

**CHAP-BOOKS AND FOLK-  
LORE TRACTS;  
THE HISTORY OF SIR  
RICHARD WHITTINGTON**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649751563

Chap-books and folk-lore tracts; The history of sir Richard Whittington by G. L. Gomme & H. B. Wheatley

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Cover @ 2017

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**G. L. GOMME & H. B. WHEATLEY**

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*Chap-Books*  
*and*  
*Folk-Lore Tracts.*

*Edited by*

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

*and*

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

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*First Series.*

**V.**

THE HISTORY  
OF  
SIR RICHARD WHITTINGTON.  
BY T. H.

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTON,

BY  
HENRY B. WHEATLEY, F.S.A.

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LONDON :  
PRINTED FOR THE VILLON SOCIETY.

1885.

## Introduction.

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THE popular story of Whittington and his Cat is one in which a version of a wide-spread folk-tale has been grafted upon the history of the life of an historical character, and in the later versions the historical incidents have been more and more eliminated. The three chief points in the chap-book story are, 1, the poor parentage of the hero; 2, his change of mind at Highgate Hill by reason of hearing Bow Bells; and, 3, his good fortune arising from the sale of his cat. Now these are all equally untrue as referring to the historical Whittington, and the second is apparently an invention of the eighteenth century. When the Rev. Canon Lysons wrote his interesting and valuable work entitled *The Model Merchant* he showed the incorrectness of the first point by tracing out Whittington's distinguished pedigree, but he was loath to dispute the other two. It is rather strange that neither Mr. Lysons nor Messrs. Besant and Rice appear to have seen the work which I now present to my readers, which is the earliest form of the life of Whittington known to exist. This is

printed from the copy in the Pepysian Library, a later edition of which, with a few typographical alterations, will be found in the British Museum library. This *History* will be found to differ very considerably from the later and better-known story, which appears to have been written early in the eighteenth century. A comparison between the latter which I print at the end of this Preface (p. xxix.) with T. H.'s earlier text will not, I think, be found unprofitable. *The Famous and Remarkable History* here reprinted is undated, but was probably published about 1670; the later edition in the British Museum is dated 1678. One passage on page 7—"The merchant went then to the Exchange, which was then in Lumber-street, about his affairs"—seems to show that it was originally written quite early in the century, and it is just possible that T. H. stands for the voluminous playwright and pamphleteer Thomas Heywood. The Exchange was removed to its present site in 1568, and therefore our tract could not have been written before that date, but must have appeared when the memory of the old meeting-place was still fresh in public memory. On page 11 it will be seen that Whittington, when discontented with his position in Fitzwarren's house, set out before day-break on All Hallows-day with his clothes in a bundle, in order to seek his fortune elsewhere. He had only got as far as Bunhill when he heard Bow bells ring out what appeared to be—

" Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London,  
Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London."



These words took complete possession of him, and he returned before it was known that he had run away. In the more modern chap-book Whittington is made to reach Holloway, where it would be less easy to hear Bow bells, and from which place he would have found it more difficult to return before the cook had risen. As far as I can find there is no allusion to Holloway or Highgate hill in any early version, and it is evident that this localization is quite modern. Mr. Lysons is certainly wrong when he says that at Highgate "a stone continued to mark the spot for many centuries." It is not known when the stone was first erected there, but it was probably put up when the name of the place was first foisted into the tale. One stone was taken away in 1795, but others have succeeded it, and now there is a Whittington Stone Tavern; and the situation of Whittington College, which was removed to Highgate in 1808, has helped to favour the supposition that Whittington himself was in some way connected with that place.

The form of invitation which the bells rung out varies very much in the different versions.

In Richard Johnson's ballad (1612) we find—

"Whittington, back return."

which is then amplified into—

"Turn againe, Whittington,  
For thou in time shall grow  
Lord Maior of London."

In T. H.'s *History* (see p. 11) we have—

“ Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London.”

In the later chap-book version this is altered into—

“ Turn again, Whittington,  
Lord Mayor of great London.”

It will be seen that the special reference to the fact that Whittington was three times Lord Mayor is not to be found in either the ballads or the chap-books.

In the *Life*, by the author of *George Barnwell* (1811), however we read—

“ Return again, Whittington,  
Thrice Lord Mayor of London.”

And in *The Life and Times of Whittington* (1841)—

“ Turn again, turn again, Whittington,  
Three times Lord Mayor of London.”

In the early version of the *History* by T. H. the fanciful portions are only allowed to occupy a small portion of the whole, and a long account is given of Whittington's real actions, but, in the later chap-book versions, the historical incidents are ruthlessly cut down, and the fictitious ones amplified. This will be seen by comparing the two printed here. Thus T. H. merely says (p. 6) that Whittington was obscurely born, and that being almost starved in the country he came up to London. In the later chap-book the journey

to London is more fully enlarged upon (p. xxxiii.), and among those at Whittington's marriage with Alice Fitzwarren the name of the Company of Stationers not then in existence is foisted in (pp. xlii.) It does not appear in T. H.'s *History*.

In many other particulars the later chap-book which contains the story as known to modern readers is amplified, and thus shows signs of a very late origin.

With regard to the three fictitious points of Whittington's history mentioned at the beginning of this preface, the first—his poor parentage—is disposed of by documentary evidence; the second—his sitting on a stone at Highgate hill—has been shown to be quite a modern invention; and the third—the story of the cat—has been told of so many other persons in different parts of the world that there is every reason to believe it to be a veritable folk-tale joined to the history of Whittington from some unexplained connection. None of the early historians who mention Whittington allude to the incident of the cat, and it is only to be found in popular literature, ballads, plays, &c. The story seems to have taken its rise in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The reason why however the life of Whittington should have been chosen as the stock upon which this folk-tale should be grafted is still unexplained. Some have supposed that he obtained his money by the employment of "cats," or vessels for the carriage of coals; but this suggestion does not appear to be worthy of much consideration.