

Billy Foss And His Fellow-Rhymesters

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Of all the many "characters" who made their personality felt in the Land's End district during the first half of the 19th century, the most versatile was Billy Foss, nicknamed "Frost." All that one learns of him and his accomplishments makes one realize how rich he must have been in those things that are most valued by " Old Cornwall " folk to-day, though they were little appreciated by the genteel inhabitants of the neighbourhood while he lived. Fortunately William Bottrell was not of the "genteel" type, and gained from him a great deal of traditional lore ; while his country neighbours all loved to pass on anecdotes and rhymes about him, many of which, a century later, are still remembered or treasured on scraps of paper.

One such scrap was given by the late Captain W. James, a native of St. Just, and one-time manager of the Bassett United Mines, Ltd., to Mr. W. A. Pascoe, of St Neot, Recorder of Liskeard Old Cornwall Society. It contains the following:

A Little Poetry by Billy Frost, Formerly a St Just Blacksmith:

As I traversed Boslow I saw an old cow,
A hog, and a flock of starved sheep;
Pesides an old mare, whose bones were so bare
As to make its poor master to weep.

A few acres of ground, as bare as a pound,
An old house ready to fall;
Therein was no meat for the people to eat
And that was the worst of the all.

No crock, pan, or kittle; no goods much or little,
Was there in the old house;
No table or chairs, nor bedding upstairs,
Not as much as to cover a louse.

No grass for the flocks, but a carp of dry rocks
Which afforded an horrible sight.
If you pass that way, you must do so by day,
For you'd scat out your brains in the night!"

Bottrell, who gives this libel on Boslow, a farm below Dry Carn, a little differently in his third series of tales (p. 112), describes Billy Foss, as "a noted old droll-teller and clock-cleaner of Sancreed." He made himself a more lasting name, however, as a composer of epitaphs and a carver of slate, and though he seems to have no tombstone of his own, his initials, or his signature, "William Foss, Sancreed," may still be seen on those of others in various churchyards, and some of his lettering is to be found here and there on milestones. It would not be astonishing to find that so versatile a person had at some time been a blacksmith at St. just, too, but if ever he was such, this is not recorded of him elsewhere, and his greatest fame was achieved as an impromptu rhymester. ^[1] His verses were so often quoted or written out by admirers whose ear for scansion and rhyme was not equal to his own that they survive in many versions; none perhaps being quite as well turned as the original. Bottrell's rendering of the foregoing Boslow rhyme, for instance, helps to fill out a few of its halting lines, though a word or two may be better here

On the same scrap of paper is an anecdote, with another rhyme of Billy's: "A new landlord was going to turn into a public-house, and promised Billy Frost should write the sign over the door, but one day Billy was passing and saw the new sign had been written by someone else. He looked on his friend and said,

"I'll take no drink in your stinking old wink;
Your heps and your door I decline;
I'd 'had a pint of beer when I came along here,
If thee's 'lowed me to paint thy sign."

A version of this written down by Mr Henry Waymouth, a Newlyn carpenter, c. 1880, gives the name of the owner of the beershop as John Burt, of Nancothan Mill, who combined the trades of miller and publican. He gives the rhyme as:

"Your stinking old wink is not fit to drink,
Nor yet to your door will incline,
I would have drank of your beer as I passed,
If you would have let me lettered your sign."

This is hardly an improvement on the other version, but suggests that the original may have been something more like:

"I'll not sit to drink in your stinking old wink
To enter your door I decline:
I'd have drank of your beer, as I passed along here,
If you'd left me letter your sign."

Billy Foss was not only a rhymester himself, but an inspirer of others to rhyming. In Sancreed parish there was also living a diminutive and teasing travelling tailor, one Lewis Grenfell. Mr Waymouth records of him that once seeing a Sedan-chair waiting at the fore-door of a big house at Penzance, he slipped into it while the bearers were "off the watch," and tapped the window. At the signal the men took up the chair and carried it to the house of the person who had originally hired it, right at the other end of the town. Directly it was set down, off scampered Lewis, shouting his thanks for the free ride, while the chairmen went fuming back again, to meet a scolding from the fare that they had left in the lurch. To Billy Foss he said:

"You go up and down from country to town,
Cutting letters in wood and in stone;
By your trade, though, you lose,
for it won't find you shoes,
And as for best clothes, you have none!"

Billy retorted:

"I'm honest, at least, for I still pay my debt
That's more than a tailor or miller's done yet!"

He had evidently not forgotten the Nancothan miller's sign.

Another sample of those rhyming bouts in which Billy had the last word was sent to Dr Hamblev Rowe, as remembered by an old lady of 90 living at Treen (Logan Rock). One corn-harvest, it seems, Billy helped a Buryan farmer to make up a few round arish-mows in a field near the highway, and some mischievous boys, after playing pranks there, taunted him with the rhyme:

"As I was walking on the road,
I saw a mow fell all abroad:
I'm sorry for the farmer's loss
The mow was made by Billy Foss."

Billy gave them as good in return:

"The mow was made, and all complete;
It was a splendid mow of wheat.
The rogues and thieves in Buryan Ch'town
They stole the sheaves, and the mow fell down."

per E T A, Crowlas.

Mr Henry Thomas, of St Just, has since given me a copy of this with slight verbal differences.

Another much-repeated rhyme of Billy's was the epitaph, written in response to her own request for "something fitty," on the famous St Just character "Betty Toddy".

Mr Waymouth's version is:

"Beneath this stone lies a rotten body,
The mortal remains of Betty Toddy **
Her occupation was making of brooms,
For to sweep the dust from her neighbours' rooms."

**alternative: "All that is mortal of Betty Toddy"

Another version, still less dignified, was given to me recently at Nancledrea. Its rhyme and reason are a little disjointed:

"Here lies the body of Betty Toddy,
Who never done any good to anybody;
Many rooms have she dirted
Making of her hurthen[2] brooms:
Here she lies till the last day
Pick up her broom and come away."

It is difficult to guess which of these two dissimilar rhymes comes closer to the original. Perhaps the latter hits the sentiment better, for we know that the epitaph didn't please Betty at all, and out of her remark, "That waan't do. Uncle Billy!" came the local proverbial saying, "'That waan't do,' says

Betty Toddy," which was almost as familiar as "dressed up a regular Betty Toddy," by which hangs another tale, of Betty's young days, well told by Bottrell, Series I, p. 141.

One day Billy was surprised by a well-known voice behind him; the voice of one of whom he expected more courtesy, hailing him as "Old Frost and Snow." Turning round he said:

"Very early in the spring,
I heard a guckoo for to sing;
His voice was very soft and low,
Singing bitter, bitter, Frost and Snow."

One of his best and most-quoted rhymes was that on Balleswidden Mine, St Just, relating the history of the difficulties overcome there. The whole of it is probably recoverable, and Old Cornwall readers may be able to supply the rest, but all that I am able to give is one delightful verse:

"And then they had an inyin (engine) good,
That draa'd the water like a flood,
And sucked right up the very mud
Of the Mine of Balleswidden!"

Billy had a musical ear almost as remarkable as his gift for "setting clocks a-working after all the goldsmiths in Penzance had given them up": he could at once name any musical note that he heard, and led the church singers at Sancreed with a hautboy, one of the few specimens of that instrument then in the district. Specimens of his delicate slate-carving may still be seen, one in Zennor church-tower, and another close to the gate of Madron churchyard, and doubtless much of his lettering decorates other stones that he did not trouble to sign with his name or initials, but he was particularly proud, according to Mr Waymouth, of the gilded lettering on a stone in St Levan churchyard, the process of which he declared was "worth a patent." This stone is not far from the famous split boulder, the St. Levan Stone of the prophecy of Merlin (or as some say St Levan):

"When, with panniers astride.
A pack-horse can ride
Through St Levan Stone,
The world shall be done."

Its gilding was as bright as ever fifteen (perhaps even fifty) years after it was done, but few traces of it are now left, though without it the carving is still worth looking at.

No one ever thought of Billy without his two dogs. Wherever he went they accompanied him; one often carried in his arms while the other trotted beside him. A local character nicknamed "Blind Dick," exaggerating his fondness for his dogs, berhymed him as follows :

"I understand both night and day
Two dogs doth in thy bosom lay..."
Winding up his unkind remarks with
"Hadst thou not got ten pounds a year,
Thou wouldst have been in places where
They'd make thee act teetotal:
The Union then would be thy lot,
A place for every drunken sot,
And every lazy lootal."

To this Billy failed to reply, and on Waymouth's asking him why he allowed "Blind Dick" to be "so out-and-out severe" without giving him anything in return, he says, "Frost contented himself by telling of me that nobody of note would think anything of a man who wrote such bad grammar, the word 'lay' being in the past time when it intended to mean the present!"

While writing this account of Billy Foss I received from Mr Henry Thomas not only the variant of the "Mow of Wheat" rhyme already mentioned, but several new Foss rhymes which he was kind enough to write out for me, and a little more detail to add to the picture which we are able to form of his life and character. His mother, he tells me, delighted in reciting Billy's and other local rhymes while she was busy sewing and knitting for the family that gathered round her in the evening, though few of them have been kept in his memory.

It is from him that I learn that Billy lived in a cottage on the extreme south of Tregonebris estate, just across the stream from Lower Leha, in Sancreed parish; Lower Leha itself being in Buryan. His chief occupation was clock-cleaning, but he was always called on for any odd job that needed ingenuity, and besides being able to roll off an extempore rhyme on any occasion, would entertain the whole household by reciting in rhyme from memory while his jobs were in hand. His one rival was "Henny" Quick, the Zennor poet, who was not only almost as ready at rhyming, but also cut mile-stones. Billy Foss's greatest effort in this direction is seen at Crows-an-Wrah, while Henny's are at Tregerest, Choon, and Brea (St Just).

Mr Thomas tells me that when Billy once passed through Buryan Churchtown, a wag cried to him, probably reminding him of some tale told against him as a bell-ringer:

"Billy Foss is at a loss in tolling of the bell!"

Billy threw back:

"There's narra man in Buryan Ch'town
Can toll the bell so well!"

Again, on a morning following a heavy downfall of rain, Billy, whilst passing the Vicarage gate at Sancreed, saw the Rev. Mr Todd himself scraping away the mud from before it, while the highway-warden, John Toman, stood looking on. He stopped and said:-

"John Toman has found a plan,
None ever found one better;
The parish toad (Todd) has scraped the road,
To turn away the waiter!"

Another time, on meeting a neighbour nicknamed "Cuddle," riding on a reluctant donkey, Billy rattled off:

"Pit, pat ! Pit, pat ! on the raud,
Cuddle is a heavy laud,
Swelled up like a burstin taud,
Upon his little dunkey:
When he want it to go quick,
He must thump or he must kick,
For he hab'm got no stick
To bait his little dunkey!"

At Tregonebris was living at that time one George H*****, who though a man of such ability as to have been called on to prepare the Tithe Map in 1838-9 and to have been regarded as an authority on local land matters, was reported as anything but an exemplary husband. His cat in its wanderings once found its way to Billy's cottage, and was sent home with this message tagged on at its neck:

"Mister George H*****, your cat is come home;
You sent her all over the world for to roam.'
Take her again, now, and spare her sweet life
Banish your keep-miss and take back your wife."

Some of his mock valentines, written at the request of teasing hussies, Mr Thomas says, were even more plainspoken than this. Perhaps these are as well forgotten, as he suggests, but there is little doubt that some of his master-pieces still remain to be collected, for no single person seems to have handed on all those that are gathered here.

Much as he added to the merriment of the countryside by his impromptu skits, or solaced the bereaved by his less original epitaphs, it was in his longer compositions, the "drolls," chimney-corner tales that had entertained many generations before he was born, that he made his chief contribution to local culture and carried on the work of the old wandering bards. Of these there is small chance of our getting more than we have already, for they were far too long to have remained in the memory of those who heard them, and Billy, unlike Henry Quick, seems never to have come to any agreement with a local printer who would put them into permanent form as broadsheets that he might sell "to earn an honest penny".

It is from Bottrell that we hear most of Billy Foss as a droll-teller. He says of him that he recited his stories in a sort of doggrel, in which he mostly half said and half sung his drolls, but he does not tell us whether the drolls were always his own compositions, though from his gift of improvisation it is easy to believe that in telling traditional tales he would string them into rhyme without effort.

One of his drolls concerned the dealings of a local witch with a certain Madam Noy, of Pendrea. Of this Bottrell gives us choice of versions, not only of the metrical curse, but even of the name of the witch. The first, concerning "Joan," who lived near Alsia Mill, he quotes as (unnamed) contributor to Hunt's Romances, and the second, of "Betty Trenoweth," of Burvan Churchtown, as author of his own second series of tales. One suspects that he was anxious not to repeat anything already printed by Hunt too closely, so that his own books should seem more original, or perhaps for fear of infringing copyright. This is probably why the tale in doggrel verse which can safely be claimed as Billy Foss's, called in Hunt "The Spriggans' Child, as told by a Cornish Droll," is given almost entirely in prose in Bottrell's Traditions as "The Changeling of Brea Veau."^[3]

Commenting on the old guise-dance play. "Duffy and the Devil," Bottrell says, "An old droll-teller of Sancreed, called Billy Foss, used to relate a story very similar to that of the guise-dance. He made no mention, however, in his droll, of any family names, nor of any particular place in which the 'lord' dwelt who married a poor girl. But her name was 'Duffy' and the demon who worked for her, and who was also fooled by a witch through strong drink, was called 'Tarroway'. Billy used to say, 'Some who know no better call Duffy's devil Terrytop, but his ancient and proper name is Tarroway. This name, therefore, Bottrell adopted for his own rambling version, half play, half tale, of the guise-dance play which he had previously given to Hunt, and which Hunt had ruthlessly cut up into bits to use as he found convenient. Perhaps the rhymes in which Bottrell makes "Tarroway" rhyme with "far

away" were part of Billy Foss's droll. They seem much less likely to be ancient than those in Hunt:

"Duff)', my lady, you'll never know—what?
That my name is Terrytop, Terrytop...top!"

But even these, though they keep something of the traditional rhymes, do not give them as well as an Irish version of the story, where the imp says:

"Little does my lady wot
That my name is Trit-a-Trot!"

This not only explains the "what" of the Cornish couplet, but gives a name that rhymes correctly with it. More than this, almost every name of the spinner in the tale will be found, in versions told in Great Britain, to end in something resembling "tot" or "trot." England has "Tom-tit-Tot" and "Habetrot;" Scotland "Fittle-te-tot" and "Marget-tots " ; Wales has "Sili-go-dwt," "Gwarwyn a throt" and "Trwtyn Tratyn," in which yn is merely a diminutive added to "Trwt Trat" ; the Isle of Man has "Mollyn droat," and, curiously enough, of all the many names of the spinner outside the British Isles, no other name with such a rhyme is found anywhere but in Iceland, where we get "Gili trutt". But there was so much coming and going between Iceland and Gaelic Ireland and Scotland in former days, that it is most likely that "Gili trutt," which has no meaning in Icelandic, is Gaelic for "Druid's gillie" or servant, just as the Manx name "Mollyn droat" is explained (by Miss Sophia Morrison, Folk Lore, 1908, p.78) as myl yn druaght, "druid's servant". It may be nothing but a quaint coincidence, but it is odd all the same, that gwas y dryw, "druid's servant," is in Welsh the name of the tom-tit, thus bringing the Manx name into relation with "Tom-tit-Tot". But this is a long digression, of which Billy Foss, with his "ancient and proper name," would have made nothing, and he may be allowed to have had a right to stick to "Tarroway" if he liked it. It is interesting to find that Mr Thurstan Peter found a version of "Duffy and the Devil," told at Illogan, in which the spinning was done by a hag, and the devil was left out altogether. ^[4]

No one save "Blind Dick," seems ever to have accused Billy of being a "drunken sot" who couldn't "act teetotal" without help; and one wonders why, with his many gifts, he could not make one of them find him in shoes or best clothes. Poor as he remained, however, he may have best served his generation, if not himself, by his slate-carving, clock-nursing, hautboy-playing, and droll-telling, all for love of the thing done rather than of the reward; and his life seems likely to have been as happy as it was useful. It is to him and his kind more than to all his "high-minded" contemporaries, that we owe what can still be found of the traditions of Old Cornwall.

[1] Bottrell, quoted by Hunt. (Introduction, p. 27) says:—I have a dim recollection of another old droll-teller, called Billy Frost, in St. Just, who used to go round to the feasts in the neighbouring parishes and be well entertained at the public-houses for the sake of his drolls." "Dim recollection", if it is Bottrell's own, is a curious expression for him to use; for he claims to have learned many drolls from Billy Foss of Sancreed.

[2] Hearth brooms, apparently.

[3] In re-telling the tale "Janey Tregeer" is made "Jenny Trayer," and the mention of Brea Vean is made the excuse for bringing in Dame and Squire Ellis of Brea, while the end of the tale especially is much elaborated.

[4] MS. note in his copy of Hunt, Penzance Library. This is a common variant of the tale of the idle spinning-maid.