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‘AN ENGLISH MONSTROSITY’?

EVOLUTION AND RECEPTION OF MANX ORTHOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates perceptions of Manx orthography within Celtic scholarship. The predominant view is well summarized by Jackson (1955: 108): ‘Manx orthography is an English monstrosity which obscures both pronunciation and etymology’. Similarly, O’Rahilly dismisses Manx spelling as ‘an abominable system, neither historic nor phonetic, and based mainly on English’ (O’Rahilly 1932: 20). The article sets these perceptions in the sociohistorical context in which the system was developed by the Manx clergy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is argued that the system is neither so directly dependent on English conventions, nor so unsystematic and inconsistent, as has been often claimed. Such weaknesses as do exist from the perspective of contemporary scholars and students of the language should not necessarily be viewed as such in the light of the needs, priorities and assumptions of those who practised Manx writing in its original context. It is shown that there was in fact an increase in the phonological transparency of certain elements of the system during the standardization of the mid-eighteenth century represented by the publication of translations of the Book of Common Prayer (1765) and the Bible (1771-72). On the other hand, countervailing pressures towards phonological ambiguity, iconicity and idiosyncrasy are discussed, including the utility of distinguishing homophones; real or presumed etymologies; the influence of non-standard or regional English spelling conventions; tensions between Manx and English norms; and an apparent preference in certain cases for more ambiguous spellings as a compromise between variant forms. Negative outcomes of the received view for scholarship on Manx are also examined, with a case study of the neglect of orthographic evidence for the historical phonology of the language. The wider context of English-based orthographies for Gaelic is also briefly considered.

Keywords: Manx; Gaelic; orthography; writing systems; standardization

1. Introduction

The best-known distinguishing feature of the Manx language is its orthography, based to a large extent on the spelling conventions of Early Modern English. It is thus very different from the established orthographies of its close relatives Irish and Scottish Gaelic, which ultimately descend from the seventh-century Old Irish system based on British Latin (Ahlqvist 1994). This fact, together with certain grammatical and lexical features of Manx, tends to raise eyebrows among speakers and scholars of the Gaelic languages, to say the least (Lewin 2017). For the reader unfamiliar with Manx, the Modern Irish and Manx cognates in (1) will give a general flavour of the orthographic differences between the two. The present article explores how Manx orthography has been viewed by scholars of the Celtic languages, and to what extent their evaluations are justified in light of the original historical sociolinguistic context in which the system evolved and the needs and priorities of those who developed and used it.[1]

(1)

Manx	Irish
goo	*guth*
thalloo	*talamh*
creen	*críon*
shiu	*sibh*
Jee	*Dia*
bannee	*beannaigh*
vannee	*bheannaigh*
aalin	*álainn*
balley	*baile*
oaie	*aghaidh*
noi	*in aghaidh*
cheh	*te*
yn	*an*

1.1. The Isle of Man and the Manx language

The Isle of Man lies at the centre of the Irish Sea midway between Britain and Ireland. It now has a population of over 83,000, about half of whom were born in the island (Isle of Man Government 2017). Although under English and British suzerainty since the fourteenth century, the Isle of Man enjoys a significant

[1] For further discussion of formal linguistic questions relating to the orthography and phonology, see Lewin (2020a; 2020b). Certain aspects of the revival context with respect to orthography are discussed in Lewin (2021: 17, 19-20), and it is hoped to return to this topic.

degree of self-government and has never been integrated into the United Kingdom.

Until the early nineteenth century, Manx was the dominant vernacular of the Manx people (Broderick 1999), and literacy in the English-based orthography was fairly widespread from the mid-eighteenth century.[2] The language is closely related to Irish and Scottish Gaelic, but owing to early political and social separation, the common tradition of a high register literary language, which persisted to some degree in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands as late as the eighteenth century, appears to have been entirely absent in Man from at least the High Middle Ages onwards (Broderick 1999: 14). The generally recognized last native speaker Ned Maddrell passed away in 1974, but a modest revival movement of committed second-language speakers had been in existence from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. With more favourable public and institutional attitudes to heritage, autochthonous culture and 'small-n' nationalism, and greater economic stability since the 1980s, this movement has gained traction and broad, if fairly shallow, public and political support (Gawne 2002; Wilson 2011). A major milestone was the establishment of Manx immersion primary education in 2001 (Clague 2009).

2. Negative assessments of Manx orthography

Owing partly to the limited extent of Manx literature and the lack of medieval material, Manx has received little attention from scholars of the Celtic languages (O'Rahilly 1932: ix; Thomson 1969: 177). Insofar as they have commented on it at all, scholars have tended to hold a generally negative view of Manx orthography. The most well-known appraisal, and perhaps the most damaging for the long-term profile and perception of the Manx language within Celtic Studies and beyond (Lewin 2017), is that of T. F. O'Rahilly (1932) in his pioneering volume *Irish Dialects Past and Present*. According to O'Rahilly, 'Manx spelling … is an abominable system, neither historic nor phonetic, and based mainly on

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[2] Passive literacy at least must have been widespread by the early nineteenth-century, given that between 1748 and 1824, about 14,000 copies of the Bible in Manx or parts of it had been printed, most funded by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the British and Foreign Bible Society and distributed for free to the Manx-speaking population (Wood 1896; Hoy 2015: 190-193). These were eagerly received (Hoy 2015: 192). There were also significant efforts to provide Manx-medium or bilingual education during this period. For comparison the total population was around 30,000 at the turn of the nineteenth century (Moore 1900: 647). It seems likely therefore that a large proportion of Manx-speaking households contained at least one Manx book and one literate member by the early nineteenth century. We may note also the widespread presence of Manx Bibles in the homes of Carl Marstrander's informants visited between 1929 and 1933 (Broderick 2019a: 47). The carval manuscripts also provide evidence of vernacular literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Clague 2005).

English' (O'Rahilly 1932: 20). His views on other aspects of the Manx language were equally damning, reflecting the 'linguistic Darwinism' which permeates much of his thinking of language and dialect contact (Ó Dochartaigh 1987: 219-231; Lewin 2017: 147-148). It is worth noting to O'Rahilly's credit, however, that he did often refer to Manx evidence in his own linguistic work (Thomson 1969: 177), and his analyses are generally sound. This degree of attention to Manx remains unusual among scholars of Irish, for whom Scottish Gaelic is often an afterthought, with Manx ignored entirely. Nevertheless, it is O'Rahilly's rather caustic assertions which are more widely remembered today.

Several scholars have taken much the same view as O'Rahilly, sometimes expressed in similarly colourful terms. In the view of one of O'Rahilly's contemporaries, Manx spelling barely deserves the name: '[c]ibé dhíobh ar a dtráchtfaidhe, an son nó an sanas, ní fhreagórfadh súd do cheachtar aca… Ní litriughadh é i n-éan-chor, acht sadhas "phonetics" (.i. saobh-litriughadh)'[3] (Laoide 1906: 171). According to Jackson (1955: 108), 'Manx orthography is an English monstrosity which obscures both pronunciation and etymology'. Breatnach (1993: 2) refers to the orthography's 'fundamental deficiencies and diverse inconsistencies' and claims that '[f]rom a philological viewpoint […] it had the regrettable effect of imposing on Manx a wholly inappropriate spelling which obscured its historical relationship with its congeners and discouraged scholarly interest in its investigation.' Similarly, Ó Cíobháin (2001: 393) claims that the 'arbitrary, unhistorical orthography established for Manx […] is likely to have an inhibiting effect on those familiar with the other branches of Gaelic'. Williams (1994b: 706) is more restrained: 'Ní rómhaith a fhreagraíonn litriú caighdeánach na Manainnise d'fhuaimeanna na teanga mar a labhraítí í'.[4]

Similarly negative evaluations are also found in the work of scholars from Manx backgrounds writing for a revivalist audience. For example, Jennifer Kewley Draskau (2008: xix) in her grammar *Practical Manx* states that

> For various reasons, its present spelling system differs radically from traditional Goidelic spelling, but in other respects Manx displays many similarities with related languages and is to some degree intelligible to speakers of Irish and Scots Gaelic, once they have recovered from the initial shock of its orthography. The system itself is riddled with exceptions and some inconsistencies.
>
> (Kewley Draskau 2008: xix)

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3 'Whether one speaks of the sound or the etymology, [the Manx orthography] would not suit either of them […] it is not spelling at all, but a kind of "phonetics" (i.e. pseudo-spelling)' (my translation). I am grateful to Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh, Aberystwyth University, for drawing my attention to this reference.

4 'The standard spelling of Manx does not correspond too well to the sounds of the language as it was spoken' (my translation).

The evaluations of these writers rest mainly on three claims about Manx spelling, crystallized in the passage cited from Jackson (1955: 108) above:

- it is based on English spelling ('English monstrosity');
- it is arbitrary and inconsistent ('obscures … pronunciation');
- it separates Manx from the other Gaelic languages ('obscures … etymology').

In the passages quoted above, the predominant system used in Ireland and Scotland is framed as 'traditional' and 'historical', while the Manx orthography is not simply an alternative means of writing Gaelic, devised by Gaelic speakers for their own needs in a particular time and place (just as the Old Irish system was), but 'unhistorical', 'aberrant', 'arbitrary', 'wholly inappropriate', and 'impos[ed]' on the language, as if from without. The present article will argue that such framing should be problematized, to say the least, and has had negative practical consequences for scholarship.

3. More positive assessments

Alongside the views discussed above, more positive evaluations of Manx orthography are to be found in the literature. Already in 1894 the Celtic scholar Sir John Rhŷs had written that 'the study of Manx phonology is by no means a bad corrective of the effect of seeing Irish written in an orthography which is more historical than phonetic' and claimed that the spelling has 'a wider interest, in fact, than has hitherto been usually supposed' (Rhŷs 1894: xii).[5] Robert L. Thomson (1924-2005) was the first scholar to specialize in the study of Manx and complete a postgraduate thesis on the language (Thomson 1953). As a result, his views are more nuanced and better informed than some of those cited above. He notes some deficiencies of the Manx orthographies compared with the Irish-Scottish system, but also points out some advantages:

> The English conventions mean that the radical and lenited or nasalized consonants lack the visible connection shown in Gaelic spelling, but the spelling has the advantage for the linguistic historian of showing the vocalization of fricatives and such new developments as svarabhakti vowels, and lengthening or diphthonging in monosyllables before unlenited liquids and nasals when these are not shown in the traditional orthography.
>
> (Thomson 1984: 307)

[5] Certain aspects of Rhŷs's own speculations regarding the origins of Manx orthography were rather fanciful (Thomson 1953: 9; Lewin 2015: 83-86), but his work has the advantage of paying close attention to the evidence which the Manx orthographies provide for the development of the language (Lewin 2019a), which has not always been the case with later scholarship, as discussed below.

Similar assessments are given by Broderick (2009: 306-307) and Russell (1995: 229). From a more sociolinguistic perspective, Ó hIfearnáin (2007) and Sebba (2012) consider some of the factors which conditioned the development and continuing acceptance of the Manx orthography.

4. The beginnings of written Manx

We now turn to the historical question of why Manx has a different orthography from its sister languages, and how it developed as it did.

4.1. Early linguistic history

The early linguistic history of the Isle of Man is somewhat obscure. Brythonic, Gaelic and Norse-speaking populations all seem to have had a presence (Thomson 1984: 307; 2015; Charles-Edwards 2013: 148-152), which is not surprising given the island's geographical location. Although there are some tantalizing literary, linguistic and historical hints that Gaelic learned elites had a presence in Man in the Middle Ages (Macquarrie 2015; Ó Cuív 1957; Thomson 1988; Lewin forthcoming), the language is generally assumed to have been an unwritten vernacular at least from the stabilization of English political control of the island in the fourteenth century. Only place and personal names in official records in Latin or English survive from this period (Thomson 1969: 180; Broderick 2009: 306).

4.2. Phillips' Prayer Book

By the turn of the seventeenth century, practically the entire population of the island at least nominally conformed to the reformed Church of England (Oliver 1860: 98; Moore 1893: 97-98), which enjoyed significant autonomy under the local diocesan bishop of Sodor and Man. The provision of church services and the Scriptures in the vernacular was a prominent concern of Protestant reformers, and in the Anglican context, this had already borne fruit with the publication of a Welsh translation of the Book of Common Prayer, the Church's official liturgy, in 1567, and the Bible in 1588; an Irish New Testament followed in 1603, and a Prayer Book translation in 1608. It is unsurprising then, that an attempt was made to provide similar translations in Manx, with a translation of the Prayer Book, including the psalms, made between 1604 and 1610 under the auspices of Bishop John Phillips (c. 1555-1633), a Welshman in origin (Moore and Rhŷs 1895; Thomson 1953).

Phillips is reported to have mastered Manx well enough to preach in the language, and to have an active hand in the Prayer Book translation, with

assistance from native Manx clergy (Cumming 1866: 9; Moore & Rhŷs 1895 I: xxii). A single manuscript of this work dating from between 1625 and 1630 survives (MNHL MSS 00003 and 00004). This was probably a fair copy intended for parochial use or perhaps for the press, but it remained unpublished until Moore and Rhŷs's scholarly edition of 1895. Phillips' orthography appears not to have found favour with some of the island's clergy, 'for that it is spelled with vowells wherewith none of them are acquainted', in the words of William Crowe, one of the Vicars General asked to inspect the work in 1611 (Moore & Rhŷs 1895 I: xii).

The extent to which Phillips and his collaborators were adapting existing orthographic practices or devising new ones is unclear. From Crowe's comment it seems that elements of the vowel representation at least were innovations, and these also diverge sharply from the later orthography. For the long vowels, Phillips' system generally follow what Thomson (1953) calls 'continental values', that is to say, close to the original Latin values, unaffected by the changes of the Middle English Great Vowel Shift. For example, <i> or <ii> when long means /iː/ not /ai/, which may have been inspired by Welsh or a number of other non-English languages with which Phillips may have been familiar. Wheeler (2019: 8) in his recent new edition of the Phillips psalter points to certain fixed spellings of common words which are idiosyncratic within Phillips' orthographic system as a whole, raising the possibility that these indicate 'that certain words already had, for him, a "standard" spelling from which he was unwilling to deviate'. However, little can be determined with any certainty, and any pre-existing tradition is unlikely to have extended further back than the fifteenth century at the earliest (Thomson 1969: 182).

4.3. Classical Manx: print and manuscript

In 1707 Manx finally reached print in the form of a bilingual catechism generally known by an abbreviation of its Manx title, *Coyrle Sodjeh* 'further advice', translated from the work of Bishop Thomas Wilson (1663-1755). This work uses a version of the orthography later standardized in the Bible translation (Lewin & Wheeler 2017), and unlike Phillips, it and subsequent Manx texts generally employ English values for the vowels; for example, the long vowel /iː/ is mostly written as <ee>, while the diphthong /ai/ is <i> or <ie> (e.g. **mee** 'month' *mí*;[6] **mie** 'good' *maith*). The publication of *Coyrle Sodjeh* can also be seen as the beginning of the 'Classical Manx' period (Thomson 1984: 307; Broderick 2009: 306), which culminated in the major translation project initiated by Wilson and

[6] Cognates of Manx words are supplied in Early Modern Irish form throughout the article unless otherwise specified.

then overseen by Bishop Mark Hildesley (1698-1772). This saw the tasks of translation and revision apportioned between the island's clergy and resulted in complete printed Manx versions of the Book of Common Prayer (1765; largely independent of Phillips' version) and the Bible (first instalment 1748, completed 1772; single-volume editions 1775 and 1819).

By the mid-eighteenth century, we also have a significant corpus of manuscript sermons from several of the island's clergy, most of them preserved in the Manx National Heritage Library at the Manx Museum in Douglas. See Lewin (2015) for an edition of the earliest extant Manx sermon. At the time of writing, I am contributing to a research project at Aberystwyth University[7] with the aim of transcribing, editing and analysing the portion of this material which dates from before the completion of the Bible (Lewin & Ó Muircheartaigh 2021).[8] These texts provide an important insight into the period when the orthography was in the process of development, revealing a greater degree of microdialectal and idiolectal variation and parallel orthographic sub-traditions (at the level of individual sound-symbol correspondences and the spelling of individual words) than is apparent in the printed texts alone.

We are also fortunate to have original translators' drafts of the parts of the Manx Bible, some attesting to multiple stages of revision and editing (Thomson 1969: 185–186; 1979; Broderick 2019b; Lewin 2019b). Another important source which requires further investigation is the very substantial corpus of manuscript 'carval' books, dating from the 1770s onwards, which record lengthy religious ballads in Manx traditionally sung on Christmas Eve. Unlike the rest of the eighteenth-century material, which is almost exclusively the work of the clergy, these carvals were often composed and copied by lay-people (Clague 2005).

5. Orthographic standardization in the mid eighteenth century

A number of conditioning factors can be discerned in the evolution of the Manx orthography during the eighteenth century. Increased accuracy and transparency of phoneme-grapheme correspondence was only one, and not necessarily always the most important.

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7 'Variation and change in the language of Manx sermons', PI Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh, funded by a British Academy and Leverhulme Trust Small Research Grant (2020-22) with additional support from Culture Vannin.

8 Based on the present state of knowledge, the pre-1772 sub-corpus compromises 88 sermons, amounting to just over a tenth of the total corpus of around 650 manuscript sermons dating from 1696 to the 1860s, not including later revival-era compositions. A catalogue of the sermon manuscripts held in the library of the Manx Museum has been compiled by the Manx scholar Fiona McArdle and is available on request from Manx National Heritage.

5.1. Improvement in sound-symbol correspondence

Despite the perceptions of commentators that Manx spelling is 'arbitrary' and 'inconsistent', there is clear evidence of an increase in the consistency and clarity with which certain phonological contrasts are represented in the standardized form of the orthography in comparison with some of the earlier iterations. For example, in manuscripts of the early to mid-eighteenth century the digraph <ea> is often used indiscriminately for both the monophthong /eː/ (reflecting Early Modern English pronunciation) and the diphthong /iə/.[9] In the orthographic standard, however, the latter diphthong is consistently written <eea>, or <ia> in a couple of words (2).[10]

(2) Distribution of <ea> /eː/ and <eea>, <ia> /iə/ in the Classical Manx standard orthography (words occurring in Bible and/all Kelly and Cregeen's dictionaries).

spelling	sound	etymology	lexical items
<ea>	/eː/	*é*, *eatha*, *eithe* etc.	**bea** (*beatha*), **beam** (*béim*), **beasagh** (*béasach*), **blean** (*bléin*), **breag** (*bréag*), **chea** (*teitheadh*), **crea** (*créadh*), **eadaghey** (*éad*), **eajee** (*éidigh*), **eam** (*éigh*), **fea** (*féith*), **feanish** (*fiadhnaise*), **greasee** (*gréasaidhe*), **imnea** (*imnidhe*), **jea** (*inné*), **jeadjagh** (*deithidneach*), **jiulean** (*deidhbhléan*), **kease** (*céas*), **lhean** (*leathan*), **shlea** (*is leithe*), **mea** (*méath*), **mean** (*meadhón*), **rea** (*réidh*), **rea** (*reithe*), **reajagh** (*réiteach*), **rheam** (*réim*), **soilshean** (*soilse* + *-éan*) **trean** (*tréan*)
<eea>, <ia>	/iə/	*ia*	**bleeaney** (*bliadhna*); **breearrey** (*briathar*); **creear** (*criathar*); **eeasaght** (*iasacht*) **eeast** (*iasc*), **feeackle** (*fiacail*); **feeagh** 'value, debt' (*fiach*), **feeagh** 'raven' (*fiach*, OIr. *fiäch*, ScG. *fitheach*);

[9] The sequence <ea> also denotes certain other vowel sounds in the Manx orthography, most notably /əː/ (G. *ao*) and /ɨə/ (G. *ua*) (Lewin 2020b: 71, 218-219).

[10] There is a handful of apparent exceptions, most of which can be explained by particular idiosyncrasies or variant forms: 1. **shleayst** 'thigh' (*sliasaid*), alongside **slheeas(s)id**, **slheeayst** (see table (2) above). 2. verbal noun **freayll(ey)** 'keep' (*friotháil*, verbal noun *friotháladh*); the inflected tense forms of this verb have a stem **freill**, as if remodelled to verbal noun **frial(adh)*, stem **fréil*; the vowel of the latter form appears to have spread to the verbal noun in some idiolects (*HLSM* II: 177), with the spelling *freayll* perhaps serving to bridge /eː/ and /iə/ variants. 3. **skeay**, **skeeah** 'vomit' (*sceith*, *scéith*), with spellings perhaps representing regular /ehʲ/ > /ei/ alongside /eh/ > /eː/ > /iə/. 4. **sheayney**, **sheeaney** 'bless' (*séanadh*), with variant diphthongized /iə/ and monophthongal /eː/ forms.

			grian (*grian*); **heear**, **sheear**, **neear** (*thiar* etc.); **jeean** (*dian*); **jeeas** (*dias*); **keeagh** (*cíoch*);[11] **mian** (*mian*); **reeast** (*riasc*); **sheeabyn** (*siabann*); **sheean** (*sian*), **shleeassid** (*sliasaid*); **streean** (*srian*); **yeeal** (*iall*); **yeearree** (*iarraidh*)
		é	**beeal** (*béal*); **eean** (*éan*); **eeanlee** (*éanlaith*); **eearlys** (*éarlais*); **jeeaghyn** (*déachain, féachain(t)*); **keead** (*céad*); **keeaght** (*céachta*); **lheeannee** (*léana*); **neeal** (*néal*); **screeagh** (*scréach*); **skeeal** (*scéal*)

In contrast, in manuscripts we often find spellings such as **jeagh** (**jeeagh** *déach*) and **grean** (**grian** *grian*) which are more ambiguous. For example, in a selection of the sermons of Philip Moore (1705-1783), dating from 1720s and 30s,[12] we find the following (3):

(3) <ea> representing /e:/ and /iə/ in MNHL MS 00277 (four sermons by Philip Moore)

	Moore MSS	standard	Gaelic	English
a) /e:/	**bea**	**bea**	*beatha*	life
	beaghey	**beaghey**	*beathaghadh*	living
	beasht	**beisht**	*béist, péist*	beast
	[c]hea	**chea**	*teitheadh*	flee
	eagin	**êgin**	*éigean*	need
	[f]eam	**feme**	*feidhm*	need
	lhea	**lieh**	*leath*	half
b) /iə/ (< *ia*)	**yearee**	**yeearree**	*iarraidh*	desire
	grean	**grian**	*grian*	sun
	feaklyn	**feeacklyn**	*fiacail*	teeth
	keal	**keeayll**	*ciall*	sense
	pean	**pian**	*pian*	pain
	skeanyn	**skianyn**	*sciathán*	wings
	yeastyn	**eeastyn**	*iasc*	fish
c) /iə/ (< *é*)	**beal**	**beeal**	*béal*	mouth
	jeaghyn	**jeeaghyn**	*déachain*	look, show
	skeal	**skeeal**	*scéal*	story

It should be noted that some of the instances of the /iə/ diphthong are themselves words which earlier had an /e:/ pronunciation (category (c) in (3)), which is still

11 For the development of /i:/ > /iə/ before /x/ see Jackson (1955: 32), Lewin (2020b: 158).

12 And thus much earlier than Moore's role as general editor of the Manx Bible in the 1760s and 70s.

shown in the Phillips orthography, and possibly intended in some of the eighteenth-century usage of <ea>. This particular orthographic development thus clearly shows a change in pronunciation which must have been complete by the mid-eighteenth century, at least in the lects of those who standardized the orthography. Furthermore, some non-standard spellings from the nineteenth century show a later development with /iə/ merging with the monophthong /iː/ (Lewin 2020b: 77-78), which was largely complete in the speech of the last native speakers (*HLSM* III: 139). If we were to start from the assumption that Manx spelling is merely a chaotic mess, we might miss these pieces of evidence for how the pronunciation has changed during the period when Manx has been a written language. On the other hand, if the 'Gaelic' orthography had been in use (unless modified significantly), such developments would also be invisible, just as the diphthongization of long /eː/ before broad consonants in Munster Irish (Ua Súilleabháin 1994: 482-483) and (northern) Scottish Gaelic (Jackson 1968) is invisible in the standard orthographies of these languages.[13]

5.2. Distinguishing homophones

Thomson (1984: 307) notes that Manx 'spelling […] has developed an iconic element, in that words of similar or identical pronunciation are as far as possible deliberately spelt differently'. Some examples are given in (4):

(4) a. /ləi/ **leih** 'forgive' (*loghadh*)
leigh 'law' (ScG. *lagh*)

b. /gɛːu/ **gaaue** 'smith' (*gobha*)[14]
gaue 'danger' (*gábhadh*)

c. /bɛːi/ **baih** 'drown' (*bádh(adh)*)
baie 'bay' (*bágh*)

d. /ɛːrʲ/ **ayr** 'father' (*athair*)
airh 'gold' (*ór*)[15]

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13 A reviewer objects that this development is at least regular and thus predictable from a dialect-internal perspective: while this is (mostly) true for Munster Irish, it is not the case in Scottish Gaelic, where the phenomenon is much more dialectally and lexically variable, even if certain trends are apparent: e.g. /eː/ tends to be preserved in high-register lexis (Robertson 1902: 89; Dillon 1953: 323; Ó Maolalaigh 2001: 31; Bauer 2011: 362).

14 The long diphthong in this word and similar cases arises from compensatory lengthening upon loss of the final syllable, i.e. /ˈgavəð/ > /ˈgauə/ > /gaːu/ > /gɛːu/ (Lewin 2020b: 94); similar developments have been noted in Donegal Irish (Quiggin 1906: 18, 58).

15 Apparently = **óir*, i.e., an oblique feminine form (Lewin 2020b: 266); the feminine gender is

Sometimes, even different semantic uses of the same etymological lemma have different spellings (5):

(5) /ˈfeːnəʃ/ **feanish** ‘witness, evidence’ (*fiadhnaise*)
fenish ‘in the presence of’ (*i bhfiadhnaise*)

Of course, from one perspective, having several spelling variants for a single sound increases the complexity of the system as a whole; it is well known that ‘deeper’ or more ‘opaque’ orthographies take longer and are more difficult to learn than ‘shallower’ (phonemic) ones (e.g., Seymour et al. 2003). On the other hand, there are trade-offs between phonological transparency and other considerations such as identification of morphological and lexical units (Perfetti & Harris 2013; Bhide 2015), so a more opaque orthography is not necessarily more difficult to use once acquired, although it may engender different reading strategies (Liberman et al. 1980; Katz & Frost 1992). The Manx system appears to be particularly opaque in the phoneme-to-grapheme direction owing to the ‘iconic element’ identified by Thomson. That is, while the intended pronunciation is usually fairly clear from the spelling, the reverse is not true: unless one has already mastered the system, it is impossible to be sure how an individual word will be spelled. For example, the convention of the standard orthography as to which of the items in 4b is spelled *gaue* and which *gaaue* is entirely arbitrary.

Presumably the functional advantage of distinguishing different lemmas was felt to outweigh the increased difficulty of learning the orthography. In addition, it should be borne in mind that for most eighteenth-century Manx speakers, passive functional literacy – the ability to read and understand the Bible and other religious texts – would have been a sufficient attainment, insofar as they learned to read the language at all. There were probably only ever a small number of individuals who fully mastered the active use of the orthographic standard (essentially, authors, copy-editors and proof-readers of printed texts). Even after the publication of the Bible, many writers seem to have been content to diverge from the standard significantly, at least in manuscripts (cf. Broderick 1982: 178-179).

5.3. Etymological spelling

On occasion presumed etymologies influence Manx orthography: so we have **peccah** ‘sin’ (6) reflecting Latin *peccatum* (of which it is ultimately a borrowing),

well-attested in Manx (it is neuter in Old Irish, generally masculine later), and the quality of the final slender consonant is commented on by Rhŷs (1894: 150).

rather than a spelling more in keeping with the conventions of the wider system, such as * **peckey**.

(6) **peccah** 'sin' (*peacadh*) expected regular spelling: * **peckey**

It is interesting to note as an example of early standardization at the level of individual lemmas that, out of the thirteen sermon authors with surviving manuscript material dating from before the completion of the Bible (1772), twelve have forms with **pecc-**, and eleven have <a> in the second syllable (sometimes **-a** or **-aa** rather than **-ah**); only one author has **peckey**, and only the latter and one other (with **peccey**) have <ey> for the final schwa. All of the pre-1772 printed sources have **peccah**. The Phillips manuscript, on the other hand, has spellings regular within its own orthography, mostly **peky** and **pecky**, and no instances of **-cca-** (Thomson 1953: 289). John Woods in his 1696 sermon has **pecca**, siding with the later tradition against his tendency to adopt elements of Phillips' system (Lewin 2015).

5.4. Non-English or non-standard English spelling conventions

Certain features of Manx orthography, such as the use of <y> (in non-final position and in monosyllabic clitics) and <ey> (the latter mostly in final position in polysyllables) to represent schwa, are distinctive both from the Gaelic orthography and from English norms (the use of <y> may be based at least in part on Welsh usage, via Phillips), or else they derive from older or regional English conventions not current in Modern English, such as the use of <y> or <i> to mark long vowels (7) (Williams 1994b: 705).

(7) **boyn** /boːn/ 'heel' (*bonn*)
stroin /stroːnʲ/ 'nose' (*sró(i)n*)

This use of <y> and <i> partially maps onto the palatalized or non-palatalized quality of the following consonant, a practice reminiscent of the Irish and Scottish use of orthographic vowels as diacritics to represent the same contrast; the resemblance is probably coincidental, however.

5.5. Innovations rejected in the standard orthography

In spite of features such as those discussed in 5.4, there seems to have sometimes been a degree of reluctance to adopt spellings which might seem too unfamiliar or outlandish from an English-language point of view, even if these might have functional utility. So, for example, one ambiguity of the standard Manx

orthography is that <ch> represents both the affricate consonant /tʃ/ in ***ch**ur**ch*** (Gaelic slender /tʲ/) and the fricative /x/ in *lo**ch*** in initial position (in other positions <gh> is used for /x/).[16] This does not normally cause too much potential confusion since the former is largely restricted to non-leniting contexts, the latter to leniting ones (8).

(8) **cheh** 'hot' (G. *te*)
my charrey 'my friend' (G. *mo chara*)

Nevertheless, in some of the sermon manuscripts we find <tch> for the affricate in initial position (9), and similarly <dj> instead of simple <j>.

(9) **tcherraghtyn** 'perish' (ScG. *teireachdainn*), standard **cherraghtyn**
tcheer 'country' (*tír*), standard **cheer**
tcheet 'come' (*tidheacht*), standard **cheet**
(MNHL MS 00269.5, sermon by Robert Christian, 1752)

This is an example of an adaptation of an English convention (<tch> and <dj> in medial position) to an environment where it does not occur in English. However, initial <tch> and <dj> were not accepted into the standard orthography, perhaps because they were felt to be redundant (<ch> and <j> being sufficient); departed too far from established Manx and/or English norms; or simply did not happen to be part of the repertoire of orthographic forms favoured by the gatekeepers of the printed orthographic norms. Similarly, some manuscript writers use <kh> for initial /x/, /ç/, but this, too, failed to gain acceptance in the printed standard.

5.6. Pseudo-etymological spelling

Some manuscript writers[17] use **Djee** for God rather than standard **Jee** (*Dia*), and lenited **Dyee** for standard **Yee** (*a Dhé*, *a Dhia*), even if they do not otherwise use initial <dj> (5.5). This probably represents an association with Latin *Deus*, and perhaps a feeling that the initial letter of the divine name should not be altered; we similarly sometimes find **Dyeesey** for **Yeesey** 'Jesus' (*Íosa*). We may compare an alternative pseudo-etymological spelling suggested by Henry Corlett (Vicar of German 1761–1801) in a marginal comment in his manuscript of the Manx translation of Revelation 19 (MNHL MS 5690C T):

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16 The editors of the 1866 publication of Kelly's dictionary introduce the practice of using the diacritic <çh> to indicate the affricate /tʃ/, which is sometimes followed in later revival usage.

17 Notably in the sermons of William Crebbin (c. 1717-1803), Robert Christian (c. 1727-1754), Thomas Cubbon (1739-1828), John Clague (1850-1816).

> suppose we spel'd *God* in Manks, thus – *Jaih* or *Jih*. there certainly sh'd be some difference in the spelling of this word, from others of the same sound – tis derived from *Jah*
> (Henry Corlett, draft translation of Revelation 19, MNHL MS 5690C T)

Here the Manx **Jee** is associated with *Jah*, a transliteration of the Hebrew divine tetragram found in Psalm 89:8 in the English Authorized Version. Similar etymological speculations, mostly spurious, are numerous in the dictionaries of Kelly (1866) and Cregeen (1835), and seem occasionally to have influenced the selection of orthographic forms (cf. the discussion of **peccah** 'sin' in 5.3).

5.6. Dialect and variant forms

Another consideration that seems to have played a role is the fact that the standard orthography needed to serve the whole population of the island, not all of whom pronounced Manx in exactly the same way. Although regional differences were relatively small, they did exist, which is unsurprising considering the mountainous terrain of the island and the difficulty of travel and communications before the development of a modern road and rail network in the nineteenth century. We may compare the microdialectal variation highlighted in recent studies of Irish spoken in Iorras Aithneach (Ó Curnáin 2007) and the Aran Islands (Ó Direáin 2021). Many words had variant pronunciations, apparently even within the same district.

A particularly complex area of Manx historical phonology is the development of the vowels spelled *ua* and *ao* in Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic (Lewin 2020a; 2020b: 163-260). From the perspective of phonological transparency, this is also one of the areas in which the standard Manx orthography is least satisfactory. The regular developments can be sketched as follows (10):

(10) Main developments of Gaelic *ua(i), ao(i)* in Manx:

Old Irish	**Irish / ScG.**	**Manx**	**Examples:**
úa	*ua* →	/uə/ (> [uː])	**tuarystal** (*tuarascbháil*)
	→	/ɨə/ (> [iə, iː])	**keayn** (*cuan*)
úai, aí, oí	*uai, aoi* →	/əː/ (> [eː])	**Jelhein** (*Dia Luain*), **Jeheiney** (*Dia hAoine*)
áe, óe	*ao* →	/əː/	**meayll** (*maol*)

- The diphthong *ua* splits into a back realization in some words, and a fronted and unrounded realization in others, tending towards merger with the high front /iː/;
- *ao(i)* is a central vowel tending towards merger with /eː/, especially before palatalized consonants; and
- *uai* before palatalized consonants also gives /əː/, merging to /eː/.

The picture is complicated by various lexical and analogical irregularities, however, resulting in a number of words with more than one realization (11).

(11) Variant forms of Manx words with Gaelic *ua(i)*, *ao(i)*:

/ɨə/ ~ /uə/	**feayr** ‘cold’ (*fuar*)
/əː/ ~ /uə/	**hooar** ‘got, found’ (*fuair*) (non-standard also **heyr** etc.)
/ɨə/ ~ /əː/	**geay** ‘wind’ (*gaoth*)[18]
/ɨə/ ~ /əː/	**cleaysh** ‘ear’ (*cluais*)[19]
/ɨə/ ~ /uə/ ~ /oː/	**heose** etc. ‘up’ (*thuas*)

Attempting to distinguish these variant pronunciations more precisely in writing would have resulted in irreconcilable spelling variants between different writers. Perhaps it was felt better to have vaguer spellings than to be forced to come down explicitly in favour of one variant or the other – although this was unavoidable in the case of **feayr** and **hooar**, both of which had front and back spoken forms.

More generally, the degree of overlap and fluctuation between developments of the *ao(i)* and *ua(i)* vowels, and their adjacency and tendency to merge with the front vowels /eː/ and /iː/, probably explain why spellings such as <eay>, <ea>, <ey>, <ei> were favoured for these vowels – spellings which do not clearly distinguish between their regular developments /əː/ and /ɨə/, and which can also indicate /eː/.[20]

A less ambiguous spelling restricted almost entirely to the *ao* and *ua* vowels, and not used for the front vowels, is <eo>,[21] a rare digraph in English without a

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18 The /gɨə/ pronunciation appears to be a back-formation from the genitive *geayee* (*gaoithe*) (given the regular merger of *aoi* and *uai*) and/or is modelled on *theay* (*tuath*), *leah* (*luath*) (Lewin 2020b: 251).

19 The regular development here is /əː/, however /ɨə/ would reflect the influence of the non-palatalized form *cluas* (the historical nominative singular / genitive plural) (Lewin 2020b: 252–253).

20 It is worth noting that Phillips’ orthography is rather clearer in this respect, distinguishing fairly consistently between diphthongal <ya> (<*ua*) and monophthongal <y(y)> (<*ao(i)*, *uai*) (Lewin 2020b: 210-217).

21 <eo> does appear in a clearly distinct use representing /oː/ in a couple of words, as in **ben-treoghe** ‘widow’ (*baintreabhach*).

single dominant sound-symbol correspondence, most commonly encountered in the word *people* /i/ (but also *leopard, jeopardy* /ɛ/, *yeoman* /oʊ/ etc.). In Manx this digraph can be regarded as a recessive survivor in the standard orthography, being restricted to a handful of words, while it is employed more extensively by certain manuscript authors and is also found in early printed sources such as *Coyrle Sodjeh* in items where it is not found in the standard (Lewin 2020b: 222-224).[22] Perhaps <eo> was viewed as an anomalous spelling from an English perspective and disfavoured on this basis – note that it gives rise to spelling pronunciations in Late Manx such as **feoh** 'hate, abhorrence' (*fuath*) /fiə/, pronounced as [fjoː] etc. by some of the last native speakers.[23] One set of words where <eo> is very consistently used, however, even by manuscript authors where this grapheme is otherwise rare or non-existent, is **seose**, **heose** 'up', **neose** 'from above' (*suas* etc.). Here the spelling involving <o> is perhaps favoured owing to the existence of a pronunciation with /oː/, alongside back and fronted realizations of *ua* (Lewin 2020b: 224).

6. The received view of Manx orthography: consequences for scholarship

As noted above, scholars have tended to give broad-brush criticisms of Manx orthography without considering the complex issues which shed light on the nature and evolution of the system. Apart from a general chilling effect on Manx scholarship (Lewin 2017), the views of influential figures such as T. F. O'Rahilly have likely ensured that the Manx orthography has received less attention than it deserves, both as an object of study in its own right and as a source of evidence for the development of the Manx sound system.

Major works on Manx phonology – most notably Jackson (1955) and Broderick (*HLSM* III) – have compared phonetic data from the last native speakers directly with Gaelic cognates, with only occasional mention of the

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22 Instances of the non-standard (or pre-standard) use of <eo> are found for example in *Coyrle Sodjeh* (1707): **sleoi** 'sooner' (standard **s'leaie**, *is luaithe*), **feosle** 'relieve' (**feayshil**, *fuascail*); in the 1796 first edition of *Pargys Caillit* [*Paradise Lost*] (probably deriving from an early eighteenth-century manuscript without substantial revision, Wheeler 2020): **cheoyn** 'sea' (**keayn**, *cuan*), **feon** 'expansive' (**feayn**, G. *fao(i)n*), **beoyn** 'eternal' (**beayn**, G. *buan*), **chleosh** 'ear' (**cleaysh**, *cluas*), **feoyr** 'cold' (**feayr**, *fuar*), among others; and in variant spellings in Cregeen (1835): **theo** 'common people' (**theay**, *tuath*), **cleoyn** 'propensity' (**cleayn**, *claon*, or *cluain*).

23 Broderick (*HLSM* II: 165) gives the following examples: [fẹːo] (Thomas Christian, Harry Kelly) and [fjoː] (Jospeh Woodworth), alongside expected [fiːə] from Thomas Taggart, for **feoh** 'hate, abhorrence' (*fuath*). Such forms may possibly derive from the pronunciation of the later generations of Manx clergy, who seem to have increasingly been English-dominant speakers or to have learnt Manx as a second language in the nineteenth century (Gill 1870: xv; Lewin 2014: 18).

orthographic evidence for the internal development of Manx from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. A good example of how this has the potential to lead the scholar astray is Jackson's (1955: 72-73) treatment of the combination of the high front vowels /i/, /iː/, /ia/ with following Gaelic *bh, mh*. In Late Manx all of these combinations are found mostly as monophthongal /uː/. However, the orthography distinguishes the following items (12):

(12) <iu> **iu** 'drink' (*ibh(e)*)
<eeu, ieu> **screeu**, **scrieu** 'write' (*scríobh*)
<ieau, eeau> **slieau** 'mountain' (*sliabh*), **cleeau** 'chest' (*cliabh*)

In the twentieth-century native speakers, all three of these vowels are realized as /uː/ (*HLSM* III: 78, 80, 82). Jackson (1955: 72-73), followed by Broderick (*HLSM* III: 78), projects this merger back to an earlier period and suggests an early shortening of long /iː/ in *íobh*, *íomh*, causing the short */iv/ and long */iːv/ and */iəv/ to fall together as */iv/ prior to the vocalization of the fricative (*/iu/ > /uː/). The orthography on the other hand, as with other vowel + fricative sequences, clearly indicates that there was a three-way contrast of short diphthong /iu/, long diphthong /iːu/, and triphthong /iəu/, at least for some speakers of eighteenth-century Manx. Moreover, Jackson and Broderick give no motivation for the early shortening posited, which does not occur regularly elsewhere in the language.[24] It was probably an assumption that Manx spelling is arbitrary and inconsistent that allowed such obvious orthographic clues to be overlooked. More examples could be given of scholars projecting improbable interpretations onto Manx orthographic forms owing to a lack of familiarity with the internal patterns of the system (see Lewin 2020b: 260, 369).

7. Other English-based orthographies

It is worth noting in relation to the widespread negative reaction to the Manx orthography, that scholars have often expressed similar views on other cases of the use of English-based orthographies to write Gaelic varieties.[25] According to O'Rahilly (1932: 20) himself, the late medieval Scottish Book of the Dean of

[24] More generally, Jackson claims to have heard only short diphthongs. However, for other historical vowel + fricative combinations, e.g. *ábh, ámh* > /ɛːu /, /ɛ̃ːu/, Rhŷs (1894) and Marstrander (1932) give clear synchronic evidence of long diphthongs, although it is possible such length contrasts were in the process of breaking down in Late Manx. There are certain cases of vowel shortening, especially in polysyllables and frequently-occurring verb forms (Lewin 2020b: 399-405), but this was not a regular or systematic phenomenon.

[25] For the use of English-based orthographies for Gaelic, see e.g. Williams (1994a: 448; 2010) and Stenson (2003) for Ireland and Meek (1989a; 1989b) and MacCoinnich (2008) for Scotland.

Lismore and the Fernaig MS are 'written in a peculiar orthography of a wholly unorthodox and rather repellent type', while Ó Muraíle (2004: 79) refers to the use of English-based orthographies in certain nineteenth-century Connacht manuscripts as a 'fogharscríbhinn sách barbartha' ('a rather barbarous phonetic spelling', my translation). Ó Cadhain (1969: 14) makes similar reference to his grandfather having been taught to read and write Irish in 'script barbartha' ('a barbarous script'). In the same vein, Mac Lochlainn (1968: 116) refers to 'a debased orthography in manuscripts of western provenance'.[26] It is likely that such evaluations ultimately reflect, in part, the romantic nationalism, as well as linguistic Darwinism, with which early Celtic Studies, along with the wider Celtic and Gaelic revivals, were suffused – ideological perspectives which saw contact with English primarily in terms of defeat and corruption (cf. Ó Dochartaigh 1987: 219-231; Ó Conchubhair 2009; Lewin 2017).

A detailed consideration of the similarities and differences between the Manx system and other English-based orthographies for Gaelic, the circumstances of their creation and use, and their reception in scholarship, is beyond the scope of the present article, but a few brief observations may be made. Despite superficial similarities, there appear to be important differences between these systems. The Middle Scots-based orthography of the Book of the Dean of Lismore has proved rather difficult to interpret for modern scholars and makes little attempt to distinguish specifically Gaelic phonological contrasts, although it is not entirely unsystematic (Meek 1989b: 394; Williams 2010: 86-87). A similar comment may be made of the orthography of *An Haicléara Mánas*, in which '[d]ifferences in consonant quality are for the most part unmarked' (Stenson 2003: xix). Other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish texts show somewhat incongruous mixtures of Gaelic and English-based conventions (e.g., Ó Fachtna 1968; Ó Fiannachta 1967).[27] On the whole these attempts to represent Gaelic in English-based spelling have a rather *ad hoc* appearance (but see Williams 2010: 97). Whether in some cases a coherent orthographic tradition began to crystallize in these contexts has yet to be investigated in depth.[28] In contrast, Classical Manx orthography stands out for having established means of representing most Gaelic phonological contrasts, even if they are not employed entirely consistently; its complete independence from the Gaelic orthography, and refinement as a distinct

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26 I am grateful to Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh for drawing my attention to some of the references in this paragraph.

27 It is interesting to note that one of the better-known (and most consciously thought-out) attempts at rendering Irish in English-based spelling, Hutchinson's (1722) *Rathlin Catechism*, was possibly inspired by Manx usage (Williams 2010: 91-92).

28 None of this is to denigrate these texts or their creators. As is argued in the present paper in the Manx context, their orthographies must have met the needs of those who used them, and their graphemic features reflect the experience and resources available to their authors.

tradition over several generations; the high degree of standardization (in terms of one word, one spelling) achieved in the major printed texts such as the Bible; and the evident perception of a 'correct' norm among its users.

8. Conclusions

Influenced by puristic nationalist and pan-Gaelic assumptions prevalent in the field (Lewin 2017), Celtic scholars have tended to take a dismissive view of Manx orthography on three main grounds: it is based on English spelling ('English monstrosity', Jackson 1955: 108), it is claimed to be arbitrary and inconsistent ('obscures … pronunciation'); and it separates Manx from the other Gaelic languages ('obscures … etymology'). However, this article has shown that the system is neither so directly or uncritically based on English norms, nor does it obscure phonological contrasts so much as has often been supposed. Where there are representational ambiguities and redundancies, there are often intelligible historical sociolinguistic factors which account for the apparent weaknesses.

Writing systems for general use are not phonetic or phonological transcriptions; and the kinds of concerns which animate contemporary linguists may be only a part of the factors influencing the choices, conscious or subconscious, made by those who devise or modify an orthographic system, or, as is often the case with more opaque systems, preserve conventions better suited to the phonology of an earlier stage of the language. As discussed in 5.2 above, native and proficient speakers can tolerate a good deal of orthographic redundancy and ambiguity, especially once they have fully learnt the system at least to passive reading fluency, and very few writing systems come close to eliminating these entirely. Certainly, all iterations of the Irish-Scottish system themselves contain numerous levels of opacity and historical accretions and omissions which Gaelic-speaking detractors of Manx orthography are happy to gloss over, presumably because they are used to them.

We might also compare the historical development of Manx orthography to the early stages of the Irish-Scottish system itself, which took centuries to develop systematic representations of certain phonological contrasts (Ahlqvist 1994; Stifter 2010: 67-68), and never developed widely adopted means of indicating others, such as lenition of liquid consonants.[29] The origins of the two systems – ecclesiastical professionals adapting the writing system of a dominant prestige language, whether Latin or English – are also broadly comparable. In a wider perspective, we should note that throughout history the vast majority of new orthographies and writing systems are adaptations by 'bilingual mediators' from

[29] Or in this instance, the system lost a (sporadically employed) means of showing non-lenition (Ahlqvist 1994: 29-30).

pre-existing systems used by another language (Sebba 2012). New systems created substantially *ex nihilo* (such as Korean Hangul or the Cherokee syllabary)[30] are rare.

As we have seen, transparent and unambiguous sound-spelling correspondence was not necessarily the chief concern of Manx writers. They were native or near-native speakers of Manx, immersed in Manx-speaking communities, and knew how the language was pronounced. Their interest was in the codification and transmission of the textual content they had cause to write. They had greater need to distinguish individual lexical items (especially the many homophones and near-homophones) for the sake of semantic clarity, than to achieve the most transparent representation of phonological contrasts which, in any case, would often have had a light functional load. On occasion they were also influenced by factors such as etymologies, real or spurious, which may seem quaint or irrelevant to us today, but which doubtless seemed significant to them. In light of these considerations, it is hoped that this article has shown that the men who developed the Manx orthographic tradition deserve more credit for their achievement than they have generally been accorded by scholars, and more generally, that Manx orthography has 'a wider interest, in fact, than has hitherto been usually supposed' (Rhŷs 1894: xii).

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[30] And both of these reflect at least the surface appearance of the pre-existing writing systems to which their creators were exposed.

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