

A NEWLY-FOUND PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WHITE BOYS *



The photograph above was recently noticed by James Franklin of Culture Vannin in *The Manxman*, a short-lived small format magazine that was published in the Island in the 1970s, where it appears as an illustration to an article titled “A Victorian Christmas” published in Number 7 (1976–77).¹ The photograph has the simple caption, “The White Boys perform the legend of St George and the Dragon.”² In the text itself, the White Boys receive just a brief mention and written in passing in a single sentence: “And later on, the White Boys would arrive in their weird and wonderful costumes to give their version of ‘St George and the Dragon,’ the traditional mummers’ play.”³ There is a disconnect between the rare prize of the photograph itself and the content of the piece which is standard fare.

* Originally published as Stephen Miller, “A newly-found photograph of the White Boys,” *Kiaull Manninagh Jiu* December (2020), [22]. Reproduced here with sources.

¹ Mary Blackburn, “A Victorian Christmas,” *The Manxman* 7 (1976–77).

² Blackburn, “A Victorian Christmas,” 41.

³ Blackburn, “A Victorian Christmas,” 41.

Turning to the photograph itself, five of the seven individuals are dressed as one would expect the White Boys to be dressed, namely in white. As a check, posting the photograph to the Master Mummers Facebook group has not to date brought back any identification with an English mumming troupe, and so we can be certain that this is indeed the White Boys from the Island who are featured here.⁴

Of the many questions, the first one is, inevitably, its date. The first figure on the left, a female, is wearing a pair of Mary Janes, and the popularity of that shoe amongst children points at least to the 1930s as a possible date (when the photograph is colourised she is sporting a pink pair of socks). The cloche hat that she is wearing was a style that was current in the 1920s, and into the early 1930s, again helping to narrow the date of the photograph to those decades. Broadly speaking then, the date is the interwar years. She is dressed all in white, as are the other three on the back row, all four of them brandishing a wooden sword. The three males are wearing wondrously elaborate headdresses and two of them are wearing a decorated sash across their chests, similar to the decorations on the headdresses, each though on a different shoulder. The figure on the far right has a jacket different to the other three with what appears to be ribbons running down its face. The remaining three in the front row are dressed differently, as befits them playing different characters in the play. The two on the left and right are attired in working clothes, the former tie-less and sporting a frock coat and waistcoat, the latter in collar and tie and wearing a tunic-style jacket and both have on their heads top hats. The one on the left has a mock beard and the right-hand figure, incidentally the second young female in the photograph, is carrying a sweeping brush. This leaves the final member of the group in the middle of the row, dressed in white and wearing a hat of the same colour as well, and attired in a patterned dressing gown or house coat and also holding a bladder on a stick.

Next comes the question as to the characters being played here. Those with the swords are clearly the Saints or Princes of the mumming play (there are other names as well for those character rôles), and on the front row, from left to right, there is the Doctor (though without his bag), the Fool (suggested), and Devil Doubt. To date, there are seven play texts recorded as performed by the White Boys, with dates varying from 1832 to 1983.⁵ The issue here is in mapping the characters here onto one of these texts and as that is not possible they are performing an unrecorded text. This is not unexpected as names of characters outside of those named in the recorded play

⁴ For further on the White Boys, see Stephen Miller, “Who wants to see the White Boys act?” *The Mumming Play in the Isle of Man: A Compendium of Sources* (Onchan: Chiollagh Books, 2010). Also, Stephen Miller, “‘Here comes I that never came yet.’ The Castletown White Boys,” *The “Town Clark’s” Castletown*, ed. Lady Eva Wilson, Castletown Heritage: Occasional Papers, No. 2 (Castletown: Castletown Heritage, 2009).

⁵ Stephen Miller, “Enter St Denis and St George.” *The White Boys Play Texts* (Onchan: Chiollagh Books for Culture Vannin, 2018). Extracted from Miller, “Who wants to see the White Boys act?” *The Mumming Play in the Isle of Man: A Compendium of Sources*.

texts have been collected. As regards other questions, there is no clue as to where in the Island the photograph was taken given that the background is vegetation only and so idea where these performers were active. And, as a final question here, the occasion on which it was taken. Looking at the newspapers in this period there are references to the White Boys performing at various events and further work combined with that essential research tool—serendipity—is called for with the hope that further can be learnt about the photograph.

STEPHEN MILLER RBV

REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Mary. “A Victorian Christmas.” *The Manxman* 7 (1976–77): 37–42.
- Miller, Stephen. “Enter St Denis and St George.” *The White Boys Play Texts*. Onchan: Chiollagh Books for Culture Vannin, 2018.
- . “‘Here comes I that never came yet.’ The Castletown White Boys.” *The “Town Clark’s” Castletown*. Ed. Wilson, Lady Eva. Castletown Heritage: Occasional Papers, No. 2. Castletown: Castletown Heritage, 2009. 95–97.
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