

STEPHEN MILLER

“BURNING THE BUTCH”



CHIOLLAGH BOOKS  
FOR  
CULTURE VANNIN  
2018

## “BURNING THE BUITCH”



“There was another burning of the witches, out of an unsuccessful boat, (last night) off Bank’s How. The flames were very visible, to the top of the bay.” This was an entry made by Richard Townley in his diary for 25 September 1789. [P2] This was the second such mention of this practice, writing earlier for the 15th of that month that “[s]ome few were pulling dry ling, by them called heather, to exorcise their boats with, or burn the witches out of them,” going on to add:

Their mode of doing it, is as follows: they set fire to a part of the heather, in the centre of the boat; then make wisps of the rest, and light them; one going to the head, others along the sides, to that every part may be touched by the flame. [P1]

This piece of occupational folklore amongst fisherfolk in the Isle of Man (see too, [N6]) was also practised on land amongst farmers, as shown in two cases that became before the Church Courts in 1716 and 1719. Ann Moore in Rushen was presented in 1719, “for a Diabolical Practice of making a burnt Sacrifice ‘on the Church Way’ of a Calf,” in order “to avert their ill-luck in Cattle.” [PR2] A Mrs Tyldesley from Arbory earlier in 1716 had set fire to a calf on the highway, where “it continued burning above a day.” [PRI] Moore professed that she acted “thro’ Ignorance” and upon promising never to offend in the same manner saw her presentment dismissed; Tyldesley was not so lucky and had to convince the vicar “that she intended no Charm by it” otherwise she was to be presented again.

Newspaper accounts from the nineteenth century were less reticent in detailing what was being “intended” by these actions. The first dates from 1841, and recounts an incident at Union Mills, where a farmer having lost a number of cows, dragged the carcase of the last one to die to “the centre of the church-road, so-called, and there burned her to ashes, hide and hair and all.” [N1] & [N2] Ducks were burnt in 1847 [N3], and cattle again in a report from that year [N4] and also in 1853 [N5]. The intention was to break the spell of bad luck due to someone having “looked with an evil eye” on the farm stock. [N1] The fire would inexorably bring the person who had overlooked the animals to the flames and the hold they had would then be broken. [N4] In the incident from 1841, “a gentleman was about to pass by the place of barbecue” who was then cautioned to take a different path “lest he be fastened on as the conjurer.” [N1] In 1847, there was no one at hand to issue a warning:

Very shortly a poor wight, returning from a *mbellia*, half seas over [*ie*, tipsy or drunk], came up. He was declared to be the witch, and he had to cut his lucky, and hide from popular indignation, to avoid the fate of the old cow.

One interesting detail from the burnings in 1719 [PR2] and 1841 [N1] & [N2] is the the mentions of the “Church Way” (1719) and “church-road” (1841) as the site of the

fire, which is taken to mean the lane to the parochial church down which all were meant to have trods on Sundays on the way to Divine Service. As regards other locations, it was the “highway” in 1716 [P1], the “centre of the road” in 1847 [N4], “a little distance beside the highway” (1853) [N5], and the perhaps expected “cross-roads” just the once (1847) [N3]. The newspaper accounts traced stretch only from 1843 to 1853, though A.W. Moore was to report that the practice was still current in the 1880s:

There was an *oural losht* in the Parish of Jurby in 1880, and even within the last five years there have been several sacrifices, but it is difficult to obtain any particulars. One of them was that of a young horse which was supposed to have been bewitched to death, which was burned in order to see the Witch come by, and she was, accordingly, seen through the smoke. [P2]

Kelly’s *Dictionary* glosses *oural losht* as “a burnt-offering” (147a) and such a phrase was recalled by John Rhys when coming across a woman in her eighties living in Andreas who remembered seeing, when young and aged ten or fifteen, a sheep being specifically burnt as a sacrifice (in her own words, Rhys recalls) on May Day in that parish. [P3.6] He was somewhat wary of accepting this, and whilst ready to believe her, also wrote that “I have failed to find anybody else in Andreas or Bride, or indeed in the whole island, who will now confess to having ever heard of the sheep sacrifice on old May-day.” Rhys was convinced that in one case a live calf had been burnt to secure luck for the rest of the livestock [P3.5], and possibly in another case [P3.4]. J.G. Frazer was so taken with Rhys’ account that he reproduced it in the third edition of *The Golden Bough* (1906–15) in *Balder the Beautiful: The Fire-Festivals of Europe* (1913).

Rhys’ piece on Manx folklore was published in 1891, and it provides a number of other accounts of “burning the bwitch.” A woman aged thirty from Kirk Michael witnessed such a burning, and “how she saw the witch coming, and how she remembers her shrivelled face, with nose and chin in close proximity.” [P3.1] According to “a well-informed middle-aged man” from the same parish, what was often burnt was a calf, and it “was wont to be burnt whole, skin and all.” (See too, [N4]) The aim was to bring the witch to the spectacle, and “he always comes,” Rhys adding, however, “but I am not clear what happens to him, when he appears.” [P3.2] Rhys recorded an incident when a man at sea, fishing some two or three miles off the coast, demanded at once to be set on shore. Giving in to his demand, once on dry land, “they watched him hurrying away towards a smoke where a beast was burning in the corner of a field.” [P3.3]

As regards the wider prophylactic use of fire, “I have heard of this use of fire having been carried so far that a practice was sometimes observed—as, for example in Lezayre—of burning gorse, however little, in the hedge of each field on a farm in order to drive away the witches and secure luck.” (Rhys, 1891, 303) This was a custom familiar from the fires on May Day Eve and Old Midsummer Eve, but in its

## INTRODUCTION

application outside of those fixed points in the calendar links it with the practice as sea as described by Townley in 1789.

This links with the photograph used on the cover here and produced following with its caption. To date, it is the only one known of someone “burning the buitch,” here carried out on May Day Eve by Charles Caine up until 2007, the year of his death. Strictly speaking, it is not connected as such with what Ann Moore and Mrs Tyldesley and the others were up to in the past, but the photograph deserves to be wider known and is still, at the day of the day, someone “burning the buitch.”

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018



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- Townley, Richard. *A Journal kept in the Isle of Man*. Vol. i. 2 vols. Whitehaven, 1791.

### OTHER

For Kelly's *Dictionary*, see Rev. William Gill, ed., *The Manx Dictionary in Two Parts. First, Manx and English; and the Second, English and Manx* (Douglas: Manx Society, 1866).

### NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS

- Anon. "[Local Intelligence] Fanaticism." *Mona's Herald* 25 January 1843: 3c.
- . "[Local News] More Witchcraft." *Manx Sun* 2 October 1847: 4b.
- . "Manx Tour on the BBC." *Isle of Man Times* 6 December 1954: 11c.
- . "Superstitions in 1843." *Manx Sun* 21 January 1843: 4d.
- . "Witchcraft." *Mona's Herald* 18 May 1853: 7a.
- . "The Witches in the Ducks." *Manx Sun* 22 May 1847: 4b.

### OFFICIAL RECORDS

#### BOOK OF PRESENTMENTS

- Book of Presentments* for Rushen, 1716
- for Arbory, Rushen, 1719



## CHARLIE CAINE

### “BURNING THE BUITCH” (MAY DAY EVE)



*Charlie Caine pictured 'burning the buitch', a ceremony he carried out on May Day Eve almost every year until his death in 2007. He only missed one year, and had a bad tractor accident which he attributed to his failure to carry out the ceremony. Charlie really believed that this ritual would rid the farm of witches. His father had always done it, and older Cronk y Voddy people like Donald Cannan remember many other farmers doing it as well.*

Charlie Caine pictured “burning the buitch” [*ie*, witch], a ceremony he carried out on May Day Eve almost every year until his death in 2007. He only missed one year, and had a bad tractor accident which he attributed to his failure to carry out the ceremony. Charlie really believed that this ritual would rid the farm of witches. His father had always done it, and older Cronk y Voddy people like Donald Cannan remember many other farmers doing it as well.

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# “BURNING THE BITCH”



## PRINTED REFERENCES



### [P1] RICHARD TOWNLEY, A JOURNAL KEPT IN THE ISLE OF MAN (1791)

[15 September 1789] [197] Some few were pulling dry ling, by them called heather, to exorcise their boats with, or burn the witches out of them.

Their mode of doing it, is as follows: they set fire to a part of the heather, in the centre of the boat; then make wisps of the rest, and light them; one going to the head, others along the sides, to that every part may be touched by the flame. This is a fact well known to *all* here; and would be attested, by hundreds, nay thousands. Such is the *still* wonderful ignorance and superstition of the lower ranks, in this island. But there are syrens in it, of a different kind, far more dangerous, far more to be guarded against by the honest, simple swains of the mountains, than the fairy-elves;—the syren nymphs, that inhabit the *Sand-side*.

[25 September 1789] [207] There was another burning of the witches, out of an unsuccessful boat, (last night) off Bank's How. The flames were very visible, to the top of the bay.

Richard Townley, *A Journal kept in the Isle of Man*, vol. i, 2 vols (Whitehaven, 1791).

### [P2] A.W. MOORE, THE FOLK-LORE OF THE ISLE OF MAN (1891)

[92] The following stories refer to the popular antidotes to the effects of witchcraft, which, as stated above, are mainly the use of fire and dust, the former being used partly as a preventive to witchcraft, and partly as a means of detecting the Witch, while the latter is an antidote only. The sacrifice of cattle by burning, as a means of preventing witchcraft, has been common even in the present century, and is secretly practised in the remote districts even now:

The cattle of a farmer, in the Parish of German, having been, in about 1834, attacked by a kind of murrain, which he [93] attributed to witchcraft, he sought to stay the spreading of the disease by offering up a living calf as a burnt sacrifice. The ashes of this unfortunate beast were collected and applied to the rest of the herd. A small chapel was afterwards built near the spot where this disgusting sacrifice took place, and was consequently called *Cabbal yn oural losht*, "Chapel of the burnt offering."—Oral.

A similar case occurred near the Union Mills in 1843.

The *Manx Sun* newspaper describes the sacrifice of a calf in the Parish of Maughold, in 1853, as follows: "The calf was dragged to an eminence not far from the

highway, a large quantity of peat and straw was provided, and, a light having been applied, the calf and pyre were consumed.”

There was an *oural losht* in the Parish of Jurby in 1880, and even within the last five years there have been several sacrifices, but it is difficult to obtain any particulars. One of them was that of a young horse which was supposed to have been bewitched to death, which was burned in order to see the Witch come by, and she was, accordingly, seen through the smoke.

A.W. Moore, *The Folk-lore of the Isle of Man* (Douglas & London: David and Son & David Nutt, 1891).

[P3] JOHN RHYS, “MANX FOLK-LORE AND SUPERSTITIONS (1),” FOLK-LORE (1891)

[299] This is, however, not the only instance of the importance and strange efficacy of fire. For when a beast dies on a farm, of course it dies, according to the old-fashioned view of things, as I understand it, from the influence of the evil eye, or the interposition of a witch; and if you want to know to whom you are indebted for the loss of the beast, you have simply to burn its carcase in the open air and watch who comes first on the spot or who first passes by; for that is the criminal to be charged with the death of the animal, and he cannot help coming there: [300] such is the effect of the fire. [P3.1] A Michael woman, who is now about thirty, related to me how she watched while the carcase of a bewitched colt was burning, and how she saw the witch coming, and how she remembers her shrivelled face, with nose and chin in close proximity. [P3.2] According to another native of Michael, a well-informed middle-aged man, the animal in question was oftenest a calf, and it was wont to be burnt whole, skin and all. The object, according to him, is invariably to bring the bewitcher on the spot, and he always comes; but I am not clear what happens to him, when he appears. My informant added, however, that it was believed that, unless the bewitcher got possession of the heart of the beast burning, he lost all his power of bewitching. [P3.3] He related, also, how his father and three other men were once out fishing on the west coast of the island, when one of the three suddenly expressed his wish to land. As they were fishing successfully some two or three miles from the shore, they would not hear of it. He, however, insisted that they must put him ashore at once, which made his comrades highly indignant; but they had soon to give way, as they found that he was determined to leap overboard unless they complied. When he got on shore they watched him hurrying away towards a smoke where a beast was burning in the corner of a field.

Manx stories merge this burning in a very perplexing fashion with what may be termed a sacrifice for luck. The following scraps of information will make it clear what I mean: [P3.4] A respectable farmer from Andreas told me that he was driving with his wife to the neighbouring parish of Jurby some years ago, and that on the way they beheld the carcase of a cow or an ox burning in a field, with a woman

engaged in stirring the fire. On reaching the village to which they were going, they found that the burning beast belonged to a farmer whom they knew. They were further told it was no wonder that the said farmer had one of his cattle burnt, as several of them had recently died. Whether this was a case of sacrifice or not I cannot say. [P3.5] But let [301] me give you another instance: a man whom I have already mentioned, saw at a farm nearer the centre of the island a live calf being burnt. The owner bears an English name, but his family has long been settled in Manx. The farmer's explanation to my informant was that the calf was burnt to secure luck for the rest of the herd, some of which were threatening to die. My informant thought there was absolutely nothing the matter with them, except that they had too little to eat. Be that as it may, the one calf was sacrificed as a burnt-offering to secure luck for the rest of the cattle. Let me here also quote Mr Moore's note in his *Manx Surnames*, p. 184, on the place-name *Cabbal yn Oural Losht*, or the 'Chapel of the Burnt Sacrifice.' "This name," he says, "records a circumstance which took place in the nineteenth century, but which, it is to be hoped, was never customary in the Isle of Man." "A farmer," he goes on to say, "who had lost a number of his sheep and cattle by murrain, burned a calf as a propitiatory offering to the Deity on this spot, where a chapel was afterwards built. Hence the name." Particulars, I may say, of time, place, and person could be easily added to Mr Moore's statement, excepting, perhaps, as to the deity in question; on that point I have never been informed, but Mr Moore is probably right in the use of the capital *d*, as the sacrificer is, according to all accounts, a highly devout Christian.

[P3.6] One more instance: an octogenarian woman, born in the parish of Bride, and now living at Kirk Andreas, saw, when she was a "lump of a girl" of ten or fifteen years of age, a live sheep being burnt in a field in the parish of Andreas, on May-day, whereby she meant the first of May reckoned according to the Old Style. She asserts very decidedly that it was *son oural*, "as a sacrifice," as she put it, and "for an object to the public": those were her words when she expressed herself in English. Further, she made the statement that it was a custom to burn a sheep on old May-day for a sacrifice. I was fully alive to the interest of this evidence, and cross-examined her so far as her age allows of it, and [302] I find that she adheres to her statement with all firmness. I distinguish two or three points in her evidence: (1) I have no doubt that she saw, as she was passing by a certain field on the borders of Andreas parish, a live sheep being burnt on old May-day. (2) But her statement that it was *son oural*, or as a sacrifice, was probably only an inference drawn by her, possibly years afterwards, on hearing things of the kind discussed. (3) Lastly I am convinced that she did hear the May-day sacrifice discussed, both in Manx and in English: her words, "for an object to the public," are her imperfect recollection of a phrase used in her hearing by somebody more ambitious of employing English abstract terms than she is; and the formal nature of her statement in Manx, that it was customary on May-day to burn as a sacrifice one head of sheep ("*Laa Boaldyn va*

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*cliagh tey dy lostey son oural un baagh keyrragh*”), produces the same impression on my mind, that she is only repeating somebody else’s words. I mention this more especially as I have failed to find anybody else in *Andreas* or *Bride*, or indeed in the whole island, who will now confess to having ever heard of the sheep sacrifice on old May-day.

John Rhys, “Manx Folk-Lore and Superstitions (i),” *Folk-Lore* ii (1891), 284–313. This piece also reproduced in John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, vol i, 2 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901) 304–08.



## NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS



### [N1] “SUPERSTITIONS IN 1843,” MANX SUN (1843)

A farmer not 100 miles from the Union Mills, which are less than 2½ miles from this goodly town of Douglas, recently had the misfortune to lose two or three cows; whether carried off by disease or bad keeping we cannot avouch. The proprietor on whom these misfortunes fell, not choosing to bother his cranium in searching out the cause of his losses, found a ready way of solving the mystery, by charging it wholly to *witchcraft*: or rather, in the language of these believers in spiritual interference among the cattle, he alleged that some naughty body had “looked with an *evil eye*” on his cows. An old toothless bos 20 years old was the last one of his stock that had died. Now to break the charm and save the remainder of his stock, what think you reader the old man did? Why, you will say, perhaps he instituted a *post-mortem* examination to search out the nature of the disease: no such thing—he paraded the old carcass in the centre of the church-road, so-called, and there burned her to ashes, hide and hair and all. While the combustibles were in flame and the smoke ascending as from an Indian sacrifice, a gentleman was about to pass by the place of barbecue, when he was cautioned with most significant looks and words of ominous import, that he better avoid going in that direction, lest he be fastened on as the conjurer, who had “looked with an *evil eye*,” and killed the beasts with necromancy.

That such superstition should be found among the poor untutored savages of the “far west,” is not to be wondered at; but that they should still retain their hold on men bred in the centre of Christendom: that on the Isle of Man, where there are 40 churches and 60 chapels for religions worship, and schools in every parish, the grossest superstitions of barbarism should still be found, presents a subject of deep inquiry in the mind of a christian philosopher.

“Superstitions in 1843,” *Manx Sun*, 21 January 1843, 4d.

### [N2] “[LOCAL INTELLIGENCE] FANATICISM,” MONA’S HERALD (1843)

We copy from a contemporary the following instance of ignorance, fanaticism, and superstition, to a degree, we imagined, did not exist in this the middle of the nineteenth century. That in this Island where the opportunities of *religious* instruction are at least equal to that of another portion of the United Kingdom—there can be such occurrences is a most humiliating fact. Talk of the *Chinese*, indeed, and of the wants of the ignorant *heathen!* This is, so far, highly commendable; but we beg of these philanthropists—these christians, *par excellence*, not to forget *home*. In particular we request the earnest attention of the Lord Bishop of this diocese, and the clergy of every denomination, to the melancholy fact. Is it to be wondered, we ask

them, that efforts to diffuse divine truth so often fail, when such lamentable ignorance is to be found among *not the least ignorant class of our people*; or that Mormonism or another delusion is listened to by multitudes steeped in Cimmerian darkness, of which this circumstance furnishes proof conclusive?—What an argument for the absolute necessity of intellectual, moral, and religious instruction being afforded to the rising generation? We beg of those “in authority” to look to it:

“A farmer,” says our contemporary, “not 100 miles from the Union Mills, which are less than 2½ miles from this goodly town of Douglas, recently had the misfortune to lose two or three cows; whether carried off by disease or bad keeping we cannot avouch. The proprietor on whom these misfortunes fell, not choosing to bother his cranium in searching out the cause of his losses, found a ready way of solving the mystery, by charging it wholly to witchcraft: or rather, in the language of these believers in spiritual interference among the cattle, he alleged that some naughty body had *‘looked with an evil eye’* on his cows. An old toothless bos 20 years old was the last one of his stock that had died. Now to break the charm and save the remainder of his stock, what think you reader the old man did? Why, you will say, perhaps he instituted a post-mortem examination to search out the nature of the disease: no such thing—he paraded the old carcass in the centre of the church-road, so-called, and there burned her to ashes, hide and hair and all. While the combustibles were in flame and the smoke ascending as from an Indian sacrifice, a gentleman was about to pass by the place of barbecue, when he was cautioned with most significant looks and words of ominous import, that he better avoid going in that direction, lest he be fastened on as the conjurer, who had *‘looked with an evil eye,’* and killed the beasts with necromancy.

That such superstition should be found among the poor untutored savages of the ‘far west,’ is not to be wondered at; but that they should still retain their hold on men bred in the centre of Christendom: that on the Isle of Man, where there are 40 churches and 60 chapels for religious worship, and schools in every parish, the grossest superstitions of barbarism should still be found, presents a subject of deep inquiry in the mind of a christian philosopher.”

The first object of enquiry, we trust, will be the “schools in every parish.” For little more than the income of a day-labourer, how can rational beings really expect that our parochial education is adequate to the end in view? That no efforts have, ere now, been made, or even attempted, to ameliorate the condition of the poor schoolmasters, and establish a proper system of instruction, is disgraceful to those whose duty it is to see these things.

“[Local Intelligence] Fanaticism,” *Mona’s Herald*, 25 January 1843, 3c.

[N3] “THE WITCHES IN THE DUCKS,” *MANX SUN* ( 1847)

Not a mile from the classic town of Douglas, fate, poison, starvation, or some other evil agency decreed, that a man’s ducks one after another should kick the bucket.

This fatality went on until Saturday last, at which time six ducks had paid the debt of nature, and the seventh gave signs of following the dead flock. This was too bad, and even good nature and human endurance could hold out no longer. Witchcraft, ay, the real old Mannin M'Leir witchcraft alone could account fur this disastrous affair; and the bewitching old hag, whoever she might be, was supposed by the duck-owner to be incarnated in the remaining drooping duck. Now, to make sure of the bewitching old wretch, a great fire was kindled at the cross-roads, the burning ling laid round in a circle, and the poor old duck was confined in the centre. As she gave her last gasp, there were not wanting those present who alleged they saw the baleful spirit of the infernal sprite ascending with the blue smoke.

“The Witches in the Ducks.” *Manx Sun* 22 May 1847: 4b.

[N4] “[LOCAL NEWS] MORE WITCHCRAFT.” *MANX SUN* (1847)

A farmer, near Poortown, in the vicinity of Peel, lately had disease among his cattle, and lost one or two of them. To detect the evil eye, or avert its malice, he resolved on a cow-fire. With turf, coals, and gorse, a large fire was kindled in the centre of the road, upon which the carcass of the defunct cow was placed. But an after thought delayed proceedings for awhile. The hide had been sold to the tanner, and an entire sacrifice was deemed essential. The hide was sent for—the purchase-price refunded, and then the barbacue went on. The actors in this scene, with holy dread, awaited the appearance of the witch. Very shortly a poor wight, returning from a *mbellia*, half seas over, came up. He was declared to be the witch, and he had to cut his lucky, and hide from popular indignation, to avoid the fate of the old cow.

“[Local News] More Witchcraft.” *Manx Sun* 2 October 1847: 4b.

[N5] “WITCHCRAFT,” *MONA'S HERALD* (1853)

A ludicrous piece of superstition was performed in the neighbourhood of Ramsey, a few days ago. A farmer in the parish celebrated by tradition, as the place where St Maughold performed such feats as cast the miraculous powers of St Paul and all his coadjutors entirely in the shade,—doubting the powers of the parish patron saint in the other world or perhaps willing to propitiate his favour by a burnt offering—sacrificed a calf with all the solemnity of the ancient Jewish priest. It appears that the superstitious might imagined that some person was practicing all the mystery of witchcraft on his farm stock, and lo ascertain who was the person so well skilled in such a black art, he resolved to make use of the method prescribed by the witchcraft doctors during the reign of Mannin beg Mac a Leir, when Mona was governed by the mystic spell in that reign of terror. On a certain day when one of our heroes cows calved, he was astonished to find that his cruel tormentor was before hand with him, as the calf was dead. Flesh and blood could endure it no longer, and it is said that in some circumstances patience ceases to be a virtue, and charity which endures, long

becomes exhausted, such was the case in this instance. The calf was dragged to an eminence at a little distance beside the highway, a large quantity of peat and straw was provided, and after all was put in order the lighted match was applied, and as the smoke rose toward the sky, it carried with it the terrors of the infatuated man. Who the troubler in league within his satanic majesty was is kept a profound secret; but undoubtedly [*page incorrectly scanned and missing the final line(s)*].

“Witchcraft,” *Mona’s Herald*, 18 May 1853, 7a.

[N6] “MANX TOUR ON THE BBC,” ISLE OF MAN TIMES (6 DECEMBER 1954)

Mr Edward Maddrell talked with Mr Qualtrough in Manx, and Mr John Gawne, in his delightful natural way, told them of the great days of the fishing industry at Port St Mary and Peel, and recalled an incident when the crew of a fishing boat went round the boat with a torch “burning the witch.”

“Manx Tour on the BBC,” *Isle of Man Times*, 6 December 1954, 11c.



## BOOK OF PRESENTMENTS



1716

[PRI] ARBORY PRESENTMENTS (27 May 1716)

M<sup>rs</sup> Tyldesley for putting a Calf in y<sup>e</sup> High Way<sup>1</sup> & c.o. fired<sup>1</sup> burning the same, & it<sup>1</sup> [*deleted* which] continued burning above a Day.

If she can't satisfy her [Parson?], that she intended no Charm by it, He is to present her again next Court.

1719

[PR2] RUSHEN PRESENTMENTS (12 May 1719)

Ann Moor, Wife of John Moor (Cooper) presented for a Diabolical Practice of making a burnt Sacrifice on the Church Way<sup>1</sup> of a Calf, to avert their ill-luck in Cattle : This p<sup>t</sup>sentm<sup>t</sup> made by y<sup>e</sup> Vicar.

The above Ann Moore having own'd y<sup>t</sup> w<sup>t</sup> She was done thro' Ignorance & Solemnly promising never to offend so again, this p<sup>t</sup>sentm<sup>t</sup> is therefore dismiss.



THE GOLDEN BOUGH  
(THIRD EDITION)

BALDER THE BEAUTIFUL  
THE FIRE-FESTIVALS OF EUROPE  
(1913)

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*The Golden Bough*, 3rd edition, 12 vols (1906–15). See, J.G. Frazer, *Balder the Beautiful: The Fire-Festivals of Europe and the Doctrine of the External Soul*, vol. i, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1913), Chapter iv, The Fire Festivals of Europe, 106–327, §9, The Sacrifice of an Animal to stay a Cattle-plague, 300–27, practice of burning cattle and sheep as sacrifices in the Isle of Man, 305–307. Frazer here draws upon John Rhys, “Manx Folk-Lore and Superstitions (i),” *Folk-Lore* ii (1891), 284–313. Material from that piece also reproduced in *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, vol. i. 2 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901), Chapter iv, Manx Folklore, 284–322.

PRACTICE OF BURNING CATTLE AND SHEEP AS SACRIFICES IN THE ISLE OF MAN [305] In the Isle of Man the practice of burning cattle alive in order to stop a murrain seems to have persisted down to a time within living memory. On this subject I will quote the evidence collected by Sir John Rhys: A respectable farmer from Andreas told me that he was driving with his wife to the neighbouring parish of Jurby some years ago, and that on the way they beheld the carcass of a cow or an ox burning in a field, with a woman engaged in stirring the fire. On reaching the village to which they were going, they found that the burning beast belonged to a farmer [306] whom they knew. They were further told it was no wonder that the said farmer had one of his cattle burnt, as several of them had recently died. Whether this was a case of sacrifice or not I cannot say. But let me give you another instance: a man whom I have already mentioned, saw at a farm nearer the centre of the island a live calf being burnt. The owner bears an English name, but his family has long been settled in Man. The farmer’s explanation to my informant was that the calf was burnt to secure luck for the rest of the herd, some of which were threatening to die. My informant thought there was absolutely nothing the matter with them, except that they had too little to eat. Be that as it may, the one calf was sacrificed as a burnt-offering to secure luck for the rest of the cattle. Let me here also quote Mr Moore’s note in his *Manx Surnames*, p. 184, on the place-name *Cabbal yn Oural Losht*, or the Chapel of the Burnt Sacrifice. “This name,” he says, “records a circumstance which took place in the nineteenth century, but which, it is to be hoped, was never customary in the Isle of Man.” “A farmer,” he goes on to say, “who had lost a number of his sheep and cattle by murrain, burned a calf as a propitiatory offering to the Deity on this spot, where a chapel was afterwards built. Hence the name.” Particulars, I may say, of

time, place, and person could be easily added to Mr Moore's statement, excepting, perhaps, as to the deity in question; on that point I have never been informed, but Mr Moore is probably right in the use of the capital *d*, as the sacrificer is, according to all accounts, a highly devout Christian. One more instance: an octogenarian woman, born in the parish of Bride, and now living at Kirk Andreas, saw, when she was a "lump of a girl" of ten or fifteen years of age, a live sheep being burnt in a field in the parish of Andreas, on May-day, whereby she meant the first of May reckoned according to the Old Style. She asserts very decidedly that it was *son oural*, "as a sacrifice," as she put it, and "for an object to the public": those were her words when she expressed herself in English. Further, she made the statement that it was a custom to burn a sheep on old May-day for a sacrifice. I was fully alive to the interest of this evidence, and cross-examined her so far as [307] her age allows of it, and I find that she adheres to her statement with all firmness.<sup>1</sup>

But Manxmen burn beasts when they are dead as well. By burning as when they are alive; and their reasons for burning the dead animals may help us to understand their reasons for burning the living animals. On this subject I will again appear quote Sir John Rhys: "When a beast dies on a farm, of course it dies, according to the old-fashioned view of things, as I understand it, from the influence of the evil eye, or the interposition of a witch; and if you want to know to whom you are indebted for the loss of the beast, you have simply to burn its carcase in the open air and watch who comes first on the spot or who first passes by; for that is the criminal to be charged with the death of the animal, and he cannot help coming there: [300] such is the effect of the fire. A Michael woman, who is now about thirty, related to me how she watched while the carcase of a bewitched colt was burning, and how she saw the witch coming, and how she remembers her shrivelled face, with nose and chin in close proximity. According to another native of Michael, a well-informed middle-aged man, the animal in question was oftenest a calf, and it was wont to be burnt whole, skin and all. The object, according to him, is invariably to bring the bewitcher on the spot, and he always comes; but I am not clear what happens to him, when he appears. My informant added, however, that it was believed that, unless the bewitcher got possession of the heart of the beast burning, he lost all his power of bewitching."<sup>2</sup>

[308] These statements shew that in the Isle of Man the sympathetic relation between the witch and his or her animal victim is believed to be so close that by burning the animal you compel the witch to appear. The original idea may have been that, by virtue of a magic sympathy which binds the two together, whatever harm you do to the animal is felt by the witch as if it were done to herself. That notion would fully explain why Manx people used also to burn bewitched animals alive; in doing so they probably imagined that they were simultaneously burning the witch who had cast the spell on their cattle.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> (Sir) John Rhys, “Manx Folk-Lore and Superstitions,” *Folk-Lore*, ii. (1891) pp. 300–302; repeated in his *Celtic Folk-lore, Welsh and Manx* (Oxford, 1901), i. 306 *sq.* Sir John does not doubt that the old woman saw, as she said, a live sheep being burnt on old May-day; but he doubts whether it was done as a sacrifice. He adds: “I have failed to find anybody else in Andreas or Bride, or indeed in the whole island, who will now confess to having ever heard of the sheep sacrifice on old May-day. However, the evidence I have adduced of a custom of burnt sacrifice among English rustics tends to confirm the old woman’s statement, that the burning of the live sheep which she witnessed was not an act of wanton cruelty but a sacrifice performed for the public good.

<sup>2</sup> (Sir) John Rhys, “Manx Folk-Lore and Superstitions,” *Folk-Lore*, ii. (1891) pp. 299 *sq.*; *id.*, *Celtic Folk-lore, Welsh and Manx* (Oxford, 1901), i. 304 *sq.* We have seen that by burning the blood of a bewitched bullock a farmer expected to compel the witch to appear. See above, p. 303.

