

1991

## Burns and the Traditional Ballad

Donald A. Low

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Low, Donald A. (1991) "Burns and the Traditional Ballad," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/46>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Donald A. Low*

## Burns and the Traditional Ballad

Traditional ballads form a small but important category within the great body of songs which Robert Burns supplied to his friend James Johnson for inclusion in *The Scots Musical Museum*. As editor of *The Scots Musical Museum* in all but name, Burns wanted to achieve a comprehensive and dependable printed collection. In practice, this meant trying to provide words and airs which were well matched. He commented.

Many beautiful airs wanted words; in the hurry of other avocations, if I could string a parcel of rhymes together any thing near tolerable, I was fain to let them pass. He must be an excellent poet indeed, whose every performances is excellent.<sup>1</sup>

Burns took pleasure in many different kinds of songs from Scotland's past, quite often adding to them when words were incomplete or obviously unworthy of a fine air. He did not distinguish sharply and consistently between, say, traditional ballads and broadside ballads in the manner of modern folklorists. Thus, such celebrated and distinctive Burns songs as "McPherson's Farewell" and "It was a' for our rightfu' king" were created on the

---

<sup>1</sup>*Notes on Scottish Song by Robert Burns*, ed. James C. Dick (London, 1908), p. 24.

basis of broadside ballads.<sup>2</sup> Burns is not to be thought of as a ballad purist or in any sense exclusive in approach. He enjoyed traditional or "classical" ballads, yes, but without abandoning his loyalty to other lyrical forms. In Mary Ellen Brown's words, "Burns knew ballads, but preferred lyrics."<sup>3</sup> Or as was noted by R. D. Thornton, seven out of ten of his songs were love songs, and one out of every two had its inspiration in personal experience. "Those songs inspired by history, a country, or a bewitching lassie generally came easy. Others were just plain hard going." With regard to collecting, the same scholar observes:

Perfect collecting can no more be expected from eighteenth century Burns than perfect liberty of the press can be expected from seventeenth century Milton.<sup>4</sup>

The process of sending traditional ballads to the *Museum* began inauspiciously with a version of "O that I were where Helen lies" in volume 2 of the *Museum*, published in 1788. Thomas Pennant had told the tragic love story behind what he described as "an ancient ballad of no great merit" in his *Tour in Scotland* (1774), and John Pinkerton printed the ballad ostensibly "from Tradition" in *Select Scottish Ballads*, 1783.<sup>5</sup> Burns commented to George Thomson in 1793:

The old Ballad is silly, to contemptibility. My alteration of it, in Johnson, is not much better. - Mr Pinkerton, in what he calls ancient ballads . . . has the best set. - It is full of his own interpolations, but no matter.<sup>6</sup>

Some ballads and songs were included in the *Museum*, no doubt, on the practical ground that no Scottish song collection was likely to be considered complete without them. An example of this kind is probably "Hardyknute, or The Battle of Largs," which had enjoyed a tremendous vogue since being published about 1710. (As it happens, the very earliest printing is included

---

<sup>2</sup>*Scots Musical Museum*, ed. James Johnson, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1787-1803), 1788, No. 114, signed Z (hereafter *SMM*); *The Poems And Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols., (Oxford, 1968), No. 196; *SMM*, 1796, 497, unsigned; Kinsley No. 589.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Ellen Brown, *Burns and Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup>R. D. Thornton, *The Tuneful Flame: Songs of Robert Burns As He Sang Them* (Lawrence, KS, 1957), pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 155, unsigned; Kinsley No. 203.

<sup>6</sup>*The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 220-1. Henceforth *Letters*.

in the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina.) I suspect Burns knew that "Hardyknute" was a modern ballad imitation. The matter-of-fact note in his List of Songs for the 3rd Volume of the *Musical Museum* does not seem to indicate that he was among the keenest "Hardyknute" enthusiasts:

Mr Burns sends the tune, Mr Johnson may just engrave three or four stanzas of the song as it is prodigious long, & put an, &c. where he leaves off.<sup>7</sup>

Johnson followed this suggestion, though not to the letter. "Hardyknute" occupies one page of volume 3 of the *Museum*, 1790. Fifteen stanzas are crammed in before the &c.

Another note in the same List of Songs for Volume 3 shows Burns's antiquarian instinct. Opposite "Barbara Allen" he writes:

In Percy's reliques of English Poetry which Mr Johnson may borrow out of any booksellers shop this song is in its best edition.<sup>8</sup>

Fairly often, perhaps, Burns in Dumfriesshire found himself missing the stimulus of Edinburgh with its rich combination of talk, music-making, and bookshops. His role in helping Johnson at long-distance required tact as Johnson was not at ease with the written word.

Percy had made ballad-collecting fashionable. In August 1787 Burns sent Tytler of Woodhouselee songs and fragments picked up from oral tradition, which he described as, "a sample of the old pieces that are still to be found among our Peasantry in the West. . . ." He added

I once had a great many fragments and some of these here entire; but as I had no idea then that any body cared for them, I have forgot them.<sup>9</sup>

All he needed was the opportunity to share with others what he knew. Burns is arguably the most notable collector of Scottish ballads between Percy's *Reliques* (1765) and Joseph Riston's collection of *Scottish Songs* (1794). Several of the ballads he caused to have included in volumes 4 and 5 of the *Museum* in 1792 and 1796 are "firsts" in the sense that they are the earliest printed versions we have of Child ballads.

---

<sup>7</sup>Burns's "List of Songs for 3d volume of the Scots Musical Museum," facsimile of holograph MS in *The Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James C. Dick (London, 1903).

<sup>8</sup>"Bonny Barbara Allan," *SMM*, 1790, 221.

<sup>9</sup>*Letters*, I, 147. Cf. National Library of Scotland, Watson MS 586, ff. 1129, 1143.

The 1792 volume, for instance, contains "Hughie Graham" in a form learned by Burns from oral tradition in Ayrshire, where it was popular in his boyhood.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Scott's version of "Hughie Graham" in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* is set in Carlisle, Burns's takes place in Stirling, which he had visited in 1787. References to Graham being "led up thro' Stirling town" (l. 6) and to "the gallows knowe" (l. 29) happen to match the actual topography of Stirling. (The gallows hill in Stirling is known today locally as the "Gowany.") Certain lines—9-12, 29-32, and 39-40—have been identified as probable additions by Burns to the text he collected.

Volume 3 also contains a fragmentary version of "Lord Randal," two stanzas only asking the question, "O, where hae ye been, Lord Ronald, my son?"<sup>11</sup> Pointing out that Burns is likely to have known more than two stanzas, Kinsley suggests that he may have reduced the ballad to make a song. This is certainly a possible explanation, approximately analogous to the reduction of "Hardyknute." But why did Burns take a quite different approach with "Hughie Graham," and for that matter with a very famous ballad included in volume 5?

If Percy and Ritson have a claim to be mentioned along with Burns, so also without question does David Herd, whose *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* (1769; 2 vols. 1776) was rightly praised by Scott as "the first classical collection of Scottish Songs and Ballads."<sup>12</sup> (Herd was born in Kincardineshire, which probably gave him an advantage in the search for reliable ballad versions.) Burns refers to Herd's work by the name of the printer, Wotherspoon. To judge by the number of times he makes use of songs or fragments gathered by Herd, he clearly found considerable stimulus in his example. It evidently did not trouble him that, as Sidney Gilpin pointed out in 1870:

The great drawback of Herd's Collection is that it gives no names of authors, no references to the sources from whence its contents were derived, no notes or comments regarding their probable date, nor any other information of a like character.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 303, unsigned; Kinsley No. 342.

<sup>11</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 327, unsigned; Kinsley No. 352.

<sup>12</sup>Kinsley, II, 1309.

<sup>13</sup>*Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*, reprinted with memoir and illustrative notes by Sidney Gilpin (Edinburgh, 1870), p. xii.

"There was a battle in the north" (Child, 209) is the subject of this comment by Burns in the Hastie MS after a note on a song from Herd's collection, "Altho' I be but a Country Lass":

Put likewise after this song the inclosed old ballad, as it sings to the same tune. - It is rather too long, but it is very pretty, and never that I know of was printed before.

Burns seems to have recovered not only the words but the air, which may be as old as the early seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> "There liv'd a man in yonder glen," no. 365 in the 1792 volume of the *Museum*, is Burns's variant of a comic ballad collected by Herd, "Get up and Bar the Door."<sup>15</sup> Burns set his own version of the words to the tune *Johnie Blunt*, which he is reported to have communicated to the *Museum*, and gave the name John Blunt to the slow-witted hero of the ballad.

Number 377 in volume 4, "O Lady Mary Ann Looks o'er the Castle-wa'," is an expanded five stanza variant of two verses in Herd's manuscripts, "She Looked o'er the Castle-wa'." Again, Burns seems to have provided the melody, a haunting one this time, as well as the words.<sup>16</sup>

Volume 5 contains another earliest printed ballad version in number 462, "Aften hae I play'd at the cards and the dice," to the tune "The rantin lad-die."<sup>17</sup> This is Child no. 240, "Lord Aboyne." Burns collected both words and melody, quite possibly while touring the northeast of Scotland in 1787.

You may recall that "The tayl of the yong tamlene" appears in the catalogue of songs, and "thom of lyn" in the catalogue of dances, in *The Complaynt of Scotland*. An essential part of the supernatural context is hinted at in King James the Sixth's *Demonologie* of 1597. He writes in Book 3, Chapter 5

That fourth kinde of spiritis, which by the Gentiles was called *Diana*, and her wandring court, and amongst us was called the *Phairie* . . . or our good neighbours, was one of the sortes of illusiones that was rifest in time of *Papistrie*: for although it was holden odious to Prophesie by the devill, yet whome these kind of Spiritis carryed awaie, and informed, they were thought to be sonsiest and of best life. To speake of the many vain trattles founded upon that illusion: How there was a King and Queene of *Phairie*, of such a jolly court and train as they had,

<sup>14</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 346, unsigned; Kinsley No. 358.

<sup>15</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 365, unsigned; Kinsley No. 368.

<sup>16</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 377, unsigned; Kinsley No. 374.

<sup>17</sup>*SMM*, 1792, 462, unsigned; Kinsley No. 575.

how they had a teynd, and duties, as it were, of all goods; how they naturallie rode and went, eate and drank, and did all other actions like naturall men and women: . . . the devil illuded the senses of sundry simple creatures, in making them beleve that they saw and harde such tinges as were nothing so indeed . . . sundrie Witches have gone to death with that confession, that they have ben transported with the *Phairie* to such a hill, which opening, they went in, and there saw a faire Queene. . .<sup>18</sup>

The greatest of all Scottish supernatural ballads was first printed in reasonably complete form by Burns. "Tam Lin" is number 411 in volume 5, 1796. (Herd has a fragmentary version, "Kertonha'.") Burns may have collected his version of "Tam Lin" direct from oral tradition, adding to it some lines of his own.<sup>19</sup> The precise means by which he obtained his text, however, is not known. There is a related manuscript in the collection of his antiquarian-minded Ellisland neighbor, Robert Riddell. It seems likely, therefore, as Child argued, that Burns and Riddell "derived the verses that are common from the same third party." What stands out about the version in the *Museum* is its narrative completeness and unity. Almost certainly, Burns contributed details—lines 65-68, 129-130, 145-8, as well as the lovely stanzas

Gloomy, gloomy was the night,  
And eerie was the way,  
As fair Jenny in her green mantle  
To Milescross she did gae.

About the middle o' the night  
She heard the bridles ring;  
This lady was as glad at that  
As any earthly thing.<sup>20</sup>

It is no doubt open to us to split hairs and complain that we can't be sure about what is Burns's work and what belongs to tradition. I suspect that Burns would not have greatly minded. Apart from not wanting to be credited with inferior songs which he did not write, he was not in the least proprietorial about his work on song. This was not like the authorship of poems in 1786, about which he felt intensely ambitious. Song-collecting, and the re-

---

<sup>18</sup>As cited by James Reed, *The Border Ballads* (London, 1973), p. 174.

<sup>19</sup>Kinsley, No. 558. Cf. Emily Lyle, "The Burns Text of Tam Lin," *Scottish Studies*, 15 (1971), 53-65.

<sup>20</sup>Kinsley, No. 558, ll. 153-60.

lated activity of touching up obviously defective inherited song-texts had to do with sharing and giving back something which properly belonged to the community of Scots song enthusiasts. As such it called for the unobtrusive exercise of his poetic skills: he was doing for its own sake something he loved, and remaining true to a lifelong interest:

A wish, that to my latest hour  
Shall strongly heave my breast;  
That I for poor auld Scotland's sake  
Some useful plan, or book could make,  
Or sing a sang at least.<sup>21</sup>

*University of Stirling*

---

<sup>21</sup>"Answer to the Guidwife of Wauchope-House," Kinsley No. 147B, ll. 15-20.