

Marriage in the Cathedral

Reprinted from Manchester Genealogist Vol. 39 No. 1, 2003.

Those whose ancestors were married in Manchester Cathedral will be interested in an account of such a ceremony - particularly if they were one of a number of couples married on the same day. It was published in a newspaper in 1863 and is itself a report from another publication Mr. Hawthorne, in a paper in the Atlantic Monthly, on 'Outside Glimpses of English Poverty', gives the following picture -

I was once present at the wedding of some poor English people, and was deeply impressed by the spectacle, though by no means with such proud and delightful emotions as seem to have affected all England on the recent occasion of the marriage of its Prince. It was in the cathedral at Manchester, a particularly black and grim old structure, into which I had stepped to examine some ancient and curious woodcarvings within the choir. The woman in attendance greeted me with a smile (which always glimmers forth on the feminine visage, I know not why, when a wedding is in question), and asked me to take a seat in the nave till some poor parties were married, it being the Easter holidays, and a good time for them to marry, because no fees would be demanded by the clergymen.

I sat down, accordingly, and soon the parson and his clerk appeared at the altar, and a considerable crowd of people made their entrance at the side door, and ranged themselves in a long huddled line across the chancel. They were my acquaintances of the poor street, or persons in a precisely similar condition of life, and were now come to their marriage ceremony in just such garbs as I had always seen them wear: the men in the loafers' coats, out at elbows, or their labours' jackets, defaced with grimy toil; the women drawing their shabby shawls tighter about their shoulders, to hide the raggedness beneath; all of them unbrushed, unshaven, unwashed, uncombed, and wrinkled with penury and care; nothing virgin-like in the brides, nor hopeful or energetic in the bridegroom - they were, in short, the mere rags and tatters of the human race, whom some east wind of evil omen, howling along the streets, had chanced to sweep together in an unfragrant heap. Each and all of them conscious of his or her individual misery, had blundered into the strange miscalculation of supposing that they could lessen the sum of it by multiplying it into the misery of another person.

All the couples (and it was difficult in such a confused crowd to compute exactly their number) stood up at once, and had execution done upon them in the lump, the clergyman addressing only small parts of the service to each individual pair, but so managing the larger portion as to include the whole company without the trouble of repetition. By this compendious contrivance, one would apprehend, he came dangerously near making every man and woman the husband or wife of every other; nor, perhaps, would he have perpetrated much additional mischief by the mistake; but, after receiving a benediction in common, they assorted themselves in their own fashion, as they only knew how, and departed to the garrets, or the cellars, or the unsheltered street corners, where their honeymoon and subsequent lives were to be spent.

The parson smiled decorously, the clerk and the sexton grinned broadly, the female attendant tittered almost aloud, and even the married parties seemed to see something exceedingly funny in the affair; but for my part, though generally apt enough to be tickled by a joke, I laid it away in my memory as one of the saddest sights I ever looked upon."

'Mr. Hawthorne' was almost certainly Nathaniel Hawthorne, American novelist and short story writer. He was American Consul in Liverpool from 1853 to 1857 and it is likely that the scene he describes took place during those years. The article may, however, have been written later because the reference to the marriage of an English prince is likely to be that of the future King Edward VII to Alexandra, daughter of the King of Denmark, on 10 March 1863. One of Hawthorne's last books was *Our Old Home* - sketches of his life in England which appeared in 1863. The *Atlantic Monthly* is an American, and more particularly New England, magazine of literature, the arts and politics founded in 1857 and still being published.

(Ed: Thanks go to the anonymous member who left this piece in the office.)