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«In Comes I»: Performance, Memory and Landscape

Mike Pearson. Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2007.

xiv, 239 pp., Illus. Maps. Bibliog. Index

ISBN (hbk) 968-0-85989-787-7. £50.00/US\$89.95. ISBN (pbk) 978-0-85989-788-4.

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With a title starting ‘In comes I’, you would expect this book to have something to say about English folk drama, and so it does. However, it covers much more besides, including plenty of interest to folklorists. Furthermore, coming from the pen of a respected experimental performance artist, it looks at familiar territory from a new perspective, ‘focussing equally on traditional practices and manifestations of contemporary devised and site-specific theatre.’

Although the volume is average-sized, its small font means you get a lot of book for your buck. It is well-structured with regular monochrome photographs, scene-setting maps and an extensive bibliography. The index has many entries that will catch the folklorist’s eye

Bracketed by the Introduction and Afterwords, the book is arranged in three main sections covering broadening geographical areas of North Lincolnshire, headed ‘village’, ‘neighbourhood’, and ‘region’. Each section starts with an extended account of an event, followed by ten texts or ‘excursions’, and ends with a proposal for a site-specific performance project. The three events are Pearson’s own ‘Bubbling Tom’ performance, the Hibaldstow Plough Play, and Haxey Hood. The ‘excursions’ are eclectic, dipping into folklore, dialect, social history, natural history, geomorphology, and so on, returning to plough plays and the Plough Jags as a refrain. The chapters sometimes seem disconnected, but like a novel with multiple threads they come together to impart a real feel for the region.

The academic content is densest in the Introduction, so thick with references that at times it is hard to discern Pearson’s original contributions within the synthesis. Away from the Introduction the chapters are more free-flowing and accessible, with fewer references. The performance projects are the chapters that folklorists may find challenging, as they are experimental in style and unfamiliar. It sometimes appears that they are a vehicle to let Pearson talk about his previous performance projects, with possible adaptations and projections onto the North Lincolnshire landscape.

The first main section concerns the village of Hibaldstow – Pearson’s home to the age of six or seven – his ‘square mile’ – the area of our childhood with which we are most intensively familiar than at any time later in life. In his performance of ‘Bubbling Tom’ - the source of the enigmatic cover photograph - he and his audience moved around the village while he recalled his life there in the 1950s and recounted historical anecdotes about each locale. For someone of my age, it is a nostalgic mix of I-Spy books, bike rides, building dens, and damming streams during a time of great post-war change. ‘Nostalgia’ is however a word that Pearson avoids.

In his second section, Pearson broadens his gaze to include nearby villages and towns. The chapter on the Hibaldstow plough play in fact gives a thorough overview of Plough Monday customs and plough plays for the whole of Lincolnshire, especially North Lincolnshire. This chapter alone might be reason enough to buy the book. In

some ways it is a pity that Pearson's home-village approach makes him focus on the Hibaldstow play, because its text is incomplete. Despite this, he does an excellent job of expounding the 'performative' aspects of the play, and provides plenty of material for practitioners who wish to find meanings in the plays to shape their own performances.

Some of the Plough Monday accounts that appear elsewhere in the book were new to me. One such was a scene in the Edward Peacock's novel 'Ralf Skirlaugh: A Lincolnshire Squire' (1870). This describes a Plough Jags' performance that is very unlike anything else I have encountered. While it is easy to dismiss this as a piece of fiction, Peacock was a folklorist who knew a thing or two about local customs, so this story may indicate that Plough Monday was much more varied in Lincolnshire in his day.

The final section covers the whole of North Lincolnshire – starting with a chapter on the Haxey Hood. His coverage of the custom is again thorough, both in terms of its current form and its history. A lot has been written about Haxey Hood over the years, so it would be fair to say that Pearson's chapter covers old ground, although no less welcome for that. The difference is that he looks at the custom from the aspect of performance, in addition to conventional description, commentary and history. He also speaks from personal experience – proudly mentioning that in the 1970s he once managed to touch the Hood during the game. He therefore succeeds in letting us know what it feels like to take part, whether as a swayman, Boggin, spectator or publican. This is one of the examples he discusses in his Afterwords of how experience as a performer affects recollection.

In summary, 'In comes I' is a difficult book to pigeonhole. It sometimes reads as a wide-ranging local history book, but with more than the usual lists of names, places, dates and dry facts. It provides a useful insight into the workings of the North Lincolnshire psyche and how it is affected by, and in turn affects the local landscape. This is reinforced by its extensive coverage of folklore topics, showing how traditions work, and what they mean to the participants and performers.

Mike Pearson is Professor of Performance Studies at the University of Aberystwyth, and a practitioner of international repute. He has established close contacts with the famous Marshfield Paper Boys, and organised a successful conference on British folk performances at Aberystwyth in 2006. There is a good chance we will be hearing from him again.

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