

Crosh Cuirn

A Manx tradition for Oie Voaldyn

A collection of historical resources



Culture

VANNIN

Archibald Cregeen
Manks Dictionary (1835)

KEIRN: The round tree, mountain ash, a berry of its fruit.

William Kennish
'Old May Eve' in *Mona's Isle and Other Poems* (1844)

And crosses of the rowan tree
Were form'd by swains in homely glee
And tied to each cow's tail
And round the bire

Rev. Dr. John Kelly
The Manx Dictionary (1866)

BAALTINN (LAA): [...] On May-Eve [...] crosses are made of mountain-ash (caorin), which are fastened to their cattle and worn by themselves as protection against witchcraft.

John Moore Jeffcott
Yn Lioar Mannianagh (Vol. I)

At the Manx May-fires are the cross of the mountain ash or *cuirn*, worn as an amulet [...] the *cuirn* cross and the leaves and flowers of the *caltha* were deemed to possess a charm against the supernatural powers of enchanters and mountain hags.

A. W. Moore
The Folklore of the Isle of Man (1891)

And branches of the Cuirn, or mountain ash were made into small crosses without the aid of a knife and stuck over the doorways of dwellings and cow houses.

John Rhys
Celtic Folklore (1901)

[...] Old May-day, in Manx *Shenn Laa Boaldyn*. This was a day when systematic efforts were made to protect man and beast against elves and witches; for it was then that people carried crosses of rowan in their hats and put May flowers on the tops of their doors and elsewhere as preservatives against all malignant influences. With the same object also in view of rowan were likewise fastened to the tails of cattle, small crosses which had to be made without the help of a knife.

Fn. The Manx word for the rowan-tree, incorrectly called a mountain ash, is *cuirn*, which is in Irish *caorthainn*, Scotch Gaelic *caorunn*; but in Welsh books it is *cerddin*, singular *cerddinen*, and in the spoken language mostly *cerdin*, *cerding*, singular *cerdingen*. This variation seems to indicate that these words have been borrowed by the Welsh from a Goidelic source; but the berry is known in Wales by the native name of *crafol*, from which the wood is frequently called, especially in North Wales, *coed criafol*, singular *coeden griafol*.

Charles Roeder
Manx Notes and Queries (1904)

And branches of the rowan tree
Were carefully in crosses made,
And placed in holes where none could see,
To keep away each witching jade.

I sent you above little composition from Edward Farquhar, descriptive of old Manx May-day, which will interest many of your Insular readers.

[Additional note from Charles Roeder:]

The Rowan Tree, or mountain ash, plays an important part in the celebration of May Eve and its berries, when placed on cow byres, and tied in the tails of cows, or hung over the threshold of the house, or worn by the milk-maids and fastened to the pails and milk vats, etc., acted as powerful agencies against witchcraft and evil spirits and their dark work. Cronk Glenchass, or the dry glen, was and still is supposed to be a favourite haunt of the Manx fairies, and I have a large collection of stories and legends referring to it.

W. Y. Evans-Wentz
The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries (1911)

'On the 11th of May we used to gather mountain-ash (*Cuirn*) with red berries on it, and make crosses out of its sprigs, and put them over the doors, so that the fairies would not come in. My father always saw that this was done; he said we could have no luck during the year if we forgot to do it.' Collected from woman in Ballasalla.

[Additional note by S. Morrison, collector for Evans-Wentz:]

'May 11 = in Manx *Oie Voaldyn*, "May-day Eve." On this evening the fairies were supposed to be peculiarly active. To propitiate them and to ward off the influence of evil spirits, and witches, who were also active at this time, green leaves or boughs and *sumark* or primrose flowers were strewn on the threshold, and branches of the *cuirn* or mountain ash made into small crosses without the aid of a knife, which was on no account to be used (steel or iron in any form being taboo to fairies and spirits), and stuck over the doors of the dwelling-houses and cow-houses. Cows were further protected from the same influences by having the *Bollan-feaill-Eoin* (John's feast wort) placed in their stalls. This was also one of the occasions on which no one would give fire away, and on which fires were and are still lit on the hills to drive away the fairies.' – SOPHIA MORRISON.

John Clague
Manx Reminiscences (1911)

On the eve of May Day the young boys would have a cross of mountain ash (*kern*) in their caps, and a cross would be tied on the tail of cattle, or any other animal that would be in the house.

The right way to make a kern cross is to split one stick and put the other stick (piece) through it, and thus bind them together.

Ned Maddrell, Tommy Leece, Sage Kinvig and John Kinvig
Recording IFC556 MM of *Skeelalyn Vannin* (1948)
[Translation from Manx by Dr. Breesha Maddrell]

Ned Maddrell: Well then, after that came the 12th of May or the, at least the 11th, the night of the 11th of May. What was the, what was the custom around here at that time?

Tommy Leece: Burning gorse for one thing.

Sage Kinvig: Burning the witch out of the gorse.

John Kinvig: At 12, yes well at 12 o'clock.

Ned Maddrell: I see. Well around my part we gathered the may flower from the meadows and strewed them at the threshold of the door and went and cut twigs from the keirn tree and made crosses and hung them behind the door, tied them with sewing thread and hung them behind the door to keep the witches and the fairies away.

Tommy Leece: And they were making crosses and tying them to each of the cows' tails.

Ned Maddrell: Aye well, I haven't seen, never seen that or never heard of that.

Tommy Leece: I've seen it done.

Sage Kinvig: I've seen the mayflower, the mayflowers at the cow-house door, too.



Oie Voaldyn – 30 April
Laa Boaldyn – 1 May
Shenn Oie Voaldyn – 11 May
Shenn Laa Boaldyn – 12 May

Resources compiled by Cathy Clucas

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