Manx National Heritage
Eiraght Ashoonagh Vannin

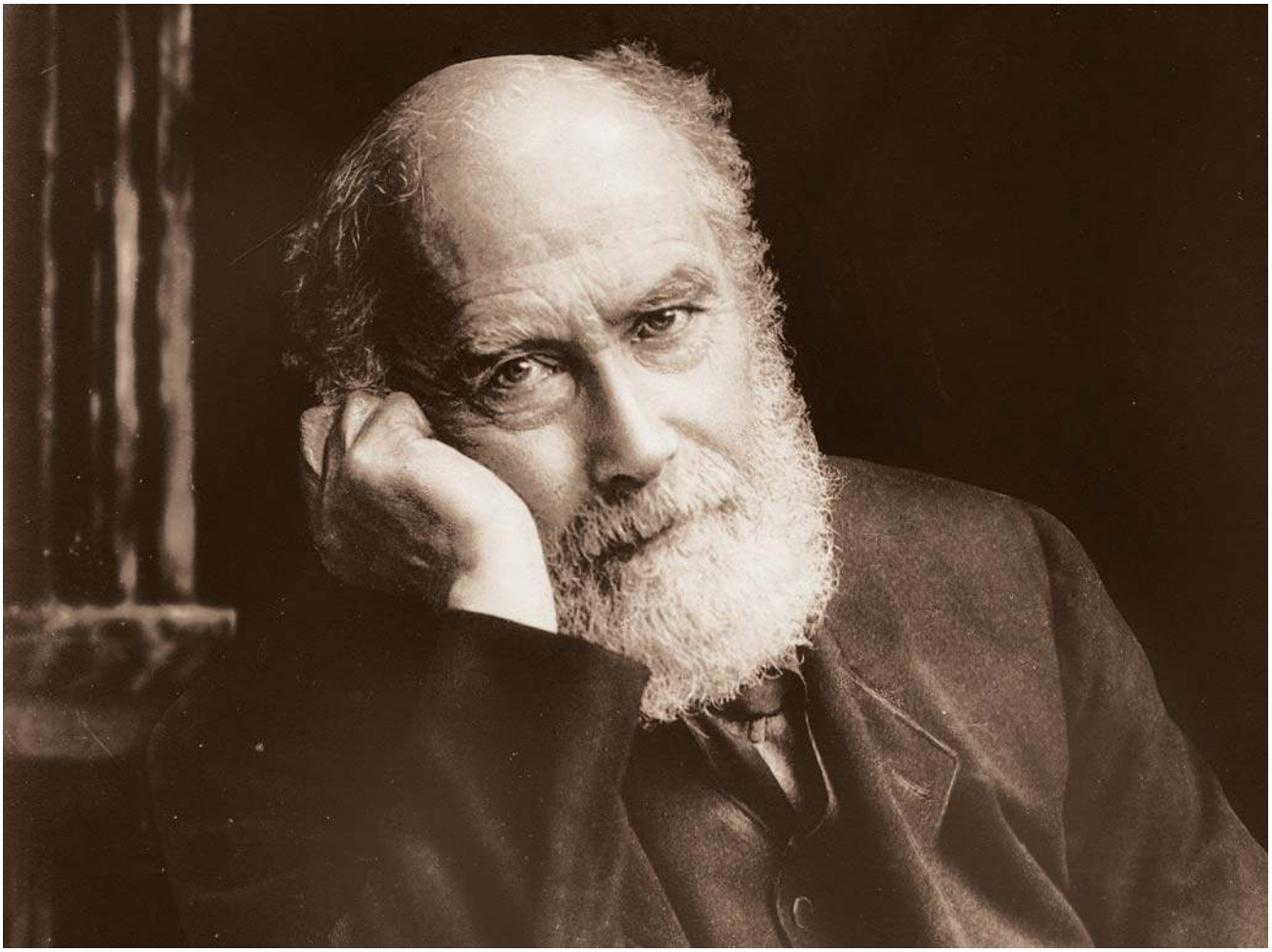
THOMAS EDWARD BROWN

Public Information Sheet **No.10** **March 2007**

The Manx National Poet

Born:	5th May 1830, Douglas.
Died:	29th October 1897, Bristol.
Father:	Revd Robert Brown.
Mother:	Dorothy (née Thompson).
Married:	June 1857, Amelia Stowell (d. July 1888).
Issue:	A daughter (died in infancy 1859), Edith, Ethel, Birkett, Braddan (d. 1876), Dora, Hugh.
Education:	Douglas Grammar School; King William's College; Christ Church, Oxford.

Thomas Edward Brown has long been established as the Manx National Poet whose narrative poems in the Manx dialect act as a sort of mirror to the Manx, showing them what they were and who they are, illustrating their use of language, their sense of humour, their livelihoods and loves, their hopes and fears. Few can read lines from any of Brown's *Fo'c's'le Yarns* without realising that Brown understands the Manx people from the inside out and is urging them to achieve their destiny as a nation.



Thomas Edward Brown, his parents' sixth child, was born on 5th May 1830 in the now demolished Grammar School house in New Bond Street, Douglas, where his father the Revd Robert Brown was the schoolmaster and also chaplain to Old St Matthew's Church. In 1832 Robert Brown was appointed curate at Kirk Braddan and moved to the old vicarage there with his wife Dorothy and their large family. Though the Browns were far from affluent they had a servant, John McCullough, a Scotsman from Galloway who was a major influence on the young Brown, teaching him, as he wrote later in his poem 'Old John', about strength and truth and 'tender grace'. More formal lessons came from the parish schoolmaster and from his father, who taught him Latin and read him his own poems.

Tragedy struck the family in December 1846 when Robert Brown fell dead in the snow, aged 54. His widow had to leave the vicarage and move with her younger children to a small house at 14 Bowling Green Road in Castletown. From there Tom Brown entered King William's College as a day boy, aged sixteen and already strongly built, with startlingly blue eyes, dark hair and a jovial manner. In the opinion of a contemporary he was 'emphatically a manly, vigorous boy' who already had a strong sense of humour and a genius for mimicry. In his time at King William's it was clear to all masters and boys that Brown had exceptional intellectual ability, and he successfully sat the examinations to be a servitor at Oxford's grandest college, Christ Church.

Brown began his studies there in January 1850 but soon realised that the position of servitor, though it provided him with free tuition and lodgings, gave him a 'poor scholar' status. This infuriated and humiliated him, and he became a recluse, devoting most of his time and energies to his studies. He took two degree courses concurrently, one in Classics, and the other a new course in History and Jurisprudence, and was awarded first classes in both. This 'double first' was exceptional, and made him one of the young stars of the university. Next he was appointed a Fellow of Oriel College on the results of a very taxing written and oral examination. By any standards his Oxford career had been outstanding.

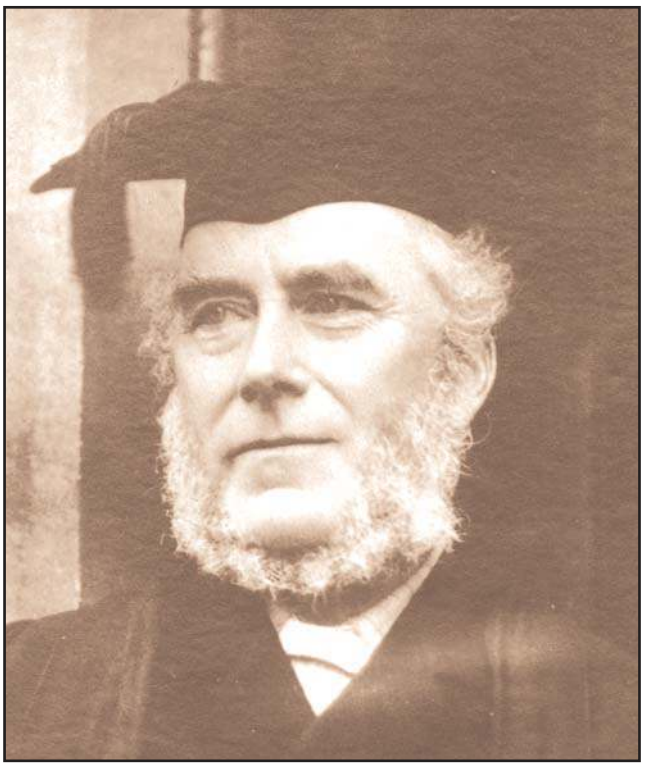
However, he was not content to stay there, partly because he missed the Isle of Man and partly because of the friendship he had forged with Amelia Stowell, the daughter of his father's first cousin, who lived in Ramsey. At that time resident Oxford dons were forbidden to marry, so when the position of Vice-Principal of King William's fell vacant, it seemed the perfect opportunity. Brown could return to the Island, teach at his old school, and marry Amelia. In 1855 he returned to Castletown, having been ordained deacon in Oxford, and in 1857 he married Amelia at Kirk Maughold. She was an attractive woman with a shy smile, whom Brown described as 'my first love … transparent, so fearless'. She did not share her husband's intellectual interests but remained for Brown 'a sunny, merry, happy woman, absolutely unconscious of the hollowness and the pretences and the shams that surrounded her, tolerant too and kind to all'. Their first child, a girl, died after a few months in 1859 and was buried at Maughold. At steady intervals six more children were born; three boys, Birkett, Braddan and Hugh, and three girls, Edith, Ethel and Dora.

Brown was a popular Vice-Principal and also became well known to the people of Castletown, giving lectures on cultural subjects such as 'Manx Proverbs', in which he insisted that Manx was 'a fine old language, rich and musical; and full of meaning and expression'. He was not a fluent Manx Gaelic speaker himself, but he had a sound working knowledge of the language. In 1861, after he had been Vice-Principal for six years, he successfully applied to be headmaster of the Crypt School in Gloucester, an ancient grammar school which was just about to re-open in new buildings. However, during his first year he was incensed when it was suggested by a parent in a letter to the local paper that he was making a profit on books which he required pupils to buy. He wrote in reply complaining of 'dyspeptic scribblers' and their 'feeble nastiness' and urged the newspaper to protect him from 'the insinuations of blackguardism and the slanders of the slums'. It was unwise of him to enter into such public controversy, but it was a lifelong feature of his character that he never suffered fools gladly.

During his two years at the Crypt he recruited several able staff and 105 pupils, but in 1863 he received an attractive offer from John Percival, head of Clifton College, a new public school which had opened in Bristol the previous year. Percival, who was to prove one of Britain's great educationalists, offered Brown the position of head of the 'Modern

Side', teaching history and English literature, in competition with the 'Classical Side'. Brown moved to Clifton in 1863 and stayed until 1892, though he made constant visits to the Isle of Man in the holidays. At Clifton he became housemaster of the second boarding house to be opened, in 1864, as well as Second Master, and he continued to hold all these positions until he retired. Under Percival's direction Clifton prospered and numbers grew rapidly, reaching 680 in 1879, the year he left. His successor was James Wilson, born on the Isle of Man where his father had been the first principal of King William's College, and educated there as a junior boy when Brown was a senior pupil. Brown worked harmoniously with both Percival and Wilson and it was only with the arrival of a third headmaster, Glazebrook, in 1890, that he felt uncomfortable. He did not get on with the new man, and this was behind his decision to retire in 1892. However there can be no doubt that Brown was one of the great influences on the development of Clifton College and he was much revered by pupils as a 'character' and an inspiring teacher. He also made lifelong friends among his colleagues, in particular Graham Dakyns, a fine classical scholar and keen games player.

Until 1868 Brown wrote very little poetry, but about this time he began to exchange poems with Dakyns. The earliest were in the English lyric style and include one of his best, 'The Schooner', and also the poem about his school life which starts 'I'm here at Clifton, grinding at the mill …' By 1870 he had written his first poem in Manx dialect, 'Betsy Lee'. This is a tale narrated to his shipmates by a fisherman, 'Tom Baynes', sitting in the fo'c's'le of a fishing boat, and it tells of his unrequited love for 'Betsy Lee', and the tragedy that befell her. Brown followed this with 'Christmas Rose', another yarn by Tom Baynes concerned with romance and tragedy, and 'Captain Tom and Captain Hugh', the story of two brothers who were rivals both at sea and in love. In 1876 Brown wrote 'The Doctor', a story about the Isle of Man cholera epidemic of 1832, and in 1878 two short Manx poems which have remained very popular, 'The Christening' and 'Peggy's Wedding'. By 1880 he had finished another Baynes yarn, 'Tommy Big Eyes', the story of a Manx lad who overcomes merciless bullying at school. Many of these poems had been published in small numbers by local printers in Douglas but in 1881 the London publisher Macmillan agreed to



Thomas Edward Brown.

publish four of them in a volume entitled *Fo'c's'le Yarns*, though Brown was required to cut out some of the more 'salty' passages. In 1887 Swan, Sonnenschein, Lowry and Co. of London published *The Doctor and Other Poems*, which included 'Kitty of the Sherragh Vane' and 'The Schoolmasters', and in 1889 Macmillan published *The Manx Witch and Other Poems*, the main yarn featuring love and murder in the 'Laxdale' mines.

By the time Brown retired from Clifton in 1892, moving to a rented house in Ramsey, he was a poet published by a famous London firm and known to literary circles well beyond the Island. Amelia had died in 1888 and was buried in Redland Churchyard, near Clifton, with their son Braddan who had died in 1876. None of the remaining five children married and his daughters kept house for Brown in Ramsey. Meanwhile he worked on a collection of his English poetry, published by Macmillan in 1893 as *Old John and Other Poems*, and he gave lectures and enjoyed long country walks. In 1894 he refused the offer of the Archdeaconry of Man, though he filled in for clergy who were sick or on leave. A good deal of his time was taken up in letter-writing, mostly to his Clifton friends Graham Dakyns and Sidney Irwin. Always keen to encourage Manx literary talent, Brown advised his friend Sir THOMAS HENRY HALL CAINE about details of Manx life which

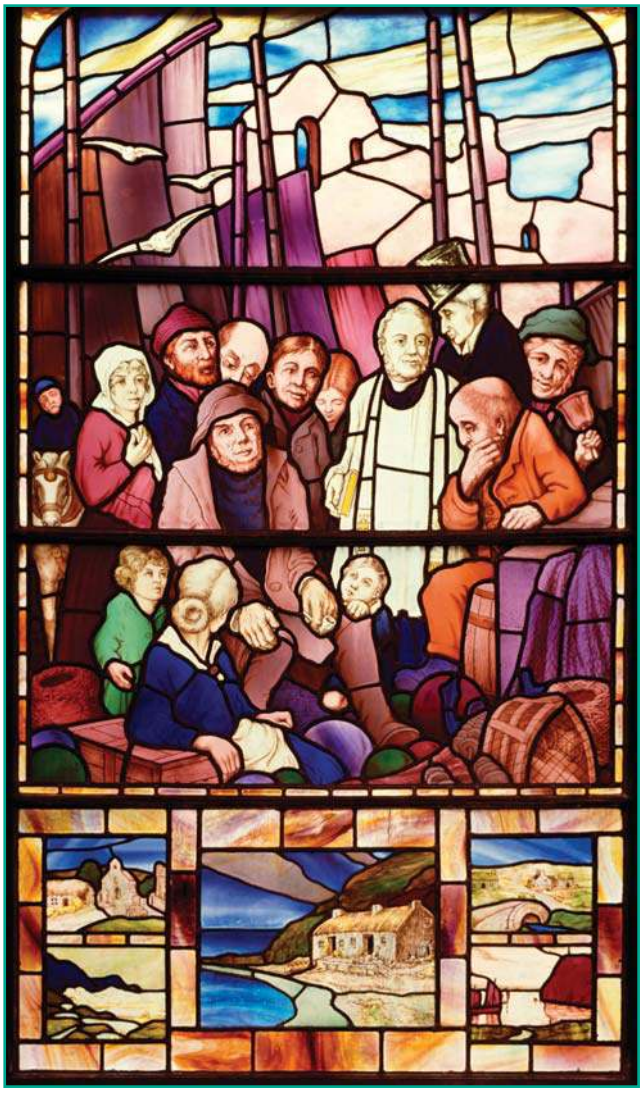
appeared in Caine's novel The Manxman. In 1897 Brown returned to Clifton to see friends, and on the night of 29th October, he suffered a brain haemorrhage and died, aged 67. He was buried with his wife and son at Redland on 3rd November, after a funeral service in Clifton College Chapel.

Brown's friends lost no time in ensuring his lasting fame and in 1900 Sidney Irwin edited two volumes of his letters, published by Constable. In the same year Dakyns and others edited *The Collected Poems of T.E. Brown*, published by Macmillan as part of a series of volumes which placed him in company with Tennyson, Shelley, Coleridge, Hardy, Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold. On the Island ARTHUR WILLIAM MOORE and SAMUEL NORRIS promoted his claim to be the Manx National Poet and raised money for a bust by JOSEPH SWYNNERTON, unveiled in 1909. In 1930 the centenary of Brown's birth was celebrated with many lectures, a concert in the Villa Marina, portrait photographs of him presented to Island schools, and a handsome memorial volume.

Right:
In 1934 the 'T.E. Brown Room' was opened in the Manx Museum, featuring three stained-glass windows by WILLIAM HOGGATT, depicting characters from the *Fo'c's'le Yarns*. Here is a photograph of the central window.

The World Manx Association continued to promote Brown's memory and a number of biographies and textual studies of his work have been published. In 1997 the centenary of his death was marked by a series of lectures and publications on the Island, and in 1998 a statue by Amanda Barton was erected in Bucks Road, Douglas. In 2007 a new T.E.Brown display opened at the Manx Musuem which features the splendid stained-glass windows by Hoggatt.

By Courtesy of The Manx Heritage Foundation.



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