

James Christian Brown  
University of Bucharest

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

**Keywords:** *ballads; ballad collectors; oral tradition; oral literature; Scotland; nineteenth century*

**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.*

The folkloric text, circulating in oral tradition through space and time, is characterized both by durability and by transience. On the one hand, there is the durability of genre and type; on the other, the transience of the individual variant, the unique performance experienced through the evanescent medium of sound, which, as Walter Ong observes, “exists only when it is going out of existence” (32). This paper will look at some of the ways in which early nineteenth-century Scottish collectors and editors of one traditional genre, the popular narrative songs that were by this time coming to be identified in literary circles as “ballads” (Gerould 250-2)—in particular Walter Scott, Robert Jamieson and William Motherwell—approached the durable and transient aspects of the texts that so fascinated them.

To what time does an orally transmitted text belong? That of its original creation, or that in which the particular version under discussion was recorded in performance? In an article first published in 1935, John Spiers claimed the Scottish ballads for the eighteenth century on the grounds that “a poem and the language it is in are one and the same”, and the language of the ballads, as we know them from published collections, is largely that of the eighteenth century (236). And in the 1990s, the editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* decided after some discussion to move their sample selection of “Popular Ballads” from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the period in which the printed texts took shape, rather than that of the conjectured origins of the genre (Brown, *Placed* 116-18).

To the eighteenth century itself, however, or at least to those eighteenth-century Britons whose encounter with ballads was primarily through expensive printed anthologies rather than through oral tradition or popular printed broadsides, things looked different: what was interesting then about ballads was that they were *old*. From *A Collection of Old Ballads* (1723-25), whose editor sought to “enter upon the Praises of Ballads, and shew their Antiquity” (qtd. in Kersey 41), through Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), where the ballads were attributed to “our ancient English bards and minstrels, an order of men, who were once greatly respected by our ancestors, and contributed to soften the roughness of a martial and unlettered people by their songs and by their music” (Percy I: xiii)—thus, it has been argued, offering a legitimating genealogy for English literature, and at the same time affirming a role for the author as a natural part of an imagined feudal world in contrast to the insecurities of the eighteenth-century literary marketplace (Stewart 113-4)—, to *Ancient Songs: From the Time of King*

*Henry the Third to the Revolution* (1790) edited by Percy's fiercest critic, Joseph Ritson, a series of English collections presented the ballads as survivals from a lost medieval past.

A preoccupation with the antiquity of the ballads, and on their value as precious survivals, is equally characteristic of the Scottish collectors who emerged in the early decades of the following century. For Walter Scott, who published his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in 1802-3, the ballads were fading relics of an older Scotland that he saw rapidly becoming assimilated to English ways, and the task of preserving them was a patriotic duty:

By such efforts, feeble as they are, I may contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally. And, trivial as may appear such an offering, to the manes of a kingdom, once proud and independent, I hang it upon her altar with // a mixture of feelings, which I shall not attempt to describe. (Scott I: cxxxii-cxxxiii)

His contemporary Robert Jamieson, editor of *Popular Ballads and Songs* (1806) saw the threatening change in terms of economic modernization rather than Anglicization as such: it was "a certain consequence of the extension of commerce and manufactures" that the Scots were learning "to disregard and discontinue the habits, usages, and amusements of their less enlightened and refined, but not less virtuous and praiseworthy predecessors," and so losing touch with part of the history without which their character could not be understood (I: iii). To William Motherwell, writing two decades later in his *Minstrelsy Ancient and Modern* (1827), in the context of the social and politic unrest of the 1820s, things looked even worse. The Scottish "peasantry and labouring classes" have departed from the stern simplicity of their fathers, and have learned with the paltry philosophers, political quacks, and illuminated dreamers on Economick and Moral science, to laugh at the prejudices, beliefs, and superstitions of elder times. [...] The stream of innovation is flooding far and wide, and ancient land-marks are fast disappearing. (cii)

And ballads are valuable as a record of enduring traits of national mentality:

They convey to posterity, that description of song which is peculiarly national and characteristick; that body of poetry which has inwoven itself with the feelings and passions of the people, and which shadows forth as it were an actual embodiment of their Universal mind, and of its intellectual and moral tendencies. (v)

Despite Motherwell's talk of a "Universal mind" of the people, and his assignment of the ballads to "a period of time to which imagination can assign no definite limits, but whose origin seems as remote and involved in as much darkness as the early history of the people themselves" (x), he and the other Scottish collectors seem to have been in no doubt that the ballads were in origin the work of individual authors: there is no sign of any interest in the ideas of communal, "folk" authorship that were in circulation in Germany at the time. These authors are sometimes loosely referred to as "minstrels", though Scott in particular explicitly avoids committing himself to Percy's theory of professional minstrel authorship (Henderson I: 165). As to their age, Scott points out that the earliest of the historical ballads in his collection can be "hardly coeval with the reign of James V" [1513-42] (Scott I: i-ii), and his introductory account of the historical background to the Scottish border ballads concentrates on events of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the context of the region, however this is sufficient to take us back into a society primitive and wild enough to belong to much earlier times, and a fitting context for the creation of such songs: "The more rude and wild the state of society, the more general and violent is the impulse received from poetry and music" (I: cx). As for the other ballads in his collection, those that he and other collectors classified as "romantic", he considers that at least some and perhaps most of these originated in medieval metrical romances (III: 92, II: 102-3).

The only editor to depart from this cautious approach is Jamieson, who argues from the undoubted similarities between Scottish and Danish ballads, that many of the former originated in the work of Scandinavian skalds and have been passed down in tradition in Scotland since the “Cimbric” (i.e. Viking) invasions. He was answered, however, two years later by John Finlay, who points out that Scottish and Scandinavian people have had plenty of occasions to exchange ballads in more recent times, and argues that in any case both traditions show the influence of French romances (xvi-xviii).

One of the most striking differences between the Scottish ballad collections of the beginning of the nineteenth century and their late eighteenth-century English forerunners concerns the extent to which they derived their texts from oral tradition. Percy and Ritson had based their collections almost entirely on old printed texts and manuscripts. The core of Percy’s collection derived from the seventeenth-century folio manuscript that he had saved from the fire in a friend’s house, supplemented by texts from old printed broadsides. With the exception of a few ballads for which he acknowledges as his source manuscript copies sent from Scotland, identifying the sender on one occasion as the judge and historian Lord Hailes (I: 61; see also I: 118, III: 99), the continuing circulation of the ballads in oral tradition and popular print culture is barely suggested. The handful of ballad texts recorded from English oral tradition that he received from a clergyman in Kent never appeared in the *Reliques* (Atkinson 234), and the existence of a flourishing contemporary trade in popular printed broadsides copies of ballads—on which Percy had himself apparently drawn as a source (Dugaw 110)—is passed over in silence. Ritson likewise concentrated his researches on old manuscript and printed copies of ballads, and in fact expressed scepticism about the possibility of finding the kind of ballads he was interested still in oral circulation in England, though he acknowledged that it was “barely possible that something of the kind may be still preserved in the country by tradition.” He has, he remarks, “frequently heard of traditional songs, but has had very little success in his endeavours to hear the songs themselves” (Ritson, *Ancient* lxxv). And in any case he is dismissive of the sort of texts that might be recovered from oral tradition, which he sees as a process of deterioration, by which “a performance of genius and merit [...] may in time be degraded to the vilest jargon” (Ritson, *Scottish* I: 77).

The raw material for a recovery of the Scottish ballad tradition, however, was very different. There was little available in manuscript or print to equal the rich stock of old texts available to Percy and Ritson. As Motherwell put it:

With the exception of a very few pieces, which, more through accident than design, appear to have found their way into old MSS., or early printed volumes, the ancient Ballad Poetry of Scotland must literally be gathered from the lips of

‘The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,  
Who use to chaunt it.’ (ii)

Indeed, unlike Percy and Ritson, at least some of the Scottish collectors emphasize that an oral tradition of balladry formed part of their own cultural background. Scott claims to have first learnt the ballads of the Scottish border country in his youth from “shepherds [...], and aged persons, in the recesses of the border mountains, [who] frequently remember and repeat the warlike songs of their fathers” (I, cxxiii). Jamieson, who had grown up in the North-East of Scotland, acknowledges the role of both orally transmitted and popular printed ballads in feeding his childhood love of poetry, saying of himself that “he naturally became fond of popular ballads and songs; such as are sung by the rustic maiden at her spinning wheel, or may be purchased of a pedling [sic] pamphlet-seller for a penny” (ii).

However despite Scott’s claim to have first learnt the ballads in oral tradition, and that, in the absence of old manuscripts or printed copies of the border ballads he “has been obliged to draw his materials chiefly from oral tradition” (I: cxxi), the notes to individual ballads in his *Minstrelsy*, where they identify sources at all, make more frequent reference to manuscripts supplied by his acquaintances than to his own collecting of ballads in the field, and his attitude to oral tradition at the time of the first

publication of the collection in 1802-03 seems to be an ambivalent one. On the one hand, oral tradition was a source of rare ballads that would otherwise be lost altogether, and its very existence proved that all connection to the past was not totally lost; on the other, it was a fundamentally destructive process, threatening the durability of precious old texts. He writes, for example, of how medieval romances had been “degraded” into ballads”, by the lapse of time, and the corruption of reciters” (III: 92, cf also II: 102-3).

In the “Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry” that he included in the 1830 edition of his *Minstrelsy*, he is more uncompromisingly negative about oral transmission. A poem transmitted by a series of reciters over centuries is, he considers, liable to “mutilation and corruption” (Henderson I: 10), as a result of “impertinent interpolations from the conceit of one rehearser, unintelligible blunders from the stupidity of another, and omissions equally to // be regretted, from the want of memory in a third” (9-10). As a metaphor for the “gradual process of alteration and recomposition” in which the “strong touches” that originally characterized the ballads have been “smoothed down and destroyed”, Scott invokes the image of a coin, which “passing from hand to hand, loses in circulation all the finer marks of the impress” (12), and borrows from Ritson the metaphor of tradition as a “degrading species of alchymy, by which the ore of antiquity is deteriorated and adulterated” (12; cf Ritson, *Scottish I: 77*).

As for the what later scholarship would come to recognize as the stylistic marks of oral creation and transmission, especially the use of formulaic language and repetition, Scott is thoroughly dismissive: frequent repetition of stock lines and even whole stanzas “contributed to the tenuity of thought and poverty of expression, by which old ballads are too often distinguished” (Henderson I: 8), and notwithstanding the precedent of Homer—compared to a ballad singer by Addison and Philips in the early eighteenth century (Kersey 41)—, “whilst, in the Father of Poetry, they give the reader an opportunity to pause, and look back upon the enchanted ground over which they have travelled, they afford nothing to the modern bard, save facilitating the power of stupefying the audience with stanzas of dull and tedious iteration” (Henderson I: 9).

By the time Scott published his “Introductory Remarks”, however, Motherwell had set ballad studies on a new footing in the “Introduction” to his own *Minstrelsy*, in which he adopts a far more positive attitude to the tradition, arguing that the authenticity of ballads is at more risk from the attentions of over-enthusiastic editors (iv) than from the “wear and tear” to which they are subjected in oral transmission (iii):

It is not therefore with the unlettered and the rude, that oral song suffers vital and irremediable wrong. What they have received from their forefathers, they transmit in the same // shape to their children. [...] Localities and persons, may it is true, be occasionally shifted to answer the meridian of the Reciter, and obsolete terms and epithets be laid aside for others more generally in use; but what may be called the facts of these compositions, are never disturbed, nor are their individual or characteristick features ever lost. (iii-iv)

In fact Motherwell holds optimistically that even if “not a word may be preserved which originally was there”, due to the gradual replacement of obsolete terms according to an “inexorable law of perpetual mutation”, tradition may nevertheless “faithfully transmit to us the narrative uninjured and unshorn of any part of its circumstance, nay even give the sentiments of the poet unaltered, and preserve the character of the piece precisely as at first pourtrayed” (x). Oral tradition is thus not a source of inevitable degradation, but a means by which the essential durability of the ballad is guaranteed.

With Motherwell too we find a far more nuanced appreciation of the ballad style. The use of commonplace language, for example, he considers not a weakness but a strength in a genre of poetry intended for oral transmission. The commonplaces of the ballads are, in the first place, an aid to memory “no doubt suggested by the wisdom and experience of many ages”, and indeed “in the absence of letters, the only efficacious means of preserving and transmitting it to after times” (xix). But he argues that they

were also aids to composition, “a kind of ground-work, on which the poem could be raised”, using which “the minstrel could with ease to himself, and with the rapidity of extemporaneous delivery, rapidly model any event which came under his cognizance into song” (xxiii). The passage seems to point in the direction of twentieth-century theories of oral-formulaic composition, though it is clear that Motherwell is thinking of the commonplaces as part of the technique of the original “minstrel” author, not as a basis for the continuing recreation of ballads in performance.

Motherwell’s respect for the ballad text derived from oral tradition can be seen perhaps most evidently in the editorial approach that he recommended. Despite his view that variation in the words in which a ballad might be recited in a particular time and place did not detract from its essential durability, Motherwell insisted that the collectors and editors of ballads should reproduce the texts as they received them, “in the very garb in which they are remembered and known” (iv), avoiding conjectural reconstructions, collation from different variants, or, worse, attempts at improving them. The individuality of each variant must be preserved:

All versions of a ballad so preserved by oral transmission from one age to another, are entitled to be considered as of equal authenticity, and coeval production, one with the other, although among them, wide and irreconcilable discrepancies exist. (vi)

This was, it is only fair to point out, a position in which Motherwell had been confirmed by Scott, who, in a letter of 1825, had distanced himself from his own earlier practice of “endeavouring to make the best possible set of an ancient ballad out of several copies”, and had advised the younger collector that the different versions resulting from changes in the course of oral tradition should be kept separate “as giving in their original state a more accurate idea of our ancient poetry” (qtd. in Brown, *Motherwell* 82). Motherwell’s commitment to the new approach came too late to be applied throughout his published *Minstrelsy*, but Mary Ellen Brown has shown how his growing sensitivity to ballad variation and to the nature of the tradition—“its fragility, its complexity, its possessors”—can be traced in the manuscript records of his ballad collecting activity (Brown, *Motherwell* 85-7). A similar respect for the integrity of texts obtained from oral tradition can be seen in G.R. Kinloch’s *Ancient Scottish Ballads*, published in the same year as Motherwell’s collection. Kinloch claims that his ballads are “given as they were taken down from recitation”, and it seems that they are indeed very close to the original transcriptions in his surviving manuscripts (Hustvedt 73-4).

By the mid-1820s, then, a new generation of Scottish ballad collectors were engaging more positively with the “transient” aspects of the tradition—the fact of variation in oral transmission, and the individuality and value of each text transcribed from performance. Motherwell, in particular, in his Introduction, seems to point forward not only to Francis James Child’s monumental work of ballad editing in the later part of the nineteenth century, but also to many of the interests of ballad scholarship in more recent times. In addition to the aspects mentioned above, for example, he also comments more extensively than any of the earlier editors on the manner in which he heard ballads performed (xiv-xv), and his remarks on the need for the collector to be sensitive to the singers’ attitude to the truth of their songs (xxvii) show a new respect for the bearers of tradition. He and the other early nineteenth-century collectors are united, however, in the fundamental privileging of the “durability” aspect: ballads were valuable to them because they were old, and ultimately oral tradition could be appreciated positively only inasmuch as it provided a medium by which ballads had been more or less reliably transmitted from the distant past. Scott’s emphasis on its degrading effects might give way to Motherwell’s more positive assessment of its accuracy, but there was no place in their thinking for the appreciation of oral tradition as a creative, evolutionary process that was to become a commonplace of ballad studies in the twentieth century. In 1907, Cecil Sharp echoed Scott’s image, quoted above, of a coin losing its fine detail as it circulates from hand to hand, when he compared the progress of a folksong in oral tradition to “a pebble on the seashore . . . rounded and polished by the action of the waves”, but for Sharp, unlike Scott, this



progress was “clearly a case of evolution”, in which the song develops towards a form “at once congenial to the taste of the community, and expressive of its feelings, aspirations, and ideals” (Sharp 16). To see the ballads as actually improving, evolving through oral transmission was a step the Scottish collectors, even Motherwell, were not yet ready to take.

### Works Cited

- Atkinson, David. *The English Traditional Ballad: Theory, Method and Practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002
- Brown, Mary Ellen. “Placed, Replaced, or Misplaced?: The Ballads’ Progress.” *The Eighteenth Century* 47.2/3 (2006): 115-129. Project Muse. 20 Dec. 2007 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>
- - -. *William Motherwell’s Cultural Politics 1797-1835*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2001
- Child, Francis James, ed. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Boston, 1882-98
- Dugaw, Dianne. “On the “Darling Songs” of Poets, Scholars, and Singers: An Introduction.” *The Eighteenth Century* 47.2/3 (2006): 97-113. Project Muse. 20 Dec. 2007 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>
- Finlay, John. *Scottish Historical and Romantic Ballads, Chiefly Ancient*. 2 vols. Edinburgh, 1808
- Gerould, Gordon Hall. *The Ballad of Tradition*. 1932. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957
- Henderson, T.F. ed. *Sir Walter Scott’s Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. 4 vols. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902
- Hustvedt, Sigurd Bernhard. *Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1930
- Jamieson, Robert. *Popular Ballads and Songs*. 2 vols. Edinburgh, 1806
- Kersey, Mel. “Ballads, Britishness and Hardyknute 1719-1859.” *Scottish Studies Review* 5(1) 2004: 40-56 [Kinloch, G.R.] *Ancient Scottish Ballads, Recovered from Tradition and Never Before Published*. London, 1827
- McLane, Maureen N. “Dating Orality, Thinking Balladry: Of Milkmaids and Minstrels in 1771.” *The Eighteenth Century* 47.2/3 (2006): 131-49. Project Muse. 20 Dec. 2007 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 1982. Rev. ed. London: Routledge, 1993
- Percy, Thomas, ed. *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets, Together with Some Few of Later Date*. 4th ed. 3 vols. London, 1794
- Ritson, Joseph. *Ancient Songs: From the Time of King Henry the Third to the Revolution*. London, 1790
- - -. *Scotish [sic] Songs*. 1794. 2nd ed. Glasgow, 1869
- Scott, Walter. *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads, Collected in the Southern Counties of Scotland; With a Few of Modern Date, Founded upon Local Tradition*. 2nd ed. 3 vols. Edinburgh, 1803
- Sharp, Cecil. *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*. London: Simkin & Co., 1907
- Spiers, John. “The Scottish Ballads.” *The Critics and the Ballad*. Ed. MacEdward Leach and Tristram P. Coffin. 1961. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973: 236-244
- Stewart, Susan. *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991