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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Folklore

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfol20>

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Percy Manning M.A. F.S.A.

Published online: 01 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: Percy Manning M.A. F.S.A. (1914) "Bringing in the Fly.", *Folklore*, 25:2, 198-205, DOI: [10.1080/0015587X.1914.9718814](https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1914.9718814)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1914.9718814>

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"BRINGING IN THE FLY."

BY PERCY MANNING, M.A., F.S.A.

(*Read at Meeting, March 19th, 1913.*)

WE read in Anthony Wood's description of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, near Oxford, written in 1661, that once a year the Fellows of New College used to visit the Hospital on Holy Thursday,¹ "early in the morning, after their grave and wonted manner," and attend a short service in the chapel. This done, "they walked from thence to a well, called Strowell, at the upper end of the grove adjoyn- ing, (which with the way from the chappell therto used anciently to be strowed with flowers)." Here, after the reading of the gospel and epistle, they joined in singing part-songs and then returned home.

In two notes, Wood first queries, "whether the bringing in of the fly doth not relate to this custome;" and then remarks that "many people resorted here; as the cooks bringing in of the fly, the boyes their at May Day to bring the first fruits of Flora."² No explanation is given of these somewhat mysterious allusions, which I daresay have puzzled others besides myself.

At the installation of the Earl of Pembroke as Chancellor of the University in 1648, the proceedings, says Wood, were so disorderly that "the rout or rabble of the City" declared openly "that they had often seen Sir Cranion or the Fly at Whitsuntide fetched in by the Cooks of Oxford

¹ "Before it was on May Day," says Wood in a note.

² A. Wood, *Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford*, vol. ii., pp. 514-5.

from St. Barthelmew's [sic] hospital with much more grace and solemnity."³

Crosfield, of Queen's College, in his diary⁴ for 1626, mentions what is evidently the same custom,—“May 30, Whitson-Tuesday, ye rideing of Cookes,”—but, here again, without any explanation.

The earliest allusion that I have yet found is in the Register of the University for 1463.⁵ It is headed “Coquorum Annualis equitatio,” and states that Thomas Dalton and Tibot Coke, proctors of the Guild (artis) of cooks of the University, lodged a complaint with the Commissary of the University, against one John Coke, “de domo S. Johannis extra portam Orientalem.”⁶ He had, they said neglected to provide certain wax candles, commonly called “Coke-lyght,” in the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Oxford, and had neglected or broken a certain laudable custom, of contributing to a certain feast, which was wont to be held once a year in the month of May “on the day of the riding of cooks.” Robert Coke of Hamton Hall and other witnesses proved that the custom was an ancient one, and that the College cooks and the cooks of the Halls each chose one proctor to collect subscriptions. There is no indication here of anything beyond the mixed religious and social festival which every medieval guild was accustomed to celebrate. But fortunately we have a description of the ceremony as it existed in Elizabethan times, shorn of its religious side, which points distinctly to a connection with those agricultural seasonal festivals which

³ A. Wood, *The History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, vol. ii., p. 563.

⁴ Ms. in Queen's College Library. I am indebted to the Provost, the Rev. J. R. Magrath, for kindly allowing me to use his transcript.

⁵ H. Anstey, *Munimenta Academica* (“The Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages,” No. 50), vol. ii., pp. 701-2.

⁶ Though Waynflete had obtained in 1457 a grant of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, with a view to incorporating it in Magdalen College, he did not begin his new buildings till 1471, and the old buildings, and doubtless many of the old servants of the Hospital, were utilized in the interval.

come within the province of the folklorist. This description is contained in an appendix to *Narcissus, a Twelfth Night Merriment, played by youths of the Parish at the College of S. John the Baptist in Oxford, A.D. 1602.*⁷ It takes the form of a burlesque speech, put into the mouth of the College porter: the cooks, he says, "few of them will take rest this night, & suffer as few to take rest in the morning. They have sett a little porch before so great an house, and have called their show the flye. Some say because a maid comming to towne with butter was mett by a cooke and by him deceived in a wood neare adioyning, whose laments the dryades and hamadriades of the place, pittiang, turned her into a butterflie; & ever since the cooks are bound to this anniversary celebration of her metamorphosis; but soft, if the cooks heare that the porridgpott of my mouth runnes over soe, they will keele⁸ it with the ladle of reprehension: therefore I will make hast away, onely asking this boone, . . . that your ladyshipps servant Monsieur Piers may ride to-morrowe with the fierye fraternitye of his fellowe cookes, & make upp the worthy companye of the round table, which they are resolv'd not to leave till the whole house goe rounde with them."

Writing in 1686-7, Aubrey thus describes the festival as he remembered it in his undergraduate days: "before the Civill warres the custome was that some day of ye Whitsun-holydayes, . . . the Master-cooke (for that yeare) with the rest of his Brethren were marched in silke doublets on Horseback, and rode (I thinke) to Bartholomews or Bullington-green, fetch in the Flye: the sd master-cooke-treated his brethren before they rode out. (At Exeter

⁷ Ed. by M. L. Lee, 1893, pp. 32-3; the significance of the speech has escaped the notice of the editor.

⁸ "Keele"—skim; cf. Winter's song in *Love's Labour Lost*:—

"Tu-whit, tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keele the pot."

Coll. 1642) I sawe them drinke their mornings draughts, and on Michaelmas day they rode thither again to convey the Fly away."⁹

We have here, I think, several of the essential features of those Oxfordshire Maytide or Whitsuntide agricultural festivals, which survived into the middle of last century.¹⁰ The company sets out on a May morning, with a great uproar, at or before the earliest hour of daylight. They are mounted on horseback, like the followers of the "Whit Hunt" in Wychwood Forest. They march up to Strowell, and there engage in a ceremony which reminds us of the Derbyshire custom of "well-dressing." The "little porch set before so great a door," *i.e.* before the College gateway, is evidently such a bower of green branches and May blossom, as Herrick describes in "Corinna's going a Maying":—

"Come, my Corinna, come ; and coming mark
How each field turns a street, each street a park
Made green, and trimmed with trees ; see how
Devotion gives each house a bough
Or branch ; each porch, each door, ere this,
An ark, a tabernacle is,
Made up of white thorn neatly interwove."

In this bower, I take it, was held the customary feast at which the "company of the round table" drank till it did "goe round with them." Booths like this, made of, or decorated with, boughs, and known as "boweries," where unlimited eating and drinking went on, sometimes for several days together, formed the centre of the festivities at the Woodstock Whitsun Ale, the Kirtlington Lamb Ale, and many other such celebrations. The hint of lawless love-making, so common at these periods, finds its parallel in Herrick's poem.¹¹

⁹ J. Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, ed. J. Britten, p. 202.

¹⁰ *Folk-Lore*, vol. viii., pp. 307-24.

¹¹ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed.; *The Magic Art*, vol. ii., pp. 67, 104.

The central feature of these agricultural festivals with which I have compared our "fly" custom, is the carrying in procession and slaughter of a live victim, part of which is eaten by each member of the community in order to bring him good luck for the coming year. The victim in this case must be the "fly," an insect of some kind, either a butterfly, as the author of *Narcissus* states, or a "crane-fly," as Wood's epithet of "Sir Cranion" suggests. A parallel for the carrying of an insect in procession and the setting up of a bower is afforded by the Danish custom mentioned by Grimm: "A quaint procession of the erewhile amazons of the spinning-wheel at Schleswig, for fetching in of a *cantharis* or *maykäfer*, with green boughs, whereat the town-hall of this place was decked out with greenery."¹² It must be remembered, too, that the German name for the cockchafer, "maikäfer," *i.e.* "may-chafer" (cf. American "may-bug"), specially identifies the insect with May-tide, the season at which the "fly" ceremony took place.

The custom of dressing "Strowell" with flowers indicates that it was, or had once been, a "holy well." The intimate connection of our "fly" with this well is shown not only by the fact that the "fly" was brought in from thence; but also by Wood's epithet of "Sir Cranion," the "crane-fly," which, according to a seventeenth-century work on entomology, was a "water-fly."¹³

A "holy well" with a guardian fly existed at Kirk-michael, Banffshire, in the eighteenth century. It was dedicated to St. Michael, and its waters possessed sovereign virtues. Here the "winged guardian under semblance of a fly was never absent from his duty." Those who wished to know the fate of sick relatives or friends visited the

¹² *Teutonic Mythology of Jacob Grimm*, trans. by J. S. Stallybrass, vol. ii., pp. 693-4.

¹³ "A Water-fly, which men call from the length of the feet or shanks . . . *Gruinam*; called therefore in English a Crane Fly." (T. Moufet, *Insectorum Theatrum*, English ed. 1658, p. 943; quoted by J. Murray, *A New English Dictionary*.

well; "every movement of the sympathetic fly was regarded in silent awe, and as he appeared cheerful or dejected," so would the event be favourable or not. "The guardian fly" was supposed to be immortal; "he might sometimes appear dead, but . . . it was only a transmigration into a similar form, which made little alteration on the real identity."¹⁴

We may, then, regard the Oxford "fly" as the guardian of Strowell, whose movements boded good or bad luck. But why should an insect be so important? I suggest that it embodied the godling or water-sprite of the well. The author of *Narcissus* says that the "fly" was a metamorphosed maiden, such a one perhaps as the Romano-British well-goddess Coventina, to whom a shrine was erected on the "wall of Hadrian."¹⁵ The belief that sprites or disembodied personalities might appear in the form of insects is found in many parts of Britain and the Continent. In Cornwall, "the moths, which some regard as departed souls, others as fairies, are called *Pisgies*."¹⁶ In Armagh "a girl chasing a butterfly was chid by her companions, saying, "that may be the soul of your grandfather." "¹⁷ In Northumberland "red butterflies were killed, being accounted witches."¹⁸

Ancient Greek artists represented the human soul as a butterfly; in fact, one species of butterfly is described by Aristotle as *ψυχή*, soul.¹⁹ Grimm states that "the dragon-fly is called enchanted maid,"²⁰ that the demon-lovers of witches appear to them in the form of butterflies, and that

¹⁴ Sir J. Sinclair, *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1794), vol. xii., pp. 464-5.

¹⁵ *Archæologia Aeliæna*, 2nd S., vol. viii., *passim*.

¹⁶ R. Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, 1st S. (1865), p. 68.

¹⁷ W. S. Mason, *A Statistical Account, or Parochial Survey of Ireland* (1816), vol. ii., p. 83.

¹⁸ *The Denham Tracts*, vol. ii., p. 325.

¹⁹ J. G. Frazer, *Taboo*, (1911), p. 26.

²⁰ Stallybrass, *op. cit.*, vol. iii., p. 1029.

their joint offspring, the elves (elbe), wear the same shape.²¹ In Servia, the soul of a sleeping witch leaves her as a butterfly; in Transylvania, as a fly.²²

That insects were thought to bring good luck with them is shown by many facts. Cornish boys "always chase and try to kill the first butterfly of the season; and, should they succeed, they will overcome their enemies—I suppose, in football, etc."²³ The converse belief prevailed in Devonshire: "any individual neglecting to kill the first butterfly he may see for the season will have ill-luck throughout the season."²⁴ In France, too, it was lucky to catch the first butterfly: "qui veult estre marié dans l'an, prenne le premier papillon qu'il verra."²⁵ In the Department of Ille et Vilaine, "celui qui attrape le premier papillon blanc qu'il voit au printemps, trouvera un essaim dans l'année."²⁶

If the parallel which I have drawn between the "fly" ceremony and other agricultural festivals is to be complete in every respect, it should appear that the insect victim was eaten. This I cannot show at Oxford, but, as Mr. Thomas points out,²⁷ there are traces both in Britain and on the Continent of the eating of insects at festivals. The natives

Ravilloles in Franche-Comté are nicknamed *les Burdaines*, or cockchafers, the story being circulated by their neighbours that on the day of the village fête dishes of these insects are prepared to regale the guests invited.²⁸ In North Lincolnshire "it is sometimes affirmed that the

²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. iii., pp. 1073-4.

²² J. G. Frazer, *Taboo*, pp. 39, 41.

²³ *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. v., p. 214.

²⁴ W. Hone, *The Table Book* (1827), vol. i., col. 678.

²⁵ E. Rolland, *Faune Populaire de la France*, vol. iii., pp. 315-16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Folk-Lore*, vol. xi., p. 259.

²⁸ C. Beauquier, *Blason Populaire de Franche-Comté*, quoted in *Folk-Lore*, vol. viii., p. 364.

reason house-flies disappear in the autumn is that they are all made into pies for Scawby feast.”²⁹

The Oxford ceremony survived into the eighteenth century, for J. Burman, writing in 1705,³⁰ includes “the custom of . . . the *Cook's* fetching in the *Flye* on *May-Day*” among those that Dr. Plot had omitted to describe in the first edition of *The Natural History of Oxford-shire* (1677).

I think it is evident that we have here another instance, like the Boar's Head ceremony at Queen's College, of a folk-custom adopted by and preserved in academic usage,—“a fly in amber.”

PERCY MANNING.

²⁹ *Folk-Lore*, vol. viii., p. 365. Is it a mere coincidence that in the English mummers' play, which centres in the killing and resurrection of a human being at the winter solstice, one of the characters is made to say about the mock victim :—

“ I'll cut him as small as flies,
And send him to the cook shop
To make mince pies” ?

³⁰ *The Natural History of Oxford-shire* (2nd ed.), p. 218.