

A SCOTTISH BALLAD BOOK

Edited by
David Buchan

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Volume 12

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**EDITED BY
DAVID BUCHAN**

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David Buchan

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The Scottish Series



A
Scottish Ballad Book

Edited by
David Buchan



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To J. D. B. and E. A. B.

Now I'm for no idle lairdies; every man has to work, if it's only at
peddling ballants; to work or to be wheeped; or to be haangit.
(Hermiston in R. L. Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston*).

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Introduction

As the ballads have always exercised a wide-ranging appeal it may not be unduly utopian to declare that this ballad book is designed for both the general reader and the more academic student. For the reader who 'reads for enjoyment' there is here a fresh choosing of ballads, unencumbered by marginalia. For the ballad student who wishes to scrutinise this maverick of literary forms the texts are selected so that they can be examined in various perspectives.

In the first place, the material is selected from one regional tradition, that of the Northeast of Scotland, and for the most part from three tradition-bearers of that region. The material has been so chosen in the belief that ballads can be most rewardingly considered when located in place and time. In the past mystical notions about 'the folk' have severely hampered ballad studies, and indeed other areas of Folklife Studies; it is now a truism of Folklife Studies that folk literature texts should be seen not in the context of a vague mystical 'Volk', but in the context of a specific regional or group culture: hence the individual ballad tradition. As with place, so with time; the ballads are most helpfully seen not in terms of a misty undefined 'past age' but, at the very least, in the context of the period when the ballad-texts were recorded: hence the three tradition-bearers, whose texts were recorded in three different centuries – eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth. As, moreover, a tradition comprises individual singers or reciters, it makes good sense to begin a study of a tradition with the study of the individuals' repertoires.

Why, then, the regional tradition of the Northeast of Scotland? The reasons are dealt with at some length in *The Ballad and the Folk* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), a book to which this anthology is complementary. Briefly, the Northeast provides a balladry unmatched in quality and quantity by any other regional culture in Britain. The Northeast's is also the only regional tradition where one can see clearly the three evolutionary stages of a ballad tradition: from oral to transitional to modern. The corpora of the three tradition-bearers – Anna Brown, James Nicol, Bell Robertson – represent these three stages, and in that of Anna Brown the Northeast tradition has the only sizeable corpus known to date of undoubtedly oral ballads.

That statement raises inevitably the thorny and basic question, 'What is a ballad?' The short reply – 'It is a narrative song that has been transmitted by tradition' – is not entirely satisfactory, as the processes of tradition have varied in response to social change. A longer, more

satisfying, but more complicated account of the ballad has to take into consideration, first, ballad transmission, second, ballad-story, and third, ballad-text. General readers may prefer at this point to begin browsing in the lush pastures of 'Gil Brenton'.

The three stages of tradition correspond to a culture's periods of nonliteracy, initial literacy, and settled literacy. It is the degree or outright absence of literacy that determines the kind of composition and transmission employed by the folk at different times. The folk of the oral tradition were nonliterate and it is their method of composition and transmission that has given the distinguishing traits to what we normally think of as 'the' ballads. Nonliterate people did not compose ballads as literate people compose poems, because the conditions of transmission differ appreciably in nonliterate and literate societies. In the latter, poems are transmitted visually, in print; in the former, ballads were transmitted aurally, from person to person. For the nonliterate singer the process necessitated his storing the material in the mind so that he could reproduce the stories readily in performance. The literate person, conditioned by the ways of his literate culture, will assume that the obvious method for dealing with this problem is rote memorisation of the heard text. Such, however, was not the way of the nonliterate singer. He learned both ballad-stories and a method of ballad composition, and in performance re-created the ballad-story by this method of composition to produce a ballad-text. Each performance, then, resulted in a freshly composed ballad-text.

This Introduction is hardly an appropriate place for discussing in detail the method of oral composition, and a brief account will necessarily involve a degree of over-simplification, but simply and crudely: the oral maker controls his material by patternings. For easy mental storage he reduces a heard ballad-story to its bare narrative essence, and then, in the act of composition, expands the nuclear story into a full-blown ballad-text through structural and formulaic patternings. These structural patternings enable him both to advance the story's episodes dramatically and to control proportionately the individual episodes in their relationship to each other and to the story as a whole. The formulaic patternings operate somewhat differently. Whatever poetic and melodic form the maker uses, whether quatrain or couplet, he must employ units of language which fit the metric, syntactic, and rhyming patterns of that form. In response to these limitations tradition evolves a restricted language, a kind of *Kunstsprache*, drawn from the spoken language, whose units do fit these patterns. The most frequently repeated units are the formulas - 'He

hadna gane a mile, a mile', 'O saddle me the black, the black' and so on – but because all the units must meet the restrictions of the form, all the units of this *Kunstsprache* are formulaically patterned. And nowhere is the formulaic patterning more evident than in the rhyming, where a few sounds and a few words do most of the work. We literates with our stress on verbal creation may tend to emphasise the formulas in the method of composition, but it is arguable that for the non-literate person the structuring bulked larger in importance. Certainly, from an analytic standpoint, it seems probable that the structuring provides a surer guide to the oral composition of a text than the formulas. The oral maker, then, relies when composing his text on the structural and formulaic patternings he inherits from tradition; and these are exemplified in the texts of Mrs Brown.

In a nonliterate society composing is a re-creative process in which the means of composition cannot be dissociated from the means of transmission. In a settled literate society composition and transmission become separate operations because with literacy comes the concept of the fixed text: the belief that a story *is* the words in which it is told rather than a platonic narrative essence capable of being concretely realised in variable words. Literacy takes away from the composer the pressures under which the oral poet creates and which have fashioned his medium; he can now compose in conditions of comparative leisure, draw thereby on much wider resources of language, and produce a visible text. This text is *the* poem, not one re-creation in a chain of re-creations; the poem has become a fixed text. In modern tradition not only are the new poems composed differently but the old poems are also transmitted differently, because people come to believe that they too must have a fixed text. Consequently the singers and reciters of modern tradition memorise the 'right' text of an old ballad-story, which may be one seen in print, or heard from another singer or from some modern mechanical medium. Whereas in oral tradition composition and transmission were both part of the same re-creative, self-renewing process, in modern tradition composition is one distinct activity and transmission another, but basically non-creative, activity. Naturally a regional tradition does not pass from oral to modern overnight; it goes through a period of transition when the local culture is adjusting to the spread of literacy. In this situation singers adopt to their stories a loosely re-creative attitude. They do not compose in the fully re-creative oral-traditional manner – in which case their recorded texts would be oral texts, which they are not – nor do they merely memorise in the modern-traditional manner – in which

case the texts would again be (slightly chipped) oral texts. They are re-creative in that they are as yet unburdened by notions of the fixed text; but they are loosely re-creative in that they do not compose their texts through the strict disciplines of the old structural and formulaic patternings. Nicol's ballad-texts exemplify the transitional mode and Bell Robertson's the modern mode of transmission.

Just as there are three kinds of transmission there are three kinds of ballad-story found in tradition: oral, chap, and modern. Oral ballad-stories are narratives composed and re-composed by a traditional oral method; chap ballad-stories are narratives composed or re-worked in subliterate style by commercial entrepreneurs expressly for traditional singers; and modern ballad-stories are non-commercial narratives composed in subliterate style normally by singers within the tradition. In general, the three kinds correspond to the three stages of a tradition's development.

So far, we have considered the three kinds of ballad transmission and the three kinds of ballad-story; when correlated, they provide us with the various kinds of ballad-text. The oral ballad-story produces, by oral transmission, oral texts; by transitional transmission, oral-transitional texts; and by modern transmission, memorised reproductions of oral and oral-transitional texts. The chap ballad-story appears initially in a printed text, and then produces, by transitional transmission, chap-transitional texts, and by modern transmission, memorised reproductions of printed and chap-transitional texts. The modern ballad-story appears initially in a written or printed text, or even a record, and then produces, by modern transmission, memorised reproductions of this modern text.

As the oral ballads make up the backbone of tradition, besides being the most interesting artistically of traditional narrative songs, most of the texts that follow are versions of oral ballad-stories. All the Anna Brown ballads are oral texts. All the James Nicol ballads are oral-transitional texts, although his 'Kemp Owyne' comes very close to being oral. The Bell Robertson selection contains modern reproductions of oral texts in 'Leesome Brand' and 'Hind Horn', but is made up for the most part of reproductions of oral-transitional texts. It also includes some chap-transitional texts. Her version of 'The Duke of Gordon's Daughter' derives from a story composed along fairly traditional lines by the chap industry that became one of the favourite broadside ballads of the Northeast. On the other hand, her chap-transitional texts of 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight', 'The Gardener', and 'The Rantin Laddie' derive from chapbook or broadside re-

workings of traditional stories; while 'Our Goodman' derives from a book text and 'Proud Lady Margaret' has two stanzas from the book text of a different ballad. The final section of the bothy ballads contains modern ballad-stories in modern texts.

Narratively the ballads are chosen both to represent the varieties of stories found in the regional tradition and to exemplify the major categories of ballad subject-matter: magical and marvellous ballads, romantic and tragic ballads, historical and semi-historical ballads. The largest single group is that of the romantic and tragic ballads: 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 29, 30, 31, 32, 39, 48, 55, 58, 60. Most deal with the happy uniting or unhappy sundering of a pair of lovers; the former generally concentrate on the brave or resourceful overcoming of the obstacles to the union, and the latter generally concentrate on the events that lead up to the death of hero or heroine as a result of a relative's implacable hostility. 'Fause Foodrage' and 'Lamkin' have murder and revenge as their theme, while 'Young Allan' is one of the few sea-adventure stories.

The magical and marvellous ballads are 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 26, 27, 28, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 47, 49. These stories are shaped by folk belief and suffused with lore of the Otherworld and witchcraft lore. They are populated by elf-knights, ladies bespelled into hags, monsters, revenants, witches, fairy queens and hosts and their human captives, magicians, and helpful spirits like the Belly Blin. They have as crucial elements in the narrative a miraculous rebirth or harps and rings with magical properties or, as in 'Bonnie Annie' (and 'Young Allan'), ships with a responsive intelligence. As the reference to 'Young Allan' indicates, these two groups – like all the groups – tend to overlap. That these groupings can only be approximate is particularly evident when one considers together 'Hind Horn', 'Young Bicham', 'Young Bekie', and 'The Kitchie-Boy', for they are all variations on the same 'return after long absence' theme that is found throughout oral tradition and most spectacularly in the *Odyssey*.

The historical and semi-historical ballads are 22, 23, 24, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57. 'Robin Hood and Allen a Dale' and 'Sir Hugh' deal with legendary figures and events of ostensible English origin. 'Sir Patrick Spens' grows out of incidents in Scottish-Scandinavian political history. 'The Death of Queen Jane' and 'Mary Hamilton' take place at the courts of England and Scotland respectively, and 'Archie o Cawfield' is a sturdy representative of the riding ballads from the Scottish-English border. 'Edom o Gordon', 'The Fire of Frendraught', 'Bonny John Seton', and 'The Baron of

Brackley' derive from Northeast feuds, which are often regional expressions of national political tensions. 'Bonny Baby Livingston' and 'Eppie Morrie' may not relate actual happenings but do reflect the pattern of events along the Northeast's Highland/Lowland border; bride-stealing seems to have been a ubiquitous feature of life in European ballad communities. The remaining three are all anecdotes about local lairds: 'The Earl of Errol' has a basis in fact, and 'The Young Laird of Craigstoun' may have a basis in fact in the story of John Urquhart and Elizabeth Innes, but 'The Rantin Laddie' has no ascertainable basis in fact.

In addition to the major groups, there is a small group of comic ballads: 46, 59, 61, 62, 63. 'Our Goodman', 'Get Up and Bar the Door', and 'The Wife Wrapt in Wether's Skin' rely on comedy of situation and incident while 'Kempy Kay' and 'Lang Johnny More' go in for the comedy of broad exaggeration. Both in fact have elements of parody, on the one hand, of the chivalric unspelling of the loathly hag into beautiful woman, and on the other, of the heroic rescue from jail story. Some minor sub-groups that fall within larger groups have their representatives. The riddling ballads are exemplified by 'The Elfin Knight' and 'Captain Wedderburn's Courtship', and the ballads of yeoman minstrelsy (to use M. J. C. Hodgart's description) by 'Robin Hood and Allen a Dale'. The ballads typified by the long Arthurian stories in the Percy MS. and called by Hodgart the ballads of late medieval minstrelsy* do not seem to have been a Scottish phenomenon, but some of the ballad-texts collected by Peter Buchan and printed at the very end of Child's collection may be the descendants of Scottish equivalents, since they do have links, though sometimes rather tenuous, with stories of the romances. The representative of this category is 'Young Bearwell', an incomplete piece which nevertheless has some motifs in common with the romance 'King Horn'.

The bothy ballads chosen represent the main concerns of their kind. They deal with the work at specific farms, aspects of the labour and leisure, and humorous incidents of farm life. Introducing them is a song which links them to the older minstrelsy, and rounding them off is a song by a highly individual composer in the genre, George Bruce Thomson, which points forward to the Scottish music-hall. Artistically these songs do not stand comparison with the older ballads, but their great virtue is that they tell honestly and accurately what the hard but frequently humorous bothy life was like. Although the bothy

* *The Ballads*, 2nd ed., London, 1962, p. 14.

ballads make up the most characteristic element of the modern regional tradition, they are very far from constituting the whole; for the full variety of narrative song in the modern tradition we must await the edition, now under way, of the Greig and Duncan MSS.

The ballads, it has often been remarked, are more than stories, they are sung stories; but only one of our three tradition-bearers, Anna Brown, has left any music for her texts. No record exists of any tunes that Nicol may have sung to, while Bell Robertson did not sing at all. The Anna Brown tunes are printed according to the transcription by Professor Bertrand Bronson in *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (Princeton, N.J., 1959-72), and the bothy ballad tunes have been copied from the Greig MSS. at the University of Aberdeen by Pat Shuldham-Shaw, the editor of the Greig and Duncan MSS.

Ballads differ from conventional poems not only because they are sung but also because they have been transmitted by word of mouth, by the oral tradition of nonliterate society and the verbal tradition of literate society, and hence belong to traditional culture (which may be defined as the culture transmitted by word of mouth and by custom and practice rather than by written or printed document). Traditional culture is the concern of Folklife Studies, and ballad study gains greatly from the perspective of this – for Britain relatively new – discipline, whose methodology is expressly designed for the problems presented by traditional material, and whose genres are interlinked in subject-matter. Throughout the ballads, for example, occur motifs found internationally in tradition and classified in one of the discipline's standard reference works – Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.^{*} Balladry's most obvious correlations, however, are with the various kinds of folk narrative, though comparatively few ballads have precise counterparts in recorded folktales. Two ballads of this selection, the tragic 'Twa Sisters' and the comic 'Get Up and Bar the Door', appear in Märchen and Schwank form respectively as 'The Singing Bone' (A-T 780) and 'The Silence Wager' (A-T 1351).[†] A number, however, share themes and motifs with folktales as 'King

^{*} 6 vols, Folklore Fellows Communications nos 106-9, 116, 117, Helsinki, 1932-6.

[†] A-T is the reference to the classification number in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Folklore Fellows Communications no. 3, 2nd revision, Helsinki, 1961. These two stories have been studied in monographs: Lutz Mackensen, *Der singende Knochen*, FFC no. 49, Helsinki, 1923, and W. N. Brown, 'The Silence Wager Stories: their Origin and their Diffusion', *American Journal of Philology*, 43 (1922), 289-317.

Henry', 'Kemp Owyne', and 'Allison Gross' do with the stories numbered in Aarne-Thompson between 400 and 450. Some ballads link with other forms of folk narrative; 'Robin Hood and Allen a Dale' and 'Sir Hugh' may be seen in relation to legend, and the variant stories of 'Johnie Scot' and 'Lang Johnny More' may be seen as equivalents to hero tale and, one stage further from reality, tall tale. One of the verbal genres of Folklife Studies, the riddle, occurs in a number of ballads, as here in 'Captain Wedderburn's Courtship' where an exchange of riddles constitutes the dramatic action, but in general the ballads are remarkably lacking in proverbs and proverbial language. Elements of folk belief permeate many of the texts, though instances of folk custom appear more in hints and glimpses.

For the ballad student, then, this anthology has been designed to serve a number of functions: to provide a representative selection from one regional tradition, the tradition with the best of ballad-texts in the oral versions of Anna Brown and the widest range of ballad-stories; to exemplify the methods of composition and transmission, the kinds of ballad-story, and the kinds of ballad-text found in the oral, transitional, and modern stages of a ballad tradition; to exemplify the variety of ballad subject-matter; and to indicate some lines of relationship with the other genres of Folklife Studies. One other factor has operated on the selection. All anthologists try to maintain a balance between the familiar and the fresh, but in the case of the ballads what is familiar may not be representatively ballad-like. In choosing the texts I have tried to counteract the tendency of some literature anthologies to represent the ballads as 'narrative poetry' with a handful of short pieces, often largely lyric or all dialogue: the texts, in short, that come closest to a literate man's conception of simple, if arresting, poetry. As Anna Brown's often lengthy versions will show, the ballad is a narrative form of a distinct kind capable, within its own limits and on its own terms, of narrative complexity and sophistication.

The texts of Anna Brown's ballads are from the Brown MSS. via F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols, Boston, 1882-98. Nicol's texts – all bar one – come from a variety of sources via Child, the exception being 'The Young Laird of Craigstoun' which derives from Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe's transcript of the 'North Country Ballads'. Two of Bell Robertson's texts derive from the Greig MSS., the remainder from the Greig MSS. via Gavin Greig, *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Ballad Airs*, ed. Alex. Keith, Aberdeen, 1925. The bothy ballads are transcribed from the Greig MSS.

The Oral
Tradition: The Ballads
of Anna Brown

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