Lent Mr Kelly French Dictionary', which occurs under the heading 'Books Lent 1776', the period during which Kelly was likely to have been working on the compilation of his Manx dictionary. On the facing page, still under the list of books loaned during 1776, occurs the note 'Mem J Kelly has my Manks Milton'. Moore's brief but important note confirms that *Pargys Caillit* was circulated in manuscript form in the Isle of Man long before its eventual publication. It also confirms that John Kelly did have access to a manuscript version of the poem and that he obtained this from Rev. Philip Moore while working on the Manx dictionary in 1776. It therefore seems safe to assume that the sole surviving eighteenth-century manuscript of *Pargys Caillit* was made by John Kelly from an exemplar in the possession of Philip Moore in the year 1776.

The date of the Manx text can be pushed back further still, however. Thomson points to a marginal manuscript note by the translator of a surviving

⁵R. L. Thomson, 'The study of Manx Gaelic', Sir John Rhŷs Memorial Lecture 1969, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 55 (1969 [1971]), 177–210, at 187.

⁶*A Practical Grammar of the Ancient Gaelic; or, Language of the Isle of Mann, Usually Called Manks* (London, 1804). The volume is more usually referred to by its running title, *A Grammar of the Manks Language*.

⁷Thomson, *Pargys Caillit*, 3.

⁸Thomson, 'The study of Manx Gaelic', 185.

draft of the Book of Exodus, Rev. Henry Corlett, Vicar of German, in which Corlett notes, 'this word *Haart* I have borrowed from Mr Xtian's Translation of Paradise Lost ...'⁹ The first volume of the Old Testament in Manx was published by John Ware and Son of Whitehaven in 1771; this remains the *terminus ante quem* for the Manx text, *Pargys Caillit*. The Thomas Christian traditionally accepted as the author of the Manx reworking was only seventeen in 1771.¹⁰

Besides its author, at least three people had access to manuscript copies of *Pargys Caillit* prior to its printing: Henry Corlett in 1771, Philip Moore prior to 1776 and John Kelly in 1776. How many manuscript copies circulated on the island before the text's printing is not clear. John Kelly clearly copied out his own version of the text from that in Moore's possession. There is no way to know whether all the 'improvements' evident in Kelly's manuscript were made by him, or if some had already been made in his exemplar, i.e. Moore's copy. Moore also records loans of his books to 'Harry Corlet [sic]' in his catalogue of books so that it is possible that Corlett, in 1771, also obtained access to *Pargys Caillit* through Moore, or vice versa.¹¹ At the very least, there were two physical manuscript copies of the poem on the island before it was printed: Moore's copy (assuming this was the basis for Briscoe's printing of *circa* 1796) and Kelly's revised copy.¹² A maximalist interpretation, however, would leave us with up to four manuscript copies of the text prior to its printing: Moore's copy, Kelly's derivative copy, a copy of unverifiable origin in Corlett's possession, and an independent, authorial version which was to form the basis of the printed text. However many of these eighteenth century manuscript copies there may once have been, John Kelly's alone survives.¹³

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⁹Thomson, *Pargys Caillit*, 4. The word occurs at line 718 of Thomson's edition in the phrase *dy chur Satan haart* 'to vanquish Satan'.

¹⁰Max Wheeler, 'Pargys Caillit: Which Thomas Christian?', forthcoming, argues cogently against the traditional identification of the text's author, suggesting instead that the text may have been composed by Christian's paternal grandfather, also Thomas Christian, who was Vicar of Marown from 1734 until his death in 1752.

¹¹A note in Manx Museum MS 00178A reads as follows: 'To Harry Corlet 1st Vol. of Life of K. David – June 15 – 1773'. I have not come across any reference to Moore's 'Manks Milton' being loaned to Corlett, however.

¹²Wheeler, 'Pargys Caillit: Which Thomas Christian?', draws attention to a marginal note, in an unidentified hand, found in MS 188A: 'The original MS comm[ences] here – the past portion being destroyed'. The note is followed by an unidentified monogram and is to be found at what corresponds to line 302 of Thomson's edition. Written in graphite pencil, the note is not earlier than the nineteenth century. It clearly indicates that the writer had access to both MS 188A and a manuscript they thought to be the original.

¹³I am grateful to Prof. Max Wheeler and Dr Christopher Lewin for useful discussion in the preparation of this short note. I am responsible for any errors it contains.