

GEDDIE JOHN

THE

BALLADISTS

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John Geddie

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PREFACE

Not much more has been attempted in these pages than to extract the marrow of the Scottish Ballad Minstrelsy. They will have served their purpose if they help to awaken, or to renew, a relish for the contents of the Ballad Book. To know and love these grand old songs is its own exceeding great reward; and it is also, alas! almost the only means now left to us of knowing something concerning their nameless writers.

Questions involving literary or critical controversy as to the age and genuineness of the ballads have been, as far as possible, avoided in this popular presentation of their beauties and their qualities; and in case any challenge may be made of the origin or authenticity of the passages quoted, I may say that, in nearly every case, I have prudently, and of purpose, refrained from giving the authority for my text, and have taken that which best pleases my own ear or has clung most closely to my memory.

J. G.

July 1896.

CHAPTER I

BALLAD CHARACTERISTICS

'Layés that in harping
Ben y-found of ferli thing;
Sum beth of wer, and sum of wo,
Sum of joye and mirthe also;
And sum of treacherie and gile;
Of old aventours that fell while;
And sum of bourdes and ribaudy;
And many ther beth of faëry, —
Of all things that men seth;
Maist o' love forsoth they beth.'

The Lay of the Ash.

Who would set forth to explore the realm of our Ballad Literature needs not to hamper himself with biographical baggage. Whatever misgivings and misadventures may beset him in his wayfaring, there is no risk of breaking neck or limb over dates or names. For of dates and names and other solid landmarks there are none to guide us in this misty morning-land of poetry. The balladist is 'a voice and nothing more' — a voice singing in a chorus of others, in which only faintly and uncertainly we sometimes fancy we can make out the note,

but rarely anything of the person or history, of the individual singer. In the hierarchy of song, he is a priest after the order of Melchisedec – without father or mother, beginning of days or end of life.

The Scottish ballads we may thus love and know by heart, and concerning their preservation, collection, collation, we may gather a large store of facts. But the original ballad-writers themselves must remain for us the Great Unknown. Here and there one can lay down vague lines that seem to confine a particular ballad, or group of ballads, within particular bounds of place and of time. Here and there one seems to get a glimpse of the balladist himself, as onlooker or as actor in the scenes of fateful love and deathless grief which he has fixed for ever in the memory of men of his race and blood. There are passages in which, in the light and heat of battle, or in agony of terror or sorrow, we are made to see something of the minstrel as well as his theme. But by no research are we likely at this late date to recover any clew to the birthplace or to the lineaments of the life and face of the grand old poet who wrote the grand old ballad of *Sir Patrick Spens*; nor do towns contend for the honour of having produced the sweet singer of *Kirkconnel Lea*, the blithe minstrel of *Glenlogie*, or the first of all the bards who made the *Dowie Dens of Yarrow* vocal with the song of unavailing sorrow.

And in truth towns – even such towns as were in those days – could have had but little to do with the birth and shaping of the Scottish Balladists. Chief among the marks by which we may

the true ballad-maker know among the verse-makers of his age, is the open-air feeling that pervades his thought and style. Like the Black Douglas, he likes better to hear the laverock sing than the mouse cheep. It is not only that he cares to tread 'the bent sae brown' rather than the paved street; that the tragedies of fiery love and hate quenched by death, in which he delights, are more often enacted under the blue cope of heaven than under vault of stone. What we seem to feel is that these simple old lays, in which lives a passion that still catches the breath and makes the cheek turn pale – whose 'words of might' have yet the power to waft us, mind and sense, into the 'Land of Faëry,' must have been conceived and brought to full strength under the light of the sun and the breath of the wind. 'The Muse,' says Robert Burns, himself of the true kin of the balladists:

'The Muse, nae Poet ever fand her,
Till by himsel' he learned to wander,
Adown some trottin' burn's meander,
An' no think lang.'

Certainly no true ballad was ever hammered out at the desk. It may have been wrought and fashioned for singing in bower or hall; but the fire that shaped it was caught, in gloaming grey or under the 'lee licht o' the mune,' in birken shaw or by wan water.

It is true that one of the earliest of the Scots ballad-makers whose names have been handed down to us – Robert Henryson, who taught the Dunfermline bairns in the hornbook in the

fifteenth century – has told us that he sought inspiration at the
ingleside over a glass:

'I mend the fyre, and beikit me about,
Then tuik ane drink my spreitis to confort,
And armit me weill fra the cold thairout;
To cut the winter nicht, and mak it schort,
I tuik ane quhair, and left all uther sport.'

But this was while conning, in cold weather, the classic tale of *Troilus and Cressid*. *Robin and Makyne*, which among Henryson's acknowledged pieces (except *The Bluidy Sark*) comes nearest to our conception of the ballad – after all it is but a pastoral – has the scent of the 'grene wode' in summer.

In sooth, the Ballad Poet was neither made nor born; he grew. The 'wild flowers of literature' is the name that has been bestowed, with some little air of condescension, upon the rich inheritance he has left us. They are the purest and the strongest growth of the genius of the race and of the soil; and though they owe little save injury and mutilation to those who have deliberately sought to prune and trim them to please a later taste, they are as full of vigour and sap to-day as they were in the Ballad Age, when such poetry sprung up naturally and spontaneously. It is probable that not one of the old ballads that have come down to us by oral recitation is the product of a single hand; or of twenty hands. The greater its age, and the greater its popular favour, the greater is the number of individual memories and imaginations

through which it has been filtered, taking from each some trace of colour, some flavour of style or character, some improving or modifying touch. The 'personal equation' is, in the ballad, a quantity at once immense and unknown. As in Homer's *Iliad*, the voice we hear is not that of any individual poet, but of an age and of a people – a voice simple, almost monotonous, in its rhythmic rise and fall, but charged with meanings multitudinous and unutterable.

The Scottish ballads are undoubtedly, in their present form, the outcome of a long and strenuous process of selection. In its earlier stages, the ballad was not written down but passed from mouth to mouth. Additions, interpolations, changes infinite must have been made in the course of transmission and repetition. Like a hardy plant, it had the power to spread and send down fresh roots wherever it found favourable soil; and in its new ground it always, as we shall see, took some colour and character from the locality, the time, and the race. Golden lines and verses may have been shed in the passage from place to place and down the centuries. But less of this happened, we may feel sure, than a purging away of the dross. As a rule, what was fittest – what was truest to nature and to human nature – survived and was perpetuated in this evolution of the ballad. When, in the course of its progress, it gathered to itself anything that was precious and worthy of remembrance, then, by the very law of things, this was seized and stored in the memories of the listeners and handed down to future generations.

But this process of purging and refining the ballad, so that it shall become – like the language, the proverbs, the folklore and nursery tales, and the traditional music of a nation – the reflection of the history and character of the race itself, if it is to be genuine, must go on unconsciously. As soon as the ballad is written down – at least as soon as it is fixed in print – the elements of natural growth it possesses are arrested. It is removed from its natural environment and means of healthy subsistence and development; and from a hardy outdoor plant it is in danger of becoming a plant of the closet – a potted thing, watered with printer's ink and trimmed with the editorial shears. Ballads have sprung up and blossomed in a literary age; but as soon as the spirit that is called literary seizes upon them and seeks to mould them to its forms, they begin to droop and to lose their native bloom and wild-wood fragrance. It is because they neglect, or are ignorant of, literary models and conventions, and go back to the 'eternal verities' of human passion and human motive and action – because they speak to 'the great heart of man' – that they are what they are.

Few of our ballads have escaped those sophisticated touches of art, which, happily, are easily detected in the rough homespun of the old lays. Walter Scott, the last of the minstrels, to whom ballad literature owes more than to any who went before or who has come after him, was himself not above mending the strains gathered from the lips of old women, hill shepherds, and the wandering tribe of cadgers and hawkers, so that one is sometimes

a little at a loss to tell what is original and what is imitation. But even the Wizard's hand is not cunning enough to patch the new so deftly upon the old that the difference cannot be detected. The genuine ballad touch is incommunicable; to improve upon it is like painting the lilies of the field.

In the ranks of the Balladists, then, we do not include the many writers of merit – some of them of genius – who have worked in the lines of the elder race of singers, copying their measures and seeking to enter into their spirit. The studied simplicity, the deliberate archaisms, the overstrained vigour or pathos of these modern ballads do but convince us that the vein is well-nigh worked out. The writers could not help thinking of their models and materials; the old minstrels sang with no thought but telling what they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears. But even in these days the precious lode of ballad poetry will sometimes break to the surface; a phrase or a whole verse, fashioned in the Iron Age, will recall the Age of Gold. Scott has many such; and, to take a more modern instance, the spirit of *Sir Patrick Spens* seems to inspire almost throughout George MacDonald's *Yerl o' Watery Deck*, now with a graphic stroke of description, anon with a sudden gleam of humour, as when the Skipper, in haste to escape his pursuers, hacked with his sword at the stout rope that bound his craft to the pier,

'And thocht it oure weel made';

and again when the King's Daughter chose between father and lover in words that leap forth like a sword from its scabbard:

'I loot me low to my father for grace,
Down on my bended knee;
But I rise, and I look my king in the face,
For the Skipper 's the king o' me.'

But even here, where we touch high-water mark of the latter-day Scottish ballad, one seems to find a faint reminiscence of stage-setting and effect, of purposed antithesis, of ethical discriminations unfamiliar to the manner and mode of thought of the ancient balladist. The latter, it may be said, does not stop to think or to analyse or moralise; he feels, and is content to tell us in the most direct and naïve language, all that he has felt. He has not learned the new trick of introspection; he is guided by intuition and the primæval instincts. He carries from his own lips to ours a draught of pure, strong, human passion, stirred into action by provocations of love, jealousy, revenge, and grief such as visit but rarely our orderly, workaday modern world. He renders for us the 'form and express feature' of his time, and though the draughtsmanship may be rude, it is free from suspicion of either flattery or bias. It is not enlisted in the cause of any moral theory or literary ideal. It is, so far as it goes, truth naked and not ashamed.

But the native-grown ballad takes also colour from the ground whence it springs. It has the tang of the soil as well as the savour

of the blood. Fletcher of Saltoun's hackneyed epigram, 'Let me make a country's ballads, and let who will make its laws,' does not embody all the truth. A country and the race inhabiting it may not be responsible for the laws that govern it. But a country and a people may rightly be tried and judged by their ballads – their own handiwork; their own offspring. The more cultured and highly-developed products of a national literature, however healthy, however strong and beautiful, must always owe much to neighbouring and to universal influences. Like the language and manners of the educated classes of a nation, they conform more or less to models of world-wide and age-long acceptance among educated men. But in the ballad one goes to the root of national character, to the pith and marrow of national life and history.

What then, thus questioned, do the Scottish ballads teach us of Scotland and the Scots? Surely much to be proud of. They are among the most precious, as they are among the oldest, of our possessions as a people. Nay, it may be held that they are the best and choicest of all the contributions that Scotland has made to poetry and story. They are written in her heart's blood. Even the songs of Burns and the tales of Scott must take second rank after the ballads; their purest inspiration was drawn from those rude old lays. In this field of national literature, at least, we need not fear comparison with any other land and people. Our ballads are distinctly different, and in the opinion of unbiassed literary judges, also distinctly superior to the rich and beautiful ballad-lore of the Southern Kingdom. One can even note an expressive

diversity of style and spirit in the ballads originating on the North and on the South margin of the Border line. The latter do not yield in rough vigour and blunt manliness to the ballads grown on the northern slope of Cheviot. *Chevy Chase* may challenge comparison with *The Battle of Otterburn*, and come at least as well out of the contest as the Percy did from his meeting with the Douglas; and in many other ballads which the two nations have in common — *The Heir of Linn*, for example — the English may fairly be held to bear away the bell from the Scottish version. We do not possess a group of ballads pervaded so thoroughly with the freedom and delight of living under 'the leavés greene' as those of the Robin Hood Cycle; although we also have our songs of the 'gay greenwood'; although bows twanged as keenly in Ettrick Forest and in Braidislee Wood as in Sherwood itself, and we can even claim, partly, perhaps, as a relic of the days when the King of Scotland was Prince of Cumbria and Earl of Huntingdon, the bold Robin and his merry men among the heroes of our ballad literature.

But, on the whole, mirth and light-heartedness are very far from being characteristics of the Scottish ballads. Of ballad themes in general, it has been said that they concern themselves mainly with the tragedy and the pathos of the life of feudal and early times; while, on the other hand, the folk-song reflects the sunnier hours of the days of old. This is peculiarly true of the Scottish ballads. The best of them are dipped in gloom of the grave. They breathe the very soul of 'the old, unhappy far-off

times.' Even over the true lovers, Fate stands from the first with a drawn sword; and the story ends with the 'jow of the deid bell' rather than with the wedding chimes. Superstitious terrors, too, add a shadow of their own to these tragedies of crossed and lawless love and swift-following vengeance. In this respect, the Scottish ballads are more nearly akin to the popular poetry of Denmark and other countries across the North Sea, than to that of our neighbours across the Tweed. There are a score of ballads that agree so closely in plot and structure, and even in names and phrases, with Norse or German versions, that it is impossible to doubt that they have been drawn directly from the same source. Either they have been transplanted thither in the many descents which the Northmen made on Scotland, as is witnessed not only by the chronicles, but by existing words, and customs, and place-names scattered thickly around our coasts; or, what may perhaps be as strongly argued, both versions may have come from an older and common original.

Celtic influences are also present, although scarcely, perhaps, so directly manifest as might have been expected, considering that the Celtic race and speech must at one time have been spread almost universally over Scotland; they appear rather in the spirit than in the plot and scene and characters of the typical Scottish ballad. They supply, unquestionably, a large portion of that feeling of mystery, of over-shadowing fate, and melancholy yearning – that air of another world surrounding and infecting the life of the senses – which seems to distinguish the body and soul

of Scottish ballad poetry from the more matter-of-fact budget of the English minstrels.

But it has to be remembered that the matrix of the ballads that have taken first place in the love and in the memory of Scotland was the region most remote and isolated from the Highlands and the Highlanders during the ballad-making era. This is the basin of the Tweed – the howms of Yarrow; Leader haughs and Ettrick shaws; the clear streams that flow past ruined abbey and peel-tower, through green folds of the Cheviots and the Lammermuirs, that for hundreds of years were the chosen homes of Border war and romance. Next after these come the banks of Clyde and Forth; Annan Water and the streams of Ayr and Galloway; and ballads and ballad localities, differing somewhat, in theme and structure, in mood and metre, from those of the South, as Aberdonian differs from Borderer, and the Men of the Mearns from the Men of the Merse, are found scattered thinly or sprinkled thickly over the whole North, by Tay, and Dee, and Spey.

These latter streams are partly without and partly within the Highland Line, across which, as unacquainted with a language that has its own rich and peculiar store of legend and ballad poetry, we do not propose to penetrate; sufficient field for exploration is provided by the Scots ballads in Scots. But when these were in the making, the Highland Line must have run down much lower into the Lowlands than it does to-day; the retreating Gaelic had still outposts in Buchan, and even in Fife, and Ayr,

and Galloway. In the ballads of the North-eastern Counties, the feuds of Highland chiefs and the raids of Highland caterans make themselves seen and felt, too visibly and not too sympathetically, in the ditties of their Lowland neighbours. 'The Hielandmen' play the part that the English clans from Bewcastle and Redesdale play in the Border ballads. The 'Red Harlaw' in those boreal provinces was a landmark and turning-point in history and poetry, as Bannockburn or Flodden was in the South. By Hangingshaws or Hermitage Castle they knew little of the Highlander, being too much absorbed in their own quarrels; on Donside and in the Lennox they knew him better than they liked him; and it was not until a comparatively recent period of literary history that the kilted warrior began to take his place as a heroic and imposing figure in the poetry and prose of the Scottish vernacular.

Making all allowance for borrowings and influences drawn from without, may we not still say that the Scottish ballad owes nearly all that is best in it – the sweetness not less than the strength of this draught of old poetry and passion – to the land and to the folk that gave it birth? A land thrust further into the gloom and cold of stormy seas than the Southern Kingdom; a land whose spare gifts are but the more esteemed by its children because they are given so grudgingly, whose high and bleak and stern features make the valleys they shelter the more lovely and loved from the contrast; a race whose blood has been blended of many strains, and tempered by long centuries of struggle with nature and with outside enemies; perfervid of spirit and dour of will;

holding with strong grip to the things of this world, but never losing consciousness of the nearness and mystery of the world of things invisible; with a border-line on either side of them that for hundreds of years had to be kept with the strong hand and the stout heart, and behind them a background of history more charged with trouble and romance than that of almost any other nation in Europe – where should the ballad draw pith and sap and colour if not on such a soil and among such a people? If Mr. Buckle was able to trace the complexion and form of Scottish religion in the climate and configuration of Scotland, much more easily should we be able to find the atmosphere and scenery of Scotland reflected in her ballads.

CHAPTER II

BALLAD GROWTH AND BALLAD HISTORY

Clown— What hast here? ballads?

Mopsa— Pray now, buy some: I love a ballad in print, a' life; for then we are sure they are true. —

Winter's Tale.

There is probably not a verse, there is scarcely a line, in the existing body of Scottish ballad poetry that can be traced with certainty further back than the sixteenth century. Many of them chronicle events that took place in the seventeenth century, and there are a few that deal with even later history. It may seem a bold thing, therefore, to claim for these traditional tales in verse the much more venerable antiquity implied in what has been said in the previous chapter. If we were to be guided by the accessible literary and historical data, or even by the language of the ballads themselves, we should be disposed to believe that the productive period of ballad-making was confined within two or at most three hundred years.

It would be more than rash, however, to imagine that ballads did not live and grow and spread in the obscure but fertile ground of the popular fancy and the popular memory, because they did

not crop up in the contemporary printed literature, and were overlooked by the dry-as-dust chroniclers of the time. Nor is it a paradox to say that a ballad may be older, by ages, than the hero and the deeds that it seems to celebrate. Like thistledown it has the property of floating from place to place, and even from kingdom to kingdom and from epoch to epoch, changing names and circumstances to suit the locality, and attaching itself to outstanding figures and fresh events without changing its essential spirit and character. The more formal Muses despised these rude and unlettered rhymes – when they noticed them at all it was in a disdainful or patronising spirit – and this holds true of the eighteenth century almost as much as of the sixteenth. It is not that ballad poetry was dumb, but that history was deaf and blind to its beauties.

Nor is any adverse judgment as to the antiquity of the Scottish ballad to be drawn from the comparative modernity of the style and language. The presence of archaisms in a ballad that claims to have been handed down by oral repetition from a remote period is, on the contrary, a thing to raise suspicion as to its genuineness. The ballad, as has been said, is a living and growing organism; or at least it is this until it has been committed to print. However deep into the mould of the past its roots run down, its language and idioms should not be much older than the popular speech of the time when it has been gathered into the collector's budget. It is like a plant that, while remaining the same at the heart and root, is constantly casting the old, and putting out fresh,

leaves.

Thus the very words and phrases that were intended to give an antique air to *Hardyknut* stamped it as an imitation; these clumsy and artificial patches were not the true mosses of age. The ballad of true lineage, partly from its simplicity of thought and structure, partly from being kept in immediate contact with the lips and the hearts of the people, is as readily 'understood of the general' to-day as when it was first sung.

It has been noted, for instance, that our ballads preserve fewer reminiscences of the time when alliteration shared importance with rhyme or took its place in the metrical system. The bulk of them are supposed to come hither from the early sixteenth century, from the reigns of James IV. and James V.; and in that period of Scottish literature alliteration not only blossomed but often overran and smothered the court poetry of the day. Alliterative lines and verses appear frequently in the ballads, but always with good taste, often with exquisite effect. What phrases are more familiar, more infused with the magic of the ballad-spirit, than the 'wan water,' the 'bent sae brown,' the 'lee licht o' the mune'? When the knight rides forth to see his true love, he mounts on his 'berry brown steed,' and 'fares o'er dale and down,' until he comes to the castle wa', where the lady sits 'sewing her silken seam.' He kisses her 'cheek and chin,' and she 'kilts her green kirtle,' and follows him; but not so fast as to outrun fate. In the oldest set of *The Battle of Otterburn*, alliteration asserts itself:

'The rae full reckless there sche runnes
To make the game and glee.'

It is but seldom that the balladist avails himself so freely of the 'artful aid' of this device as in *Johnie o' Braidislee*, the vigorous hunting lay that was a favourite with Carlyle's mother:

'Won up, won up, my good grey dogs,
Won up and be unboun';
For we maun awa' to Bride's braid wood,
To ding the dun deer down, down,
To ding the dun deer down.'

The words that have had the best chance of coming down to us intact on the stream of ballad-verse, or with only such marks of attrition and wear as might be caused by time and a rough channel, are those to which the popular mind of a later day has been unable to attach any definite meaning; for instance, certain names of places and houses, titles and functions, snatches of refrains, phrases reminiscent of otherwise forgotten primæval or mediæval customs and the like. These remain bedded like fossils in the more recent deposits, and form a curious study, for those who have time to enter into it, in the archæology and palæontology of the ballad. *Childe Rowland*, *Hynde Horn*, *Kempion*, furnish us with words, drawn from the language of Gothic and Norman chivalry, that must have dropped out of the common speech long before the ballads began to be regularly

collected and printed. They recall the gentleness and courtesy, as well as the courage, that were supposed to be attributes of the 'most perfect goodly knight' – attributes in which, sooth to say, the typical knight of the Scottish ballad is not always a pattern. *Kempion*– 'Kaempe' or Champion Owayne – is supposed to perpetuate the name of 'Owain-ap-Urien, King of Reged,' celebrated by Taliessin and the other early Welsh bards. And this is by no means the only instance in which ballads appear to have distilled the spirit and blended names and stories out of both Celtic and Teutonic legend. Thus *Glasgerion*, which in the best-known Scottish version has become *Glenkindie*, has been translated as *Glas-keraint*– Geraint, the Blue Bard – an Orpheus among the Brythons, whose chief legendary sites, according to Mr. Skene, Professor Rhys, and other authorities, are to be sought in Scotland and its borderlands. The fame of this harper, who, like Glenkindie, could 'wile the fish from the flood,' came down to the times of Chaucer and Gavin Douglas, and was by them passed on; the former mentions him in his *House of Fame* along with Chiron and Orion,

'And other Harpers many one,
With the Briton, Glasgerion.'

It is not too much to conjecture that it was remembered also in popular poetry; and these and other classical writers of the Middle Ages, who despised not the common folk and their ways,

no doubt drank deeply of knowledge and inspiration from the clear and hidden well of English poetry and romance even then existing in ballad lore. In fact, it seems as probable that the prose and metrical romances of chivalry have been derived from the folk-songs they resemble, as that the ballads have been borrowed from the romances; perhaps both owe their descent to a common and forgotten ancestor.

Is it too much to believe that in our older ballads we hear the echoes of the voices – it may be the very words – of the old bards, the harpers and the minstrels, who sang in the ears of princes and people as far back as history can carry us? We know, by experience of other lands and races, from Samoa to Sicily, that are still in their earlier or later ballad-age, that the making of ballads is almost as old as the making of war or of love – that it long precedes letters, to say nothing of the printed page. It comes as natural for men to sing of the pangs of passion, or of the joys of victory, as to kiss or to fight. For untold generations the harps twanged in the hall, and the song of battle and the song of sorrow found eager listeners. All the while, the same tales, though perhaps in ruder and simpler guise, met with as warm a welcome in road and field and at country merrymaking. Trouvere and wandering minstrel, gleeman and eke gle maiden, passed from place to place and from land to land repeating, altering, adapting the old stock of heroic or lovelorn ditties, or inventing new ones. They were a law unto themselves in other matters than metres; and had their own guilds, their own courts, and their

own kings. The names of all but a few that chance, more than anything else, has preserved, have perished. But time may have been more tender than we know to their thoughts and words, or to their words and music, where these have been fitly wedded together. It may have saved for us some thrilling image as old as the time of the scalds, some scrap of melody which Ossian or Llywarch Hen but improved and handed on. The law of the conservation of force holds good in the world of poetry as well as in the physical world; and all that is dispersed and forgotten in ancient song is not lost. It is fused into the general stock of the nation's ideas and memories; and the richest and purest relics of it are perhaps to be sought in the Scottish ballads.

The chroniclers who set down, often at inordinate and wearisome length, what was said and done in court or council or monastery did not wholly overlook the 'gospel of green fields' sung by the contemporary minstrels. But their notices are provokingly vague and unsatisfactory; no happy thought ever seems to have occurred to any monkish penman that he might earn more gratitude from posterity by collecting ballad verses than by copying the Legends of the Saints – so little can we guess what will be deemed of value by future ages. But in Scotland, as elsewhere, we have reason to believe that every event that deeply moved the popular mind gave rise to its crop of ballads, either freshly invented or worked up out of the old ballad stock. So sharply were incidents connected with the departure of a Scottish Princess, daughter of King Alexander III., to be the

bride of Eric of Norway, imprinted on people's minds that, according to Motherwell's calculation, the ballad of *Sir Patrick Spens* preserves the very days of the week when the expedition set sail and made the land:

'They hoisted their sails on a Mononday morn,
Wi' a' the speed they may,
And they have landed in Norawa'
Upon a Wodensday.'

But this has the fault of proving too much. The last virtue that the ballad can claim is that of accuracy. With every desire to find proof and confirmation in the very calendar of the antiquity of this glorious old rhyme, one is disposed to suspect these dates to be a lucky hit; in fact, no sounder evidence than the correct enumeration of the daughters of George, fourth Earl of Huntly, in the old Aberdeenshire ballad:

'The Lord o' Gordon had three daughters,
Elizabeth, Margaret, and Jean,'

which has led some Northern commentators to assume that its heroine was that Lady Jane Gordon whom Bothwell wronged and divorced, and who afterwards managed to console herself by marrying an Earl of Sutherland and a Lord Ogilvy of Boyne. The tragedy of the death of 'Alexander our King,' and the unnumbered woes that came in its train, was, as we know,

celebrated in rhymes of which some scant salvage has come down to us; and the feats of William Wallace and the victories of the Bruce were rewarded by the maidens singing and the harpers harping in their praise. This we learn from a surer source than the ballads of the Wallace and Bruce Cycle that have been preserved, and that are neither the best of their kind nor of unquestioned authenticity. Blind Harry was himself of the ancient guild of the Minstrels, and gathered his materials at a date when the 'gude Sir William Wallace' was nearer his day than Prince Charlie is to our own. His poem is nothing other than floating ballads and traditional tales strung into epic form after the manner in which Pausanias is supposed to have pieced together the *Iliad*; indeed John Major, who in his childhood was contemporary with the Minstrel, tells us that he wrote down these 'native rhymes' and 'all that passed current among the people in his day,' and afterwards 'used to recite his tales in the households of the nobles, and thereby get the food and clothing that he deserved.'

Then nothing could yield more convincing proof of the prevalence and popularity of the ballad in Scotland in the period of Chaucer – and nothing also could be more tantalising to the ballad-hunter – than Barbour's remark in his *Brus*, that it is needless for him to rehearse the tale of Sir John Soulis's victory over the English on the shores of Esk:

'For quha sa likis, thai may heir
Yong women, quhen they will play

Sing it emang thame ilka day.'

The 'young women,' and likewise the old – bless them for it! – have always taken a foremost part in the singing and preservation of our old ballads, and even in the composing of them. Bannockburn set their quick brains working and their tongues wagging tunefully, in praise of their own heroes and in scorn of the English 'loons.' Aytoun quotes from the contemporary *St. Alban's Chronicle* a stanza of a song, which (says the old writer) 'the maydens in that countree made on Kyng Edward; and in this manere they sang:

"Maydens of Englande, sore may ye morne,
For ye have lost your lemans at Bannocksborne,
With rombelogh."

Do not these jottings of grave fourteenth century churchmen, bred in the cell but having ears open to the din of the camp and the 'song of the maydens,' recall the exquisite words in *Twelfth Night*, that sum up the ballad at its best?

'It is old and plain:
The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones
Do use to chaunt it; it is silly sooth,
And dallies with the innocence of love
Like the old age.'

In the long struggle with our 'auld enemies' of England that followed Bannockburn; in the quarrels between nobles and king; in the feuds of noble with noble and of laird with laird that continued for nearly three hundred years, themes and inspirations for the ballad muse came thick and fast. It was not alone, or chiefly, kingly doings and great national events that awakened the minstrel's voice and strings. Harpers and people had their favourite clans and names – a favour won most readily by those who were free both with purse and with sword. The Gordons of the North; and, in the South, Graemes, Scotts, Armstrongs, Douglases, are among the races that figure most prominently in ballad poetry. The great house of Douglas, in particular, is in the eyes and lips of romance and legend more honoured than the Stewarts themselves. The Douglas is the hero of both the Scottish and English versions of *Chevy Chase*. Hume of Godscroft, in his *History of the House of Angus*, written in 1644, has saved for us several scraps of traditional song celebrating the wrongs or the exploits of the Douglases, some of which must have originated at least as early as the second half of the fourteenth century, and can be identified in ballads that are extant and sung in the present day. One of them, quoted by Scott in his *Minstrelsy*, and times out of number since, unmistakably reveals the singer's sympathies. It is the verse that commemorates the treacherous slaughter of William, sixth Earl of Douglas, and his brother in 1440, by that great enemy of his race, James II., after the fatal 'black bull's head' had been set before them at the banquet to which they had

been invited by the king:

'Edinburgh Castle, towne and toure,
God grant thou sink for sinne!
And that even for the black dinoúr
Erl Douglas gat therein.'

Another records with glee the Douglas triumph when, in 1528, 'The Earl of Argyle had bound him to ride' into the Merse by the Pass of Pease, but was met and discomfited at 'Edgebucklin Brae.' In another, and much earlier fragment, recording how William Douglas the 'Knight of Liddesdale,' was met and slain by his kinsman, the Earl of Douglas, at the spot now known as Williamshope in Etrick Forest, after the Countess had written letters to the doomed man 'to dissuade him from that hunting,' we may perhaps discover a germ of *Little Musgrave*, or trace situations and phrases that reappear in *The Douglas Tragedy*, *Gil Morice*, and their variants.

In *Johnie Armstrong o' Gilnockie*, *The Border Widow*, and *The Sang of the Outlaw Murray*, also – in which we should perhaps see the reflection, in the popular mind of the day, of the efforts of James IV. and James V. to preserve order on the Borders – it is on the side of the freebooter rather than of the king and the law that our sympathies are enlisted. Indeed your balladist, like Allan Breck Stewart, was never a bigoted partisan of the law. There is ample proof in the writings of Sir David Lyndsay and others that in the first half of the sixteenth century a number of the Scottish

ballads that have come down to us were already current and in high favour among the people, although they have not reached us in the shape in which they were then sung or recited.

Long before this period, however, and on both sides of the Border, the status of the minstrel or ballad-maker – for in old times the two went together, or rather were blent in one, like the words and music – had suffered sad declension. There was no longer question of royal harpers or troubadours, as Alfred the Great and as Richard the Lion Heart had been in their hour of need; or even of bards and musicians held in high favour and honour by king and court, like Taillefer or Blondel. 'King's Minstrels' there were on both sides of Tweed, as is found from Exchequer and other records. But we suspect that these were players and singers of courtly and artificial lays. True, a poet of such genuine gifts as Dunbar had gone to London as the 'King's singer,' and had recited verses at a Lord Mayor's banquet that had tickled the ears of the worshipful aldermen and livery. But these could hardly have been the natural and spontaneous notes of the Muse of Scottish ballad poetry. The written and printed verse of the period had got overlaid and smothered by the flowers of ornament. As a French student of our literature has said, 'The roses of these poets are splendid, but too full blown; they have expended all their strength, all their beauty, all their fragrance; no store of youth is left in them; they have given it all away.'

As has happened repeatedly in our literary history, simplicity in art, as a source both of strength and of beauty, was

almost forgotten; or its tradition was only remembered among the humble and nameless balladists. The only ones, says M. Jusserand, who escape the touch of decadence, are 'those unknown singers, chiefly in the region of the Scottish border, who derive their inspiration directly from the people'; who leave books alone and 'remodel ballads that will be remade after them, and come down to us stirring and touching,' like that ride of the Percy and the Douglas which, spite of his classic tastes, stirred the heart of the author of the *Art of Poesy* 'like the sound of a trumpet.'

Thus, like Antæus, poetry sprang up again, fresh and strong, at the touch of its native earth; 'although declining in castles, it still thrilled with youth along the hedges and copses, in the woods and on the moors'; banished from court, it found refuge in the wilderness and sang at poor men's hearths and at rural fairs, where the King himself, if we may believe tradition, went out in romantic quest of it and of adventure, clad as a *gaberlunzie man*. In the *Complaynt of Scotland*, published in 1549, we have an enticing picture of the extent to which ballad lore and ballad music entered into the lives of the country people on the eve of the Reformation troubles. At the gatherings of the shepherds, old tales would be told, with or without stringed accompaniment – of *Gil Quheskher* and *Sir Walter, the Bauld Leslye*, pieces now probably lost to us irrecoverably; of the familiar *Tayl of Yong Tamlane*; of *Robene Hude* and *Litel Ihone*, whose fame, like that of the prophecies of Thomas of Ercildoune, had already been

firmly established for a couple of centuries; of the *Red Etin*, whose place in folklore is well ascertained; and of the *Tayl of the Thre Vierd Systirs*, in which one can snuff the ingredients of the caldron in *Macbeth*. There were dances, founded on the same themes — *Robin Hood*, *Thom of Lyn*, and *Johnie Ermstrang*, and between whiles the women sang 'sueit melodious sangis of natural music of the antiquite, such as *The Hunting of Cheviot* and *The Red Harlaw*.' But of all this feast which he spreads in our sight, our author only lets us taste a morsel — a couple of lines taken apparently from a lost ballad on the fate of the Chevalier de la Beauté, rubbed down by the rough Scottish tongue to 'Bawty,' at Billie Mire in 1517.

The great religious and social upheaval that had already changed the face of England reached Scotland in a severer form. There was an escape of the *odium theologicum* which always and everywhere is fatal to the tenderer flowers of poetry and romance. Men's minds were too deeply moved, and their hands too full to look upon ballads otherwise than askance and with disfavour. The Wedderburns and other zealous reformers set themselves to match the traditional and popular airs to 'Gude and Godlie Ballates' of their own invention. The wandering ballad-singer could no longer count on a welcome, either in the castles of the nobles or with the shepherds of the hills. Instead of getting, like Henry the Minstrel, his deserts in 'food and clothing,' these were apt to come to him in the shape of the stocks or the repentance-stool. He had lost caste and character, from causes

for which he was not altogether responsible. An ill name had been given to him; and doubtless he often managed to merit it. His type, as it was found on both sides of the Border, is Autolycus, whom Shakespeare must often have met in the flesh about the 'footpath ways,' and at the rustic merrymakings of Warwickshire. Autolycus, too, has known the court, and has found his wares go out of fashion and favour with the great, and has to be content with cozening the ears and pockets of simple country folk. One cannot help liking the rogue, although he is as nimble with his fingers as with his tongue. He has the true balladist's love for freedom and sunshine and the open country. He will not be tied by rule; according to his moral law,

'When we wander here and there
We then do go most right.'

His memory and his mouth, like his wallet, are full of snatches of ballads; and they cover a multitude of sins.

Though no undoubted Scottish specimen was drawn from this pedlar's pack, we know, from the plays of the Elizabethan dramatists and other evidence, that Border minstrelsy had already raised echoes in London town, before King Jamie went thither with Scotland streaming in his train. During the last troublous half century of Scotland's history as an independent kingdom, the raw material of ballads was being manufactured as actively as at any period of her history, especially on the

Borders and in the North. It may be called, indeed, the Moss-trooping Age, and the chief members of the Moss-trooping Cycle date from the latter years of the sixteenth century. *The Raid of the Reidswire* happened in 1575; the expedition of *Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead* is conjecturally set down for 1582; *The Lads of Wamphray* commemorates a Dumfriesshire feud of the year 1593; while the more famous incident sung with immortal fire and vigour in *Kinmont Willie* took place in 1596. To the same period belong the exploits of *Dick of the Cow* (who had made a name for himself in London while Elizabeth was on the throne), Archie of Ca'field, Hobbie Noble, Dickie of Dryhope, the Laird's Jock, John o' the Side, and other 'rank reivers,' whose title to the gallows is summed up in Sir Richard Maitland of Lethington's terse verse on the Liddesdale thieves; and their match in spulzying and fighting was to be found on the other side of the Esk and the Cheviot.

With the Union of the Crowns, Sir Walter Scott half sadly reminds us in *Nigel*, one stream of Scottish romance and song ran dry; the end of the Kingdom became the middle of it; and as his namesake, Scott of Satchells puts it, the noble freebooter was degraded to be a common thief. But even the Reformation and the Union did not wipe out original sin or alter human nature. The kingdoms might have outwardly composed their quarrels; but private feuds remained, and even the Martyrs and the Covenanters had their relapses, and loved and sang and slew under the impulse of earthly passion. *The Dowie Dens*

o' Yarrow— perhaps the most moving and most famous of the Scottish ballads — is supposed to have sprung, in its present shape at least, out of a tragic passage that occurred by that stream of sorrow so late as 1616.

Away in the North, what we may call the ballad-yielding age, if it came later and had a less brilliant flowering time, endured longer. They had a fighting 'Border' there that lasted until the '45. The Gordons, of their own hand, have furnished a ballad literature as rich, if not quite so choice, as that of the Douglasses themselves. *Glenlogie* and *Geordie* were of the 'gay Gordons,' and had the 'sprightly turn' that is held to be an inheritance of the race. *Edom o' Gordon*— Adam of Auchindoun — did his ruthless work in 1571. It was in one of their interminable quarrels, begun on the farther side of Spey, that, in the year 1592, the *Bonnie Earl o' Moray* fell so far away as Donibristle, in Fife. The mystery of the *Burning of Fren draught* took place in 1630; the tragedy of *Mill o' Tiftie's Annie*— one of the few dramas in which the balladist is content to take his characters from humble life — is dated, from the tombstone in Fyvie churchyard, in the year following, and is placed in Gordon country, and under the shadow of the Setons that became Gordons. *The Bonnie House o' Airlie* treats of one of the incidents of the Civil War, and, for a wonder, in the true ballad fashion; and it turns, as the balladists are apt to do, a crooked and misliking look on the 'gleyed Argyll'; while that fine Deeside ballad, *The Baron o' Bracklay*, deals with an encounter between Farquharsons and Gordons in the period of

the Restoration.

After this, however, we hardly meet with a ballad having the antique ring about it, even on the Highland Line. The fine gold had become dim, or mixed with later clay. The mood and condition of the nation had changed. The 'end of the auld sang' of the Scottish Parliament was the end also of the ballad. There was an outburst of national feeling, expressed in song and music, over the Jacobite risings of last century; Allan Ramsay rose like a star at its beginning, and Burns shone out gloriously towards its close. But the expression was lyrical, and not narrative. The ballad of the old type no longer grew naturally and freshly by edge of copse and shaw. The collector had his eye upon it, and was already collecting, comparing, and classifying – and, what was worse, correcting, restoring, and improving.

CHAPTER III

BALLAD STRUCTURE AND BALLAD STYLE

'Strike on, strike on, Glenkindie,
O' thy harping do not blinne,
For every stroke goes o'er thy harp,
It stounds my heart within.'

Glenkindie.

The old ballads were made to be sung; or, at least, to be chanted. An inquiry whether the traditional ballad airs preceded the words, or *vice versâ*, would probably lead us to no more certain conclusions than that of whether the egg came before the fowl or the fowl before the egg. Both ballads and ballad airs have come down to us greatly changed and corrupted; and probably it is the airs that have suffered most from neglect and from alteration. Notation of the simple and plaintive and sweet old melodies appropriated in the ears and lips of the people to the words of particular ballads came long after the transcribing of the words themselves. There are other elements of perplexity and difficulty in ballad music which require an expert to unravel and explain, and which cannot be entered into here. The subject

is referred to only because, in the eyes of the original composers and singers at least, to dissever the words from the tune would have seemed like parting soul from body; and because no right notion can be gathered of the Scottish ballads without bearing in mind the part which the ancient airs have taken in framing their structure and in moulding their style.

Like the ballads themselves, the 'sets' of ballad airs vary with the localities; and even in the same district different airs will be found sung to the same words and different words to the same air. But of many of the older ballads, at least, it may be affirmed that, from time immemorial, they have been preserved in a certain musical setting which has not altered more in transmission from place to place and from generation to generation than have the ballads themselves, and which has so wrought itself into the texture and essence of the tale that it is impossible to think of them apart. The analogy of the Scottish psalmody may, perhaps, be used in illustration. In it, also, there is a 'common measure' that can be fitted at will to the common metre – in the psalms, as in the ballads, the alternation of lines of four and three accented syllables. In the one case, as in the other, there is a certain family resemblance, in the melody as in the theme, that to the untrained and unaccustomed ear may convey an impression of monotony. But to each ballad, as to each psalm, there belongs a peculiar strain or lilt, touched, as a rule, with a solemn or piercing pathos, often cast in the plaintive minor mode, that alone can bring out the full inner meaning of the words, and that is endeared and

hallowed by centuries of association. As easily might we explain why the words and air of the 'Old Hundredth' or the 'Old 124th' belong to each other, as analyse the wedded harmony of the verse and music in *The Broom o' the Cowdenknowes*

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