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# The Bottle Imp

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Scottish Ballads and Popular Culture

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The ballad is by no means the sole property of Scotland, but it is rooted deeply in Scottish popular culture: in the hills of the Borders, the fishing villages of the north-east, the berry fields of Perthshire, the broadside collections of the national archives, and the venues of Glasgow's Celtic Connections folk festival. Its significance for Scotland has been documented over centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Many factors have contributed to the ballad's longevity and shaped its legacy in Scotland. The first has to do with the form itself, most observable in ballads that have been transmitted primarily through oral tradition over generations, many of which bear evidence of their medieval origins. This type of ballad is most commonly defined as a narrative song, that is, a song that tells a story. Scottish ballad stories are dramatic in nature, centring on moments of intense conflict and marked by violence, ranging over themes such as murder, fatal consequences, supernatural encounters, and treachery in love. The 'cruel mother' (20B)<sup>2</sup> bears two babies in secret and murders them; 'she's howked a grave by the light o the moon' and is later confronted by their revenants. The sailor Sir Patrick Spens (58) mourns his fate, and that of his men, at the king's capricious order to sail during 'this time o' the yeir' when sailing the North Sea means probable death. The 'wife of usher's well' (79) defies the natural order by wishing for the return of her dead sons: 'I wish the wind may never cease, / Nor fashes in the flood, / Till my sons come hame to me, / In earthly flesh and blood'. Willie Macintosh (183B) seeks revenge for the murder of the popular Earl of Murray, the emotion depicted in a brief, intense conversation:

As I came in by Fiddich-side,  
In a May morning,  
I met Willie Mackintosh,  
An hour before the dawning.

'Turn again, turn again,  
Turn again, I bid ye;  
If ye burn Auchindown,  
Huntly he will head ye.'

'Head me, hang me,  
That sall never fear me;  
I'll burn Auchindown  
Before the life leaves me.'

In 'Lord Thomas' (73), the young lord chooses to marry the wealthy 'nut-browne bride' rather than the Fair Annet, setting in motion a series of events ending in two murders and a suicide.

As ballad scholars have long observed, the traditional ballad is designed to tell a story through conventions which function to aid memory, and which have preserved narratives over centuries. It tends to begin *in medias res* – at the height of conflict – paced by the familiar ballad stanza of four lines in common metre, alternating iambic four- and three-stress lines (sometimes described as two seven-stress lines). The narrative often leaps from scene to scene, sometimes as in 'Willie Mackintosh' propelled by dialogue, producing ironic juxtapositions and leaving gaps that must be filled by the listener or reader. The language is simple and direct, heavily coded through the use of familiar phrases, while the emphasis is on action rather than motivation, for example on the cruel mother's act of infanticide with only shadowy hints as to why she has murdered her children. Through transmission, historical markers and geographical details are stripped away, 'worn by the friction of time' to expose an 'emotional core', what Tristram Coffin describes as 'a basic human reaction to a dramatic situation'. The emotional core of 'Mary Hamilton' may perhaps be exemplified by Mary's reflection from the gallows which features in the variants: 'Oh little did my mother think, / First time she cradled me, / What land I was to travel on, / Or what death I would die' (173B).<sup>3</sup>

Ballads are also characterised by multiplicity and diversity. Many have led parallel lives, current in the oral song culture and printed in collections, taking different shapes according to the context.<sup>4</sup> Oral transmission results in multiple, regionally diverse variations. The obsessive Victorian ballad editor Francis J. Child tried to gather every possible variant of every 'popular' ballad (by which he meant as purely oral as possible), including 28 variations of 'Mary Hamilton' and 18 of 'Sir Patrick Spens' in his five-volume edition of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898). Further, he resorted to adding any texts he subsequently discovered to appendices in later volumes. When ballads appeared in collections or in cheap, popular

broadsides, the texts became fixed, blurring the distinction between orality and print, and thus becoming memorable for different audiences and serving different functions.

Scottish ballads constituted much of the material chosen by the English collector Thomas Percy for his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), one of the most influential publications of the eighteenth century. Percy was drawn to the ballads' poetic qualities, and he deemed them to be remnants of an ancient British poetry written by a formerly distinguished class, the minstrels. First published by Percy, 'Sir Patrick Spens' became a sensation. The version of 'The Bonny Earl of Murray' (181) that appeared in Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany* (11<sup>th</sup> edition, 1750) was an eighteenth-century hit. But much earlier, at the time of these ballads' composition, they served other functions in popular culture. 'Sir Patrick Spens' critiques the devastating effects of the Scottish ruler's thoughtless abuse of power. 'The Bonny Earl of Murray' was not merely an elegy calling on 'ye Highlands and ye Lowlands' to mourn the loss of a well-liked figure, but a robust public outcry against a very real political murder.<sup>5</sup>

Over centuries, antiquarians' fascination with ballads linked them with a culturally-national narrative, which was perpetuated by their inclusion in print. Percy argued in the lengthy introduction to *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* that ballads were the remnants – the reliques – of an ancient British poetry that could rival the classics: a poetry of Britain's own, so to speak. But subsequently, culturally-nationalistic Scottish ballad-collectors sought to shift that assignment of authorship. Concerned with preserving a post-Union cultural identity, Scots such as David Herd, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, Robert Jamieson, and James Hogg reclaimed these treasures for Scotland's own. Scott, for example, included in his collection many of the same ballads as Percy, but chose different variants; and he took great pains to document their Scottish geographical, historical, and cultural origins (despite his generally pro-Union sentiment). His collection was the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, representing Scotland's song rather than England's 'reliques'.

Other nineteenth-century collectors, such as William Motherwell and James Hogg, were careful to stress the living nature of ballads; real people were singing many variants of these songs. Hogg's famous report of his mother chastising Scott for printing her ballads because they were 'made for singing an' no for reading'<sup>6</sup> embodies the form: the ballad

must be *sung* by a *person* in order to be itself. Collectors (and Hogg had also been complicit in Scott's project) were guilty of reducing the ballad by fixing it in print without the music, thus depleting the aesthetic experience.<sup>7</sup>

Despite certainty among Enlightenment intellectuals that oral tradition was dying in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the mid-twentieth century saw an explosion of ballad-collecting in the Scottish 'folk revival'. It was a new kind of collecting, the emphasis not only on the words but on restoration of the music. The most influential collector, Hamish Henderson (1919-2002), camped out in the Perthshire berry fields, tapping into a rich stream of traditional ballads preserved among the travelling families of Perthshire and Fife – singers such as Jeannie Robertson, Belle Stewart, and Betsy Whyte, who became internationally renowned. Recording the songs for Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies, which he co-founded, Henderson reported that it 'was like holding a bucket under Niagra Falls'.<sup>8</sup>

There followed a rush of collectors into Scotland during this time. Others leaving lasting impressions were Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, who documented the richness of Scottish tradition and its translation overseas in a series of ballad recordings, *The Long Harvest*. The legacy continues: for example, the storyteller and singer Stanley Robertson has his own version of 'Willie Macintosh', learned orally from his travelling family. Ballads still hold a significant place in Scotland's cultural expression through their performance in folk clubs and festivals such as the increasingly influential Celtic Connections, held annually in Glasgow.

The ballad's representation and its identification with Scotland have been shaped by antiquarian ideals, but it has remained a functional part of Scottish life. Though academics – and even many ballad-singers – continue to recycle the notion that ballads represent a dying tradition, they might be described more accurately as a tradition always reinventing itself.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For introductions to the ballad, see Sarah Dunnigan, *Scottish Ballads*, Glasgow: ASLS, 2005; and Alan Bold, *The Ballad*, London: Routledge, 1979.
- 2 Ballads are still classified according to the system devised by Francis J. Child in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (five vols, Boston, 1882-1898; reprinted New York, 1965). Child identified 305 ballads that fit his criteria and gathered as many variants of each as he could discover. According to his system, 'The Cruel Mother' is ballad number 20, and the quotation comes from variant B, which he took from James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803).
- 3 See Thomas Pettit, "'Worn by the Friction of time': Oral Tradition and the Generation of the Balladic Narrative Mode", in *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative: The European Tradition*, ed. Roy Eriksen, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994; and Tristram Coffin, 'Mary Hamilton and the Anglo-American Ballad as an Art Form', in *The Critics and the Ballad*, ed. MacEdward Leach and Tristram P. Coffin, Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois UP, 1961, pp. 245-256.
- 4 On the role of print in ballad transmission, see Flemming Andersen, 'From Tradition to Print: Ballads on Broad-sides', in *The Ballad as Narrative: Studies in the Ballad Traditions of England, Scotland, Germany and Denmark*, ed. Flemming G. Andersen, Otto Holzapfel, and Thomas Pettitt, Odense: Odense University Press, 1982, pp. 39-58; Joseph Donatelli, "'To Hear with Eyes": Orality, Print Culture, and the Textuality of Ballads', in *Ballads and Boundaries: Narrative Singing in an Intercultural Context*, ed. James Porter, Los Angeles: Department of Ethnomusicology and Systematic Musicology, UCLA, 1995; and Dianne Dugaw, 'Anglo-American Folksong Reconsidered: The Interface of Oral and Written Forms', *Western Folklore* 43.2 (1984): 83-103.
- 5 See Edward D. Ives, *The Bonny Earl of Murray: The Man, the Murder, the Ballad*, University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- 6 James Hogg, *Anecdotes of Scott*, ed. Jill Rubenstein, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 38.
- 7 In *The Ballad as Song* (Los Angeles, 1969), Bertrand H. Bronson argued cogently that a ballad is not a ballad without the tune, and he sought to provide what Child had omitted in *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (4 vols, Princeton, New Jersey, 1959-72).
- 8 Quoted in Shelia Stewart, *Queen Among the Heather: The Life of Belle Stewart*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006, p. 67.



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