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## The Modern Historical Pageant: Commodifying Locality

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In 1905, in Sherborne, Dorset, Louis Napoleon Parker, a playwright, organised a spectacular drama, which he called a 'historical pageant'. Nine hundred people performed in the ruin of Sherborne's castle. The pageant comprised of 11 episodes, covering the town's history from 705 to 1593.

Robert Withington, an American theatre historian and a friend of Parker's, who later wrote a book about historical pageantry, described the uncertain beginnings of historical pageantry:

The 'Pageant' at Sherborne—the first of a long line—was something new; it met with opposition and ridicule from outsiders; given in a small out-of-the-way town, under a pageant-master who himself hardly knew what he meant to do, the first modern pageant struggled into life. [...] The grandstand was erected, yet everything seemed to have been done for nothing, because no audience was in prospect. Ten days before the performance, the dress rehearsal took place; and by accident 2 newspaper men were present. Their notices brought 50,000 people to the little Dorset village. All England took fire.<sup>1</sup>

H.V. Nelles points out that *The Times* index contained no reference to pageants in 1906.

But:

By 1908 it required a full column to itemize articles dealing with a score or more English pageants, including a renowned pageant at Oxford directed by Frank Lascelles [...] Historical pageants had become all the rage.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Withington, *English Pageantry: An Historical Outline*, vol.2. (New York and London: Harvard University Press, 1918-1919), p.198.

<sup>2</sup> H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary*

In the meantime, Parker had organised the Warwick Pageant in 1906. By 1907, imitators were beginning to emerge. *The Times* and the *Illustrated London News* carried reports of pageants by F. R. Benson at Romsey and the Isle of Wight, Frank Lascelles at Oxford as well as Parker at Bury St. Edmunds. *The Romsey Advertiser*, as part of the hype for its event, reported under the headline 'The Pageant Microbe': 'There can be no doubt that pageants have caught on very badly in England. Nearly half the towns with anything of interest in the history of England affecting them are preparing to celebrate the fact with a pageant. The sales of histories must have gone up sevenfold of late [...]'<sup>3</sup>

One of the most striking things about these events was their scale. The London Pageant (1911) had 15,000 volunteers<sup>4</sup> and the six pageants Parker organised between 1905 and 1909 totalled 13,000 performers and half a million spectators.<sup>5</sup> The Chester Pageant of 1910 had a cast of 3,000 and seating for 4,000 spectators.<sup>6</sup> The Oxford Pageant had 3,000 performers and 300 horses.<sup>7</sup>

These events were often frequented and contributed to by prominent cultural and political figures. They usually boasted Royal patronage and major pageants like Oxford and Winchester had the active support of people such as Robert Bridges, Henry Newbolt, Hubert Parry, A.T. Quiller-Couch and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

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(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p.145.

<sup>3</sup> *Romsey Advertiser*, 3 May 1907, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Ryan., 'Staging the Imperial City: the Pageant of London 1911' in *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity.*, ed. by Felix Driver and David Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.117.

<sup>5</sup> Foreword to the *Book of the York Pageant* (York: Ben Johnson, 1909)

I quoted a different figure 16,000 and half a million spectators, in my article, 'Between the Acts and Louis Napoleon Parker' and related it solely to the York pageant. This was based on a misreading of the Book of the York pageant. My corrected figure here relates to all 6 pageants Parker produced between 1905-1909.

Ayako Yoshino, 'Between the Acts and Louis Napoleon Parker—The Creator of the Modern English Pageant', in *Critical Survey*, 15.2 (2003) 49-60.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua D. Esty, "Amnesia in the Fields: Late Modernism, Late Imperialism, and the English Pageant-Play" *ELH* 69.1 (2002) 245-76.

<sup>7</sup> The Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, Pageant 6.

At this point, it is worth defining specifically what we are referring to as ‘historical pageantry’ in this paper. We are not discussing a traditional English pageant or masque form. Parker himself stated in the foreword to *The Book of the York Pageant* ‘In 1905, I invented a new form of dramatic art with the Sherborne Pageant.’<sup>8</sup> In his autobiography, Parker quoted himself telling the people of Sherborne, at the first organising meeting for the event, that the spectacle he had in mind was not to be confused with more traditional entertainments:

It is not a street procession.

It is not a gala.

It is not a wayzegoose.[sic.]

It is not a fête.

It is not a beanfeast.

It is not done on trollies.

It is not *tableaux-vivants*.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Parker had an interest in proclaiming his own originality and there is a discussion to be had about its extent, however, contemporaries did regard ‘historical pageantry’ as a new and distinct genre. This genre can be defined as secular amateur drama, performed in localities, largely by local amateur performers, and about local history, using originally written scripts but relying to a large extent on spectacle to communicate the plays’ meanings.

I will try to provide a broad introduction to these events in this paper. I will not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of the contents of these spectacles or of the relationship between pageant making and the globalised experience, which I will

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<sup>8</sup> Louis N. Parker, ‘Foreword’ to the *Book of the York Pageant* (York: Ben Johnson, 1909)

<sup>9</sup> *SML*, p.278.

reserve for my conference presentation. I think it is important first to give a broad introduction to a drama form which is often misunderstood because of the nature of the rhetoric which surrounded it.

What did 'historical pageantry' mean to its contemporaries and why did it become so widely popular?

Some of the most prominent features of the discourse surrounding these events are an anti-commercialism, anti-modernism, an elevation of local community and a definition of locality in terms of continuity with its historical roots. The modern history of the pageant making locality was usually consciously avoided because of the risk of fostering political/ religious discord. The focus was on fostering local community and overcoming current social divisions and much of the rhetoric surrounding these events was explicitly anti-modern and anti-commercial. G. K. Chesterton, who played the role of Dr Johnson in the Church Pageant, described the spectacle of the pageant as an antidote to a meaningless, commercialised modernity.<sup>10</sup>

[...] the truth which the Pageant has to tell the British Public is rather more special and curious than one might at first assume. It is easy enough to say in the rough that modern dress is dingy, and that the dress of our fathers was more bright and picturesque. But that is not really the point. [...] A friar in a brown coat is much more severe than an 'Arry in a brown bowler. Why is it that he is also much more pleasant?

I think the whole difference is this; that the first man is brown with a reason and the second without a reason. [...] The modern trouble is not that the people do not see splendid colours or striking effects. The trouble is that they see too much of them and see them divorced from all reason. [...] a thing is insignificant when we do not know what it signifies. [...] modern life, with its vastness, its energy, its elaboration, its wealth, is, in the exact sense, insignificant. Nobody knows what we mean; we do not know ourselves.

This view of modernity as inherently problematic makes escape from the 'here

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<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'Modern and Ancient Pageants', pp.350-3.

and now' a moral issue. 'This modernising spirit', wrote Parker, 'which destroys all loveliness and has no loveliness of its own to put in its place, is the negation of poetry, the negation of romance... this is just precisely the kind of spirit which a properly organised and properly conducted pageant is designed to kill.'<sup>11</sup>

Pageantry was often described by contemporaries as an quasi mystical act of collective social healing, bringing people together outside the narrowing and dirtying confines of a commercialised modernity, and much of the rhetoric implicitly denied even the existence of an audience for the spectacle being presented in the pageant. Parker was quoted in a pamphlet for the Romsey pageant describing the event as 'a great act of Thanksgiving for the mercies of the past' that was 'acted by the citizens themselves, their wives, their children and their friends.'<sup>12</sup> This non-commercial act of thanksgiving is a spiritual event according to Parker and should be preceded by a 'solemn offering of Divine Worship' every morning. The social and political rhetoric surrounding the event fits with this non-commercial vision of the pageant. The idea of the pageant fostering good patriotism, unity in a community and educating the people about their own history are all framed in the non-commercial terms of a community talking to itself.

This, then, seems to be a peculiarly introverted form of spectacle, justified as a collective endeavour by a community and pulling that community together in a defence against the fracturing forces of modernity. Here is spectacle as communal ritual rather than an image viewed by an outsider.

However, the closer we look at pageantry, the more difficult this view of an

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<sup>11</sup> Louis Napoleon Parker, *Journ.Soc. Arts* (22 December 1905) p.143, quoted by Withington, vol2., p.195.

<sup>12</sup> Preliminary Notice for Romsey Pageant, Romsey Heritage Centre.

introverted, non-commercial event is to sustain. Pageants made money. In 1936 Mary Kelly rather bluntly included the large sum that a pageant made for the community that hosted it as one of the reasons for staging one.<sup>13</sup> Winchester Pageant, for example, made a total of £2,500, a substantial sum in 1908.<sup>14</sup> The York pageant made just over £760, still a respectable amount. Among York's £13,677 expenses, was £1,556 spent on advertisement and marketing, more than was spent on costumes. This was more than balanced by receipts of £14,439, including £11,612 made from ticket and camera permit sales, £362 from sales of the book of words and £22 from adverts in the book. Money was also made from marketing the rights to sell souvenirs, postcards, photographs and books to private traders (£145) and from the sale of official postcards (£3,5s).<sup>15</sup> The sophistication of this business side of the pageant seems to have developed since its inception. At Sherborne, in 1905, there was only one version of the book of words, the same for its players and its audience, and the price of 6d was remarkably cheap compared to later books (between 1 and 3 shillings). It had no advertisements in it. However, we cannot interpret this as evidence of a lack of commercialism at Sherborne or on Parker's part. Rather, Parker seems not fully aware, at this stage, of the potential of the book of words to make money. At Parker's Colchester Pageant (1909), there was a 6d book of words 'For the Use of Performers Only' and a 1 shilling book of words for the audience. Both books contained more than 20 pages of adverts. The Bury St. Edmunds Pageant, also by Parker, even seems to have sold a pageant 'pamphlet' in Holland, translated into Dutch, although I have been unable to track it down.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Kelly,, pp.2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Ian T Henderson and John Crook, *The Winchester Diver: The Saving of a Great Cathedral* (Crawley: Henderson and Stirk, 1984), p.98.

<sup>15</sup> Withington, p.234.

<sup>16</sup> *Romsey Advertiser*, 21 June, 1907, p.5.

Souvenirs were also a feature of every pageant ground. At Sherborne, imitation Roman pottery and a pageant handkerchief were for sale.<sup>17</sup> At Romsey, the book of words contained in its introduction an announcement for ‘sale of interesting objects’ including walking sticks, picture frames and crosses made by ‘skilled mechanics of Romsey’ out of 600 years old ‘ancient oak which had to be removed from the Abbey roof’.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is misleading to understand the economy of pageantry as being limited to the official receipts of the pageant committee, which it was normal to donate to local charities or causes chosen in the run up to the event.<sup>19</sup> Like any tourist attraction, the pageant made much larger sums for its community simply by drawing wealthy visitors into the local economy.

Advertisements in the books of words and/or souvenir books of some of the more prominent pageants include marketing for businesses outside their local areas. For example, the Oxford (1907) souvenir book includes adverts for London based businesses including the silversmiths ‘Elkington’, Thurston Billiard Table makers and Steinway piano makers. The Bury St. Edmunds pageant advertises a chair manufacturer in Bristol and a panel maker on Pall Mall.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, the concentration at these events of large numbers of wealthy people with money to spend, many of whom had travelled from other areas, was an attractive marketing opportunity for luxury businesses outside the locality. However, the souvenir books and books of words also provide ample evidence of the immediate commercial opportunities for local businesses. The

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<sup>17</sup> A pot and a handkerchief, respectively at Sherborne Museum and Sherborne School Archive. Pag.34.

<sup>18</sup> *Romsey Pageant*, p.15.

<sup>19</sup> Parker is an exception here. He claimed pageants should be done for heir own sake and that the use of any proceeds should be left to the discretion of the pageant organisers. See *SML*, p.290.

<sup>20</sup> *Oxford Souvenir Book* (no page number) and *Bury St Edmunds Book of Words*, pp.iv-v.

Gloucestershire Historical Pageant (1908) souvenir book includes an advert from Simmons & Son diamond and clock makers, High Street, Cheltenham, selling not only its normal lines but ‘a large and varied stock of Pageant sovenirs [sic] spoons, Match Boxes, Cigarette Cases, Ink Bottles.’ A rival shop, Waite and Son, were selling silver spoons decorated with Gloucestershire’s borough arms. At Colchester, Cheshire’s China Stores in St. Botolph Street advertised a ‘unique memento’: ‘Performers in the pageant and visitors to Colchester should secure a piece of Goss China with King Cole Badge’ for 10 1/2d each.

The opportunities went much further than souvenir selling. The pageant books are full of adverts for hotels, local luxury goods shops of all descriptions, local newspapers, and automobile sellers. There are also advertisements clearly aimed at pageant goers as tourists. At Colchester, the Great Eastern Railway took out a full page advert selling ‘golfing on the East Coast, yachting on the Norfolk Broads’, and steamer services to Germany, Holland, Belgium and Denmark.<sup>21</sup> The Colchester Pageant even included explicit advertising of its local delicacy, oysters, at at least two points in its pageant script.<sup>22</sup>

The pageant master of that event, Parker, who was fond of decrying the commercialism of other pageants whilst running fully commercialised events himself, captured the incorrigible money making that surrounded pageantry with the following anecdote:

[...]an enterprising tradesman had sent a captive sausage balloon from the roof of his house, which, with a favouring wind floated gracefully just over the centre of the arena in full sight of the entire audience. From it he had hung a banner with this strange device: “How’s your liver? Try Bleachem’s Pills” or

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<sup>21</sup> These advertisements are in *Colchester Pageant*. (no page number)

<sup>22</sup> *Colchester Pageant*, p.9, p.51.



words to that effect. By strange good fortune the cable got itself cut just before the performance and the infernal thing floated away carrying its message of healing to Stratford-on-Avon.<sup>23</sup>

But perhaps the clearest statement of the centrality of the pageant's tourist oriented commercialism comes in a response by a writer in *The Oxford Times* to criticism by a 'Mr Barr' of money-making by pageant hosting localities.

"The commercial Spirit has crept in, and one at least of this year's pageants is being run as if it were Barnum's Circus. A special train beforehand took down London Pressmen to eat and drink and advertise; professional photographers secured exclusive rights to make as much money as possible, and this sort of thing will undoubtedly cause a reaction." We do not profess to know to which of the several pageants Mr. Barr is alluding, but as in this country this sort of thing cannot be charged upon the municipal funds, it is inevitable the commercial spirit will govern them, and that the success of the show will be determined, not by its educational influence, but by whether it is sufficiently attractive to cover the expenses and leave a reasonable margin of profit.<sup>24</sup>

Pageants were tourist attractions and it is clear from local newspaper coverage of the preparations for these events that, in many towns, the key reason for holding the pageant was to attract tourists to the town. In her study of the English folk revival, Georgina Boyes noted that 'performers in both types of activity [pageant and folk customs] were usually known to their audience and came from the area in which they appeared.'<sup>25</sup> This is not, in fact, true in the case of pageants. Even in the case of the West Dorset Historical Pageant, which was so small (150 performers) that it was not recorded in national newspapers, there exists a timetable for special trains to carry outsiders to the pageant.<sup>26</sup> The bigger pageants were advertised in the national newspapers and special trains were routinely arranged to bring people to host towns.

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<sup>23</sup> *SML*, p.299.

<sup>24</sup> *The Oxford Times*, 13 July 1907, p.15.

<sup>25</sup> Boyes, p.34.

<sup>26</sup> Timetable for West Dorset Pageant (my own possession)

The Romsey Book of Words advertises ‘cheap railway tickets to Romsey in connection with the pageant.’<sup>27</sup> *The Times* newspaper on June 22, 1907 carried an announcement from the Great Western Railway of ‘convenient arrangements for travel to and from Oxford in connection with the pageant’.<sup>28</sup> Cheap tickets were available to pageant ticket holders and special non-stop trains were put on.

It is true that pageant organisers liked to talk about their cities as if they were organic communities where everyone knew each other, but even in the West Dorset Historical Pageant, the performers would not have known large parts of the audience in the way Boyes assumes. Colchester resident Nellie Lissimore was struck by how the pageant audience ‘came from all over the place’ to that town’s pageant.<sup>29</sup>

The touristic consumers of the pageant were often from further afield than we might imagine. In 1936, Mary Kelly advised the pageant hosting towns to approach shipping and travel agencies to secure publicity for their events: ‘The interest in pageants is particularly great in America, and it is well worth while advertising in the American Shipping lines.’<sup>30</sup>

A world map titled ‘how to get to the Pageant’ was included in a magazine titled the *Oxford Hysterical Pageant*—a student publication in the year of the Oxford Pageant (1907).

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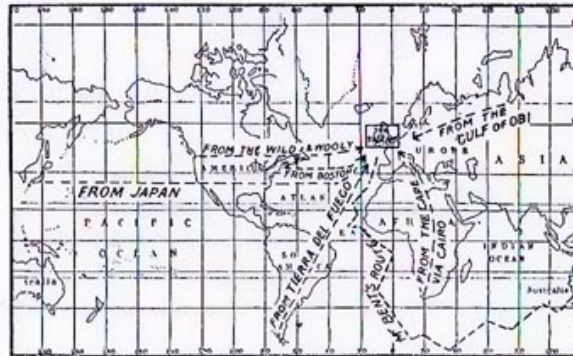
<sup>27</sup> *Romsey Pageant*, p.15.

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 22 June, 1907, p.14.

<sup>29</sup> Nellie Lissimore in Denney, *Colchester Voices*, p.118.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Kelly, *How to Make a Pageant*, (London: Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1936), p.107.

## V. How to get to the Pageant.



The World—(Mackinder's Correction).

On reaching England you may go:

BY AEROPLANE (apply at the office of the Associated Papers, Carmelite House).

BY L. & N.W.R. (Change at Bletchley).

BY THE FISHGUARD ROUTE (change at Billingsgate).

BY THE TIPGUARD ROUTE (change at any price).

BY G.W.R. [adv.]

The same magazine carried a 'Timetable and Guide' which was 'specially compiled for American visitors, who have taken so long crossing the Atlantic that they have not many hours to spend this side of it.'<sup>31</sup> This publication was, of course, employing humorous exaggeration, but there is other evidence of international visitors to the Oxford event. A postgraduate student complained that he was forced out of his accommodation as the landlord was eager to rent the room during the pageant week to Americans who were prepared to pay more.<sup>32</sup> Ashley Dukes, a reviewer, also commented on the number of Americans:

The special trains from Paddington carry a heterogeneous mob of well-dressed people, many of them Americans. Americans have an instinctive passion for pageantry, for quaint ceremonial and costume; and one has a momentary vision of a possible announcement on the advertisement hoardings of New York or Chicago: "Mr Charles Frohman presents the Oxford Pageant, as played in

<sup>31</sup> *Oxford Hysterical Pageant* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1907), p.15.

<sup>32</sup> *The Oxford Magazine*, 1 May, 1907, p.303.

England, with the original scenery and effects.... Enormous attraction!”<sup>33</sup>  
Americans sometimes even participated in the pageants as players<sup>34</sup> and the Dover Pageant featured a scene largely played by French people.

The organisational reality of pageantry was a world away from its anti-commercial rhetoric. Pageants consciously courted wealthy visitors from outside the locality and the spectacles they presented can be seen as a packaging of the locality for consumption by the visitor. If we look again at the content of the pageants, we see that, although the subject is local history, this is not a local narrative being presented in its own terms but in terms of wider narratives of nation and empire. Not only did the scripts of the pageants typically explore these themes—for instance the virtually ubiquitous Roman scenes usually operated as barely concealed metaphors for the modern imperial endeavour and the project of modernising other societies—but the spectacle of these pageants attempted to encompass a far wider geographical space than the locality. At the inception of the modern historical pageant, the Sherborne pageant finale featured mother Sherborne (England) and daughter Sherborne (US) surrounded by girls dressed up in white frocks (English) and Native American costumes (US). Other pageants followed this pattern. The Winchester pageant, for instance, featured a procession of bishops from around the world at its opening. (It is interesting, here, to observe how the concept of the global and the imperial seems to have been thoroughly confused in the minds of organisers. A visiting Bishop from Japan, who seems to have taken part in the Winchester event, was listed as one of the ‘colonial bishops’.) Generally speaking, the spectacular finales of pageants almost always featured depictions of the foreign cities named after the English mother city, symbolising the

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<sup>33</sup> Ashley Dukes, ‘Pomp and Pageantry’ in *The New Age*, 4 July, 1907, p.150

<sup>34</sup> See for example, *Sherborne Pageant Souvenir Book* and *Book of Bath Pageant*.

pageant hosting city's role as the head of an international family.

Edwardian pageantry appears to be a curious amalgam of apparently inconsistent characteristics: an event open to a global market which dresses itself up as a communal, local event; a spectacle that denies it is being spectated; an event surrounded by anti-modern rhetoric that typically endorsed the ideologies of imperial progress and modernisation within its narrative. This curious cultural product proved massively popular in Edwardian England but was also eminently exportable. The historical pageant became a global product. The events were internationally reported. For 1907 Oxford Pageant was covered by the New York Times and the Canadian Toronto Tercentenary Pageant was reported by the British media. Books of words of pageants were distributed across the world to such an extent that it is now easier to obtain English pageant scripts on the American market than in England.

The form itself was also exported. The United States' pageant movement was to become much more organised than its British equivalent. Major pageants were organised in Canada, South Africa, and India. There was even an attempt to import the pageant movement into Japan, by the leading Shakespearean scholar, Tsubouchi Shoyo. Although the specifics of each of these events require detailed examination, it is striking how the rhetoric associated with them often loyally mirrored the anti-commercial, communal rhetoric of the English movement.

In my conference presentation, I will hope to explore in more detail the contents of these spectacles and analyse the ways in which locality is packaged for consumption outside the locality.