

## Miracle Plays and Mysteries in the North.



If we accept the general belief that ancient Greek tragedy was in its earliest form a purely religious worship, it is easy to understand the commencement of Passion plays or mysteries. The fathers of the Christian Church, even in the second century, desiring to make their worship attractive, observed pagan feasts as religious festivals, and substituted plays from the Old and New Testament in the place of the dramas of Sophocles and Euripides, turning the choruses, which formed so important a part of classical dramatic representations, into Christian hymns. Thus they substituted religious shows for ancient spectacles in order to wean the people from Greek or heathen learning, which, even in its simplest form, was, in the early ages of Christianity, and for many centuries after, held in great abhorrence.

The first instance of a religious play having been performed in this country is recorded by Matthew Paris, who relates that in the year 1100 a learned Norman, master of the Abbey School at Dunstable, wrote a mystery entitled the "Life of St. Catherine," and had it acted by his scholars. But the earliest notices of sacred plays performed by trading societies on Corpus Christi Day (as the Thursday after Trinity Sunday is called) are those connected with the York Guilds, which, from about the middle of the thirteenth century, annually exhibited a variety of those dramatised religious traditions. Every trade in the city was obliged by its terms of incorporation to furnish a pageant at its own expense, and so extraordinary was the splendour displayed in the ancient Yorkshire city that large concourses of people flocked from all parts of the country to witness the pious entertainments, and many orders and ordinances still exist in the municipal registers regulating them. One minute affirms that the plays are good in themselves and commendable, but that "the citizens of the said city, and other foreigners coming to the feast, had greatly disgraced the play by revellings, drunkenness, shouts and songs, and other insolences, little regarding the divine offices of the said day." Mr. Toulmin Smith, in his "History of English Guilds," tells us that "once on a time a play, setting forth the goodness of the Lord's Prayer, was played in the city of York; in which play all manner of vices and sins were held up to scorn, and the virtues held up to praise." So popular did this "Morality" become that a guild of men and women was founded for the purpose of keeping it up. The play itself is now lost, though Wyclif, who died in 1304, refers to "Ye paternoster in Engliysch tunge as men seyen in ye play of York."

Our forefathers were strangers to modern delicacy, but their morals were as pure as, perhaps purer and stricter

than, our own; yet these incorruptible Englishmen would look calmly on many things which would certainly shock their descendants; nay, they even regarded with solemn awe the representation of the Coventry play of the "Temptation," though during that performance Adam and Eve appeared on the stage *in puris naturalibus*. "This extraordinary spectacle," says Warton, "was beheld by a numerous company of both sexes with great composure; they had the authority of Scripture for such a representation, and gave matters just as they found them in the first chapter of Genesis."

Bourne, in his history of Newcastle, has fortunately rescued from oblivion the only vestige that remains to us of Newcastle mysteries. It is entitled "Noah's Ark, or the Shipwrights' Ancient Play or Dirge." Brand, who so eagerly collected relics of a bygone age, sought vainly in the archives of several local societies for another, and gives it as his opinion that they were probably all destroyed after the Reformation, as the spirit of Protestantism was strongly adverse to the preservation of these compositions, considering them doubtless as savouring of Popish superstition. In "Noah's Ark" the Almighty, an angel, Noah, his wife, and the Devil are the *dramatis persone*. The dirge commences with a long soliloquy from the Almighty, who, after explaining his resolution to destroy mankind, "all but Noah, my darling, free," sends an angel to Noah, bidding him

Go, make a ship  
Of stiff board and great,  
Although he be not a wright.

The angel finds Noah asleep, awakens him, and bids him "take tent" of God's command. After some conversation, during which the angel further explains the situation, Noah responds:—

I am six hundred winters old;  
Unlusty I am to do such a deed.  
For I have neither ryff nor ruff,  
Spyer, sprond, spront, nor sproll—  
Christ be the shaper of this ship,  
For a ship needs make I must.

The Devil overhears this conversation, and, displeased at the determination expressed by the patriarch, exclaims, in sonorous Saxon phrase:—

Put off Harro, and wele away  
That ever I uprose this day.

The Father of All Evil then determines to prevent the building of the ark, and, going to Noah's wife (who, as in the Chester play on the same subject, is represented as an ill-tempered, vixenish woman), warns her:

I tell thee secretly,  
And thou do after thy husband read—  
Thou and thy children will all be dead  
And that right hastily.  
*Uxor dicat.*  
Go, devil, how say for shame.  
*Deabolus dicat.*  
Yes, hold thee still, le dame,  
And I shall tell how;



I swear thee by my crooked snout,  
All that thy husband goes about  
Is little for thy profit.

Noah's wife is now thoroughly aroused by Satan's representations, and promises to give her husband a potion which will render him unable to work. Noah, however, is deaf to her entreaties, and refuses to take the draught, whereon she loses her temper, and, with a sublime indifference to anachronism, swears by Christ and St. John. Her last words are—

The devil of hell thee speed  
To ship when thou shalt go.

Noah is much downcast after this quarrel with his spouse; but the angel comforts and counsels him. The ark is completed, and Satan, baffled and disappointed, finally prays

. . . . To Dolphin, prince of dead,  
Scald you all in his lead,  
That never a one of you thrive, nor thee.

Miracle plays appear generally to have been acted in the open air. A pageant car, supporting a stage of three platforms, was usually drawn to a spot calculated to show the performance to the greatest crowd of spectators. The entertainment was under the control of the Mayor and other town officials, who directed the manner of moving the car from street to street. Each craft had its assigned pageant, and had to play at the time and place appointed, any of the brethren who failed to attend at the hour specified being punished by fines. These fines varied; the Saddlers in Newcastle were mulcted in forty pence, while if one of the Guild of Millers was absent at the performance of "the antient play" of their fellowship, entitled "The Deliverance of the Children of Isrell out of the Thaldome, Bondage, and the Servytude of King Pharo," he had to pay a penalty of 20s. Considerable cost was entailed on the various companies, who severally bore the expense of their own plays. Many notices occur relating to the sums expended on Corpus Christi Day; for instance, in an old book of the Newcastle Merchant Adventurers, dated A.D. 1552, the following financial entry may still be read:—"Item, paide of this revenus above said for the fyve playes, whereof the towne must pay for the ost men playe, £4, and as their playes paid for with the fees and ordinarie charg's as aperes by perticulars wrytten in the stewards' book of this yere ys £31 1s. 1d." The earliest mention of Corpus Christi plays in Newcastle occurs in an ordinary of the Coopers, dated 1426. The Smiths soon followed their example, as in January, 1437, they are enjoined to go together in procession on the feast day, and play their play at their own expense, every brother to be at St. Nicholas' Church at the setting forth of the procession, on pain of forfeiting a pound of wax.

In 1442, the Barber Chirurgeons had to play the "Baptyng of Crist," and to form part of the pageant when it should be shown in a livery. The House Carpenters had to perform the "Burial of Christ," which anciently

belonged to their fellowship, "whensoever the generall plaies of the towne shall be plaied." In 1527, the ordinary of the Incorporated Weavers enjoined the brethren to assemble every year on Corpus Christi Day, and go together in procession and play their play and pageant of the "Bearing of the Cross," each brother to forfeit sixpence if absent from the place appointed at the hour assigned. In September, 1536, the Plumbers, Glaziers, Jewellers, and Painters were incorporated in one fraternity, and were bound, by the rules of their society, to maintain the miracle play of the "Three Kyngs of Coleyn." The title of the Weavers' play was the "Beringe of the Crosse," and that of the Bricklayers "The Flying of our Ladye into Egypte." The Tailors had to act and exhibit the "Descent into Hell," and must have been rather a quarrelsome set, for at a meeting of their guild, in 1560, it was ordered and agreed that all the tailors dwelling in Newcastle shall live together as loving brethren of their fellowship, and shall gather themselves together, in their accustomed places, upon Corpus Christi Day, and amicably play their play, at their own cost and charges. In 1561, the Fullers and Dyers paid for the setting forth of their play as follows:—

The play letten to Sir Robert Hert (of All Saints), Sir W. Hert (of St. Nicholas), George Wallus, and R. Murton .....	9s.	
First for the rehersall of the playe before ye craft .....	10s.	
Item to a mynstrell yt night .....		3d.
Item for paynting the geyre .....	10s.	
Item for a salmone trowt .....		15d.
Item for the Mawndy loves and caks .....	2s.	8d.
Item for wyn .....	3s.	
Item for 3 yerds and a d. lyn cloth for God's cot .....	3s.	2d.
Item for ye hoyser (hose) and cot makyng ..		6d.
Item for a payr of gloves .....		3d.
Item for the care banner berryng .....		20d.
Item for the carynge of the trowt and wyn about the towne .....		12d.
Item for the mynstrell .....		12d.
Item for 2 spares for stanges .....		6d.
Item for drynke and thaye suppers that wated of the paient .....	5s.	
Item for tenter howks .....		3d.
Summa totalis .....	50s.	0l.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, miracle plays seemed to be on the decline, as they were never acted but by a special command of the magistrates of Newcastle, and we find that on May 29, 1567, a mystery play cost the Corporation as follows:—

For sixty men's dennors .....	50s.
For 35 horses for the players, at 4d. a horse ..	11s. 8d.
For wine at their dinners .....	6s. 8d.
For a drum .....	8d.
The waits for playing before the players ...	2s.
Painting the sergeants staff .....	2s.
To John Hardcastel for making 46 little castles and 6 great castles .....	8s.
For painting Beelzebub's cloak .....	4d.

An ordinary of the Joiners' Company, dated 1589, provided that "Whensoever it shall be thought necessary by the Mayor, &c., to command to be set forth and plaied or exercised any general playe or martial exercise, they shall attend on the same and do what is assigned



them." Little is heard of these entertainments after the date mentioned, and shortly after the accession of James I., they were finally suppressed in every town in the kingdom.

In the Earl of Northumberland's household book (1512) we find that at Christmas and Easter the children of his chapel performed mysteries under the direction of the master of the revels; indeed, the exhibition of scriptural dramas formed on great festivals a regular part of the domestic entertainment of our ancient nobility, and it was then as much the business of the chaplain of the household to compose biblical plays as it is now his duty to write sermons.

Theatrical entertainments have always been popular in Newcastle, and we gather from municipal records that a couple of years before Shakspeare saw the light the burgesses, whenever they had a chance, patronised the drama, and gladly welcomed to Tyneside any strolling players who found themselves in the neighbourhood. The ordinary gratuity for a performance was 20s., and it is recorded that various companies that professed to be the "servants" of my Lord of Leycester, the Earl of Hardforthe, my Lord of Worsytur, the Duchess of Sowfolke, and other strangely named grandees acted for this sum. The "players of Durham" were evidently held in greater estimation, for when they came to the town the Mayor entertained his fellow-citizens with a

performance, the cost of which was £3 3s. 4d., viz. :—To the players, £3; a quart of wine, 4d.; four links for lights, 2s.; three loads of coals to keep the actors warm, 1s.

Sacred stories or events taken from Scriptural sources have yet a strong hold on the public mind, for the ever favourite oratorio is only a mystery or morality set to music, and periodically vast concourses are drawn from all parts of Europe by the Ober Ammergau plays.

M. S. HARDCASTLE.

---

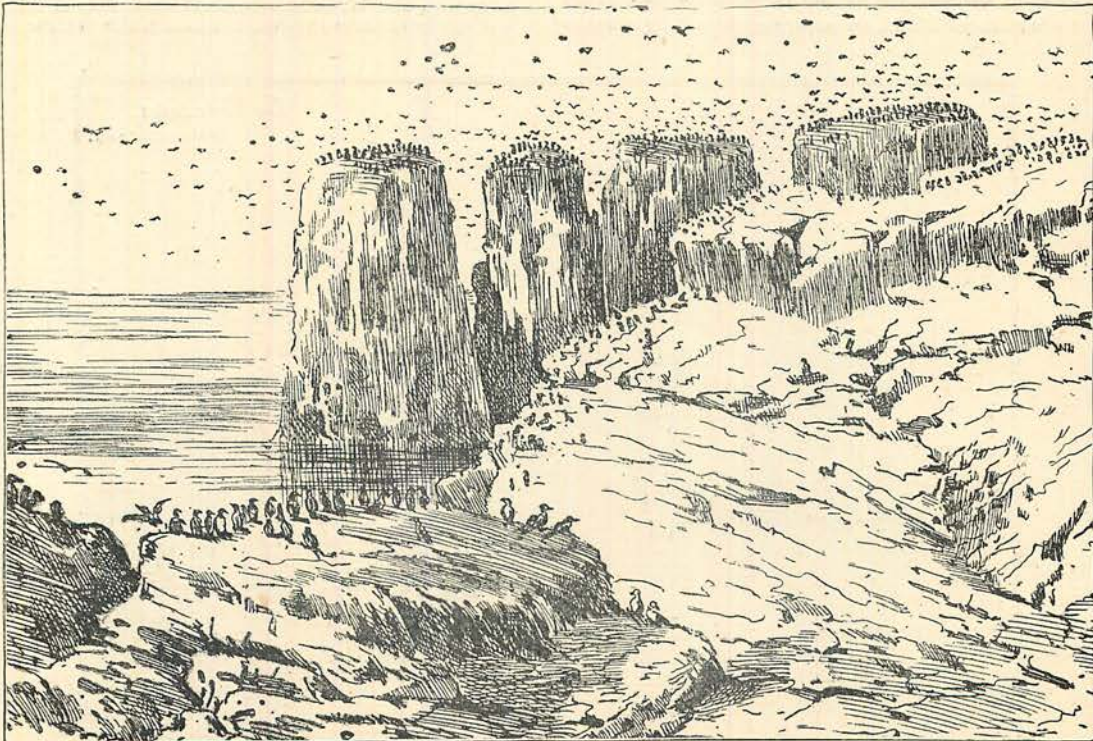
### Bird Life on the Farne Islands.

---



MEMORABLE as are the Farnes as the scene of the heroism of Grace Darling, interest also centres in them as the home of innumerable sea birds. In the height of the season there is an incessant clamour while the birds cluster on the various rocks or circle in clouds overhead. Coupled with the noise of the beating surf, the effect is singularly wild.

The Farne group consists of twenty-five islands, about ten of which are covered at high water. They lie from one and a half to five miles from the Northumberland



THE PINNACLES, FARNE ISLANDS.