

Mytton... Dyer...
Sweet Billy Gibson...

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Deborah Tyler-Bennett

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**Mytton... Dyer...
Sweet Billy Gibson...**

THREE POETRY PORTRAITS

Deborah Tyler-Bennett



Nine
Arches
Press

For my sister Rachel,
for Billy Gibson, who I never met ...
and in spirit of Pat Tierney, Dublin Ballad Singer.

MYTTON

1796–1834

Squire John ‘Mango’ (‘Mad Jack’) Mytton was one of the most popular Regency figures to be depicted in sporting prints, books, and paintings. A hard-drinking eccentric who rushed across duck ponds naked in order to get a better shot at birds, rode a pet bear through his dining room, and was variedly depicted on his one-eyed horse, Baronet, he was also known for his many accidents (setting himself alight to cure hiccups) as well as his sporting prowess. Often turning-up at farm doors and asking he and his horse be let in for a warm, Mytton was held in strange affection by his neighbours. He died of drink, after spending last years as a debtor. He’s been written of by, amongst others, ‘Nimrod’, Edith Sitwell, William Donaldson, and in *The Chap* magazine.

DEATH OF THE POPULAR ENGLISH PRINT

No more 'Mytton Rides a Bear',
'To Hounds', 'On Fire'
(mad cure for hiccups),
frames fit only for the byre.

Annals listing bad behaviour
(and extreme) deny entry
to vanquished squirearchy.
Chilled, standing sentry

those who dreaded invites,
Parson wobbling on –
something about sins cleansed,
carved heaven won.

Print-maker's lament,
subject dust-bound,
shunned visitors received,
now cold in ground.

No more 'Mytton Set Alight',
'With Hounds' ... New gloom
consigns rich racing prints fit
only for a Bawd's scant room.

HORSE AND HIMSELF ...

... Bothering farm doors come night.
Him, shivered in thinned coats,
impersonating jobbing labourer.
Horse? They'd harbour doubts

but let both in. 'Wits gone,
yon nag comes too!'
'Beast and Master blocking fire's
breath, insane to-do!'

'Squire's a Squire,
moon-mad or not'. Choice?
Seems rich man's folly
chilled as sherbet ice.

DYER

1841–1903

In The Lanes shopping development, Carlisle, stands a statue to Cumbrian fiddler and ballad singer, Jimmy Dyer. Dyer, like John Stagg and Benjamin Wells, was well known for keeping the Cumbrian ballad tradition alive and, like many ballad singers would have walked miles in order to perform. Books on oral poetry by John McInnes and Timothy Neat and the enduring presences on city streets of ballad singers such as the late Dublin bard, Pat Tierney, reveal how the tradition endures.

TELLING THE BEES FOR JIMMY DYER

Carlisle Market hosts midnight concert.
Jimmy Dyer's ghost, ballad singer fiddling below blea stars.

Only drunken stragglers to hear ...
Cabbies waiting on night's last fare

think strings daggy hill-blown winds.
Passing strays rub through his legs.

Were rushes laid?
Hive receiving funeral crumbs?

Song travelling corpse roads, fingers cupped
round the bowl, brawny as bee-bread.

Where does he go come daylight, as shoppers bree
through *Tesco*? Where does he play in sunlight?

Maybe hills replenish his pack, strings
plucking local names for flora:

Oxeye, Ellers, Dead Tongue, Horse Knap ... Vagabond's Friend
his favourite. Crumbled notes

perfecting, telling the bees
how it was, how it always is.

Blea, Bree: Old Cumbrian words for blue, and bustle, or hurry.

DALE FIDDLER, DOWNBANKS

Coat edges' nibbled grass, boots scraffling scree,
Jimmy Dyer, sleet-crooked, heading for Carlisle
where his fiddle'll scrape supper.

Fired curls pushed into stove-in stovepipe.
Careful of case, fiddle his livelihood.
Around, hills dark-coated as funeral bidders.

Distant farm lights, huts passed
sink like his hat, occupied by sheps and pyats,
he hasn't time to join flinty music.

Elms could be lost travellers,
mouth creases at thoughts of hill madness
bringing him here to practise

tunes in some lonely
hollow, only
coin spilt winter sun.

Ice bees gather,
lamb skull's
clinging wool
recalls trouble.
Next hut, he's
in, before snow's comforter muffles.

BILLY GIBSON

1884–1955

was my Great Grandfather. Storyteller, sportsman (Sutton Harrier, winning many cups), dog handler, animal curer, hosiery worker, and dog fancier. Long after he'd died, lots of local people recalled his stories, songs, and exploits such as riding a Penny-Farthing bike through someone's house.

JAMES WILLIAM GIBSON

For Ray Gosling

'The little things of life are more important than the big things ...'

Ray Gosling, Introduction to Sum Total

Billy's lad – no formal inscription –
dead within scant days of being born,
buried underneath Cimitry wall.

Initials scratched by Mam, Dad, Sisters, haunting
as growing kid, windfall face safe within a star,
night's sparklers held over chimneys, stations,
Cooke's Hosiery, secretive wall ...

Three letters wind-scrubbed ages
since. No memorial pages,
nor archangel, protecting wings
rebuffing neshest Midland winds.

Only Tommy from a rotten war, back-turned on
family plots, leads to James William, distanced,
never aged to Our Jem, Jimbo, or Jim Gibson.

Life-lines stretching in minds'-eyes of Mam, Dad,
Sisters, complicit in his legend's scraping,
but lacking chisel-edge to make it last.

FLOYD ON EXITING

I.M.: Keith Floyd, 1943–2009 / William Gibson, 1884–1955

When Keith Floyd died,
tabloid story: CHEF'S FINAL FEAST
(partridge, cocktails, full-blown wine)
reminded Mum of Billy Gibson's partied going
(bitter, dessert cake, marinated song)
at Sutton Lib Club's *Pensioners' Christmas Night*.

Billy poling up come dawn's glazed light, trilby tight-
balanced at crown's back, wrong
scarf ... Piquantly 'worse for wear',
boasting booze too much, food too much,
'fantastic times' tasted. Such
swanning served later by friends, their
glacé eyes. He'd sung: *Let him go, let him tarry,
let him sink, let him swim*.
'Suffer tomorrow', Daughter grinned
at forced defiance. 'Your head'll be
that old chestnut: THE DRUNKARD'S CURSE'.

Mates re-heated Billy's refused
seat downstairs, he'd felt abused,
well-meaning Steward, ill-versed
in tact, asked: 'Able-bodied?' Boozing
upstairs, dying-up to 'Showman' nick-name,
ballad's flambéd flame.
Gone in bed, no bruising
hang-over, cure un-needed.

Now, Floyd's obituary note,
mean-spirited rival gloats
of days mis-lived. Still, something to be said
for tables left post- savoured food and drink,
hung-over insecurities dwindled (think
reducing stock). Obits gut and joint the dead,
no cognac after-glow ...

Fabled feasts feed hungry ghosts, allow
my unrepentant Angel's chorus: *'Let him tarry, let him go.'*