



*W. Bampfylde, Moore Curran, King of the Beggars.*

## INTRODUCTION

Although it is now forgotten by almost all, the name of Bampfylde Moore Carew was once known throughout the West Country. Furthermore, far from being just a local hero, his fame was spread the length and breadth of Britain. For over a hundred years, he competed with such popular figures as Aladdin and Robinson Crusoe for the leading role in pantomimes great and small. In 1825, a 'romantic melodrama' entitled *Bampfylde Moore Carew, or the Gipsy of the Glen* appeared while nine years later, on February 27 1834, the Queen's Ferry Theatre performed a pantomime called *Bampfylde Moore Carew, Or Harlequin King of the Beggars*. During the 19th century articles appeared about him in many journals such as *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Indeed, Sir Egerton Brydges wrote of him in the *Censure Literarina* as one who needed no introduction. Nor was notice of him confined to the stage and magazines. He even made a number of appearances in popular literature. So wide was his fame that Thackeray, when he wished to describe the adventurous, wandering character of Becky Sharp, spoke of her as 'as restless as Ulysses or Bampfylde Moore Carew'. In this century Bampfylde's strange life inspired Frederick Carter to write a short story, *Bergamask's Revenge*, around him. In this he is described, under the new name of Kingston Carew, as a 'wild blade, dandy and gamester, lord paramount of the beggars by heritage and acclaim, master and king of the desperate republican underworld'.

Conclusive evidence of Bampfylde's popularity is moreover amply supplied by the very great number of books and pamphlets published about him in which his adventures are described, more or less accurately, at varying length. The first accounts of Bampfylde's extraordinary career appeared while he was still alive and different versions of these were continuously in print throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Even in the early years of this century a few new editions appeared.

Why did Bampfylde Moore Carew capture the public imagination to such an extent and what was it about his life that made him a folk hero hardly less famous than Robin Hood? The answer seems to lie in the one word that accurately describes Bampfylde - he was a Rogue in the grand tradition. An idler, a swindler, a knave and a rascal, he was also a man of breeding and education, a consummate actor, a wit and a practical joker. Furthermore, although there can be no doubt that he was a deeply dishonest man, there was never anything seriously anti-social about his activities. The victims of his deceptions never lost anything they could not afford and, like all great confidence tricksters, Bampfylde never resorted to either violence or the despicable arts of the common thief.

However much society may condemn his activities, the confidence trickster has always retained a place in the affections of the British. The recollection of early hoaxes and tricks played on the authorities of childhood retain for most of us the power

to brighten existence. When the rich or powerful are made fools of, few can resist a smile. Who has not been amused by such tales as that of the sale of the Albert Hall to an American millionaire?. When disguise becomes an integral part of the operation, as it was always with Carew, then memories of childhood games of fancy dress are evoked to enlist our sympathy.

This side of Bampfylde's story alone would account for its immense popularity. There is though another side of it which also undoubtedly contributed to its widespread diffusion. Apart from his story's appeal to the love of the comic in the tales of the tricks and jests of one who relied solely on his own wit, Bampfylde's story also appeals to the love of vicarious vagabondage. Alexander Smith wrote that 'no man is worth much who has not a touch of the vagabond in him'. During the centuries that saw the British being increasingly forced into narrow conformity by social and economic forces beyond the control of individuals, the story of Bampfylde Moore Carew stood out as a shining example of a man who could still choose independence and self-respect, even though it meant the life of a beggar and a tramp.

There has always been a flourishing literature of Roguery and few artists have failed to recognise this endless fountain of inspiration. The Beggar and the Rogue played a large part in the literature of the seventeenth century. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dramatists found the beggar a useful stage property, poets played with the literary conception of the vagabond life and authors continued to construct picaresque novels round such characters. But Bampfylde Moore Carew was no fictional figure. He lived and his adventures were real. It was this that enabled so many people to identify with him, fully and with sympathy.

This introduction first gives a brief history of the Carew family. From this history it becomes clear that, while Bampfylde was wilder than any other member of the family, he was only displaying in an extreme form traits characteristic of his blood. This is followed first by a short essay on some of the relevant features of life in late 17th century England and then by a short description of Devon at this time. The introduction concludes with a bibliographical survey of the various editions of books written about the life and adventures of Bampfylde Moore Carew.