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Postscript to Mrs Ewing and the St Kitts Mummies' Plays

Peter Millington

Abstract

This note follows up loose ends remaining from the article 'Mrs Ewing and the Textual Origin of the St Kitts Mummies' Plays', published in *Folklore* in 1996. In particular, it reports on how Ewing's play *The Peace Egg* was transmitted to St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean, and resolves a minor confusion regarding the sources she used in compiling her text.

Introduction

In my article on 'Mrs Ewing and the Textual Origin of the St Kitts Mummies' Plays' (Millington 1996), I demonstrated that the play texts used by the 'Mummies' of St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean (Abrahams 1968) were taken from the compiled text published by the Victorian children's author Juliana Horatia Ewing (1884). I then went on to explore the relative contributions of the five texts Ewing declared as her sources, and how she had handled them. The documentary evidence presented was comprehensive and conclusive, but inevitably there were one or two minor queries and loose ends:

- How did Ewing's text get to St Kitts-Nevis and enter its oral tradition?
- Why did Ewing seem to cite the same play twice in her list of sources—once as *Alexander the Great* (i.e. *Alexander and the King of Egypt*) and separately by its usual subtitle *A Mock Play*?
- Where did Ewing obtain the undeclared traditional folk play lines in her text?

This research note follows up these loose ends.

Mummies continue to perform in St Kitts-Nevis. The group filmed by Joan McMurray in Independence Square, Basseterre at Christmas 2003 performed a play with a shortened text, regularly interspersed with interludes of dancing in the local masquerade style (McMurray, pers. comm., 2003). This was, however, still recognizably Ewing's text.

Mummies also performed until recently among Kittitian sugar workers in San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic. These workers and their descendants form a distinct community known as *Cocolos*, and the Mummies' performances were one of a number of

Christmas sports, some of which still continue. These Mummies have also been captured on film (Museo Del Hombre Dominicano 2005). Both of these videos have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Millington and James 2011).

Transmission of the Ewing Text to St Kitts and Nevis

Having established that the Caribbean Mummies used Ewing's *Peace Egg* text, the question arises as to how it arrived there. The fact that the text was published by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge suggested to me that missionaries or clergy might have had something to do with it, which turns out to have been correct. This is substantiated in a filmed interview with Theophilus Chiverton, known as 'Primo', the leader of the San Pedro de Macoris Mummies. The interview is in Spanish, and the English subtitles include the following:

The origin of the mummies comes from an English priest who had a book . . . And a man who worked for the church stole it and copied all the lessons. The game has about 28 cast members. And each individual has to learn his lessons to do it . . . At the end of the game, one fights with the Giant . . . and he is killed. (Museo Del Hombre Dominicano 2005)

We thus have direct confirmation from a performer that the Mummies originally drew their text from a book. The textual correlations alone are sufficient for us to be confident that that book was an edition of Ewing's *Peace Egg* text.

Ewing's Textual Sources

Ewing stated that she had compiled her text from five others: ' . . . the "Peace Egg," the "Wassail Cup," "Alexander the Great," "A Mock Play," and the "Silverton Mummer's [sic] Play" (Devon)', with the addition of a 'Mumming Chorus' and thirty lines of her own (Ewing 1887, 44). I was able to identify all of these sources to my satisfaction, except for 'A Mock Play'. This appeared to duplicate the Alexander play, which was originally published as a chapbook. Its full title is *Alexander and the King of Egypt. A Mock Play as it is Acted by The Mummies Every Christmas*. Newcastle editions of the chapbook start the text on a new page under the prominent heading *A Mock Play*, which in some circumstances could be mistaken as the main title.

When I matched the lines in Ewing's text with the lines of her sources, I found nothing to contradict my view that *Alexander the Great* and *A Mock Play* were the same. On the other hand there was a residue of twenty-seven lines that could not be accounted for. A dozen of these lines were recognizably traditional, and distinctive enough to be able to identify their ultimate source (Sandys 1833, cx, cxi and 174–78). However, my efforts to explain their inclusion in Ewing's text were unsatisfactory, because they necessitated her using a hypothetical manuscript of the Silverton play that was different from the manuscript which I was pretty confident she had used.

I believe the answers to both these problems lie with two Christmas play texts published in William Sandys's book *Christmas-tide—Its History, Festivities and Carols* (1852), which I encountered after publishing my article. The first is a chapbook text, which he cites in his introduction using its full title *Alexander and the King of Egypt. A Mock Play as it is Acted by The Mummies Every Christmas*, published in Newcastle (Anonymous 1788). However, he reproduces the complete text later in the book under the shortened title

A *Mock Play*, as shown in [Figure 1](#) (Sandys 1852, 212–13 and 292–97, respectively). The latter title is also used in the book's contents list. This appears to be the chapbook edition ascribed to the publisher T. Saint by Preston, Smith, and Smith (1977).

Sandys's *A Mock Play* text is immediately followed by another text taken from his own collection entitled *Christmas Play of St. George and the Dragon. As represented in the west of England* (Sandys 1852, 298–301). This has all the unaccounted-for known traditional lines that were enumerated in my article.

It is my view that Ewing used both of Sandys's 1852 texts, but that she confused the titles while writing her introduction.

At the time Ewing was preparing her text, the only other readily available printed source for the *Alexander* text, apart from original chapbooks and Sandys's *A Mock Play*, was an edition by T. Wilson, Whitehaven, reproduced in abridged form in William Hone's *Every-day Book* (1827, cols. 1645–48). The Hone/Wilson version omits a long racy speech relating the Doctor's cures that the Sandys/Saint version keeps, albeit with certain words dotted out. Ewing uses several lines from this missing speech; so Hone/Wilson cannot have been her source. She also uses the line 'at the sounding of the trumpet and beating of the drum', which is particular to Newcastle editions of the *Alexander* chapbook, including Saint's. Whitehaven editions, including Hone's reproduction, and the *Peace Egg* chapbooks, which also have this speech, use a shortened version of the line: 'at the sound of the trumpet and beat of the drum'. Evidently, therefore, Ewing used a Newcastle version of the chapbook text. It remains a possibility that Ewing possessed an original copy of an *Alexander* chapbook, but the Newcastle version had not been printed for a hundred years. Consequently, it is most likely that she used Sandys's *A Mock Play*.

Sandys's second text is similar to one he had published earlier (Sandys 1833). This is the text already mentioned as the ultimate source of the distinctive Dragon dialogue. The lines that these two Sandys versions share are effectively identical, including those lines used by Ewing. Fortunately, there are lines in one that are not in the other and vice versa, and there are two lines in particular that Ewing uses from Sandys's 1852 text that are not in his 1833 text:

I'll never pardon a Turkish Knight;

So rise thee up again, and try thy might. (Sandys 1852, lines 70–71)

These are given by Ewing as:

I keep no slaves thou Turkish Knight

So rise thee up again, and try thy might. (Ewing 1887, lines 257–58)

My earlier paper illustrated the overlap between Ewing's text and her source texts with a Venn diagram. Updating this with the extra Sandys text has proved too complex. It suffices to say that of sixty-four lines in Sandys's text, forty-four appear in Ewing's text, and of these eighteen are not shared with any of her other sources. Most shared overlap is with the Silverton text, which is perhaps unsurprising considering that both texts come from the West Country (see [Figure 2](#)).

The graph in [Figure 2](#) compares the shared lines of the Ewing and Sandys texts prepared using the same method as in my earlier article for her other sources. The unique contributions from Sandys's text to Ewing's text have been highlighted. These are

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A Mock Play.

ACT I.—SCENE I.

Enter Alexander.—Alexander speaks.

SILENCE, brave gentlemen; if you will give me an eye,
Alexander is my name, I'll sing the Tragedy;
 A ramble here I took, the country for to see,
 Three actors here I've brought so far from *Italy*;
 The first I do present, he is a noble king,
 He's just come from the wars, good tidings he doth bring;
 The next that doth come in, he is a docter good,
 Had it not been for him, I'd surely lost my blood:
 Old *Dives* is the next, a miser you may see,
 Who, by lending of his gold, is come to poverty.
 So, gentlemen, you see four actors will go round;
 Stand off a little while, more pastime shall be found.

[*Exeunt.*

ACT I.—SCENE II.

Enter Actors.

Room, room, brave gallants, give us room to sport,
 For in this room we have a mind to resort—
 Resort, and to repeat to you our merry rhyme,
 For remember, good sirs, this is *Christmas* time;
 The time to cut up goose pies now doth appear,
 So we are come to act our merry mirth here:

Figure 1. First page of the *Mock Play* text from Sandys (1852).

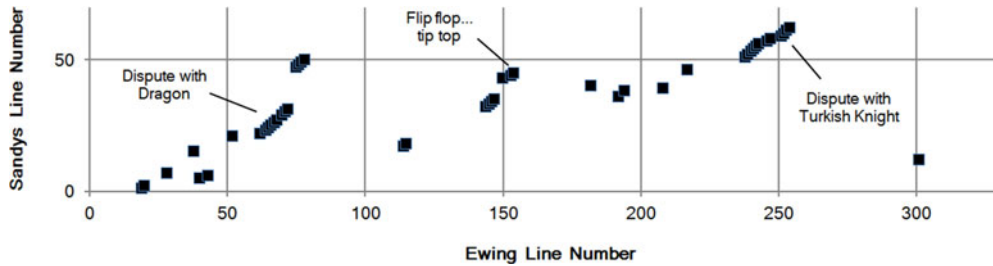


Figure 2. Correlation of Ewing's *Peace Egg* with Sandys's *Christmas Play*.

precisely the parts that I predicted would appear in the unidentified source (Millington 1996, 87).

My earlier paper suggested that Ewing compiled her text starting with the *Alexander* text, merging in lines and parts from the *Peace Egg* chapbook. She then took the heroes and one or two other speeches from the *Wassail Cup*, and I think this would also have been the point at which she introduced the speeches from Sandys's text. Finally, she added embellishments and an ending from the Silverton text and a few lines of her own.

Conclusion

I believe I have presented a good case for Ewing having incorporated material from both of Sandys's 1852 texts in her play. This is much more satisfactory than having to posit hypothetical unidentified texts. That being the case, she evidently confused the titles while writing her introduction.

Primo's testimony regarding the transfer of Ewing's text into the Kittitian Mummies tradition is convincing, all the more so for having been given unprompted.

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Biographical Note

Peter Millington has been researching mumming and guising plays since 1970, and was a founder member of the Traditional Drama Research Group (TDRG). He gained his PhD on 'The Origins and Development of English Folk Plays' from the University of Sheffield in 2002. He runs the Master Mummies website (<http://www.mastermummies.org/>), and inaugurated the TDRG's Folk Play Research website (<http://www.folkplay.info/>). Recently, he has been researching the music and traditions of Tristan da Cunha, and is an active member of the Tristan da Cunha Association Committee.