

Babban ny Mheillea

A Manx tradition for harvest

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The harvest festival is called in Manx *yn mheillea*, or *yn meailley*, 'the harvest home,' "though," says Gill, "more strictly it is the name of the garland made of the last handful of corn which is shorn and formed into the shape of that which is borne by Ceres. This figure, dressed with ribbons, is carried before the reapers, and is called, together with the procession, *yn meailley*, or *meilley*, 'the reapers feast,' from *meall*." "Meall," he adds, "is the whole gang of reapers."

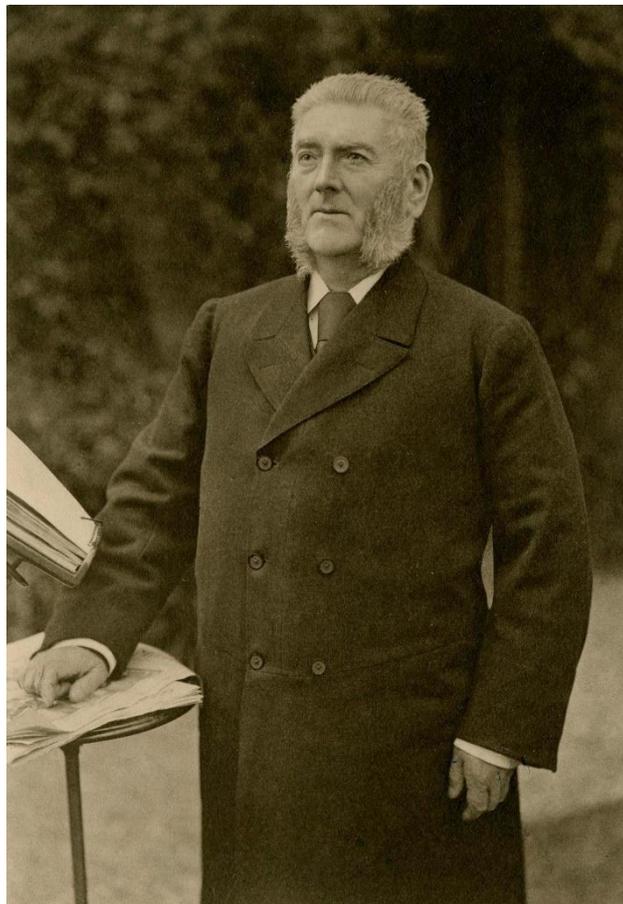
This figure, somewhat obscurely described by Gill, was called *yn moidyn*, 'the maiden,' and was made of straw, decorated with ribbons and wild flowers. It was carried by the Queen of the Meailley, a girl elected from among the female workers, though usually the youngest of them, to the highest part of the field where it was placed and saluted with hearty cheers.

It was also a custom to cut off a bunch of ears from this last sheaf of corn, with about twelve inches of straw attached. This bunch of corn, called *baban ny mheillea*, 'the doll of the harvest,' or simply *yn mheillea*, 'the harvest,' which was usually about four inches in diameter, was dressed up to represent a woman, from the neck downwards, the ears doing duty for the head and face. It was then placed on the chimney piece in the kitchen of the farm house, and was not removed till the following harvest, when its place was taken by a similar successor.

This custom has not long died out, and indeed the small sheaf, though not dressed, may still be seen in many a farm house. The large sheaf previously referred to was taken from the field, where the last load of corn was carried and placed on top of it, together with the *moldyn*. It was then deposited in the barn with much clamour and rejoicing, and was kept there till the following harvest. After this they all adjourned to the supper, which it was usual for the farmer to provide on these occasions, and which was a scene of great joy and merriment, the *Laare-vane*, as on twelfth-day, being a conspicuous feature. The carrying of the 'maiden' has now fallen into desuetude, so that the name is now associated with the harvest supper only.

Dr John Clague
Manx Reminiscences (1911)

When the corn was all cut, the last piece was carried home, and the stalks tied and plaited, and it was kept for an offering to the Corn God. It was called the "mheillea." The band of reapers went home, and put off their working clothes, and then put on better clothing, to come to the supper of the "mheillea." After supper there would be dancing, and a fiddler at them (they would have a fiddler) to keep time with the dancing.



Photograph of Dr. John Clague from *Manx Reminiscences*
(Photograph taken in 1908 by George Bellett Cowen)

“The Mheillea or ‘Yn Meailley.” This term is used for the finishing of reaping corn, when the last handful is cut; this is bound up with ribbons, and what wild flowers come readily to hand, and borne by the Queen of the Mheillea, some female favourite of the harvest-field, to the highest part of the land where the reapers express their joy in loud huzzas.

Fred Radcliffe
Manx Farming and Country Life, 1700 – 1900 (1991)

There were celebrations to mark the completion of the harvest. On the day the shearing was completed one of the women workers would be selected as 'Queen of the Mheillea' and would hold up the last sheaf to cheers on the highest point of the field. This would act as a signal to a neighbouring farmer that there were workers free for reaping elsewhere. A little 'babban', or harvest doll, would be decorated with ribbons and kept in the farmhouse until next year's harvest.



Thomas Quayle
General View of the Agriculture of the Isle of Man (1812)

The Manks peasantry being much attached to dancing, it is a constant practice on the evening of the day on which the last corn is cut, for the farmer to call in a fiddler or two. Laborers, young and old, then assemble; and often the family and friends of the farmer himself join in the merry dance. [...] During the dance, a diminutive sheaf, formed of the last cut corn, bound with ribbands, which had been borne in procession from the field by the queen of the mellow, passes from hand to hand among the young woman, and in dancing is waved above the head.

Josepha Dalby of Ballacooey Lodge, Kirk Michael
Diary entry for 25 September 1812 [MNHL MS 5583c]

When the last bundle of wheat and barley is cut, it is tyd up and ornamented with long streamers of new ribbon. The person who cuts it has the bundle and dances all night with it in her hand. It is called the Mhelliah, which everybody who has a farm gives, with abundance of strong beer.

William Kennish
Mona's Isle (1844)

Then Kitty, eldest of the youthful band
Of females, challenged all within the field
To be the first to cut with friendly hand
The last oat sheaf the farm that year did yield,
To form the Maiden¹ in its usual style
With ribbon-bows and plaited straw-made arms,²
Then with a light-heel'd skip and playful smile,
Which added beauty to her native charms,
She bore it forth in triumph in her hand,
Leading the shearers to the highest ground,
Where met the rural and the happy band,
Whose hearty cheers did through the air resound

1. The last handful of corn, decorated with ribands, and placed over the dresser, until it was replaced by another on the following season.
2. The last handful of corn, decorated with ribands, and placed over the dresser, until it was replaced by another on the following season.



William Kennish
[Image courtesy of Manx National Heritage (PG/12905)]

George Quarrie
The Melliah (1880)

But also followin the Melliah day laws
Owl Nannie our senior with dignity grand
Steps up an' a weapon from the pile she draws
And strikes the last ears from their legs to the land.
Then hooray for the Melliah! the Melliah is took!
Shouted Sthuggas far over a score.
Poor Aasther carry'n Bob-a-loo on her back
And Billy an' Veg, an' many more.
The Melliah was carefully gathered up
And tastefully plaited into shape,
A trophy dainty to grace Melliah Cup
And the dinner, well tied with a tape.

Mona Douglas
Rinkaghyn Vannin (1983)
Notes to the dance, 'Yn Mheillea'

A circular dance for as many couples as will. The Mheillea Queen sits in the centre cradling a babban (straw fashioned wrapped as an infant) in her arms.

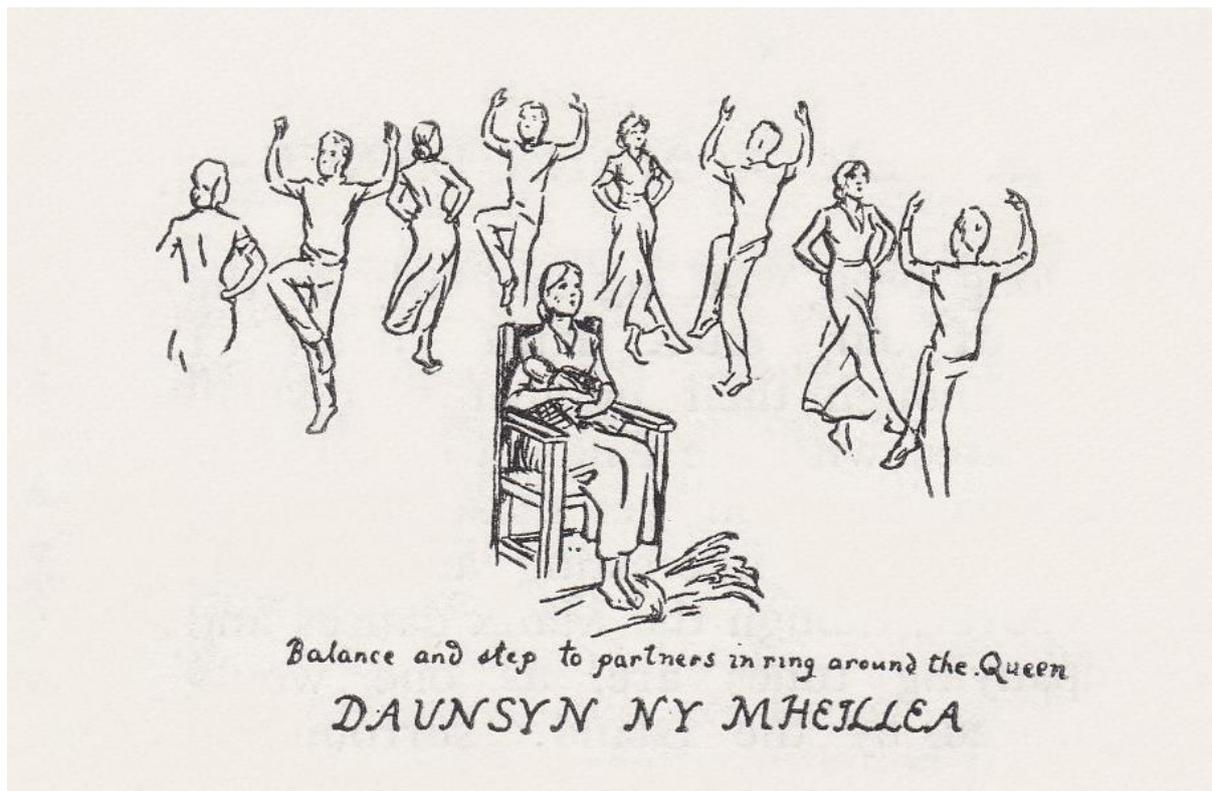


Illustration of *Daunsyn ny Mheillea* by Eric Austwick

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