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***EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY SCOTTISH BALLAD COLLECTORS
AND THE ORAL TRADITION:
SEEKING DURABILITY AND ACKNOWLEDGING TRANSIENCE***

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Abstract: In contrast to their English predecessors, who had compiled their collections largely from printed texts and manuscripts, the Scottish ballad collectors of the early nineteenth derived their material principally from oral tradition. The introductory material and commentary in their published collections makes it clear that value of the ballads for them lay above all in their antiquity. From this perspective, oral tradition was initially approached with ambivalence: on the one hand, it had ensured the durability of ballads which would otherwise be lost, while on the other, it involved a process of change which had eroded the integrity of the supposed original texts leaving only transient variants. By the 1820s, a more positive view of oral tradition was being expressed, but still within a basically devolutionary paradigm. The twentieth century appreciation of oral tradition as a creative and evolutionary process was still in the future.