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POPULAR COUNTY HISTORIES

A HISTORY
OF
NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

BY

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'THE ANNALS OF NEWARK-ON-TRENT,' 'LIVES OF NOTTS WORTHIES
AND CELEBRITIES,' ETC., ETC.

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Chapter XXV

Dialect and folklore

Provincial Words; Their Origin and Use – Examples from Great Writers – Superstitions and Proverbial Sayings – Eccentric Epitaphs.

THE study of the dialect and folklore of the county (the latter already partially dealt with) opens up a wide field of interest. It is curious to notice how many old words which have lapsed into desuetude in ordinary writing and speaking still linger in the country villages. If a farm labourer speaks of his week's work he will probably say that he has *addled* so many shillings as a result of his exertions. Thus in an old ballad we have the couplet:

'With my good man's hogs, or corn, or hay,
I *addle* my ninepence every day.'

Addle is also used in this, as in most other counties, to indicate an egg that has gone bad under the hen while she is sitting.

Men who urge others on are said to egg them on, from the Anglo-Saxon *eggian*, to incite. Cattle that are taken in to pasture are said to be *agisted*, from the Old Latin *agistant*.

To *haggle* is to cut unevenly, and it is also to squabble over a bargain.

If a master discharges a man, he is said to have given him the *sack*, and if the man went hither and thither

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talking loudly of his grievances, he would be said to be *blurting* it about, or more commonly to *blether*. Thus in Beaumont and Fletcher:

'There's nothing gained by being witty
But wind to *blether* at his name.'

A gossip is still known as a *blab* or a *clat*—

'A *blab* that will not keep her tongue;'

and there is also in common use the word *blurt*, as meaning to make some statement in a sudden, thoughtless manner.

To *boggle* is to do anything awkwardly; to *brag* is to swagger, and to *swop* is to exchange.

A man who is surly is said to be *chuffy*, and one who is starved is looked upon as *clammed*. Thus in a poem of 1633 occur the following lines:

'Now barks the wolf against the full-cheek'd moon,

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Now lions half-clammed entrails roar for food.'

A sticky, dirty path is described as *clarty*. A falsehood is a *crammer*. A rich man is said to have 'a *sight* of money,' an expression used in 'Merry Tales,' published in 1567.

'She would not rest until Conom took out a great *sight* of the fairest roots.'

A deceiver is still a *sneak*, as in Beaumont and Fletcher's days, and the word *fond* is often used to indicate a foolish person, though the expression is rapidly dying out. In Roger Ascham's preface to 'The Schoolmaster,' 1563, we have the saying: 'A sword in a *fond* man's handling,' and in another production of the same period: 'What *fondness* moveth thee?'

Anything kept in close confinement is usually said to be *mewed* up, or *cooped* up, the term originally describing, we believe, a place where hawks were kept while moulting. [283]

If a villager has found anything, he will very often say he has *fun* it, and the word is not merely a corruption or contraction, as might generally be supposed, for in 'The Shepherd's Play,' a fourteenth-century production in North Country dialect, we have:

'My part have I *fun*,
I know my lesson,'

showing that it was in common use in those days as a recognised word.

It is interesting to a Nottinghamshire man to note how in the aforesaid play there are many words with which he continues to be made familiar. *Nesh* is still employed in the villages in the sense of being tender, as in the old couplet:

'I can find no flesh
Hard or *nesh*.'

A bush is often called a *busk*, and in a play of 1535 'Ralph Roister-doister,' we find the same word:

'As the beast passed by, he starts out of a *busk*,
And e'en with pure strength of arms plucked out his great tusk.'

In the same play *royl* is used as meaning to ramble; but in Nottinghamshire to *roil* or *rile* is to aggravate. It is usual to say 'I had as lieve do this or that,' a term common to many counties, and in place of sigh, a Nottinghamshire man will sometimes say *sike*, as in the old-time writing

'She neither wept nor *siked*.'

It is said to be good old English, if not now polite, to speak of a *heap* of people; but we do not know whether it is old English or polite—probably neither—to say as some

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Nottinghamshire men do, when they have succeeded in irritating a neighbour, that they have 'got his *rag* out'

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For might it is usual to say *mote*, pronounced 'mowt':

'Good, he said, so *mote* I thee,
Thou hadst better have gold or fee.'

Men are still spoken of as old *files* and *fausse old files*, the latter expression not being used to indicate deceitfulness, but cunning. A man who walks with great strides is said to *laup*, and a flogging is described as a *licking* or *leathering*, probably from the use of a leather strap as a mode of punishment. For far, people say *ferr*, a word used by Chaucer; and you may hear, on a blazing hot day, a man remark that he is sweltered to death, and wants to *sleck* (slake) his thirst.

A boy playing at marbles will tell his comrade to knuckle down, and not *fullock*, the latter term meaning to jerk the hand. If he is beaten, as he thinks, unfairly, he will say that he has been *swizled*, or *chiselled*. If his companion is loitering in the street, he will tell you he is *micling*, and in so doing he uses one of the oldest words in the language, taking its derivation from the Old Norse *mak*, leisure—a term which even Shakespeare does not disdain to use:

'Shall the blessed sun of heaven prove a *micher*?'
I *Henry IV.*, ii. 4.

Spenser writes, 'To straggle up and down the country, or *miche* in corners amongst their friends idly'; and in a pamphlet written in 1493 we find, 'At such fayrs and markets there be many theyvs, *mychers* and cut-purses.' If a *micher* in his lazy peregrinations went up a narrow lane, he would be said to have gone up a *twitchel*, in some counties called a *twitchen*, and as such classified in Dr. Brewer's 'Phrase and Fable.'

The first milk given by a cow after calving is called *beastlings*, as it has been for centuries past, for in Holland's Pliny, vol i, p. 36, we read:

'The first milk that she gives down is called *beastlings*, which will soon turn as hard as a pumish stone.'

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The fruit of the ash is known as *ash-keys*, and a man who had come from market after purchasing a steed would say that he had *bote a hoss*.

For may happen we have *mappen*; for nothing, *nowt*; for himself, *hissen*; and myself, *mysen*; *frit*, for frighten; *dry*, for thirsty; while a man will often say he is as 'hungry as a hunter.' We hear '*lowance* for allowance; *enew* for enough; *hanker*, to desire; *waynt* for wont. *Dab* is used in the double sense of to strike, and to give a quantity, as 'a great dab of fish,' and *dawdle*, to loiter. For mouldy we have *frowsty* or *fusty*, as Shakespeare says:

'As good crack a *frowsty* nut with no kernel'

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A man who is stupefied is said to be *mazzled*, and if he has but little sense, he would have no *nous* about him, a term which is of Greek derivation. Scraps are termed *orts*, a word found several times in Shakespeare. A dish of creed wheat and milk is a popular one in Nottinghamshire, and is well known as *furmity*, concerning which poor Robin says:

‘Those that are rich, and have a mind to it,
May notwithstanding feed on mince-pie and *furmity*.’

To pull about is to *towse*; to wriggle is to *squirm*. A thing that is good for nothing is a *wastrel*, and when a man has had enough he is said to have got his *whack*. A fool is described as a *ninny*, a term which Shakespeare employs in ‘The Tempest.’ If a man pulled another’s hair or ears, he would be said to *lug* him. Ears are also called *lug*, as in an early play we have the following:

‘Dare you think your clumsy *lugs* as proper to decide
As the delicate ears of justice?’

If a man is troubling himself he is said to be *whittling*. The affirmative is usually expressed by *ah* instead of *yes*; and for *ask*, a common word among the peasantry is *ax*. This is by no means an innovation or vulgarism, as some

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would suppose; but is of great antiquity. ‘*Axe*, indeed,’ says Richardson, ‘is as old as the language,’ and Trench points out that ‘this is a genuine English form of the word, the form which in the earlier English it constantly assumed; it is quite exceptional when the word appears in its other, that is, its present shape in Wyclif’s Bible; and, indeed, *axe* occurs continually, I know not whether invariably, in Tyndale’s translation of the Scriptures.’ Thus Matthew vi. 8, Wyclif translates, ‘*Youre fadir woot what is need to you bifor that ye axen him,*’ and Tyndale, ‘*Before ye axe of him.*’ So also Matt. vii. 6: ‘*Eche that axeth taketh*’ (Wyclif). A.S. *axian*, *assian*.

We have not space to pursue the subject further, interesting though undoubtedly it is, and must leave to others the task of collecting what further remains of local words and traditions. As in Norfolk, a limp corpse is an invariable warning of death, and many a household has been alarmed by the midnight howling of a dog, which is also regarded as an evil omen. To help to salt is said to help to sorrow, and crossed knives are viewed with a shudder. If a bit of bride-cake is put under the pillow, it is believed that the future husband or wife will appear in sleep, and there is a tradition that quicksilver put inside a penny loaf and cast into a river will invariably indicate the whereabouts of the body of a drowned man. With reference to the supposed virtues of quicksilver, an instance of rural superstition may be appropriately given. About a pound of quicksilver was recently found in a walnut-tree at Denton, on the borders of the county, and interesting discussions took place on the subject both in *Notes and Queries* and the *Pharmaceutical Journal*. One correspondent surmised that it was placed there with malicious intent in order to spite a neighbour. Mr. Thiselton Dwyer, however, thinks that it is connected

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with the old belief prevailing in country districts, that when a tree is infested with insect plagues of any sort it may be cured by boring

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a hole obliquely in the trunk and filling it with mercury. The Chinese have a similar notion. They profess to be able to restore *Cycas revoluta* to health by driving an iron nail into the stem. If you have money in your pocket when you first hear the cuckoo you will continue in possession of it throughout the year. Again, if the sun shines through the apple-trees at noon on Christmas Day, it will be a good apple year. A wedding-ring is looked upon as a powerful charm to cure a sty by rubbing, while there are innumerable charms for warts, and of weather rhymes and sayings there are scores. 'Till May is out ne'er cast a clout' is a well-known Nottinghamshire maxim, while of magpies it is said:

'One for sorrow,
Two for mirth,
Three for a wedding,
Four for a birth.'

Among the familiar sayings current in the county we give a few of the most characteristic. One old couplet runs as follows:

'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on;
Blessed is the corpse that the rain rains on.'

If it should happen to rain while the corpse is carried to the church, it is reckoned to bode well to the deceased whose bier is wet with the dew of heaven—so says Pennant, whilst Herrick ('Hesp.' p. 152) writes:

'While that others do divine,
Blest is the bride on whom the sun does shine.'

The following has long been a beekeeper's tradition of the apiary:

'A swarm of bees in May
Is worth a load of hay,
A swarm of bees in June
Is worth a silver spoon,
A swarm of bees in July
Is not worth a fly.'

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There are extended variations of these sayings current amongst the villagers. The following explanation is given by Dr. Fuller in his 'Worthies of England' relative to the Nottinghamshire saying:

'The little smith of Nottingham,

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He doth the work that no man can.

‘Who this little smith and great workman was, and when he lived, I know not; perhaps this of Nottingham is a periphrasis of a person who never was. By way of sarcasm it is applied to those who, being conceited of their skill, pretend to the achievement of impossibilities.’ A correspondent says, ‘What Fuller and Deering count a proverb was often given as a riddle formerly:

“I’m the little smith of Nottingham,
I do the work that no man can;
Riddle my riddle, if you can.”

Most of the weather rhymes common to various parts of England are frequently heard in the county. Here is one relating to St. Swithin:

‘St. Swithin’s Day, if thou dost rain,
For forty days it will remain;
St. Swithin’s Day, if thou be fair,
For forty days ‘twill rain nae mair.’

Gay says:

‘Now, if on St. Swithin’s feast the welkin lowers,
And every penthouse streams with hasty showers,
Twice twenty days shall clouds their fleeces drain,
And wash the pavement with incessant rain;
Let not such vulgar tales debase the mind,
Nor Paul nor Swithin rule the cloud and wind.’

A country clergyman, having asked one of his tenants whether he had better pray for rain, was answered: ‘What’s t’ use of prayin’ for t’ rain when t’ winds i’th north?’ Most villagers have faith in the following rhyme:

‘The south wind brings wet weather,
The north wind brings wet and cold together;
The west wind brings rain,
The east wind blows it back again.’

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Here is another weather prognostication in rhyme, which often proves true:

‘Evening red and morning gray
Will set the trav’ler on his way;
But evening gray and morning red
Will bring down rain upon his head.’

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Of the tombstone epitaphs the following are reproduced as quaint specimens. In the churchyard at Sibthorpe, where four infants are buried in one grave:

‘The cup of life just with their lips they pressed,
They found it bitter and declined the rest;
Averse then, turning from the face of day,
They softly sighed their little souls away.’

Here is a professional epitaph at Bridgford-on-the-Hill:

‘Sacred to the memory of John Walker, the only son of Benjamin and Ann Walker, Engineer and Palisade Maker; died September 22nd, 1832, aged 36 years.’

‘Farewell, my wife and father dear;
My glass is run, my work is done,
And now my head lies quiet here.
That many an engine I’ve set up,
And got great praise from men;
I made them work on British ground,
And on the roaring seas;
My engine stopp’d, my valves are bad,
And lies so deep within;
No engineer could there be found
To put me new ones in.
But Jesus Christ converted me,
And took me up above,
I hope once more to meet once more,
And sing redeeming love.’

At Edwalton, under date of 1741, on Mrs. Rebecca Freeland, is a grotesque example:

‘She drank good ale, good punch, and wine,
And lived to the age of ninety-nine.’

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In the churchyard at Edwinstowe there used to be the following inscription:

‘Robert Rockley body here is laid,
It’s for him these lines are made,
That we all here may remember
He died the 19th of September.
Robert Rockley son he be,
His age is near to 23.
1742.’

At Bilsthorpe there is, or was, another attempt at poetry of similar merit. It runs thus:

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'Little Mary's dead and gone,
And was a loving
And a precious wife to little John
Fletcher.'

