

The Lancashire Pace-Egg Play – A Social History, Eddie Cass, FLS Books, 257 pp.,
nd (but 2001), £13.95, 0 903515 22 9

The Pace-Egg Plays of the Calder Valley, Eddie Cass, FLS Books, 70 pp, 2004,
£6.99, 0 9035152 3 7

On Good Friday April 1 1825 William Greenwood, a Yorkshire handloom weaver
recorded in his diary

*Morning six o'clock very fine, some frost last night, eight Do Do; nine Do Do;
ten Do Do; Pace egg men came James Greenwood, Pits, Abrm Greenwood
Brownbirks, James Mitchel Chattom, Abrm Stansfield Sha[w]s was the old
tosspot. Also there was Henry Greenwood Portsmouth.*

This it would seem is the earliest contemporary reference to pace egging known so
far¹. However Eddie Cass reports nineteenth century recollections that may reach
back a decade or so further and an unauthenticated claim that it was being performed
in Midgley in 1780. Certainly Greenwood's diary entry suggests a custom already
regular and known.

The pace egg play was largely a Lancashire phenomenon with an extension into parts
of the Pennine West Riding. It had a number of versions (the Midgley Play now
being the most well-known) and a number of stock characters – St George, Slasher, a
Doctor and one or more Fools (Tosspot in the Midgley and Heptonstall versions).
These might be augmented by various others including the Prince of Morocco, the
King of Egypt, Hector and Beelzebub. A central episode in the play was a single
combat sword fight followed by a resuscitation of the defeated party by the Doctor. It
was performed at Easter usually on Good Friday. ('pace' being a northern dialect
word derived probably via Norman French or church Latin from 'Pasch' the Hebrew
word for Passover)

William Greenwood lived at Carrbottom on the outskirts of what is now Cornholme,
just north of Todmorden. He was only just in Yorkshire, the Lancashire border being
no more than yards away the other side of Pudsey Clough. And though the fact that he
mentions Tosspot suggests the pace eggers he saw performed a Yorkshire version of
the play, Brownbirks, Chatham and Portsmouth that he mentions were in Lancashire –
though again only just².

¹ Photocopy of the diary in my possession. The absence of this reference from either of Cass's books
should in no way be held against him. The original diary (if it still exists) is in private hands. Some
extracts (though not this one) were published before the First World War in the *Todmorden Almanac*. I
am grateful to Linda Croft for reminding me of the pace egging entry.

² Brownbirks, Chatham and Portsmouth were all in the Lancashire township of Cliviger. In his
Lancashire volume Cass quotes an article by a Henry Kerr in the *Burnley Express* of 8 April 1893 who
reported 'In the Cliviger Valley on Good Friday a few years ago, I saw the rustic play of St George,
enacted in the open air...near the Roebuck at Portsmouth'. It is possible this was a direct descendent
of the performance seen by Greenwood.

Within a particular folklore tradition that developed in the nineteenth century, but overflowed well into the twentieth, the pace egg play was seen as the last vestiges of a pagan fertility ritual (the Doctor's revival of the apparently slain Slasher being regarded as a resurrection). This is a view that Cass emphatically and convincingly rejects. Apart from the complete lack of evidence to support such a theory, he points out that it is based on the assumption that the pace egg plays (and other mumming plays with different narratives from other parts of the British Isles) must have some inner meaning which needs to be unravelled, though the very *mélange* of the stock characters makes this inherently unlikely. Much more important, Cass argues is to focus on the function pace egging played which was 'legitimised wealth transfer' ie the plays were popularly sanctioned performances in which the players raised money or its equivalent for their own benefit. In order to understand pace egging it would seem, we need to know its function at Easter in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

After watching the pace eggers in the morning William Greenwood's diary records 'I went to Todmorden about three in the afternoon and I got home about two in the night'. Without doubt his destination was the annual Todmorden Fair and we can guess this was where the pace eggers went as well with the funds they had raised from their audiences³. And Lancashire at Easter Cass notes 'seems to have had more publicly observed festivals than at any other time of the year'. Hence pace-egging rather than the Christmas mumming found in some other parts of England.

As to the origins of the tradition, Cass believes we can never be completely sure, but he suggests that 'the primeval 'soup' from which [the] play emerged' is likely to have been 'the interplay between the travelling theatre, chapbooks, the broadside songs and ballads and their demotic audience and users'. Hence the jumble of characters and the absence of any coherent plot in any of the many versions of the play. As for the resurrection theme Cass convincingly argues this was a skit on the quack doctors who frequented eighteenth and early nineteenth century fairs. The lines given to the Doctor that he has travelled 'from Italy, Titaly, High Germany, France and Spain, and now I'm returned to cure disease in Old England again' reproduces the sort of patter that the quacks would use to introduce their pills and potions. So the resuscitation of Slasher does not, it turns out, celebrate the miracle of the rebirth of Spring but is just straight burlesque.

As to when the play emerged, Cass suggests the early eighteenth century. This is possible, but it might be later and might even be a little earlier and be part of the 'general and sometimes exuberant revival of popular sports, wakes, rush bearings and rituals' after the Restoration that the late E P Thompson drew our attention to, noting

³ The Heptonstall version of the play reproduced in Cass's Calder Valley volume ends with a fund-raising chorus that includes the line 'we'll treat our bonny lasses to Todmorden fair'. Even as late as the 1860s the Todmorden Fair was a major regional event extending over four days from Good Friday to Easter Monday.

in particular their secular nature, even though the occasion for them was nominally part of the church calendar⁴. At the moment we simply do not know.

But why it is that through all the variations of the play a central core can be found which extends from the edge of the Lake District down to Stockport in Cheshire and east as far as Brighouse? The key to this, Cass believes, was played by the printed word – through broadsides and chapbooks. Surviving printed versions of the play however, cannot be dated much before 1840, though Cass provides some evidence that these were copies of earlier versions. So if some eighteenth century chapbook version of the play turns up then we perhaps should not be surprised. But given the strength of oral culture in eighteenth century England combined with the mobility of the population – particularly in the textile districts - I think it perfectly possible that the play could have fanned out from some successful impromptu performance in one particular place without any printed text at all. After all the practice of ‘wife sale’; a custom found across much of England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (and which the folklorists also got wrong), must have begun somewhere and emphatically did not spread through the circulation of printed instructions.

But of course even with the circulation of printed texts (certainly widespread after the mid-nineteenth century), there would have always been scope for innovation either because characters or lines were forgotten or because of an urge to throw in a contemporary reference. If the innovation worked with the audience it might be permanently incorporated into a particular local version of the play. This is no doubt how Nelson, Collingwood and ‘Boney’ found their way into one or two of the versions that Cass reports. The tradition of innovation continues; the Heptonstall performance in 2004 had various *ad lib* remarks critical of the Iraq war.

Who performed the play and who they performed it for, is Cass suggests a complex matter, with changes in both players and audiences over time. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century players were probably teenagers or young men – mostly one suspects unmarried. By the later nineteenth and early twentieth century the tradition seems to have migrated to children. Though Cass has found a small number of women players in the Rochdale area in the early twentieth century, as with other mumming plays pace egging was resolutely male. As to audience, except in its later stages we really know very little. It is possible in some areas it was originally performed outside the houses of the rich as Cass suggests, but this is certainly not where William Greenwood saw it, since Pudsey Clough was a community of handloom weavers and small farmers.

And this where I would want to argue with Cass. For he wishes to locate pace-egging within the context of a rural paternalism that transferred itself into industrial communities and ‘the central place which the mill owner, his house and factory occupied within a small community’. This is not to deny that examples of such urban paternalism can be found. But not in Pudsey Clough and nor I think in Midgley,

⁴ *Customs in Common*, London 1991, p 53. Some of the evidence Thompson uses to support his argument comes from the Halifax parish.

which for much of the nineteenth century was amongst the most radical and implacably undeferential villages in the Yorkshire Pennines. In the West Riding at least the pace egg play might perhaps be more usefully seen as part of a vigorous popular culture of domestic outworkers and small farmers which persisted well into the factory age.

Why pace egging declined in the later nineteenth century is again complex; but I think Cass is right to see it as only one small aspect of much wider shifts in popular culture. This includes (and I would emphasise the point more than Cass does) the differentiation, particularly in large urban communities, between the 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' working classes. One possible cause of the decline that Cass omits is the sustained campaign waged by both the churches and the non-conformists chapels in a number of areas (including Todmorden) against Easter Fairs. But whatever its cause, the decline was universal; apart from the Rochdale area the last pace egging it seems took place at Easter 1914. Recalling the last performance in that fateful year in Urswick, a village in the Furness district of north west Lancashire, an informant told a folk drama collector 'Many of the young actors never returned from World War 1. They lie buried in Flanders. Their names are recorded on Urswick War Memorial'.

The modern performances of the play, as Cass meticulously shows, are all revivals in one way or another – even in Rochdale. And all in radically different contexts from traditional pace-egging. The gap between the ending of traditional performances of Midgley play and its revival via the pupils of Midgley School, though, was only 18 years, the first revived performance being at the school on Parents Day 23rd March 1932. This was followed by performances around the village two days later on the Good Friday. A crucial part in the revival was played by Henry Harwood, apprentice whitesmith turned journalist on the *Halifax Courier* and of course prominent member of the Halifax Antiquarians. Born in Midgley in 1885 he had first seen the play performed in 1889 and had joined a pace egging team first as a 'doll carrier', transporting an effigy that accompanied the play from pitch to pitch, before graduating at the ripe old age of 11 to be a full member of the troupe. A year before the Midgley performance, on the initiative of Frank Marsden, English Master at Sowerby Bridge Grammar School, Harwood and a group of adults had made a radio version of the play broadcast by the BBC. The costumes used for the 1932 school play were based on Harwood's pre 1914 memories. A photograph of Midgley pace eggers in 1913 reproduced by Cass shows the accuracy of Harwood's recollections. The costumes are little changed in the current performances.

With the creation by the 1944 Education Act of separate primary and secondary schools, Midgley school lost its 12-14 year olds and by 1950 the play had transferred to what is now Calder High School whose pupils perform the revived play every Good Friday.

But of course revivals can create their own traditions. Walking along from Foster Clough to Midgley on Good Friday last year to watch the play, my partner and I fell into the company of one of our neighbours, a retired farmer's wife and one of the few

remaining Midgley natives of her generation living locally. ‘It is not really Easter until you’ve seen the pace-egggers’ she said.

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January 2005