

MILL POETRY

Phillipa Norchi

Mill poetry is a very varied subject, and I find that such poems can be put into definite categories. The miller's daughter appears to be a 19th century theme, and I consider it was a piece of early sensationalism to attract attention. Reading through Tennyson's poem, there seems to be more reference to the miller's wife than his daughter. The innkeeper's daughter had a similar reputation in literature.

Many poems are about a specific mill. "Outwood Windmill" (which I found in Arthur Mee's Kings England series) is written in the first person and tells how the Great Fire of London was observed from the mill. Other poems relate to more active days in the life of the mill; e.g. Rottingdean Windmill, by Sheila Asch. She also wrote Bishopstone Tide Mills, which comes into the "abandoned mill" category. Wilfred Foreman's recent book contains a very haunting poem which highlights the decaying mill beautifully.

The image of the miller that is portrayed in poetry - generally that of a wealthy and dishonest person - forms a category of its own. The image is also apparent on tombstones, as you will see from the display of epitaphs. On the other hand, a few even mention an honest miller - most unusual! The first two lines of one poem is typical:

I see the wealthy miller yet,
His double chin, his portly size,

Robert Bridges in his poem 'The Windmill' says of His Tireless Merry Slave the Wind:

And doth not much his work o'er look:
He stands besides the sacks, and ranks
The figures in his dusty book.

Chaucer writes of the dishonest miller thus:

A rumbustuous cheat of sixteen stone
Big in brawn, and big in bone,
He was a master hand at stealing grain
And oft took three times his due
Because by feeling with his thumb,
He new its quality.
By God! To think it went by rote,
A golden thumb to judge an oat!

The majority of mill books contain a poem of some sort. Many have several, especially the old ones. I may find there are further categories to slot them into. The object is to find every mill poem and put them all into a computer - a record for all time!

Discussion

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| Plunkett | If anyone comes across such items, perhaps they would pass them on to Phillipa? |
| Jones | What languages are you accepting? |
| Norchi | Anything - any language. |
| Jones | I have seen a number in German. I also have a recording of a poem by |

- a miller in Skye - in English, but clearly thought out in Gaelic.
- Organ Isn't there something by Burns?
- Jones He wrote something briefly using imagery from a mill, in 'Advice to the Unco Guid'. It is about the self-righteous people whose main interest is discussing the failings of their neighbours.
- Whaes Life is like a well-gaun mill
Supplied wi' store o' water,
The heaped hopper's ebbing still,
But still the clap goes clatter.
- This is imagery which is already lost for most readers.
- Jarvis I am not happy about using poetry of this sort; it tended to be written by literary people rather than those in the milling trade, so while elements of the truth come out in this, much of it is likely to be imagination on the part of the authors.
- Plunkett This applies to almost any writing; traveller's tales and descriptions of mills can amount to much the same thing.
- Organ There was an element of romanticising about them, because they were romantic poets. For Masfield about ships; beautiful sails on the horizon are an entirely different picture from the poor devils who were working on board them.
- Davison Often anyone with a knowledge of mills can glean something from the Poetry.
- Jones But surely it misses the point to complain that the literary poet was not concerned with accuracy, or lacked knowledge of the subject. It need not be accurate, for the poet is not concerned with strict fact. He can tell us about the attitude to mills, millers, and their trade. If we want technical information, we should seek it somewhere else. We should also remember that not all of it is literary in the narrow sense. Some of it has a practical background. The example I mentioned from Skye was by Danny McLachlan, who was a working miller, albeit a very well-read miller. Also, many of the German examples I have met are similar, and might be described as folk-poetry.
- Freedman I agree; poets are concerned with emotional reactions and if you want factual information you wouldn't go to a poet. As Phillipa pointed out, the two recurring figures are the miller's daughter and the thieving miller.
- Norchi Also the sound of the mill wheel, in watermill poems. Though there are far more windmill poems than watermill ones.