



F. W. MOORMAN

***YORKSHIRE
DIALECT
POEMS (1673-
1915) AND
TRADITIONAL
POEMS***

F. W. Moorman

Yorkshire Dialect Poems (1673-1915) and traditional poems

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Preface

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Several anthologies of poems by Yorkshiremen, or about Yorkshiremen, have passed through the press since Joseph Ritson published his *Yorkshire Garland* in 1786. Most of these have included a number of dialect poems, but I believe that the volume which the reader now holds in his hand is the first which is made up entirely of poems written in "broad Yorkshire." In my choice of poems I have been governed entirely by the literary quality and popular appeal of the material which lay at my disposal. This anthology has not been compiled for the philologist, but for those who have learnt to speak "broad Yorkshire" at their mother's knee, and have not wholly unlearned it at their schoolmaster's desk. To such the variety and interest of these poems, no less than the considerable range of time over which their composition extends, will, I believe, come as a surprise.

It is in some ways a misfortune that there is no such thing as a standard Yorkshire dialect. The speech of the North and East Ridings is far removed from that of the industrial south-west. The difference consists, not so much in idiom or vocabulary, as in pronunciation—especially in the pronunciation of the long vowels and diphthongs.⁽¹⁾ As a consequence of this, I have found it impossible, in bringing together dialect poems from all parts of the county, to reduce their forms to what might be called Standard Yorkshire. Had I attempted to do this, I should have destroyed what was most characteristic. My purpose throughout has been to preserve the distinguishing marks of

dialect possessed by the poems, but to normalise the spelling of those writers who belong to one and the same dialect area.

The spelling of "broad Yorkshire" will always be one of the problems which the dialect-writer has to face. At best he can only hope for a broadly accurate representation of his mode of speech, but he can take comfort in the thought that most of those who read his verses know by habit how the words should be pronounced far better than he can teach them by adopting strange phonetic devices. A recognition of this fact has guided me in fixing the text of this anthology, and every spelling device which seemed to me unnecessary, or clumsy, or pedantic, I have ruthlessly discarded. On the other hand, where the dialect-writer has chosen the Standard English spelling of any word, I have as a rule not thought fit to alter its form and spell it as it would be pronounced in his dialect.

I am afraid I may have given offence to those whom I should most of all like to please—the living contributors to this anthology—by tampering in this way with the text of their poems. In defence of what I have done, I must put forward the plea of consistency. If I had preserved every poet's text as I found it, I should have reduced my readers to despair.

In conclusion, I should—like to thank the contributors to this volume, and also their publishers, for the permission to reproduce copyright work. Special thanks are due to Mr. Richard Blakeborough, who has placed Yorkshiremen under a debt, by the great service which he has rendered in recovering much of the traditional poetry of Yorkshire and in

giving it the permanence of the printed page. In compiling the so-called traditional poems at the end of this volume, I have largely drawn upon his Wit, Character, Folklore, and Customs of the North Riding.

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1. Thus in the south-west fool and soon are pronounced foil and sooin, in the north-east feal and seean. Both the south-west and the north-east have a word praad—with a vowel—sound like the a in father—but whereas in the south-west it stands for proud, in the north-east it stands for pride,

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The demand for a second edition of this anthology of Yorkshire dialect verse gives me an opportunity of correcting two rather serious error's which crept into the first edition. The poem entitled "Hunting Song" on page 86, which I attributed to Mr. Richard Blakeborough, is the work of Mr. Malham-Dembleby", whose poem, "A Kuss," immediately precedes it in the volume.

The poem on page 75, which in the first edition was marked Anonymous and entitled "Parson Drew thro' Pudsey," is the work of the late John Hartley; its proper' title is "T' First o' t' Soar't," and it includes eight introductory stanzas which are now added as Appendix II.

Through the kindness of: Fr W. A. Craigie, Dr. M. Denby, and Mr. E. G. Bayford, I have also been able to make a few changes in the glossarial footnotes, The most important of these is the change from "Ember's" to "Floor" as the meaning of the word, "Fleet" in the second line of "A Lyke-wake Dirge." The note which Dr. Craigie sent me on this word is so interesting that I reproduce it here verbatim: "The word fleet in the 'Lyke-wake Dirge' has been much misunderstood, but it is certainly the same thing as flet-floor; see the O.E.D. and E.D.D. under. FLET. The form is not necessarily 'erroneous,' as is said in the O.E.D., for it might represent ,the O.N. dative fleti, which must have been common in the phrase a fleti (cf. the first verse of 'Havamal'). The collocation with 'fire' occurs in 'Sir Gawayne' (l. 1653): 'Aboute the fyre upon flet.' 'Fire and fleet and candle-light' are a summary of the comforts of the house, which the dead person still enjoys for 'this ae night,' and then goes out into the dark and cold."

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INTRODUCTION

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The publication of an anthology of Yorkshire dialect poetry seems to demand a brief introduction in which something shall be said of the history and general character of that poetry. It is hardly necessary to state that Yorkshire has produced neither a Robert Burns, a William Barnes, nor even an Edwin Waugh. Its singers are as yet known only among their own folk; the names of John Castillo and Florence Tweddell are household words among the peasants of the Cleveland dales, as are those of Ben Preston and John Hartley among the artisans of the Aire and Calder valleys; but, outside of the county, they are almost unknown, except to those who are of Yorkshire descent and who cherish the dialect because of its association with the homes of their childhood.

At the same time there is no body of dialect verse which better deserves the honour of an anthology. In volume and variety the dialect poetry of Yorkshire surpasses that of all other English counties. Moreover, when the rise of the Standard English idiom crushed out our dialect literature, it was the Yorkshire dialect which first reasserted its claims upon the muse of poetry; hence, whereas the dialect literature of most of the English counties dates only from the beginning of the nineteenth century, that of Yorkshire reaches back to the second half of the seventeenth.

In one sense it may be said that Yorkshire dialect poetry dates, not from the seventeenth, but from the seventh century, and that the first Yorkshire dialect poet was Caedmon, the neat-herd of Whitby Abbey. But to the ordinary person the reference to a dialect implies the existence of a standard mode of speech almost as certainly

as odd implies even. Accordingly, this is not the place to speak of that great heritage of song which Yorkshire bequeathed to the nation between the seventh century and the fifteenth. After the Caedmonic poems, its chief glories are the religious lyrics of Richard Rolle, the mystic, and the great cycles of scriptural plays which are associated with the trade-guilds of York and Wakefield. But in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the all-conquering Standard English spread like a mighty spring-tide over England and found no check to its progress till the Cheviots were reached. The new "King's English" was of little avail in silencing dialect as a means of intercourse between man and man, but it checked for centuries the development of dialect literature. The old traditional ballads and songs, which were handed down orally from generation to generation in the speech of the district to which they belonged, escaped to some extent this movement towards uniformity; but the deliberate artificers of verse showed themselves eager above all things to get rid of their provincialisms and use only the language of the Court. Shakespeare may introduce a few Warwickshire words into his plays, but his English is none the less the Standard English of his day, while Spenser is sharply brought to task by Ben Jonson for using archaisms and provincialisms in his poems. A notable song of the Elizabethan age is that entitled "York, York, for my Monie," which was first published in 1584; only a Yorkshireman could have written it, and it was plainly intended for the gratification of Yorkshire pride; yet its language is without trace of local colour, either in spelling or vocabulary. Again, there appeared in the year 1615 a poem by Richard

Brathwaite, entitled, "The Yorkshire Cottoneers," and addressed to "all true-bred Northerne Sparks, of the generous society of the Cottoneers, who hold their High-roade by the Pinder of Wakefield, the Shoo-maker of Bradford, and the white Coate of Kendall"; but Brathwaite, though a Kendal man by birth, makes no attempt to win the hearts of his "true-bred Northern Sparks" by addressing them in the dialect that was their daily wear. In a word, the use of the Yorkshire dialect for literary purposes died out early in the Tudor period.

As already stated, its rebirth dates from the second half of the seventeenth century. That was an age of scientific investigation and antiquarian research. John Ray, the father of natural history, not content with his achievements in the classification of plants, took up also the collection of outlandish words, and in the year 1674 he published a work entitled, *A Collection of English Words, not generally used, with their Significations and Original, in two Alphabetical Catalogues*, the one of such as are proper to the Northern, the other to the Southern Counties. Later he entered into correspondence with the Leeds antiquary, Ralph Thoresby, who, in a letter dated April 27, 1703, sends him a list of dialect words current in and about Leeds.(1)

Side by side with this new interest in the dialect vocabulary comes also the dialect poem. One year before the appearance of Ray's *Collection of English Words* the York printer, Stephen Bulkby, had issued, as a humble broadside without author's name, a poem which bore the following title: *A Yorkshire Dialogue in Yorkshire Dialect; Between an Awd Wife, a Lass, and a Butcher*. This dialogue occupies the

first place in our anthology, and it is, from several points of view, a significant work. It marks the beginning, not only of modern Yorkshire, but also of modern English, dialect poetry. It appeared just a thousand years after Caedmon had sung the Creator's praise in Whitby Abbey, and its dialect is that of northeast Yorkshire—in other words, the lineal descendant of that speech which was used by Caedmon in the seventh century, by Richard Rolle in the fourteenth, and which may be heard to this day in the streets of Whitby and among the hamlets of the Cleveland Hills.

The dialogue is a piece of boldest realism. Written in an age when classic restraint and classic elegance were in the ascendant, and when English poets were taking only too readily to heart the warning of Boileau against allowing shepherds to speak "comme on parle au village," the author of this rustic dialogue flings to the winds every convention of poetic elegance. His lines "baisent la terre" in a way that would have inexpressibly shocked Boileau and the Parisian salons. The poem reeks of the byre and the shambles; its theme is the misadventure which befalls an ox in its stall and its final despatch by the butcher's mallet! One might perhaps find something comparable to it in theme and treatment in the paintings of the contemporary school of Dutch realists, but in poetry it is unique. Yet, gross as is its realism, it cannot be called crude as a work of poetic art. In rhyme and rhythm it is quite regular, and the impression which it leaves upon the mind is that it was the work of an educated man, keenly interested in the unvarnished life of a Yorkshire farm, keenly interested in the vocabulary and idioms of his district, and determined to produce a poem

which should bid defiance to all the proprieties of the poetic art.

Eleven years later—in 1684—appeared two more poems, in a dialect akin to but not identical with that of the above and very similar in theme and treatment. These are *A Yorkshire Dialogue in its pure Natural Dialect* as it is now commonly spoken in the North Parts of Yorkeshire, and *A Scould between Bess and Nell, two Yorkshire Women*. These two poems were also published at York, though by a different printer, and in the following year a second edition appeared, followed by a third in 1697. To the poems is appended Francis Brokesby's "Observations on the Dialect and Pronunciation of Words in the East Riding of Yorkshire," which he had previously sent to Ray,(1) together with a collection of Yorkshire proverbs and a "Clavis," or Glossary, also by Brokesby. The author of these two poems, who signs himself "G. M. Gent" on the title-page, is generally supposed to be a certain George Meriton, an attorney by profession, though Francis Douce, the antiquary, claims George Morrinton of Northallerton as the author.

"G. M." is a deliberate imitator of the man who wrote the Dialogue Between an Awd Wife, a Lass, and a Butcher. All that has been said about the trenchant realism of farmlife in the dialogue of 1673 applies with equal force to the dialogues of 1684. The later poet, having a larger canvas at his disposal, is able to introduce more characters and more incident; but in all that pertains to style and atmosphere he keeps closely to his model. What is still more apparent is that the author is consciously employing dialect words and idioms with the set purpose of illustrating what he calls the "pure Natural Dialect" of Yorkshire; above all, he delights in the proverbial lore of his native county and never misses an opportunity of tagging his conversations with one or other of these homespun proverbs. The poem is too long for our anthology,(2) but I cannot forbear quoting some of these proverbs:

"There's neay carrion can kill a crow."

"It's a good horse that duz never stumble,
And a good wife that duz never grumble."

"Neare is my sarke, but nearer is my skin."

"It's an ill-made bargain whore beath parties rue."

"A curst cow hes short horns."

"Wilfull fowkes duz never want weay."

"For change of pastures macks fat cawves, it's said,
But change of women macks lean knaves, I'se flaid

The excellent example set by the authors of the Yorkshire Dialogues was not followed all at once. Early in the eighteenth century, however, Allan Ramsay rendered conspicuous service to dialect poetry generally by the publication of his pastoral drama, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725), as well as by his collections of Scottish songs, known as *The Evergreen* and *Tea Table* miscellanies. Scotland awoke to song, and the charm of Lowland Scots was recognised even by Pope and the wits of the coffee-houses. One can well believe that lovers of dialect south of the Tweed were thereby moved to emulation, and in the year 1736 Henry Carey, the reputed son of the Marquis of Halifax, produced a ballad-opera bearing the equivocal title, *A Wonder, or An Honest Yorkshireman*.⁽³⁾ Popular in its day, this opera is now forgotten, but its song, "An Honest Yorkshireman" has found a place in many collections of Yorkshire songs. It lacks the charm of the same author's famous "Sally in our Alley," but there is a fine manly ring about its sentiments, and it deserves wider recognition. The dialect is that of north-east Yorkshire.

In 1754 appeared the anonymous dialect poem, *Snaith Marsh*.⁽⁴⁾ This is a much more conventional piece of work than the seventeenth-century dialogues, and the use which is made of the local idiom is more restricted. Yet it is not without historic interest. Composed at a time when the Enclosure Acts were robbing the peasant farmer of his rights of common, the poem is an elegiac lament on the part of the Snaith farmer who sees himself suddenly brought to the brink of ruin by the enclosure of Snaith Marsh. To add to his misery, his bride, Susan, has deserted him for the more