

# Manx Notes 710 (2025)

“I AM MYSELF VERY MUCH INTERESTED IN CHARMS”

SOPHIA MORRISON WRITES  
TO ALEXANDER CARMICHAEL  
(1910)

Sept 1

Dear Dr Carmichael

I am myself very much interested in Charms & have collected a good deal of material on the subject. The belief in Charms is still as deeply rooted as ever in the minds of ~~the~~ 'Manx' people—nearly every household in Peel can give you a story of a cure by a charm, & many persons have the power of stopping blood at a distance. 1 man has 3 C.<sup>1</sup> for s. b,<sup>2</sup> The 1st stops the flow instantly, the 2nd, in about 3 or 4 m.<sup>3</sup> the 3rd in 6 or 7. He seldom uses the 1st, as he finds that it is apt to do harm by such a sudden stoppage, the 3rd is the 1 he generally uses. We know nothing whatever about moles—so have no Charms for that special affliction. It is believed that all charms to stop blood can be used successfully without the Charmer seeing the patient—I have heard of one Charmer who requires to take hold some article of clothing belonging to the patient—a handker.<sup>4</sup> for instance—but this may be regarded as exceptional. An important factor in M. Ch.<sup>5</sup> is the insistence on the full name of the patient, & it must be given as at baptism, otherwise the charm will be of no good. Whether used alone or with a herbal remedy the virtue of a Charm may be destroyed in four ways.

I have myself collected many Charms & can testify to their use at the present day. Some require contact of the hand dead or alive, others (stys) are most efficacious by contact with metal, others again, as scalds, by the breath. It is a most interesting subject.

Yours etc | S.M.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>*Charms* <sup>2</sup>*stopping blood* <sup>3</sup>*minutes* <sup>4</sup>*handkerchief* <sup>5</sup>*Manx Charms* Source: Copy letter of Sophia Morrison to [Alexander] Carmichael, 1 September 1910, MNHL, MS 09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 4, Letter Copybook (1908–13).

\*

The recipient of this letter, known only as a working draft in Sophia Morrison's copy letter book, was Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912).<sup>1</sup> He is best known for his

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart of the Carmichael Watson Project at the University of Edinburgh for confirming that the recipient of the letter was indeed Alexander Carmichael.

*Carmina Gaedelica*, now an edition of eight volumes (1900–71), though just the first two volumes appeared during his lifetime in 1900. The incoming letter from Carmichael is not amongst her papers nor is there any other correspondence extant between them. Morrison's specific interest in charming (the term here covering not just verbal charming but also the preparation and usage of herbal simples) is shown in a letter to Karl Roeder, a German resident of Manchester who was also a collector of Manx folklore:

I send you my notes on Charms & Charmers, Manx Dye Plants & Herbal Remedies. I collected them about four years ago & have added nothing to them since. I have always intended to work them up, but from lack of time have not done so. [...] Please excuse the notes being only roughly jotted down. I have not had time to copy them. I will ask you please not to publish the names of any of the givers of the prescriptions & charms, though I have put them down for the sake of remembering them.<sup>2</sup>

Both she and Roeder were interested in plants used in folk medicine; Roeder's own herbarium eventually passed into her hands in 1908:

Mr Roeder has quite lately sent me about 120 pressed plants which he has collected in the S. of the Island. They are beautiful specimens, each one mounted on a sheet of foolscap, with the date & place of collecting, also Gaelic & Manx names, with a short note as to the particular use of the plant in folk medicine or charms. He also gives the name of the Manx person who told him the Manx name of the plant & its medicinal qualities.<sup>3</sup>

A number of notebooks containing folklore and other materials collected by her survive including a number of charms. Whether she ever supplied any Manx material to Carmichael is unclear; however, she certainly had material to share. Besides this letter showing that Morrison had a reputation outside of the Island itself as a collector, it also shows Carmichael himself being interested in charms and their associated practices in other Gaelic-speaking areas of the British Isles and engaging in correspondence with those likely to be willing to share material with him.

Stephen Miller RBV

\*

---

<sup>2</sup> Copy letter from Sophia Morrison to Karl Roeder, undated [April? 1906], MNHL, MS 09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 4, (Disbound) Letter copy book (1904–07).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Sophia Morrison to J.J. Kneen, 15 September 1908, MNHL, MS 1086/21 c.