

William Dhone: Patriot or Traitor?

The Life, Death and Legacy of William Christian

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH

www.profilebooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 082 2

Typeset in Bembo by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk

Printed and bound in Britain by Clays, Bungay, Suffolk



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Introduction

ON THE MORNING OF 2 JANUARY 1662/3,¹ William Christian was led out to a windswept field near his home and shot, his body being laid to rest later that day near the altar of Malew Church. Thus was born the legend of Illiam Dhone,² ‘Dark-haired William’, Manx patriot and martyr. Four hundred years later, men and women still meet together at Hango Hill to commemorate his death, and in 2006, in a solemn service of dedication, a bust of Illiam Dhone was erected on the wall of Malew Church.

To every Manx person, and to anyone vaguely aware of the existence of the Isle of Man, the name of Illiam Dhone is both legendary and controversial. Existing records are garbled and fragmentary, and opinions as polarised and passionate today as they were in his own time. A martyred folk hero or a treacherous opportunist? There are compelling arguments on both sides, summed up over a century ago by the pre-eminent Manx historian and politician A. W. Moore: ‘William Christian has been variously represented as a perjured traitor and as the patriotic victim of a judicial murder, according to the sympathies of the writer.’³

It is an age-old controversy that rages still.

The extraordinary story of William Christian of Ronaldsway, who became an iconic folk hero under his nickname Illiam Dhone, or ‘Dark[-haired] William’, is a tale of substance and of shadow. Illiam’s supporters are as inclined as his detractors to confuse the one with the other. From our perspective, Illiam himself remains an ambiguous figure, remote in time, rendered more mysterious and complex by the shrouds of symbolism and legend that have gathered around his

name over the years. The surviving records are imperfect. It is, in any case, notoriously difficult to judge with any degree of impartiality actions committed during a period of revolution.

At first sight Illiam Dhone appears a most unlikely hero. Judging from what we know of his early career and privileged upbringing, he was an improbable revolutionary. From a comfortable life of relative obscurity, he burst with meteoric force upon the Manx national consciousness, assuming at one stroke the fabulous mantle of supreme patriot, hero and martyr.

Centuries later, public demand has led to modern government buildings being named in his honour, and increasing numbers attend the annual commemoration of his death; people of all ages and walks of life, by no means all of them Manx. On these occasions, orations in Manx and English are proclaimed at Hango Hill, the approximate site of his execution, followed by a church service in Malew Parish Church. At both the hill and in the church, emotional wreath-laying ceremonies are carried out with due solemnity.

Illiam Dhone's name resonates in the Isle of Man today. But his trial and execution cannot be dismissed as some petty parish pump affair, a mere parochial dispute which would quickly be consigned to the dusty backrooms of history. At the time, the impact of the execution of an obscure Manx official on a faraway island rocked the English legal system to its foundations. Its echoes resounded throughout England, occupying the finest legal minds in the country and throwing the newly restored and usually equable monarch into a towering rage.

So what was so remarkable about the story of Illiam Dhone? If we strip away the patina of the ages and discard the trappings of myth and symbolism, there are several strands which merit serious investigation, and which still have relevance today. These include:

- The political impact of the Illiam Dhone case on the House of Stanley, the feudal Lords of Man, with regard to its relationship both with the Island and with the English Crown
- The clarification of the legal status of the Isle of Man in relation to the English Crown

Introduction

- The social, psychological and ideological impact of the Illiam Dhone myth
- The ultimate, possibly unanswerable, human question: should we regard Illiam Dhone as patriot and martyr, or as perjured traitor and opportunist?

This last question has occupied the minds of Manxmen for centuries. To examine it, we must revisit the world of seventeenth-century Britain, and consider not only the position of the Isle of Man within that world, but also that of the powerful Christian clan in the Island, especially with regard to their relationship with the Island's lords, the Stanleys, who enjoyed many of the benefits of the status of petty kings, as indeed they originally were.

A Tale of Two Families

THE STANLEYS, a powerful and well-connected English family, were first appointed kings (later lords) of Man¹ in 1405 by King Henry IV of England. In 1485, they were created earls of Derby, after the Battle of Bosworth Field established the Tudor dynasty. As rulers of Man, the Stanleys enjoyed sovereign powers in the Island; during their rule, while continuing to pay homage to the English king, they never sought political integration with England, nor did they make any real effort to anglicise the culture and language of the indigenous population of Man. (Lord Fairfax,² the Parliamentary ruler of Man during the seventeenth-century Interregnum, commanded an extensive library comprising 217 English and Latin texts to be shipped over to the Island for the edification of the populace, yet these remained largely unread, stored in Castle Rushen gathering dust. In the community at large, Manx Gaelic continued to be the principal means of communication for both official and unofficial transactions.)

The book of Statutes suggests that the Island's early rulers, as absentee landlords, were less concerned about the welfare of their Manx subjects than about their own privileges and revenues. These were considerable: the Lord of Man was entitled to the best of fish and game, all wrecks, treasure trove and the goods of persons condemned to death. In addition, he enjoyed substantial supplies of free food and

fuel. Tenants were obliged, on certain fixed days, to undertake repairs to the Lord's forts and houses. For this captive workforce there was little escape: they were forbidden to leave the Island without special licence; compulsory military service meant that all men between the ages of 20 and 60 had to train as militiamen under the Captains of the Parishes;³ and the Islanders were required to pay taxes for fishing rights, for importing and exporting goods, and for grinding corn at the Lord's mill. This last rule caused widespread resentment, but if people were suspected of attempting to circumvent the rule by using private hand-mills, or querns, the Lord's officers were sent out to track these down and smash them.

Despite these many impositions on its inhabitants, under the Stanley rule the Island entered a period characterised by greater stability, both politically and economically. Although the first Stanleys rarely visited the Island, they appointed governors, who in the main appear to have been well chosen and to have acquitted themselves satisfactorily in undertaking the task entrusted to them. Certainly, as the House of Stanley grew in wealth and political influence, their Island fiefdom was finally safeguarded from the invasions and depredations of its neighbours, and able to develop in peace and relative prosperity.

Against this background, a handful of Manx families began to emerge as pre-eminent. The most remarkable amongst them were the prolific, ambitious and acquisitive Christians of Milntown and their numerous relations, the most famous of whom was William, third son of one of the Island's two judges or deemsters, Deemster Ewan Christian. As Illiam Dhone, William Christian was to become the best-known Manxman of all time.

By 1608, when Illiam was born in Milntown on the outskirts of Ramsey, the small northern mansion had long been the seat and cradle of his family. The clan of the Christians of Milntown, or 'MacCriste[e]ns' – the name is probably of Scandinavian origin, and there are many variant spellings – had sprung to prominence early in the Island's recorded history; their own roller-coaster narrative was interwoven inexorably with the history of the Island. By the time William was born, they had for centuries been the most powerful Island family.

The name 'Milntown' is recorded as early as 1448, when one of the McChristen clan was Comptroller of Man. The historical site chosen by the Christians for their mansion house was that of the most famous battle in Manx history, the Battle of Skyhill or Scacafel. It was here in 1079 that the best-known of the Island's Norse rulers, chieftain Guðrøðr (Godred) Crovan, (King of Man from 1079 to 1095, and identified by historians with King Orry),⁴ defeated the Manx at his third attempt, and thereafter established in the Island a dynasty of Norse kings which was to endure for almost four centuries.

The name of John McChristen is recorded as Deemster in 1408, and as a member of the Tynwald Court in 1422. The first of John's three successors, who were also all christened John, resided at Altadale, in the parish of Lezayre, near Ramsey; the second John McChristen held the office of Deemster from 1500 to 1510, and the third, from 1511 to 1535. It was the last-named who first recorded Manx law in written form; and it was he who acquired the property adjoining Altadale, and named the whole estate Milntown. His eldest son, William, who would later serve as Deemster along with his father, succeeded briefly to the estate in 1535, dying just four years later.

Milntown retained its importance throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was regularly used as the meeting place of the Sheading Courts. When the 'Captain' or 'Lieutenant' of Man (as the Governor was known during the first two hundred years of Stanley rule), went on circuit, accompanied by the Island's chief officers, the Deemsters, Receiver, Comptroller and Water-Bailiff, the mounted procession of judges and clerks must have been a spectacular sight for people living on outlying farmsteads. From Glenfaba to Kirk Michael and thence to Ayre, the cavalcade, accompanied by pack-horses carrying the records in leather trunks slung in horse-creels (wicker baskets), picked its way over the rough bridle paths. They would spend two days at each place visited. At houses such as Milntown, they were catered for by the householder, who subsequently submitted a bill for his outlay. The millstream at Milntown, after which the estate had been renamed, had flowed through that land from ancient times; it had also played a major role

in the consolidation of the fortunes of the family first known as MacChriste[e]n, and later, as the Goidelic patronymic ‘Mac’ became absorbed, as Christians. During the long period of Stanley rule, mills offered an opportunity for profit for landowners who were sufficiently influential and prosperous to apply and pay for mill grants. There was keen competition among landowners who sought to be awarded the Lord’s leases, and the Christians were as competitive as any, and frequently more successful. The Christians of Milntown succeeded in obtaining permanent control of water mills in other parts of Lezayre, in Maughold, and, for a while, extended their empire to include Jurby as well.

Not content with their economic success, the Christians of Milntown soon extended their aspirations to the trappings of nobility. Their ambitions included the acquisition of arms: when granted, these were *azure*, a chevron humet, with three covered golden chalices on a canton *argent*, an anchor erect, with part of the cable around the stock. The crest, out of a naval coronet *or*, shows a unicorn’s head, *argent*, collared *gules*, crested and armed *or*; and two mottoes: ‘*salus per Christum*’, and ‘*perseverando*’. For some of their enemies, this pretentiousness must have been the last straw.

As is the case with prominent families everywhere, the rise in fortunes and status of the powerful Christian clan, and the political, social and financial dealings which secured it, owed much to vaulting ambition and acute intelligence allied to pragmatism. The Christians acquired the best land either through astute dealing or by marriage; they sued for and obtained posts of influence and importance through audacity as well as ability. Their rise was attended, predictably, by rumblings among the malcontents whose success was less spectacular, or who had felt upon their necks the weight of the Christians’ boots in their ruthless upward scramble; there were whispers of restrictive practices, nepotism, corruption and misappropriation.⁵

But the Christians were indisputably a formidable power. In 1627, when the 6th Earl of Derby handed the government of Man to 21-year-old James, Lord Strange (by 1642 the 7th Earl of Derby), his son’s enquiries led him to be well aware of the reputation of the

Christians. James (1607–51) was a remarkable man. Later known to his Manx subjects as *Yn Stanlagh Mooar*, the Great Stanley, he noted that ‘the family of Christians, or rather, Christins, for that is the true name, have made themselves chief in the Island and occupied the most important posts’. James, like his Stanley predecessors, recognized that he was in need of a reliable lieutenant–governor. The member of the Christian clan who immediately sprang to mind as a successful leader was Illiam Dhone’s relation, the charismatic Captain Edward Christian of Maughold.

Edward, second son of the Revd John Christian, Vicar of Maughold from 1589 to 1625, was a cosmopolitan Manxman who had forged a successful career outside the Island. He had amassed a fortune as a merchant adventurer, operating his own vessel under the auspices of the East India Company. Moreover, as a member of the Duke of Buckingham’s suite at court, he had achieved a high rank in the Royal Navy, obtaining through the duke’s influence the command of the *Bonaventura*, a frigate of thirty-seven guns. In the light of his achievements, it was quite understandable that, when he returned to the Island in 1627, Edward should at once attract the attention of the new young ruler of Man.

James was initially very taken with Edward: he wrote: ‘He is excellent good company: as rude as a sea-captain should be, but refined as one that had civilized himself half a year at Court where he served the Duke of Buckingham.’ Despite an underlying suspicion that some of the Christians were ‘Puritanically affected’, and that their inclination for political agitation included making their compatriots swear compromising oaths – an action criminalised at the time⁶ – James, impressed by Edward himself and by his reputation, took the unprecedented step of appointing him Governor, a post never previously held by a Manxman. Edward accepted graciously; in a manner calculated to please the Lord of Man, he stated that he would be glad to serve as Governor even without being paid for his services.

At first, this appeared a successful appointment. James congratulated himself on his unorthodox choice, noting with satisfaction that Edward had the quality most desirable in a good servant: if the Lord’s

orders proved unsuccessful, Edward took the blame on himself, but, if matters turned out well, he gave his Lord 'the glory of it'.

Later, however, James came to regret his decision. It was not long before Edward revealed his true colours, confirming the young Lord's worst suspicions about the political inclinations of some members of the Christian clan and their subversive and revolutionary tendencies.

Despite James's wariness of the Christians, the one member of the family who managed to retain his favour throughout his long life in office was Illiam Dhone's father, the canny Deemster Ewan Christian of Milntown (1579–1656). Known as the 'Old Deemster' even while still middle-aged, Ewan Christian is the first Council member of whose activities we have any record. His private life was not inactive, either. Earl James, aware of the Deemster's dynastic aspirations, remarked, only half in jest, that Ewan 'begot so many bastards not from lust but in order to people the island with his family'. This was not idle gossip: in addition to at least three other children born out of wedlock through liaisons with various local women, Deemster Ewan Christian sired, acknowledged and gave his name to his three children by Jane Woods, his common-law wife. Jane (1600–44/5), of Baltrin, Maughold, was recorded on her death as 'not married', but in Burke's Peerage she is referred to as Deemster Christian's second wife,⁷ and he bequeathed a considerable inheritance to the two sons and the daughter she bore him before she married one Ferdinando Fox.

The virile Ewan Christian had been appointed Deemster at the early age of 26, and retained that office until his death fifty-one years later (his son John acting as his deputy during the last six years of his life). Deputy-Governor of the Island from 1634 to 1636, he was appointed Deputy-Captain of Peel Castle in 1640. In the years that followed the threatened revolts of 1642 and 1643, the shrewd Deemster Ewan successfully maintained good relations with the Island's overlords, and retained their trust despite the fact that people closely connected to him by blood or marriage, Edward Christian and John Curghey, and also his legitimate sons, Illiam and John, became embroiled in various plots and insurrections against the Stanley regime.

The historian A. W. Moore remarks that Deemster Ewan is ‘more remarkable for the powerful position he attained in the island than for, as far as we know, any special ability he showed either as councillor or deemster’. However, whatever his other abilities, in addition to a talent for diplomacy and the dynastic aspirations perceptively observed by Earl James, Deemster Ewan possessed considerable business acumen. With so many offspring, both legitimate and illegitimate, to provide for – and, to his credit, he not only openly acknowledged his bastards but was concerned to provide for them in his will at a time when most people of lesser wealth died intestate – the need to consolidate the family fortunes remained uppermost in his mind. With this end in view, he advised his legitimate sons to marry off-Island, and to follow his example and marry, if not solely for money, at least where money was. Iliam Dhone’s mother, Mrs Ewan Christian, née Miss Katherine Harrison of Bankfield, Eastham (Eastholme), was a propertied Lancashirewoman who conveniently brought with her, on marriage, a moiety, or half share, of the estate of Warton Manor, the estate later being settled upon the couple’s third surviving son, Iliam.

Iliam Dhone was thus born into an influential and upwardly mobile family whose fortune was already established. The best record of his life, character and motivations must, however, be pieced together from the proceedings of his trial, and from fragmentary household and estate accounts. There is no telling how much documentary evidence was lost in the regrettable, and probably deliberate, destruction, in 1852, of the family muniment room at Milntown.

The nickname ‘Dark’ is our most reliable clue to what Iliam looked like, apart from the only known portrait, a dignified and sombre work⁸ which once hung in his family home, Milntown, and now enjoys pride of place in the Manx Museum. This full-length portrait shows a somewhat heavy-set, bearded figure, past the first flush of youth, but with a bright intelligent gaze, a patrician nose and the fresh complexion which some historians have identified as typical of the Manx. The sitter wears the celebrated embroidered cap, the only certified relic of Iliam Dhone, which has been preserved