

SONGS OF THE RIDINGS

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Songs of the ridings by F.W. Moorman

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PREFACE

ABOUT two years ago I published a collection of Yorkshire dialect poems, chosen from many authors and extending over a period of two hundred and fifty years.¹ The volume was well received, and there are abundant signs that the interest in dialect literature is steadily growing in all parts of the county and beyond its borders. What is most encouraging is to find that the book has found an entrance into the homes of Yorkshire peasants and artisans where the works of our great national poets are unknown. I now essay the more venturesome task of publishing dialect verses of my own. Most of the poems contained in this little volume have appeared, anonymously, in the Yorkshire press, and I have now decided to reissue them in book form and with my name on the title-page.

A generation ago the minor poet was, in the eyes of most Englishmen, an object of ridicule. Dickens and Thackeray had done their worst with him: we knew him—or her—as Augustus Snodgrass or Blanche Amory—an amiable fool or an unamiable minx. The twentieth century has already, in its short course, done much to

¹ *Yorkshire Dialect Poems, 1673-1915* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1916).

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remove this prejudice, and the minor poet is no longer expected to be apologetic; his circle of readers, though small, is sympathetic, and the outside public is learning to tolerate him and to recognise that it is as natural and wholesome for him to write and publish his verses as it is for the minor painter to depict and exhibit in public his interpretation of the beauty and power which he sees in human life and in nature. All this is clear gain, and the time may not be far distant when England will again become what it was in Elizabethan days—a nest of singing birds, where the minor poets will be able to take their share in the chorus of song, leaving the chief parts in the oratorio to the Shakespeares and Spensers of to-morrow.

The twenty-five poems of which this volume consists are meant to serve a double purpose. Most of them are character-sketches or dramatic studies, and my wish is to bring before the notice of my readers the habits of mind of certain Yorkshire men and women whose acquaintance I have made. For ten years I have gone up hill and down dale in the three Ridings, intent on the study of the sounds, words and idioms of the local folk-speech. At first my object was purely philological, but soon I came to realise that men and women were more interesting than words and phrases, and my attention was attracted from dialect speech to dialect speakers. Among Yorkshire farmers, farm labourers, fishermen, miners and mill workers I discovered a vitality and an

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outlook upon life of which I, a bourgeois professor, had no previous knowledge. Not only had I never met such men before, but I had not read about them in literature, or seen their portraits painted on canvas. The wish to give a literary interpretation of the world into which I had been privileged to enter grew every day more insistent, and this volume is the fulfilment of that wish.

Of all forms of literature, whether in verse or prose, the dramatic monologue seemed to me the aptest for the exposition of character and habits of mind. It is the creation—or recreation—of Robert Browning, the most illuminating interpreter of the workings of the human mind that England has produced since Shakespeare died. My first endeavour was therefore

to watch
The Master work, and catch
Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

I have been, I fear, a clumsy botcher in applying the lessons that Browning was able to teach, but the dramatic monologues of which this volume is largely composed owe whatever art they may possess to his example. My dramatic studies are drawn from life. For example, the local preacher who expresses his views on the rival merits of Church and Chapel is a Wharfedale acquaintance, and the farmer in *Cambodunum* who declares that "eddication's nowt but muckment" actually expressed this view to a Chief

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Inspector of Schools, a member of the West Riding Education Committee, and myself, when we visited him on his farm. I do not claim that I have furnished literal transcripts of what I heard in my conversations with my heroes and heroines, but my purpose throughout has been to hold a mirror up to Nature, to give a faithful interpretation of thought and character, and to show my readers some of the ply of mind and habits of life that still prevail among Yorkshiremen whose individuality has not been blunted by convention and who have the courage to express their reasoned or instinctive views of life and society.

But the interpretation of the minds of Yorkshire peasants and artisans for the benefit of the so-called general reader is only the secondary object which I have in view. My primary appeal is not to those who have the full chorus of English song, from Chaucer to Masefield, at their beck and call, but to a still larger class of men and women who are not general readers of literature at all, and for whom most English poetry is a closed book. In my dialect wanderings through Yorkshire I discovered that while there was a hunger for poetry in the hearts of the people, the great masterpieces of our national song made little or no appeal to them. They were bidden to a feast of rarest quality and profusion, but it consisted of food that they could not assimilate. Spenser, Milton, Pope, Keats, Tennyson, all spoke to them in a language which they could not understand,

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and presented to them a world of thought and life in which they had no inheritance. But the Yorkshire dialect verse which circulated through the dales in chap-book or Christmas almanac was welcomed everywhere. Two memories come before my mind as I write. One is that of a North Riding farm labourer who knew by heart many of the dialect poems of the Eskdale poet, John Castillo, and was in the habit of reciting them to himself as he followed the plough. The other is that of a blind girl in a West Riding village who had committed to memory scores of the poems of John Hartley, and, gathering her neighbours round her kitchen fire of a winter evening, regaled them with *Bite Bigger*, *Nelly o' Bob's* and other verses of the Halifax poet. My object is to add something to this chorus of local song. It was the aim of Addison in his *Spectator* essays to bring "philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses"; and, in like manner, it should be the aim of the writer of dialect verse to bring poetry out of the coteries of the people of leisure and to make it dwell in artisans' tenements and in cottagers' kitchens. "Poetry," declared Shelley, "is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds," and it is time that the working men and women of England were made partakers in this inheritance of wealth and joy.

It may be argued that it should be the aim of

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our schools and universities to educate the working classes to appreciate what is best in standard English poetry. I do not deny that much may be done in this way, but let us not forget that something more will be needed than a course of instruction in poetic diction and metrical rhythm. Our great poets depict a world which is only to a very small extent that of the working man. It is a world of courts and drawing-rooms and General Headquarters, a world of clubs and academies. The working man or woman finds a place in this charmed world only if his occupation is that of a shepherd, and even then he must be a shepherd of the Golden Age and answer to the name of Corydon. Poets, we are solemnly assured by Pope, must not describe shepherds as they really are, "but as they may be conceived to have been when the best of men followed the employment of shepherd." Class-consciousness—a word often on the lips of our democratic leaders of to-day—has held far too much sway over the minds of poets from the Elizabethan age onwards. Spenser writes his *Faerie Queene* "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline," and Milton's audience, fit but few, is composed of scholars whose ears have been attuned to the harmonies of epic verse from their first lisping of Virgilian hexameters, or of latter-day Puritans, like John Bright, who overhear in *Paradise Lost* the echoes of a faith that once was stalwart.

But what, it may be asked, of Crabbe, and what