THE HISTORY OF THOMAS HICKATHRIFT

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GEORGE LAURENCE GOMME

THE HISTORY OF THOMAS HICKATHRIFT

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Edited by

G. L. Gomme, F.S.A.

and

H. B. Wheatley, F.S.A.

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I.

THE HISTORY

OF

THOMAS HICKATHRIFT.

PRINTED FROM

THE EARLIEST EXTANT COPIES.

AND EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,

BY

GEORGE LAURENCE GOMME, F.S.A.

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Introduction.

THERE seems to be some considerable reason for believing that the hero of this story was a reality. The story tells us that he lived in the marsh of the Isle of Ely, and that he became "a brewer's man" at Lyn, and traded to Wisbeach. This little piece of geographical evidence enables us to fix the story as belonging to the great Fen District, which occupied the north of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk.

The antiquary Thomas Hearne has gone so far as to identify the hero of tradition with a doughty knight of the Crusaders. Writing in the *Quarterly Review* (vol. xxi. p. 102), Sir Francis Palgrave says:—

"Mr. Thomas Hickathrift, afterwards Sir Thomas Hickathrift, Knight, is praised by Mr. Thomas Hearne as a 'famous champion.' The honest antiquary has identified this well-known knight with the far less celebrated Sir Frederick de Tylney, Baron of Tylney in Norfolk, the ancestor of the Tylney family, who was killed at Acon, in Syria, in the reign of Richard Cœur de Lion. Hycophric, or Hycothrift, as the mister-wight observes, being probably a corruption of Frederick.

This happy exertion of etymological acumen is not wholly due to Hearne, who only adopted a hint given by Mr. Philip le Neve, whilome of the College of Arms."

There does not seem to be the slightest evidence for Hearne's identification any more than there is for his philological conclusions, and we may pass over this for other and more reliable information.

We must first of all turn to the story itself, as it has come down to us in its chapbook form. It is divided into two parts. The first part of the story is the earliest; the second part being evidently a printer's or a chapman's addition. Our reprint of the former is taken from the copy in the Pepysian Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and which was printed probably about 1660—1690; the latter is taken from the British Museum copy, the date of which, according to the Museum authorities, is 1780.

In trying to ascertain something as to the date of the story apart from that of its printed version, it will therefore be necessary to put out of consideration the second portion. This has been written by some one well acquainted with the original first part, and with the spirit of the story; but in spite of this there is undoubted evidence of its literary origin at a date later than the first part. But turning to the first part there are two expressions in this early Pepysian version which have not been repeated in the later editions—those of the eighteenth century; and these two expressions appear to me to indicate a

date *after which* the story could not have been originated. On page 1 we read that Tom Hickathrift dwelt "in the *marsh* of the Isle of Ely." In the earliest British Museum copy this appears as "in the *parish* of the Isle of Ely." Again, on page 11 Tom is described as laying out the giant's estate, "some of which he gave to the poor for their common, and the rest he made pastures of and divided the most part into *good ground*, to maintain him and his old mother Jane Hickathrift." In the earliest British Museum copy the expression "good ground" is displaced by "tillage." Now it is clear from these curious transposition of words in the earliest and latest editions that something had been going on to change the nature of the country. The eighteenth-century people did not know the "marsh" of Ely, so they read "parish"; they did not know the meaning of "good ground" so they read "tillage." And hence it is clear that at the printing of this earliest version the fen lands of Cambridge and Norfolk had not yet been drained; there was still "marsh land" which was being made into "good land."

But I think there is evidence in this printed chap-book version of the story which tells us that it was taken from a traditional version. Let any one take the trouble to read aloud the first part, and he will at once perceive that there is a ring and a cadence given to the voice by the wording of the story, and particularly by the curious punctuation, which at once reminds us of a narrative from word of mouth. And besides this there is some little evidence of phonetic spelling, just such

as might have been expected from the first printer taking the story from the lips of one of the Fen-country peasantry.

Now this internal evidence of the once *viva-voce* existence of the printed legend of Tom Hickathrift has a direct bearing upon the question as to the date of the earliest printed version. The colloquialisms are so few, and the rhythm, though marked and definite, is occasionally so halting and approaches so nearly a literary form, that we are forced to observe that the earliest printed edition now known is certainly not the earliest version printed. There are too few phoneticisms and dialect words to make it probable that the print in the Pepysian collection is the one directly derived from popular tradition. As the various printers in the eighteenth century altered words and sentences here and there, as different editions were issued, so did the seventeenth-century printers; and therefore it is necessary to push the date of the printed version farther back than we can hope to ascertain by direct evidence. There is no reason why there should not have been a sixteenth-century printed version, and to this period I am inclined to allocate the earliest appearance of the story in print.

And then prior to the printed version was the popular version with its almost endless life, perhaps reaching back to that vague period indicated in the opening words of the story, "in the reign before William the Conqueror." Already internal evidence has, it is suggested, pointed to a popular unwritten tradition of Tom Hickathrift's life and exploits. But we must

ask now, Is there, or was there, any tradition among the peasantry of Lyn and its neighbourhood about Thomas Hickathrift? And, if so, how far does this popular tradition reach back, and how far does it tally with the chap-book version? Again, is this popular tradition independent of the chap-book story, or has it been generated from the printed book? To answer these questions properly we must closely examine all the evidence available as to the existence and form of this popular tradition.

Turning first of all to the historian of Norfolk, Blomefield,* writing in 1808, gives us the following account:—

"The town of Tilney gives name to a famous common called Tilney Smeeth, whereon 30,000 or more large Marshland sheep and the great cattle of seven towns to which it belongs are constantly said to feed. Of this plain of Smeeth there is a tradition, *which the common people retain*, that in old time the inhabitants of these towns [Tilney, Terrington, Clenchwarton, Islington, Walpole, West Walton, Walsoken, and Emneth] had a contest with the lords of the manors about the bounds and limits of it, when one *Hickifric*, a person of great stature and courage, assisting the said inhabitants in their rights of common, took an axle-tree from a cart-wheel, instead

* Blomefield's *History of Norfolk*, vol. ix. pp. 79-80; the same story is related by Chambers in his *History of Norfolk*, vol. i. p. 370. The parishes of W. and N. Lynn, though lying in marshland, are excluded from any right of pasturage on the Smeth Common.