

The "Deighn Layrocks."

IN the twilight of a glorious Sunday evening, in the height of summer, I was roaming over the heathery waste towards Dean in company with a musical friend of mine, when we saw a little crowd of people coming down a moorland slope far away in front of us. As they drew nearer we found that many of them had musical instruments; and when we met, my friend recognised them as working people living in the district, and mostly well-known to him. He inquired where they had been, and they told him they had been to "a bit ov' a sing deawn i' th' Dean."

"Well," said he, "can't we have a tune here?"

"Sure yo' con, wi' o' th' plezzur i' th' world," replied he who acted as spokesman, and a low buzz of delightful consent ran through the rest of the company. They then arranged themselves in a circle around their conductor, and they played and sang several fine pieces of psalmody upon this heather-scented mountain top."

These Lancashire musicians, here described by Edwin Waugh in his *Home Life of Lancashire Folk*, were the "Deighn Layrocks"—the larks of Dean, the sweetest of all the sweet singers of Rossendale. "A sing deawn i' th' Dean" was one of the regular events in the lives of this little community, and these rehearsals had far-reaching effects, not only in the musical but even in the religious life of the whole district. Their love of music almost passionate in its intensity, was so closely interwoven in the fabric of their lives that to understand it is to go far towards the understanding of them. Every phase of their lives was so intricately bound up with the cult of music, that their ideas, their attitude to life, many of their peculiar manners and local customs, and even to some extent their religious creed can be interpreted in terms of music.

Many factors—geographical, social, and economic—contributed to the development of the musical ability inherent in these people. The hamlet of Dean is situated in a high valley, among the remote easterly recesses of the highlands of Rossendale, and until the latter half of the nineteenth century was virtually isolated from the rest of East Lancashire by rough stretches of boggy moorlands. Geographical conditions thus left them practically untouched by contemporary movements in

the world outside, and they were able to develop freely their individuality as a community. In a district so isolated, and in a people so self-contained, the informal meetings for the practice of music provided almost the sole means of intercourse between the inhabitants of the farms scattered freely about the more fertile patches of the hillsides and of the thirty cottages clustered together in the hamlet of Dean, and they inevitably played an important part in the social life of the district. Economic conditions also fostered this inherent love of music. Most of the layrocks were farmer-weavers, who scraped a scanty, hard-earned livelihood from the barren unyielding clay of the district, eked out by the earnings of the often numerous family on the handlooms, which almost every farm and cottage then possessed. This freedom from the restrictions and discipline of modern industrialism encouraged the practice of music, and it was quite usual for the Sunday evening's rehearsal to be continued far into the early hours of Monday and Tuesday as well.

The "society" of "Deighn Layrocks" was a purely spontaneous growth, and therefore its origin is difficult to trace. Probably it grew up from the informal meetings of two or three musical enthusiasts, who gradually added fellow musicians to their company until it embraced almost the whole population of Dean. The first definite information extant reveals this unorganised musical "club" already in existence and holding meetings fairly regularly, under the leadership of John Nuttall (1714-92). Probably at first the layrocks regarded their rehearsals purely from a musical point of view, but whilst John Nuttall was still in his twenties, "it pleased God to awaken him to a sense of sin and danger," and from this time the whole character of the meetings changed. Psalms, hymns, anthems, and later oratorio were zealously practised, passages from the Bible, from John Bunyan, and from Elisha Cole were read, and occasionally John Nuttall himself gave an address. The next stage in the development of the "Layrock" movement came with the baptism of John Nuttall and several of his colleagues in 1747, by the Rev. Joseph Piccop of the Ebenezer Baptist Church at Bacup. From that time they grew rapidly. In 1750 they were able to build a small meeting house at Bullar Trees, Lumb, and three years later they separated from the Bacup Church to form a self-constituted church of their own under the pastorate of their old leader, John Nuttall. When, seven years later, the church at Lumb was abandoned for the more populous and central village of Goodshaw, John Nuttall continued his work as pastor of the new church. The "Layrock" body was by this time so closely

identified with the Baptist church at Lumb that it seemed highly probable the movement would die out with the transfer of the church. But fortunately the "Deighn Layrocks" were so attached to their music that they continued their meetings, and even formed the nucleus of the choir at the new Chapel at Goodshaw, although this involved a tramp of six miles over rough, boggy moorland, every Sunday. It was the same body of "Deighn Layrocks" who, seventy years later in 1828, were largely instrumental in the establishment of a separate church again at Lumb, and until the latter part of the nineteenth century they figure largely among the officers, as teachers, deacons, superintendents in the Church and Sunday School.

The enthusiasm and energy of these "Deighn Layrocks" knew no bounds. They are characteristically described in a local ballad entitled, "Th' Deighn Layrocks, bi' one o' th' Breed on 'em," sung to the hymn tune *Bocking Warp*, composed by James Nuttall, a son of John Nuttall of Lumb.

"Naah, all yo' fooak uts fond o' lore,
 List to mi tale o' days av yore :
 When layrocks true, began to sing,
 Thoor fiddlers fairly touched ther string.
 Aw think just naah aw see um stand,
 Wi candle lifted, book i' hand ;
 While others on th' owd table spread
 Ther book, un pept o'er fiddlers' yeds.
 Then one, two, three, they all began,
 Un th' crotchets, quavers, heaw they ran !
 Th' owd singers sang, un th' fiddlers bow'd,
 Th' effect uth' song con neer be tow'd.
 Un when ther wark wur done ut neet,
 They met together, dark or leet ;
 Ther sows wur full o' music rife,
 True harmony ther aim o' life.

Mr. Samuel Compston, an octogenarian of Crawshawbooth, tells a typical story of a youth who tramped six miles over the hills from Dean to Haslingden, to attend a rehearsal. When the practice had gone on till after midnight, he thought he ought to be going, and some time later said so, because he had to be up "middlin' soon on i' th' morning," whereupon an old enthusiast exclaimed: "Dost yer what awm sayin' to tha? Tha'll ne'er mek a musicianer as long as tha lives : tha'rt i' too big a hurry." The great day for the "Layrocks" was the "Charity Sermons" or the Sunday School Anniversary. At Goodshaw Baptist "Charity" in 1818, no fewer than eighteen

hymns and choruses were performed, in which thirteen bass singers and the other parts to balance took part, accompanied by violins, violas, 'cellos, double-basses, a clarionette and a bassoon. The efforts of the "Layrocks" were, however, not always appreciated. On one occasion, when William Gadsby was preaching at Goodshaw, a party of "Deighn Layrocks" went over the hill to help the choir. "After the service Gadsby rebuked the singers, remarking that the presence of so many singers savoured more of the playhouse than the House of God, and hoped that if ever he came amongst them again the fiddles and trombones might be dispensed with."

Most of the "Deighn Layrocks" were composers as well as performers of considerable ability, and many of their tunes are sung and admired in far distant places by people quite ignorant of their origin. Some of them find a place, usually under different names and by unknown composers, in standard collections of tunes, and many more are to be found in manuscript in most unsuspected places.

Most of the collections gathered together by the individual "Layrocks" have become scattered, but there is in the Rawten-stall Library a manuscript copy of tunes "as sung by the 'Deighn Layrocks,' with a short sketch of their lives and times" by Moses Heap of Crawshawbooth, who, as a native of Lumb born in 1824, spent his life of nearly ninety years in collecting information about the "Layrocks." The collection contains 255 tunes, of which about 150 are original compositions of the "Layrocks." These tunes are clearly stamped with the individuality of their composers. Hitherto the psalm tune had been a very simple melody, generally in a minor key, and more capable of expressing the sorrows than the joys of the Christian life. But the "Layrocks" harnessed their musical abilities to the service of Christ, and adapted the psalm tune to express the dauntless enthusiasm and the robust joyousness of their religion. Almost all the "Deighn Layrock" tunes reveal that vigorous strength and intense vitality which characterised their composers, whose one desire was to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." They invariably go with a "swing," untrammelled by the demands of modern technique, teeming with runs and repetitions, and often finishing with a rolling chorus.

An examination of the personnel of the compositions reveals the fact that the musical ability was to a large extent inherited. Three families especially are prominent among the "Layrocks"—the Nuttalls, the Ashworths, and the Hargreaves, but these families so intermarried that it soon became almost impossible to distinguish the individual members. Besides John Nuttall,

already mentioned, there were his two sons, James and Henry, both of whom had inherited their father's musical ability as performers and composers. The compositions of James included an anthem "Great Salvation" which with its solo, duet, choral and fugal passages occupied half an hour for a complete performance, whilst his "Linnet Tune," sung to Psalm 104, had a different tune for each verse. The three sons of James—John, James and Richard—were all in turn composers, and John was, until his death in 1856, the 'cello player in the choir at Lumb.

Comparatively little is known about the early members of the Ashworth family, but they must have been connected with the "Layrocks" almost from the beginning, for one of them, James Ashworth, who was born in 1777, as a youth of sixteen, carried his grandfather, then old and lame and blind, to a performance of the "Messiah" at Dean, where he was to take the tenor solos. The four sons of this James Ashworth were all prominent figures among the "Layrocks," two of them, James and John, as solo singers, and Abraham and Robert as composers and violinists. The compositions of Robert (1799-1881) include, in addition to twenty overtures and fifty psalm tunes, a number of quadrilles, hornpipes, and waltzes. He was also in considerable demand as a preacher in local churches. Moses Heap says, "His son told me that he frequently went to preach at Waterbarn Chapel in the early days of that place, taking his dinner with him in his pocket, for they were all very poor. On giving out the hymn in the pulpit, he came down into the singing pew and played his 'cello to help on the singing. When the service was over, he would take the 'cello with him into the vestry. After being refreshed with his plain dinner, his custom was to have a practice on his 'cello. On one of these occasions he was playing a hornpipe, at the sound of which a member came in saying, "Hush! hush! Robert, you are playing an idle tune!" Robert replied, "There is no idle tunes, it is all in the rendering." Two other prominent members of the Ashworth family, were Susie, generally known as Susie o' owd James, who led the sopranos, and Jinny o' t' Clough, the leader of the altos, both of whom were active in all the musical activities of the church and Sunday School during the middle years of the nineteenth century.

The Hargreaves came into prominence much later than the Nuttalls and the Ashworths. One of them, John Hargreaves, known as John Sam, superseded James Ashworth as leader of the choir in 1860. His two sons Richard and Samuel, known respectively as Richard o' John Sam and Sammy o' John Sam, were both among the last members of the "Deighn Layrocks."

The Hargreaves, like their colleagues, were composers as well as performers, and many of their tunes and the tunes of their descendants are still sung at Lumb.

Another member of the "Layrocks" was Henry Whittles, Harry o' Jacks, one of the foundation members of the Lumb Baptist Chapel in 1828. He was a tenor singer of more than local repute, and has been described by one of the old scholars as "the sweetest tenor singer he had ever heard." On one occasion he walked from Lumb to Manchester, a distance of twenty four miles, just to "have a look at Samson." On his death in 1886, he was carried, shoulder high, over the Livery Hills to be buried in the old grave-yard at Goodshaw.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the "Deighn Layrocks" had become practically identical with the Lumb choir, although they still proudly retained the old name given to them by their admirers a century before. The death blow to the "Layrock" movement however came with the advent of the organ, which was purchased in 1858. Hitherto the orchestra of violins, 'cellos, double-basses, had been as important as the choir in the musical part of the service, but now they found their services unnecessary, except on special occasions like the "Charity." So the "Layrocks" finding themselves without any useful function to fulfil in the church, gradually died out, and by the end of the century their society had become a thing of the past, to be remembered with pride and thankfulness not only music far beyond the bounds of their native hills.

by the church for which they worked, but by many lovers of

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