

## **Thomas Fairman Ordish (1855-1924): A Lasting Legacy**

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*[Lore and Language, 1997, Vol.15 Nos.1-2, pp.84-116]*

### **INTRODUCTION [1]**

For folklorists, Thomas Fairman Ordish's claim to fame was that in the latter part of the nineteenth century he undertook the first major investigation of British traditional drama. Possibly because neither Ordish nor the Council of the Folklore Society, who latterly supported the venture, realised the enormity of the task, his projected book based on this material never appeared. He did, however, publish several influential articles on the topic.[2] After his death in 1924 his papers on traditional drama passed into the hands of the Folklore Society in London. Although it was forgotten and overlooked for many years, examinations of this material in the 1950s by Alex Helm[3] and Margaret Dean-Smith[4] led to the establishment of "The Ordish Collection".[5] In turn, this fed a revival of interest in traditional drama which continues today. This essay consolidates our knowledge about Ordish the man, outlines some of his more significant associations and associates, and examines how his research and projected book came to be the catalyst for the Ordish Collection

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Ordish was an ordinary man who, over the years, developed passionate interests in such topics as London antiquities and social life, Shakespeare, early London theatres, and subsequently traditional drama. While all this is evident from his writings, as with many ordinary people his life was not a matter of public record, and writers on the history of British folklore studies gave him little more than a passing mention.[6] Regardless, it has been possible to piece together an outline of his life.

Born on December 20th, 1855 in Brompton, Middlesex,[7] Ordish was the second of six children of Thomas Ordish of Wissett, Suffolk, and his wife Sarah, the eldest daughter of Fairman and Bethalina Mann of Rockland St. Andrews, near Attleborough, Norfolk. His father was a wholesale stationer and probably comfortably well off, in that he could afford to have Ordish educated privately.[8]

By the age of fifteen Ordish was employed as a "Clerk [in the] Book Trade".[9] How long he continued at that employment is not known, but by 1880 he was working as a Lower Division Clerk in the Printing and Drawing Branch of the Patent Office in London.[10] Apart from a short period in 1908 when he was attached to the London Traffic Branch of the Board of Trade, he was to work as a civil servant in the Patent Office for the rest of his life.

On March 3rd, 1880, at the age of twenty four, he married Ada Lamacraft, who was six years his senior. Ada was the daughter of Eliza Lydia and John Lamacraft, a stationer from Paddington, London.[11] They were to have one daughter, Eliza Lydia Ordish. For almost all his life Ordish lived in London. His first home with Ada was in Devonport Road, Shepherd's Bush, a new house which they moved into when they married. Here they lived with a servant in what was essentially a white collar area, their neighbours having such occupations as dressmaker, schoolmistress, commercial traveller, and member of the Stock Exchange. Two neighbours were even described as deriving their income from private investment.[12] The

Ordish family appear to have moved house fairly frequently, sometimes finding themselves living in rather more blue/white collar areas of the city. For instance, in 1891 they were renting a house in Essex Villas, Barnes, where their neighbours included a tailor's cutter, a locomotive engine fitter, a tea dealer's assistant, a number of clerks of one sort or another, a dressmaker, and a jeweller. Also living nearby were a number of unemployed individuals.[13]

In 1918, at the age of sixty three, Ordish was forced to retire early from the Patent Office through illness. One possibility is that he was a victim of the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic, although he is not included amongst the survivors listed by Richard Collier.[14] At that point Ordish moved from London to live in Cecil Park, Herne Bay, Kent. Somewhat disgruntled, in a letter of October 5th, 1918 to the Shakespearean/ Elizabethan revivalist, William Poel,[15] Ordish observed:

"I am now pensioned off and can only afford 2/- for the Monthly Letter, which I find stimulating: your comments on All's Well. Chagrined that illness forced me to retire before the end of the war [November, 1918]; <I acted to save my life which may not have been worth saving>" [passage cut away: the words in < > are a tentative reconstruction of the beginning of the passage based on remaining ascenders].[16]

Ordish died on December 5th, 1924 in a nursing home in Leytonstone, Essex. Contributory factors included an enlarged prostate, which had troubled him for over two years; surgery earlier in 1924 to remove his prostate; and heart failure due to uraemia (Death Certificate).He was buried in Eddington, near Herne Bay.[17]

Ordish was not a "professional" academic as such. Instead, like many of his associates, he filled his leisure time by researching and writing on a variety of topics which interested him.[18] He had begun to publish at the age of twenty one, his first two pieces, "Fact and Faith: Some considerations on their relation" and "Skeptomania", appearing in the *New Monthly Magazine*. [19] The editor at that time was William Francis Ainsworth [20] who was later thought to have been a significant influence on Ordish. [21] These essays were followed by a short piece on "Russian History" in *Notes and Queries* (1878). [22] This was simply to be the tip of the iceberg, and Ordish went on to publish in excess of seventy articles and monographs. He also wrote two books, *Early London Theatres (In the Fields)* (1894) [23] and *Shakespeare's London: A Study of London in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (1897), [24] both of which were reprinted at various times: *Early London Theatres* in 1899 and 1971, and *Shakespeare's London* in 1975. He also revised *Shakespeare's London* in 1904. In addition, he edited such publications as *The Antiquary: A Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Past* (1888-1889), *The Bookworm: An Illustrated Treasury of Old Time Literature* (1888), and *London Topographical Record* (1901-1906). Ordish and George Lawrence Gomme also acted as editors for the series *The Camden Library* (1891-1896) produced by the publisher Elliott Stock. [25]

Retrospectively, folklorists tend to view Ordish as an individual whose main focus was researching traditional drama. In reality, however, traditional drama was a minor interest for him.

"The mummers' play and sword dance were primarily responsible for his attraction towards folklore, and it was in the drama and in London and its literary associations that Mr. Ordish's interests mainly centred." [26]

Outside of the Folklore Society Ordish involved himself, in varying degrees, in a number of bodies including The London Topographical Society, The London Shakespeare Commemoration League, The Elizabethan Stage Society, The Blake Society, The New Shakespeare Society, The Society of Antiquaries of London, The Index Society, and latterly The Herne Bay Literary and Social Society. In some instances he appears to have been simply a member of the society concerned. For example, although he was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London for over thirty years (1890-1921), he never really participated in an active way in the Society's affairs. This contrasts sharply with his involvement in the London Topographical Society, where he was elected Honorary Secretary at the inaugural meeting in 1880.

"[Henry B.] Wheatley and Ordish were between them the active members of the committee but were so busy with their own affairs that there were, if the record in the minute book is correct, meetings only in 1881 (once) and 1885 (twice) after the promising start of 1880. The Society languished with rapidly diminishing subscription income and must have been thought defunct, but in 1896 Ordish called a meeting 'to explain the cessation of the work of the Society' and 'to consider the advisability of re-starting the Society'." [27]

He subsequently became Chairman of the Executive Committee (1898-1903) and was the first editor of its journal, *London Topographical Record* (1901-1906). From 1906 to 1920 he was Vice-President of the Society and in 1921 was made its first Honorary Vice-President.

It was through his involvement in these societies that this ordinary civil servant came to count amongst his friends and correspondents such individuals as Henry B. Wheatley, mentioned above, [28] James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps, [29] who encouraged him with his writings on Shakespeare and London theatres, [30] and Frederick James Furnivall, founder of The New Shakespeare Society. [31] In spite of Halliwell-Phillipps and Furnivall being in dispute, Ordish appears to have remained on good terms with both. Amongst his friends he also counted William Poel, with whom he collaborated on the "Elizabethan Stage Society ad hoc committee to co-operate in the building of an 'Elizabethan' playhouse, and in the observance of Shakespeare's birthday in London". [32] Together they were also founder members of The London Shakespeare League. [33]

Ordish's participation in these various theatrical, topographical and folklore societies was also shared by the members of the Gomme family, with whom he was to develop a special relationship. George Laurence Gomme, as well as holding a variety of positions in the Folklore Society, was a Vice-President of the London Topographical Society (1903-1916) and Chairman of The London Shakespeare League. [34] Along with his wife, Alice Bertha Gomme, and their son Allan, George Laurence Gomme shared Ordish's interest in folklore, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethan theatre. [35] Alice Bertha was eventually to write two short pieces on traditional drama. [36] Allan Gomme was also a colleague, being an Examiner and then the Librarian at the Patent Office where he had gone to work in 1904 at the age of twenty one. [37]

## **ORDISH AND THE FOLKLORE SOCIETY**

As recorded in the minutes of the Council Meeting of the Folk-Lore Society, 12th January 1887, [38] Ordish was first elected a member of the Society in 1886. He possibly joined at the encouragement of his friends the Gommes, George Laurence Gomme being President of the

Society at that time. Over the years Ordish played an active part in the organisation of the Society. At the 1887 Annual Meeting, when the size of the Council was increased from twelve to twenty, Ordish was elected to this new body,[39] a position he held almost constantly until January 1909, when he left the Council.[40] The following year we find Ordish assisting with the "Ballads and Songs" section of the proposed *Handbook of Folklore* which was being prepared by George Laurence Gomme[41] and also assisting with the tabulations of folktales in the Folklore Society's publications for the Tabulation and Analysis of Folktales Project.[42] Having said that, if he ever produced any Tabulations, they do not appear to have been published in *Folk-Lore*. In 1889 he became a member of the Society's newly formed Surrey Local Committee for the Collection of Folklore.[43] Over the years Ordish was also a member of the Finance and General Purposes Committee (1895-1898), the Bibliographic Committee (1901-1902), the Publications Committee (1902-1905), and the Lecture Committee (1903-1904). He also acted as Chairman of the Entertainment Committee for the International Folk-Lore Congress which was hosted by the Society in 1891,[44] was a member of the Organising Committee and the Executive Committee of the same Congress,[45] and prepared a catalogue for the associated exhibition staged by the Society of Antiquaries of London.[46]

His membership of the Council of the Folklore Society and these various committees brought him into close contact with such scholars as Charlotte S. Burne, E. K. Chambers, and Edward Clodd, with whom he sided over the matter of Clodd's controversial 1896 Presidential Address.[47] Other members of the committee at various times included James George Frazer, Alfred C. Haddon, Sidney Hartland, Joseph Jacobs, Andrew Lang, Alfred Nutt, Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Edward Tylor, and Arthur R. Wright who also, coincidentally, was a colleague at the Patent Office.[48]

In retrospect, however, it appears that Ordish was never given, or chose not to hold, an "executive position" in the Folklore Society, other than that of the Chairman of the Entertainment Committee for the International Folklore Congress. In fact, he did not even get to chair one of the sessions of the Congress for which he had so diligently worked in the background. Furthermore, in spite of his thirty seven year involvement in the Society, for some reason Ordish never wrote any book reviews for *Folk-Lore*. This is curious, as several items reviewed during the period in which he was a member of the Society, for example E. K. Chambers's *The Mediaeval Stage* (1903), Percy Maylam's *The Hooden Horse* (1909), and George Laurence Gomme's *The Making of London* (1912),[49] appear to be exactly the sort of books he would have been interested in reviewing. Instead, these volumes were respectively reviewed by Oliver Elton (1906), Charlotte S. Burne (1910), and Bertram Windle (1912).[50]

## **ORDISH AND THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL DRAMA**

The history of traditional drama scholarship is comparatively short. Although from 1800 onwards there was a steady increase in the number of plays recorded,[51] the majority of the early documentations were random, with such plays being viewed as little more than interesting, isolated curiosities. Around the turn of the century this was to change when Ordish undertook what was to be the first major investigation of British traditional drama.

Ordish's interest in traditional drama possibly grew out of his love for Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre and his research for a series of fourteen articles on "London Theatres ..."

which he produced for *The Antiquary* (1885-1887). These essays eventually became his first book, *Early London Theatres (In the Fields)* (1894).[52]

"The revival [of interest in Shakespeare] had been a long while germinating. Before it emerged, its field had been prepared and fertilised by the husbandry of a notable succession of scholars and enthusiasts. Prominent among these, towards the end of the last century, were the members of F. J. Furnivall's short-lived but influential New Shakespeare Society, a group which included the then very renowned James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps and his friend T. Fairman Ordish ... His *Early London Theatres* was in fact the first systematic critical study of the evidence relating to the old playhouses, and it was to be the progenitor of many other works by other writers, many of whom, profiting from Ordish's first venture, went further and deeper into the field at their later opportunity, and produced the longer works which have become standard (such as Chambers's *Elizabethan Stage* and Greg's *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses*).

None, however, have produced works more enthusiastically engaging for the general reader, without any relaxation of the scholarly principles which guided the author, than this book by Fairman Ordish. It is remarkable and it must be due to the rightness of his judgement that for all the seventy-eight years that have passed since his book was first published he would find, were he alive today, little cause to alter it in any very radical way. The general reader may still accept it as a good guide, and the scholar will be glad to use it as a reliable companion for his own findings."[53]

Ordish's first foray into the field of traditional drama came with the publication of "Morris Dance at Revesby" (1889).[54] Here he discussed and presented a transcript of the entertainment purportedly performed on October 20th, 1779 at the Revesby Estate in Lincolnshire, of Sir Joseph Banks, landowner, President of the Royal Society, plant collector, explorer and antiquarian.[55] Although unacknowledged, the manuscript upon which this essay was based was probably loaned to him by George Laurence and Alice Bertha Gomme, into whose hands it had passed.

Demonstrating his continuing interest in traditional drama, in 1891 Ordish gave the first of a series of occasional presentations on the topic, some of which were eventually published, at the monthly meetings of the Folklore Society. These included two lengthy pieces, "Folk-Drama" and "English Folk-Drama II", [56] and a third, "English Folk Drama", which he presented on March 20th, 1895, but which was never published.[57] He also contributed two shorter pieces to *Folk-Lore*, [58] and occasionally exhibited costumes, photographs and chapbooks which he had received.[59] The costumes were subsequently presented to the Society, which added them to its collection at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography.[60]

It was in 1892 that Ordish first began to urge members of the Folklore Society, albeit obliquely, to consider documenting "... mumming plays which are a feature of the rural celebration of the season in various parts of the country". [61] But it was in his essay, "English Folk-Drama II", the published version of his paper "Folk-Drama" presented to the Society in February 1893, that he moved towards advocating the "systematic collecting" of material.

"But, knowing as I do—as no doubt you all do—that these traditions, within the last few years, have been exhibiting signs of rapid decay, I am glad to be the humble means of

introducing the subject to the consideration of the Society this evening, knowing well that my deficiencies will be made good from the knowledge of those whom I am addressing. I may say at once that this will be the burden of my remarks—the value of folk-drama as a vehicle of tradition; the bearing and influence—undoubted in my mind—of folk-drama upon the evolution of the drama of our nation; the very incomplete collection which has been made of the various forms or phases of folk-drama; their present alarmingly rapid decay. I am convinced that if a systematic collection had been made after Mr. Udal gave us his very interesting paper on the Mumming-Plays of Dorsetshire in 1880 [*Folklore Record*, Vol. 3 (1880), 86-116], much that is now irretrievably lost would have been on record. It is not only that the traditions have utterly died out in so many districts, but in other places where they have survived they have become attenuated, and show an altogether feeble existence compared with what they were only a few years ago ... What I shall have to urge is that the Society spread its net—which it can now effectively do by means of its local organisation—all over the country, and collect together all the fragments of folk-drama and dramatic custom which remain to us." [62]

Over the next few years Ordish was to champion the cause of traditional drama to other audiences as well. For example, in his "Folklore in the Home Counties: How the camera can help" in the *Home Counties Magazine*, [63] he described the performance of a folk-play that he serendipitously observed in the High Street in Barnes on the evening of November 30th, 1891, [64] and then went on to advocate the use of photography to document traditional plays. The piece concluded with an appeal for readers to send material, but regrettably no responses were forthcoming. [65]

The idea of Ordish producing a book on traditional drama to be published by the Folklore Society was apparently suggested by him around December 1901, if not earlier. The venture was decided upon by the Council on March 26th, 1902, perhaps being spurred on in its decision as a result of correspondence which Ordish had received earlier that month from Edward Hibbert Binney. [66] Apparently, Binney had only just heard of Ordish's work. [67]

"The Chairman read a letter he had received from Mr. Ordish dated March 26th enclosing several letters he had received from Mr. Binney of Exeter Coll: Oxford, who it appeared was engaged in the preparation of a book on Folk Drama, and asking the Council to state definitely whether they accepted his [Ordish's] offer to write a book on the subject and to bring it out as an additional publication of the Society. It was unanimously resolved that in the absence of any report from the Publications Committee on the reference of December 18th the Council take it up at Mr. Ordish's request as a matter of urgency and that Mr. Ordish's work be accepted as the additional publication for 1902." [68]

At this point Binney wrote to Ordish and appears to have graciously backed away from creating any competition, instead offering to place his materials at the disposal of Ordish for his book. [69]

The survey of "The Mumming-Play and Other Vestiges of Folk-Drama in the British Isles" which Ordish was to conduct in conjunction with the Folklore Society, and his projected book on the subject, were not announced by him in *Folk-Lore* until September 1902, which secured his position as the soon-to-be-published authority on the subject:

"The Council of the Folk-Lore Society have decided that it is desirable to bring together the scattered material bearing on this subject without further delay, and I have undertaken to edit the collection, which will form one of the issues of the Society. Members who have collected notes and versions are invited to send them either to the Secretary or to me direct, and they may rest assured that their contributions will receive careful attention, and in every case will be suitably acknowledged in the work which is now in active preparation." [70]

It appears, however, that Ordish for some time had had in mind a book on English Folk-Drama and Folk-Plays. This volume had first been advertised as "In preparation" as early as 1896 by the publisher George Redway, and a draft of the notice in Ordish's handwriting still exists. [71] Catalogues containing the announcement are to be found bound in the back of some copies of P. H. Ditchfield, *Old English Customs Extant at the Present Time ...* (1896). [72] To include "... Illustrations of Players, Dresses, and Weapons...", the volume was described to contain:

"... a collection of versions of folk-plays, many of which are very curious, and characteristic of the English folk. The discussion of the origin of the plays, their 'locality', and their inter-relation will be of interest to folklorists." [73]

A plan by Ordish for a book on traditional drama still exists, but it is not known whether it is the one for George Redway or the Folklore Society. The volume, which appears to have been quite ambitious and to embrace traditional drama in its widest sense, was projected to include the following:

### **"English Folk-Drama**

- I. Introduction  
On dramatic tradition. A folk play as a phenomenon in folk-lore.
- II. A picturesque tradition  
The humours of collecting a folk play. A descriptive account of the Hampshire Mummers. Their aspect as they came across the snow towards the house. A farm house kitchen as a theatre. My exceeding curiosity treated with good-natured contempt—I succeed in gaining the confidence of one of the troupe. The result—dresses, hats and swords. Illustrations.
- III. A comparison of versions  
Other Hampshire versions of the mumming play (illustrated from photographs of the Bitterne mummers). Versions in other parts of England. Some versions never before printed [see Appendix].
- IV. The Soulers' Play  
An account of the Souling custom, and the occasion of the play. Remarks on the play; special features. Text of the play [see Appendix].
- V. The Plough Monday Play  
An account of the Plough Monday festival. What the Plough Monday play represents in the history of the English race. The Plough Monday Procession (two illustrations). The Plough Monday play in the Vale of Belvoir (illustration, actors' dress). Remarks on the play. Text [see Appendix].
- VI. The St. George Pageant

- Crusades and miracle-plays. Echoes, not origin, survivals.
- VII. The Sword-dance Play  
Descriptive account. What the tradition tells us of our history. Illustrations (1) dancers hat, (2) dancers coat. "A Morrice-dancers play." A composite drama, mainly a sword dance play. Striking instance of survival, witnessing to our descent from the dancers described by Tacitus. Text of both plays [see Appendix].
- VIII. The Easter or Pace Egg Play  
An account of the Pace Egg custom. Pagan and Christian symbolism. Dramatic celebration (as survival) of Pagan rites in nineteenth century. Chap-book versions. Quaint pictures. Illustrations from these. An analysis: Pagan features; medieval features. Text of the play [see Appendix].
- IX. Other Folk Plays  
Rumpelstiltskin. The Horn dance. Shakespeare and folk-plays. Children's games and folk-drama. Punch and Judy. Harlequin and Columbine.
- X. Evolution and devolution of drama  
The folk play in relation to our national drama. Origin of the playhouse (two illustrations). Literature and oral tradition. Summary and conclusion: national characteristics in English folk-drama.
- Appendix I: Versions of folk plays hitherto unprinted.  
Appendix II: Bibliography of printed versions."[74]

Regardless of Ordish's enthusiasm at the time, and the apparent support of the Council of the Folklore Society, the book was never to appear. In the long term, the fact that the volume did not appear caused some discontent with Ordish from within the ranks of the Society. A second notice of the proposed publication of Ordish's book by the Folklore Society appeared in the Twenty-Fifth Annual Report,[75] as did a third in 1904:

"As foreshadowed in the last Report, the additional volume for 1903 will be a collection of materials for a history of English Folk-Drama, edited by Mr. T. Fairman Ordish, and based to a large extent upon contributions by members of the Society. Mr. Ordish has made good progress with the work, and it is hoped that it may be published in the course of the year."[76]

By 1905, however, there were signs that work on the volume was falling behind:

"The promised collection by Mr. T. Fairman Ordish of materials for the History of English Folk-drama is not yet ready for press; but it is hoped that it may be finished in time to be issued as the additional volume for 1904."[77]

This was a problem acknowledged even by the author because, on February 10th, 1906, Ordish wrote to Percy Manning that:

"My work on the versions has been interrupted somewhat by a heavy strain of official work, but in due time I hope it will be completed to the satisfaction of yourself and other fellow-labourers in the same field.



Thanks very cordially for your kind expression of forbearance and patience. I am doing my best and I promise you I will miss no crotchets of my own in my commentary, but arrange the matter as completely and as simply as possible." [78]

Unfortunately, little progress was made and matters appear to have come to a head shortly after Ordish left the Council of the Folklore Society in January 1909. [79] On March 11th, 1909, Mabel Peacock wrote to the Society:

"Some years ago it was proposed to issue a volume of *Folk-Lore* on the subject of the rural dramas such as the Plough-Monday Plays. I remember sending some copies of Lincolnshire Plough-jag 'ditties' to be used. Can you tell me whether the book is in progress?

I ask for this reason. If it is, there will be no occasion for me to include the things I then sent in the collection of folk-lore gleanings which I am gradually copying out and arranging; but if nothing is being done, it would be better to put them with my later notes on the subject." [80]

Accordingly, on March 18th, 1909, F. A. Milne, the then Secretary of the Folklore Society, passed Mabel Peacock's letter to Ordish and requested "an answer at your earliest convenience". [81] In addition, Charlotte Burne wrote to Ordish noting Mabel Peacock's concern, and offering her own services to work on the volume:

"I had a letter from Miss Peacock the other day, asking whether your Mummings' Plays were likely to appear soon. She sent you some Plough Monday notes, at one time, I believe, and she thinks she could utilize them herself if you do not want them. Now I hope very much that you do want them and that the work is getting on steadily. Of course I know that it is *monotonous* work, to get all the Mss collated, and so on. I am not so busy as I was, now that I have given up the Editorship—can I do anything to help you? I should be so *very* pleased if the work were to come out under my Presidency! Time flies—we none of us get younger—and 'the night cometh, when no man can work'." [82]

It appears, however, that the Council was beginning to lose patience with Ordish, for at a committee meeting in October 1910 "it was resolved that Mr. Ordish be asked to prepare a report on the materials he had collected for a history of English Folk Drama to be presented at the Annual meeting in January." [83] No reply was forthcoming, and the following month the Secretary was directed to write again to Ordish and to request him to prepare a report. [84]

In response to the request, Ordish accordingly compiled a "Report on Mumming Plays and Other Vestiges of Folk Drama". Although not present at the meeting when the report was to be delivered, Ordish certainly made his presence felt, in that he also sent a number of items to be exhibited, some of which he had displayed before. [85]

"By Mr. T. Fairman Ordish—Photographs of sword-dancer's coat and sword-dancer's hat from Durham; photograph of dress of Plough-Monday player, from Vale of Beaver (Northamptonshire); photographs of three scenes from mummings' play at Netley Abbey; photograph of Horn Dance at Abbot's Bromley (Staffordshire); drawing of a mummings' play from Mill Hill (Middlesex); drawings of 'Old Bighead', 'Father Christmas', and 'Dolly' from the same mummings' play; photographs of

mummers' swords and hats, and drawing of a fight in a mummers' play, from Sherfield English (Hants)."[86]

In Ordish's absence, the report was read to the Annual Meeting on January 18th, 1911 by the Secretary, F. A. Milne.[87] It simply began with Ordish listing the contributions received from such individuals as Mabel Peacock, Percy Manning, E. H. Binney, Charlotte S. Burne, and Horatia K. F. Eden, the sister of the writer Juliana Horatia Ewing. Ordish then went on to observe that:

"The above contributions, which have been summarised in a very compendious form, contain a considerable addition to the material already in hand. It will be necessary to compare the collected versions with those already in print in accessible sources. Many of the transcripts from printed sources are repeated in the above collections and in that which was already in hand; but they will be very useful. The lists of printed versions, when collated will furnish a list which will in all probability cover the whole ground of printed record.

The Council of the Society has been deterred from carrying out the proposal to devote one of the Society's occasional volumes to this subject, on account of the large number of versions, the variations in which are of varying significance. On the other hand, the large number of versions which have been printed is evidence of the interest generally taken in the subject; and the Council now has at its disposal a *corpus* of new material in MS. which it specially concerns the Society to render accessible."[88]

The Council's response was muted, to say the least:

"It was resolved that the thanks of the Society be given to Mr. Ordish for the preparation of the Report, and that it be referred to the Council to consider what steps can be taken for giving effect to the suggestions contained in it."[89]

Although a copy survives in the Ordish Collection, the report was never published, and one possible reason for this was later referred to by Charlotte S. Burne in a letter to Ordish:

"I am much obliged to you for the copy of your Report. I do not know why it was not published in *Folk-Lore*. I was not Editor when it was presented, and my tenure of the Presidency expired that night [January 18th, 1911], so I had no *locus standi*. The general disappointment much at finding you had made no progress with the collation of the material may have had something to do with it."[90]

The Council considered Ordish's report in March, 1911, and decided to ask him to allow Charlotte Burne to see the materials.[91] Whether or not she ever saw them is not known. In May, 1911, the Council received a letter from Arthur Beatty of Wisconsin offering to work on "the St. George Mummers' Play", a topic on which he had already written.[92] The Council replied "that the Society is already committed ...," the implication being that they were still backing Ordish to complete his book.[93]

Two years later there was still no sign of the volume. It appears, however, that Ordish still had hope that the project would be completed, for, in a letter he received from Reginald Tiddy, the latter responded, "I am very glad to hear that you have not given up the idea of producing a volume on the Mummers' Play ..."[94]

Furthermore, Ordish was still collecting material. For example, in November, 1913, Tiddy wrote to him:

"I also enclose four of my own collection—Sunningwell, Chadlington & Weston Sub Edge and Overton. I wonder if you would mind having them copied & letting me some time have the originals. I value the latter for the sake of the donors ..."[95]

While Ordish did comply and copy the texts, typically he never returned the originals to Tiddy, and so they and the copies still remain in the Ordish Collection (Berkshire 12-14; Oxfordshire 3-5; Gloucestershire 20-22; Hampshire 12-13), with only the Weston Sub Edge play being included in Tiddy's *The Mummers' Play*. [96]

In December, 1913, things were to change yet again when E. H. Binney wrote to Dr. Robert R. Marett, the President of the Folklore Society, to ask "... what chance there was of his doing anything with his materials on mummers [which he had earlier sent to Ordish], as Mr. Ordish seems to have dropped the subject." The letter was dealt with by the Finance and Publications Committee who "... resolved to recommend to the Council to ask Mr. Binney whether he would be prepared to undertake to edit the material collected." [97] The Council, however, "... resolved that the matter stand over until the next meeting, the President ... undertaking to communicate with Mr. Ordish and to endeavour to obtain from him the materials in his possession." [98] At the Council meeting on January 21st, 1914, the Chairman read a letter he had received from Mr. Ordish from which he inferred that:

"... he was unwilling to give up the work, at any rate at present, but that he might be inclined to do so under certain circumstances [unspecified]. The Chairman also reported that Mr. Binney would be quite prepared to take up the work and would undertake to complete it in 3 years' time. It was agreed that the Chairman be left to further negotiate with Mr. Ordish." [99]

In spite of the lack of any activity on the project, Ordish appears to have been discussing a book on traditional drama with the publisher T. Fisher Unwin, for on February 3rd, 1914, Unwin wrote to Ordish:

"With regards to the little book that you suggest, I should be quite inclined to print and publish such a work if I could see my way. How could I know more about it and see the pictures? In any case I should be happy to see you at this office and to discuss the subject." [100]

Perhaps it was these discussions which made Ordish reluctant to hand over the materials to the Folklore Society.

Quite what happened next is not known. Perhaps because of the sensitivity of the issue, the matter appears to have disappeared as an item for discussion in Council meetings. And the next thing we hear is that E. H. Binney has resigned from the Society. [101] Whether or not Ordish's negative response to the request for him to release the material for someone else to work on and Binney's resignation are related is a matter of conjecture.

Conversely, E. K. Chambers's changing attitude towards Ordish is somewhat more obvious. Margaret Dean-Smith observed that Chambers wrote his *The English Folk-Play* (1933) "... apparently in complete ignorance of what he [Ordish] had done." [102] In fact, just the

opposite was true. E. K. Chambers knew exactly what Ordish was doing. Chambers and Ordish were both members of the Council of the Folklore Society (1900-1907) and both were on the Society's Publications Committee (1901-1905) at the exact time when Ordish's projected book was being discussed. Consequently there was no way that Chambers could not have known about the survey or the book. Furthermore, in *The Mediaeval Stage* (1903) Chambers is almost laudatory about Ordish, in that he includes him in the "List of Authorities", and begins the chapter on "The Mummings' Play" by citing Ordish's articles and noting his forthcoming book.[103] Likewise, Chambers was aware of Ordish's research on *Early London Theatres ...* (1894) and *Shakespeare's London ...* (1897), and accordingly cited him amongst the authorities in his *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923). Things changed considerably, however, by the time Chambers wrote *The English Folk-Play* (1933). Here he now favours Reginald Tiddy as the authority,[104] and cites Ordish only once in a footnote, choosing not to name him in the text but only to refer to him as "One folk-lorist ..."[105] Similarly, while the full text of the Revesby Play presented by Chambers is based upon the edition by Ordish[106] and an edition by Manly[107] which in turn is based on Ordish,[108] this is done without any acknowledgement. Also, in the "List of Texts" which are arranged by county, while Chambers lists Ordish's essay on the Revesby play, he somehow manages to omit the name of the author.[109] I would suggest that these omissions are rather more than coincidental, and do more than simply reflect Chambers electing to cite Tiddy's work as opposed to that of Ordish. Rather, this demonstrates a changing attitude on Chambers's part towards Ordish, and appears to be an attempt to downplay, if not expunge, the latter's role as a key figure in traditional drama scholarship at the turn of the century.

We have few clues concerning why Ordish never completed his book, and we will probably never know the full story. He certainly had the skill and experience to write such a volume, as well as plenty of relevant material. Nor was it because he had lost interest in the topic. Even after his retirement we find him lecturing on "Survival in Folklore: Father Christmas and the Mumming Play" to the Herne Bay Literary and Social Society.[110] Also, he had the support of the Council of the Folklore Society, which obviously had every intention of publishing the work. It is possible, however, that neither Ordish nor the Council of the Society initially realised the scale of the task he was facing.

Perhaps it was not just one issue which led to the demise of the project, but a combination of factors. On the one hand, we know that Ordish was involved in many other societies and ventures, and it may be that he was simply overstretched. For example, in 1902, the same year the Mumming Play survey was launched, Ordish and others founded the London Shakespeare League, a society in which he was to be heavily involved for a number of years.[111] Also in 1902, as Chairman of the Executive of the London Topographical Society, he was to relaunch an appeal to build in central London a reproduction of an Elizabethan theatre, as a memorial to Shakespeare.[112] On the other hand, Ordish's plan for the volume might well have been too ambitious and covered too much ground. Perhaps another reason was that there was no model for writing such a book, and this in itself inevitably makes the task harder.

It certainly appears that up to 1914 Ordish intended to complete a book on the subject.[113] Later that year, Europe was plunged into the Great War of 1914-1918. While the conflict appears hardly to have interfered with the activities of the Folklore Society,[114] it altered the lives of individuals such as Ordish, if only to increase his workload at the Patent Office.[115]

The book could also possibly have been abandoned for personal reasons. For instance, we know that some time prior to November, 1918, Ordish was in sufficient ill health to have to retire early.[116] However, an earlier unspecified family crisis, referred to in a letter he wrote to Edward Clodd on May 30th, 1904, may have also been a contributory factor:

"Your letter reached me at a moment of great despondency, due to a domestic sorrow which I fear is irremediable, and I mention this that you may know just how and why your kind thought has touched me and made me feel uplifted with pride and gratitude ..."[117]

Whatever our speculations, the outcome was the same. The book never appeared.

## **THE ORDISH COLLECTION**

Ironically, Ordish's inability to complete his book was to have a surprise benefit for future scholars, in that his reluctance to return materials to the contributors or release them to the Folklore Society in a strange way "protected" them in the long term, and so created a legacy for future generations. As Christopher Cawte observed when discussing the possible current whereabouts of E. H. Binney's papers, "I suspect they were lost. The only C. S. Burne MSS which survive are those she lent to Ordish and which he did not return."[118]

Ordish died on December 5th, 1924, an event recorded in the Annual Report of the Folklore Society along with the observation that:

"It is regretted that the book Mr. Ordish had in contemplation on English Folk Drama was not completed before his death; but it is hoped that the valuable material he had collected will be carefully preserved."[119]

Alice Bertha Gomme had kept in touch with Ordish after he had moved from London, even going down to give a lecture in 1922 to the Herne Bay Literary and Social Society on "The Story of Children's Singing Games".[120] Not surprisingly, then, members of the Gomme family attended Ordish's funeral, including Allan Gomme.[121] And it is possibly through the Gomme family that some time prior to April 1925 the Folklore Society finally took possession of the materials which Ordish had been collecting all those years. At that point the papers were moved to the library of the Folklore Society which had been established at University College London in 1911.

"Lady Gomme brought up a report on Mr. T. Fairman Ordish's M.S.S. of Mummings Plays, and it was resolved that the Mss. be deposited in boxes at University College: and that the Hon: Librarian be authorised to expend a sum not exceeding 25/- in providing boxes in which to place them."[122]

What happened next is uncertain, other than that for some reason the collection dropped out of sight for the next twenty three years. This in itself raises a question. For while we have seen Chambers downplaying Ordish's research, we need to consider if he, or for that matter anyone outside the Council of the Folklore Society, was aware of the extent of the material Ordish had collected, and that the papers were now in the hands of the Society. Or was it a case that the papers were simply shelved and forgotten?

In 1948 the archives were moved from their temporary wartime location in the Royal Anthropological Institute in Bedford Square, London, to the home of Mrs. Lake Barnett—primarily because of the lack of space at University College at the time. In a "List of Folk-Lore Society's Records and Papers at Mrs Lake Barnett's," prepared by Allan Gomme in September 1948, the final item is described as "... a large bundle of material on the mummings' play, mostly that collected by T. F. Ordish (c. 1903), *with me*" [my emphasis].[123] This could be taken to imply that, while compiling his report, Allan Gomme had removed the Ordish Papers from Mrs Lake Barnett's, possibly for his own use—a not altogether unknown action by members of the Council at that time.

Around 1954, Keith Holland, who had read of Ordish's work in old copies of the *Home Counties Magazine*,[124] approached Allan Gomme with regard to obtaining access to the papers:

"My discovery of the Ordish collection was brought about by my curiosity of the whereabouts of the Mill Hill mummings play. Something made me look in the telephone directory and I found the name Fairman J. Ordish a dentist living in Ealing. I wrote to him and he said Thomas Fairman Ordish was his uncle and he left his collection to Mr. Gomme ... I wrote to Mr. Gomme and he sent me a notebook with the text of the Mill Hill play. I gave the notebook to the Librarian in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and she made a copy of it." [125]

These events eventually came to the attention of Alex Helm and Margaret Dean-Smith, who both approached the Folklore Society for permission to inspect the papers.[126]

"Mr. Helm wishes to become a member of the Society and in examining the material would be prepared to arrange it in order and return it intact. After discussion it was agreed that the material should be sent to Mr. Helm on the understanding that it should be returned direct to the Library of the Society. The thanks of the Council were expressed to Mr. Gomme for taking care of the papers." [127]

"Mr. [Allan] Gomme reported that he had had a letter from Miss Dean-Smith asking (a) to be allowed to copy the material on Mummings Plays which had already been lent to Mr. Alex Helm for use in connection with her own book on the subject and (b) to be allowed to present the copy so made to the English Folk Dance & Song Society when she had finished with the copy. After discussion it was agreed that permission should be given for Miss Dean-Smith to have and use such a copy, but that the copy when no longer required by Miss Dean-Smith should be deposited in the Library of the Society at least until the material with Mr. Helm had been returned, when its further disposal could be arranged.

In the meantime the copy would be available for reference by any interested members of the E.F.D.S.S. Mr. Gomme was asked to communicate with Miss Dean-Smith to this effect." [128]

Access to the papers came too late for Helm to integrate fully all the materials he found into his *The English Folk Play*. [129] Without naming Ordish, however, he acknowledged that the Folklore Society had given him "... permission for the examination of Mss in their possession", and he signalled in his geographical listing those items which had come to light as a result. [130] In April, 1955, Helm submitted his observations on the papers to the Council, [131] and they were subsequently published in *Folklore*. [132]

Helm described the collection when he first saw it as being "... originally contained in unsorted bundles tied together with string". To bring order from the chaos, Helm accordingly created "... separate files, on the basis of one file per county." [133] While a reorganisation of the collection was obviously necessary, we need to consider why it was organised on a geographical basis. The answer is that Helm, and others at the time, were significantly influenced by Joseph Needham's 1936 essay, "The Geographical Distribution of English Ceremonial Dance Traditions". [134] Here Needham set out his findings region by region, much in the way E. K. Chambers had earlier done in a limited way in *The Mediaeval Stage* [135] and *The English Folk-Play*. [136] Needham then went on to examine the zonation of traditions in relation to the Danelaw, and the persistence of those traditions into the present century, and finally explored the origin of the morris dance. During the 1950s a number of United Kingdom folklorists adopted this geographical approach. For example, Maurice Barley's "Plough Plays in the East Midlands" [137] was one of the first, and probably the most influential, of this new wave of publications. The discussion of origin theory is minimal, the concentration being on the spatial distribution of recorded texts and their relationship to early drama and to Plough Monday customs in the East Midlands. Helm himself had used this approach, [138] and so it is perhaps not surprising that, when he came to sort the Ordish papers, he adopted a method with which he was familiar.

In his "Report on The Ordish Papers" [139] Helm offered the following assessment and highlighted the importance of the collection:

- "1. The papers bring to light many printed instances of the play recorded in books and periodicals now forgotten or only obtainable with great difficulty.
2. It contains other instances recorded in private communications, some of great value, not hitherto published or recorded elsewhere.
3. Areas which have been until now considered sterile from a traditional point of view, have now recorded examples of play texts (e.g. Surrey, Herts).
4. Besides the play proper, there is much interesting incidental information concerning the sword dance, plough-bullocking and other seasonal customs, (e.g. Miss Mabel Peacock's Lincolnshire Notes—not previously published).
5. There is also much valuable information concerning the background of the play—costume and disguise worn, etc.
6. There are a number of photographs, some of which—if not all—may be in the album in the Society's Library, but which will be new to many people ..." [140]

A second piece on the Ordish Papers, this time by Margaret Dean-Smith, was also published in *Folk-Lore*.

"... I would venture to draw the attention of the present generation of readers of *Folk-Lore* to the work of T. F. Ordish, and the standing he occupied *outside* England.

Today, one has to explain to any English audience who T. F. Ordish was ... But it is impossible to pick up any American work on the folk play, published in responsible journals, for years after these dates, without finding his name mentioned ...

It is abundantly clear, from the material now at the reader's disposal, both published and unpublished, that Ordish, (who in the 1880's, or earlier, became interested first in the sword-dance and its play, nearly thirty years before Cecil Sharp began collecting the same, and who, like his contemporary 'young Mr. Frazer' was soaked in the scholarly traditions of Grimm and Mannhardt, and had, therefore, his feet on the track which is now regarded as more nearly the 'right' one than the approach of 'literature' or 'the popular stage') [had] become overwhelmed with the mass of evidence which he and his correspondents collected up to approximately 1912. Moreover, the book ... would not only have been a worthy alternative to the chapters devoted to the subject in Chambers's *Mediaeval Stage*, published in 1903, but would have made unnecessary the infinitely poorer *English Folk Play*, published nearly ten years after Ordish's death, ..." [141]

Praise indeed for our ordinary civil servant.

## CONCLUSIONS

The collection of material on English traditional drama made by Thomas Fairman Ordish is by no means his only legacy to us, though some folklorists would possibly consider it to be his most important. As to his other achievements in the field of traditional drama, his publication of the transcript of the "Morris Dance at Revesby" [142] gave scholars access to the text of the entertainment which was not generally available to researchers until 1936 when Lady Alice Bertha Gomme donated it to the Library of the British Museum. [143] It is probably fair to say that practically all references to the entertainment, even up to and after the publication of a facsimile of the manuscript, [144] were based on Ordish's original essay.

Ordish also offered scholars of the day suggestions as to how they could conduct their research. While on the one hand we could possibly describe him as being an "armchair folklorist", [145] Ordish documented several performances of plays. Possibly influenced by the approaches of such contemporaries as Sidney O. Addy [146] and Alfred C. Haddon, [147] Ordish regularly urged others to gather information, be it minimal by today's standards, in order to help contextualise the plays:

"Contributors will oblige by taking note of the great importance of locality, action, and dress in these traditions. Of mere versions of the words of the mumming-play we already possess a considerable number; but no version which includes a note of the place where collected, or anything descriptive of the action of the piece, or of the dress of the players, will be either superfluous or valueless." [148]

In addition to advocating the collection of contextual information, Ordish was a promoter of the use of photography. At least as early as 1892 he had appealed to members of the Folklore Society to assist him in photographing mummers, his reason being:

"... *I attach great importance to what is done in these folk-plays, to the action employed, to the characters represented, and to costume.* The words of many versions have been recorded, but generally without any hint of *action, gesture, and costume*; and it will be obvious that photography offers just what we want. It is a pleasing instance of the saving quality of science. Education saps and undermines tradition; but science and scientific means are at hand to preserve a record of that which is doomed to pass away [my emphasis]." [149]



In terms of theoretical approaches to the material he was collecting, the full exposition of his thoughts on the matter would have come, presumably, with the publication of his book. This we were denied, but he did set out some of his ideas in his various published essays. There he outlined the variety and distribution of the plays and emphasised their antiquity, arguing for their relationship with the Indo-Germanic traditions from which the Classical Greek and Roman Drama developed.[150] Like many of his British contemporaries, Ordish approached the study of traditional drama utilising the nineteenth-century folkloristic concept that the prime importance of research was the search for origins. He aimed to explain the existence and form of these plays in terms of theory that can only be described as historical determinism.[151] Rightly or wrongly, in Britain at that time such arguments, although unsubstantiated, proved to be persuasive, and the approach employed by Ordish was later to be explored by Sir Edmund Chambers,[152] Reginald Tiddy,[153] and Charles Baskervill.[154] These writers, furthermore, developed the examination of such texts as a series of plot structures and started to draw upon analogous European material, as had Ordish before them.

Ordish's research has contributed much to traditional drama scholarship over the years, as is evidenced in the writings of Alan Brody,[155] Alex Helm[156] and, of course, in the joint research of Christopher Cawte, Alex Helm and Norman Peacock,[157] to name but a few. Sadly today, however, while we acknowledge the Ordish Collection as one of the more valuable resources for the study of the topic in Britain, Ordish the man is almost ignored. Furthermore, Margaret Dean-Smith's enthusiasms concerning "... the standing he occupied *outside* England ..." and how "... it is impossible to pick up any American work on the folk play, published in responsible journals ... without finding his name mentioned ..." [158] have become reversed. The continuing interest in traditional drama in Britain, on the part of both scholars and performers, has meant that the Ordish Collection is possibly the most heavily used material in the Archive of the Folklore Society. Furthermore, the current upsurge of interest amongst British folklorists in the "history of the discipline" has kept figures such as Ordish in our minds.[159] Conversely, in North America it appears that Ordish has been forgotten, as is evidenced by his exclusion from Steve Tillis's recent book *Rethinking Folk Drama*. [160]

While this is a regrettable situation, it raises the question of why it is of value to explore these "pasts" when we have so many other avenues to explore. My reflective response is simple. It is all well and good to be on the "cutting edge" of scholarship, but it was through the maze of the past, and the work of individuals such as Ordish, that our discipline was shaped and determinations made which ultimately led us to where we are today. We must not forget that, or deny it. Instead, we need to be aware, and proud, of our own research tradition. To quote David Lowenthal:

"The past remains integral to us all, individually and collectively. We must concede the ancients their place, as I have argued. But their place is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country; it is assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present." [161]

## Notes

1. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the various individuals who have helped me in one way or another with this quest. First and foremost, I would like to thank Caroline Oates, the Librarian of the Folklore Society, for all her kind help. Without her this study would probably never have been completed. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the participation and assistance I have received from the following people: Jane Baxter of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Library, Andrew Bennett, Jane Birkett of the Theatre Museum, Georgina Boyes, Eddie Cass, E. C. Cawte, Sharon Cochrane, Mrs. J. Corden of Hendon Library, David Cousins of Canterbury Library, Patrick Frazer of the London Topographical Society, Keith Holland, Malcolm Holmes of Holborn Library, Ann Hyde of Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, Adrian James of the Society of Antiquaries of London, Kathryn McCord of Kensington and Chelsea Library, Sylvia McKean of Herne Bay Library, George Monger, Ann Norbury of Ealing Central Library, E. G. Partridge of Attleborough, Michael J. Preston, Marian Pringle of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Cathy Rickey, Steve Roud, Christopher Sheppard of the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, Ron Shuttleworth, Murray Simpson of Edinburgh University Library, Doris Thomas of the Patent Office, Anne Wheeldon of the Hammersmith and Fulham Archives and Local History Centre, Bob Woodward of the Patent Office, Diane Yeadon of Norfolk and Norwich Library, MUCEP research assistants Jeff Green and Stephen Brenton, the staff of the Inter-Library-Loan section of the QEII Library, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and others too numerous to mention.
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4. M. Dean-Smith, "To the Editor of *Folk-Lore: The Ordish Papers*", *Folk-Lore*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (September, 1955), 432-434; "The Life-Cycle Play or Folk Play; Some conclusions following the examination of the Ordish Papers and other sources", *Folklore*, Vol. 69 (December, 1958), 237-253.
5. The original collection is held in the Archives of the Folklore Society at University College, London. A xerox copy is in the archives of the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield. A typescript of the Collection was made by Alex Helm in the 1950s, and copies are held in the Archives of the Folklore Society and the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. The materials in the collection are split into two sets of files. The first contains items arranged by county. Consequently, reference to (Ordish Collection: Surrey 1) indicates that the information came from item 1 in the Surrey file. An additional set of files, lettered A to H, contains material on a variety of topics, including correspondence, drafts of articles, and notes. Within each file the materials are numbered, although several items, such as a group of letters, may be covered by one entry. In addition, "File E" is subdivided into four sections. Consequently, in addition to identifying the file and item, a date to indicate a specific letter/document has sometimes been provided. For example, Ordish Collection, E(I) 19, March 5th,

1902 indicates that the information was taken from a letter dated March 5th which is to be found in File E, section I, item 19.

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