The Great Ballad Collectors: Percy, Herd, and Ritson

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The assigning of specific dates to a literary age is often misleading.  It may impose arbitrary limits not only undesirable, but inaccurate. The most I wish to do here is to indicate some of the signs that point to the third quarter of the eighteenth century as the centre of the transition period between the classical age, characterized by what Cazamian calls its "lucid self-mastery," and the romantic age with its rich self-expression; and to consider, both from a historical and a critical point of view, the part played in the transition by Thomas Percy, David Herd and Joseph Ritson, the three most important ballad collectors to arise in the second half of the century.

One of the important signs of the transition was the interest taken in translations from poetry of writers remote in time, place and spirit. Ker has shown the importance of Temple's essay, "Of Heroic Virtue," where Temple "notices the song of Ragnar because it explains something of the past, and contributes something to the experience of the human race."1 And further, in the essay, "Of Poetry," Temple "takes up 'runic' literature";2 but his remained a more or less isolated voice until Gray observed in "The Progress of Poesy," 1754, that it was possible to find the poetic muse in the untutored verses of Laplanders and South American Indians; and Macpherson in 1760 began to publish the Ossianic poems which, "whatever one may think of them now, exercised a European influence, making Scotland, in the eyes of the world, the true and only home of Romance."3

To read today Macpherson's "Dissertation concerning the Poems of Ossian," and Hugh Blair's "Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Os-


2 *loc. cit.*


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sian" is a valuable aid to understanding the literary climate which produced the great ballad collectors, particularly Percy and his circle, the climate wherein two widely disparate beliefs were held at the same time. Ossian is an epic poem, classical in effect, which the author and his admirers astonishingly affirmed was simpler than Homer, as full of sensibility as Virgil. Nevertheless in his dissertation Macpherson set down his ideas:

The nobler passions of the mind never shoot forth more free and unrestrained than in the times we call barbarous. That irregular manner of life, and those manly pursuits, from which barbarity takes its name, are highly favourable to a strength of mind unknown in polished times. . . . The human passions lie in some degree concealed behind forms and artificial manners; and the powers of the soul, without an opportunity of exerting them, lose their vigour. 4

Blair advanced to his argument through a discussion of the way in which the understanding gains ground over the imagination: "Hence poetry, which is the child of imagination, is frequently most glowing and animated in the first ages of society." 5 As an example of untamed imagination he turned back to the illustration used by Temple, "The Death Song of Ragnar," as preserved by Olaus Wormius, which he transcribed and commented upon:

This is such poetry as we might expect from a barbarous nation. It breathes a most ferocious spirit. It is wild, harsh, and irregular; but at the same time animated and strong; the style, in the original, full of inversions, and, as we learn from some of Olaus's notes, highly metaphorical and figured. 6

But a poem of this kind could not commend itself wholeheartedly to one steeped in the sensibility of the age, and it is not surprising to find that Blair wrote:

But when we open the works of Ossian, a very different scene presents itself. There we find the fire and enthusiasm of the most early times, combined with an amazing degree of regularity and art. We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity. Our hearts are melted with the softest feelings, and at the same time elevated with the highest ideas of magnanimity, generosity and true heroism. When we turn from the poetry of Lodbrog


5 "Dr. Blair's Critical Dissertation," p. 79.

6 Ibid., p. 84.
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to that of Ossian, it is like passing from a savage desert into a fertile
and cultivated country.7

Ossian has a "Solemn and awful grandeur," and

[1] In point of humanity, magnanimity, virtuous feelings of every kind
... not only the heroes of Homer, but even those of the polite and
refined Virgil, are left far behind by those of Ossian.8

Although the reaction from the artificiality of the classical age was not
yet well established, the transition was in progress. "The public has
seen all that art can do," wrote William Shenstone to John MacGowan
in 1761, "and they want the more striking efforts of wild, original,
enthusiastic genius."9 In view of Shenstone's work at this time in
pruning the ballads to make them suitable for men of taste, this state-
ment is typical of the inconsistencies of the age.

The "more learned antiquaries" who succeeded Ramsay, did not
confine their interest only to Gaelic, Norse, Icelandic [sic] and Welsh.
They began to turn their attention to the neglected treasures of their
own language. After publishing his "Five Pieces of Runic Poetry,"
Percy borrowed from Allan Ramsay's son the transcripts of David
Lyndsay's Interludes, which Ramsay had begun in 1724 and had re-
turned to after twenty years.10

I do not wish to oversimplify here; to maintain that all writers
and scholars in Britain were interested in antiquities in general and
ballads in particular. It is nevertheless true that the vivid emotions of
the time called for adequate expression, and this could not always be
found in the "order" and "reason" of the neo-classical poets. Readers
were no longer satisfied with a composition wherein one "might
suppose that the poem was written for a wager, to prove that country
life might be described, and nothing called by its name."11 Simplicity
of diction was sought, but fervour and passion must accompany the sim-
plity. The primitivism which had spread to nature in both philosophy
and gardening, was, as Lovejoy pointed out, extended to literature.12

7 loc. cit.
8 Ibid., p. 97.
9 Duncan Mallam, ed. The Letters of William Shenstone (Minneapolis,
10 George Neilson, "A Bundle of Ballads:" Essays and Studies by Mem-
bers of the English Association, VII (1921), 163.
11 C. V. Deane, Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry (Oxford,
12 A. O. Lovejoy, "The Discrimination of Romanticism," PMLA, XXIX
(1924), 241.
The necessary qualities were not to be found in the contemporary poetry of a literate people. But they were found in ballads.

Among the distinguishing features of ballad poetry are its vocabulary, rhetoric and complete freedom from fashionable poetic diction. The "wan water" and the "lily lea," "the black steed or the brown" belong to no period—they are ballad epithets. But also peculiar to this kind of poetry is the point of view found in a ballad, a point of view which is direct, simple, primitive. Love, sex, jealousy, violence, superstition and death are all presented with a matter-of-fact directness, uncomplicated by orthodox moralizing, although ballads have their own moral values. The result of this directness is a dramatic compression, which brings to the reader a sudden sense of different standards. As C. V. Deane has said in his Aspects of Eighteenth Century Native Poetry, "the ballads came to be powerful dissolvers of eighteenth-century poetic complacency." In them was found the freedom from rules, and from the false wit which Addison had deplored; here was the "painting of nature" described by Joseph Warton. Deane has a paragraph on ballad phraseology which is pertinent at this point:

If their work points in many ways to a transitional state of taste, it can hardly be said that the eighteenth-century ballad editors were conscious of preparing the way for a grand revolution in poetic aims. They did not hold that the taste for the polished verse of their contemporaries was likely to be dispelled by the appeal of these more roughly moulded treasures of the past. It does not seem unjustifiable to suppose, therefore, that their evident appreciation of the formal elements in the oral poetry—or, as Percy put it, "a cast of style and measure very different from that of contemporary poets of a higher class; and many phrases and idioms, which the minstrels seem to have appropriated to themselves"—may have been quickened by the fact that an equally conventional phraseology was prevalent in the verse of their own age.

On to the stage then, thus adequately furnished, in 1765, and with a receptive audience already assembled, came treading delicately, but firmly, Thomas Percy. Percy was a man of his time. Few can regret that it fell to his lot to rescue the old folio MS. from Humphrey Pitt's housemaid. Hecht, whose assessment of Percy's contribution is very just, praised his "knowledge and art." Professor Clawson in his article, Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, showed how susceptible Percy was to the literary currents and tendencies of his age,

13 Deane, p. 25.
14 loc. cit.
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while attributing to him more originality than is generally accorded today:

His literary ambitions, facile pen, assimilative and sympathetic power of appreciating and reflecting what he read, delicate but somewhat narrow literary judgment, and slender but genuine poetic talent made him capable of presenting this popular material in a form which would arrest public attention.18

That Percy appreciated the "poetry in a state of nature" which he found in the folio, is beyond doubt, and his desire to share it was genuine; but equally strong was his anxiety to conform to the standards of contemporary correctness. Here was the conflict already evident in the dissertation of Macpherson and, later, of Blair. Despite his real enthusiasm for his subject Percy felt the need to apologise for the collection he offered to the public. True, Watson in 1711 and Ramsay in 1724 had both prefaced their collections with deferential explanations; but these men had been pioneers, and the time was not ripe for their kind of offering. Percy, on the other hand, published his selections from the folio MS. not only with the blessing of "the author of the 'Rambler' and the late Mr. Shenstone," but indeed on the "importunity of several learned and ingenious friends."19 The preface to the first edition of the Reliques 20 shows how fortunately situated Percy was to undertake his chosen task. Watson had been a busy printer, Ramsay a wig-maker, but Percy was a scholar and a gentleman. As chaplain to the Earl of Sussex he had means and some leisure; as a man he had a lively curiosity, and as a literary connoisseur he had scholarly friends who were all ardent admirers of this "new, irregular poetry." He was even able to protest that "To the friendship of Dr. Samuel Johnson he owes many hints for the conduct of the work." Despite the assistance of scholars who supplied him with manuscripts and annotations, Percy cautiously says that "he was long in doubt whether, in the present state of improved literature, they [the ballads] could be deemed worthy


20 The date of the first edition of the Reliques is 1765, but notice must be taken here of an edition in 3 vols. in the Bodleian Library catalogued under the date 1764. These have no title page or preliminary leaves, but on the spine is the legend Percy's Ancient Poetry. These volumes are in Douce's Collection, and inside one volume Douce has noted that he bought them at D. Farmer's sale, as supposed waste, but that they contain some pieces not in the published editions.
the attention of the public.”

That his admission was not from naiveté becomes evident from an examination of some of his voluminous correspondence.

An adequate estimate of Percy's position in the world of letters of the second half of the eighteenth century has not yet been made, although as Watkin-Jones pointed out thirty years ago:

It seems that a thorough biography is necessary to do justice to a man of so many activities. Such a biography would also do inestimable service as a guidebook or map to this abundant period, revealing much information about the literary and social activities of the time.

Realization of the fundamental importance in literary history of an inquiry into the diaries and vast correspondence left by Percy, who, having a sound idea as to its value caused much of it to be collected during his lifetime, has led David Nichol Smith and Cleanth Brooks, as general editors, to publish some of this fund of material; though some MS. material remains untouched as yet.

It is an anomaly that the very qualities for which Professor Clawson praised Percy are those which damned him in the eyes of his contemporaries, Joseph Ritson, critical student, historian and antiquarian, but only occasionally a man of taste. Percy was at all times willing to sacrifice accuracy and fidelity on the altar of good taste as he understood it. He was frank about this characteristic, and hardly found it a defect. An indefatigable worker, he carefully collated transcripts with their originals, and spared no pains to pick up information. However, "to edit" meant "to improve," and the notion of "improving" or "refining" the ballads was a constant subject of his correspondence. And if Dr. Johnson pontificated that the "reading of ancient books is probably true, and is therefore not to be disturbed for the sake of elegance, perspicuity, or mere improvement of the sense," Percy gave no sign that he heard. He believed himself to be not only sufficiently honest in his editing, but deserving of praise for his methods, and even for his disarming, if mistaken, modesty in the preface:

18 Percy, I, ix.


20 Six volumes have been completed of this correspondence: Percy and Malone, Percy and Richard Farmer, Percy and Thomas Warton, Percy and Dalrymple, Percy and Evan Evans, Percy and George Paton.

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[When, by a few slight corrections or additions, a most beautiful or interesting sense hath started forth ... the Editor could seldom prevail on himself to indulge the vanity of making a formal claim to the improvement; but must plead guilty to the charge of concealing his own share in the amendments under some such general title as a "Modern Copy," or the like. ... His object was to please both the judicious antiquary and the reader of taste; and he hath endeavoured to gratify both without offending either.

Until the publication of the Percy-Shenstone correspondence by Hans Hecht, the reasons for the individual amendments were a matter for conjecture, although the publication of the Folio Manuscript by Hales and Furnivall in 1867 enabled Child to set down a comparison of the MS. texts with those of Percy, taken, as he said, from the folio, a task not possible for the early editors, who had not been permitted a glimpse of the folio. The Percy-Shenstone correspondence, first edited by Hecht, shows Percy's mind at work. For example, in November 1757, some months after the production in London of John Home's *Douglas*, the tragedy founded on "Gil Morice," Percy wrote to Shenstone to tell him that he had a MS. version of "Gil Morice" which Johnson urged him to publish, although Boswell reported of *Douglas* that Johnson had said angrily that there were not "ten good lines in the whole play."22 Two months later Shenstone wrote back quoting stanzas of the same ballad, which he believed were an improvement on those in Percy's copy:

His hair was like the threads of gold
Shot frae the burning sun,
His lips like roses dropping dew,
His breath was a perfume.23

Shenstone's version is oddly reminiscent of lines in a short poem by an anonymous author which appeared in *The Edinburgh Miscellany*, 1720, wherein a lady's hair is described as: "Of shining Thred, shot from the Sun,/ And twisted into line."24 Percy expressed his gratitude for Shenstone's help, finding that the versions "differ in a surprising manner; scarcely two lines are found alike."25 The ballad remained uppermost in his mind. Again he wrote:

I can think of no rhyme for Sun in the 14th Stanza of the additions to Gil Morice—but what if you find one for perfume lin. ult. Query?

24 *The Edinburgh Assembly: by various Hands* (Edinburgh, 1720), p. 3.

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Threads of Gold drawn from Minerva's Loom — or something infinitely better.26

One need not conclude that Shenstone approved of the version Percy finally published in the Reliques:

His hair was like the threads of gold,
Drawne frae Minervas loome:
His lipps like roses drapping dew,
His breath was s' perfume.

Even the simple perfume has now become "all perfume." He had now confirmed his belief that if being Scots tended to make a ballad good, being more Scots would make it better. An example of superlative understatement occurred in the notes Percy appended to this ballad:

As this Poem lays claim to a pretty high Antiquity, we have assigned it a place among our early Pieces; though, after all, there is reason to believe it has received very considerable Modern Improvements.

Percy had indeed reason to believe so! This same remark is repeated in all subsequent editions of the Reliques, but with additional notes.

An early letter from Percy to Shenstone makes it clear that the collaborators did not always agree:

By Mr. Dodsley I rec'd the favour of your Corrections of the Rhymes you were so good as to look over: to your Pen they are now indebted for Beauties they were not before possess'd of. You will notwithstanding (I flatter myself) make Allowances for the foolish Fondness of Scribblers, if you sh'd find I have now and then ventur'd to retain the old Reading, in Defiance of your superior Judgment.27

They were equally culpable, however, in their editorial methods, and equally deserving of the scorn and censure Joseph Ritson was soon to pour out. That there was as yet no formula or specific criterion for a ballad is obvious throughout the correspondence, although Shenstone attempted a very simple definition in a letter to Percy: "I... am apt to consider a Ballad as containing some little story, either real or invented."28 It remained for Ritson to differentiate clearly between song and ballad, and to make the now accepted statement that a ballad is a lyrical narrative.

26 loc. cit.

27 ibid., p. 4.


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Percy's correspondence with Scottish antiquaries, begun in 1762, is illuminating. In January 1763 he wrote to David Dalrymple (later Lord Hailes) suggesting the mingling of two ballads, "Adam Carre" and "Edom O' Gordon," in order to make "one elegant ballad." And in the same letter he said:

[S]hould any improvement either in Sentiment or Expression occur, I should not scruple to insert it, provided it were not inconsistent with the general Plan or style of the Poem.39

His complacency here regarding his ability to improve the poems is rather remarkable, considering that he was to write to Dalrymple a few months later: "[I]n some of the Scottish Ballads I meet with expressions which the Glossaries I have at hand either wholly omit, or do not explain to my satisfaction."30 And a year later, regarding "Scottisms," he wrote:

Mr. Johnson (Author of the 'Rambler') who has been with me for 2 months past on a Visit & left me but last week, gives them up as inexplicable: and as he has a good deal of Glossarizing knowledge, it will be some honour to succeed, after he has given them over.31

Obviously Percy and his correspondents found nothing reprehensible in using Procrustean methods on the old poems. John Wother-spoon, the able printer of the collection of ballads published in 1769 by David Herd, not only agreed with their methods, but offered approval. Herd was the most faithful and trustworthy editor of old songs and ballads yet to appear on the scene. Lacking the "facile pen" and "poetic talent" of Percy, but with far less concern for the sensibilities of the man of taste or feeling, Herd succeeded in pleasing the latter, as well as the judicious antiquary. After reading Herd's volume with pleasure, Percy proposed through an intermediary, George Paton, friend of contemporary Scots scholars and writers, to use Herd's MS. in a forthcoming volume. Wotherspoon replied to Paton:

My friend, Mr. Herd, obliged me with a sight of Dr. Percy's letter to you respecting the Scottish Songs, &c., which I now return.—Be pleased to inform that gentleman, that we cheerfully consent to his making the use he proposes of our MS. vol. by extracting such fragments as he thinks proper to adopt into his plan. These mutilated antiques thus perfected and restored by Dr. Percy, will give us a pleasure resembling that which we should feel from beholding the injuries of time on a

30 Ibid., p. 58.
31 Ibid., p. 85.

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statue of Phidias or Polyclitus repaired by the hand of Buonarroti [sic].32

Today few readers would disagree with Hodgart that as "scholarship the collection [the Reliques] is useless, and . . . highly uneven in literary value"; but most would concur, as would have even the redoubtable Ritson, when he added, "it is nevertheless a remarkable achievement."33 The publication of the Reliques resulted in a furor similar to that caused by Ossian. In Britain within two years the demand resulted in a second edition, similar to the first but not identical with it. Ancient manuscripts were turning up; "old women and nurses" were persuaded to remember and recite or sing other versions than those "purified" by Percy; and the excellent chapbooks of Robert and Andrew Foulis were increasingly circulated. Sudden retribution did not fall upon Percy, but criticisms of his first edition were not lacking. In the second edition he found it necessary to make changes, add explanatory notes, and sometimes modify or amplify the notes he had already given. But these changes did not necessarily make for improvement or more accuracy. Sometimes Percy, like Dr. Blair, had too much sensibility; a condition regretted by Dr. Johnson, when he pronounced that Mrs. Percy "had more sense than her husband."34

It was reasonable that Dr. Johnson should be mild in his strictures. He had greatly encouraged Percy in the early days of their mutual interest in ballads. Indeed Irving Churchill declares that only Johnson's preparation of his edition of Shakespeare prevented him from being co-editor.35 But Percy's severest critic was not a gentleman. Today Ritson's thunder perhaps tells us less about Percy than it does about Ritson, although one admits that the thunder was justifiable:

The history of Scotch poetry exhibits a series of fraud, forgery, and imposture, practised with impunity and success. The ballad of Gil Morrice, was printed, for the second time, at Glasgow [by the brothers Foulis], in 1755, with an advertisement, setting forth "that its preservation was owing to a lady, who favoured the printers with a copy, as it was carefully collected from the mouths of old women and nurses; and

32 Hans Hecht, ed. Songs from David Hord's Manuscripts (Edinburgh, 1904), pp. 22-23.
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"any reader that can render it more correct or complete," is desired to oblige the public with such improvements. In consequence of this advertisement, as we learn from Dr. Percy, no less than sixteen additional verses were produced and handed about in manuscript, which that editor, though he conjectures them after all to be only an ingenious interpolation, has inserted, in their proper places. . . . The doctor assures us, that in his ancient folio MS. "is a very imperfect copy of the same ballad: wherein, though the leading features of the story are the same, yet the colouring here is so much improved and heightened, and so many additional strokes are thrown in, that it is evident the whole has undergone a revival. . . ." The original stanzas, even as the ballad is now printed, may be easily distinguished from the interpolations; great part of the latter being a[n] . . . evident and pitiful forgery. 36

Ritson saw no chance of being allowed to examine the folio MS. It was easier for Hales to be amiable eighty years later, when he and Furnivall had the precious document in their possession:

The extent to which Percy used his Folio MS. in his Reliques has been concealed by his misstatement, that of the pieces he published "The greater part of them are extracted from an ancient folio manuscript in the Editor's possession, which contains near 200 poems, songs and 'metrical romances'."

The Reliques (1st ed.) contains 176 pieces, and of these the Folio is used only in 45; so that for Percy's "greater part" we should read "about one-fourth," and, if his term "extracted" is to be taken strictly, "not one-sixth." It is perhaps too bad to follow Bp. Colenso in applying the test of numbers to poetical statements, but the result may as well be known. 37

One illustration of Percy's technique may suffice here. The edition of 1775 followed more or less the same lines as the text of 1767, with re-touching and re-editing still the order of the day, and misleading statements set down as facts. The old Scots song "John Anderson my jo" suffered particularly reprehensible changes. It was given in the edition of 1765 as follows:

Woman.
John Anderson my jo, cum in as ze gae bye,
And ze sall get a sheips heid weel baken in a pye;
Weel baken in a pye, and the haggis in a par;
John Anderson my jo, cum in, and ze's get that.


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Man.
And how doe ze, Cummer? and how doe ze thrive?
And how mony bairns hae ze? Wom. Cummer, I hae five.
Man. Are they to zour awin gude man? Wom. Na, Cummer, na;
For four of tham were gotten, quhan Wullie was awa'.

The accompanying note explained:

It is a received tradition in Scotland that at the time of the Reformation, ridiculous and bawdy songs were composed by the rabble to the tunes of the most favourite hymns in the Latin service. . . . John Anderson my jo was [one of these].

The edition of 1767 followed that of 1765 as to text, but in the edition of 1775 the sea change occurred. The five bairns were turned into seven, and Percy appended the following:

In the present Edition this song is much improved by some new readings communicated by a friend; who thinks the "Seven Bairs," in st. 2nd allude to the Seven Sacraments; five of which were the spurious off-spring of Mother Church: ae [misprint for as] the first st. contains a satirical allusion to the luxury of the popish clergy.

Percy gave no authority for his changes, and he was not convincing as to the satirical allusion. Nor was there any proof for his "received tradition" with regard to the music of the song; indeed the opposite was true, and sacred words were given to the secular tunes, a fact which Ritson seized on eagerly. Too much blame, however, should not be attached to Percy in this case. Even William Tytler, an acknowledged authority on Scottish music, had fallen into the same error, and Ritson's wrath descended upon him also. But in this case Percy went his unrepentant way, and the notes and the bairns remained uncorrected. It is a small pleasure to add that Ritson nodded for once, and misquoted Percy, turning Percy's four bairns into three.

By the time Percy's third edition reached the public, David Herd's anonymous volume of 1769 had achieved so much favourable notice that Herd felt justified in issuing his collection rearranged and extended into two volumes, which appeared in 1776. Stern critical faculties were not yet brought to bear on ballads, but Herd earnestly strove for accuracy, and he was not troubled overmuch by the delicacy of feeling admired by Percy. Considering Herd's importance in the ballad history of the eighteenth century, it is unfortunate that so little has been done to rectify the neglect which has been his portion. Hans Hecht's Songs from David Herd's Manuscripts, published in 1904, remains the best available source for facts on "the most indefatigable and the most conscientious of the old Scots collectors." Hecht drew
largely on James Maidment's publications of the correspondence of George Paton, Herd's friend and one of the original members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Paton is worthy of notice; as Hecht wrote:

[H]is influence on the men of letters of his day must not be underrated. His comprehensive knowledge equally with his celebrated library was common property, and he imparted it with a liberality which gained him wide influence with the best intellect of his time. . . . The total number of his correspondents amounts to fifty-four, amongst whom are Lord Hailis, Thomas Percy, Joseph Ritson, David Herd, James Cumming, Gilbert Stuart and Lord Buchan.

Hecht added his regret that no editor has undertaken to finish the task so well begun by Maidment, but rejoiced that such a widely read book as Pennant's Tour in Scotland made enthusiastic acknowledgment of Paton's unselfish and faithful assistance to the literary undertakings of his friends.

It is clear that Herd had scant literary ambition. His first volume, The Ancient and Modern Scots Songs, Heroic Ballads, &c., was published anonymously. The preface is important historically, and as giving evidence of the trend ballad collecting had begun to follow:

The only collection upon our plan, consisting entirely of Scots Songs, is the Orpheus Caledonius, published by William Thomson in 1733; but this is confined to a small number, with the music, and now become very scarce; for Allan Ramsay's Tea-Table Miscellany cannot be termed A Complete Collection of Scots Songs; they are, as he himself entitled them,

—A Choice Collection of Scots and English.

The valuable collection of Percy has furnished some songs, and more perfect copies of several ballads, than those formerly printed; and when modern words could only be given to ancient tunes, these are, however (to speak on Ecceo) composed by Poets natives of North Britain. After the manner of Percy, it was at first intended to have prefixed notes to the more ancient and historical poems in this Collection; but the volume would have been thereby too much swelled; and as the Editor hath already some prospect of materials for a second, he is of opinion that these notes will come in with more propriety at the conclusion where they may be by themselves perused.

In 1776 the collection was issued again, in two volumes, with "The Second Edition" on the title page of the second volume. The work was

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38 James Maidment, ed. Letters from Joseph Ritson, Esq., to Mr. George Paton (Edinburgh, 1829).
39 Hecht, Songs, p. 7.
40 Ibid., p. 8.

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again anonymous, and T. F. Henderson is not accurate when he says in *Scottish Vernacular Literature* that Herd's name was given as editor of the volumes.41

There were improvements, additions, modifications and omissions in the edition of 1776. It was enthusiastically received, and no dissenting voice appears to have been raised save only that of John Pinkerton. The statement in Chambers' *Cyclopedia of Literature*, 1903, that "Herd did for Scottish song what Bishop Percy had done for English Ballads" does not over-state the importance of Herd's collections. Their influence can be clearly seen. Burns's debt to Herd is made clear in the notes in Henley and Henderson's Centenary Edition of *Burns's Poems*. Scott made no secret of his respect and admiration for Herd as a collector as well as a man. As the introduction to *Border Minstrelsy* shows, Scott was indebted to Herd for much valuable material:

To the politeness and liberality of Mr. Herd, of Edinburgh, the editor of the first classical collection of Scottish songs and ballads ... the editor is indebted for the use of his MSS., containing songs and ballads, published and unpublished, to the number of ninety and upwards.

In *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott* is a pen portrait of Herd, composed by Scott after Herd had been dead for fifteen years.42 But it could be argued that years are kind and Scott was not always discriminating. Perhaps more critical praise came from Ritson, of whom Scott had written: "As bitter as gall, and as sharp as a razor,"43 but whom even his enemies acclaimed as an acute and just critic:

To this [collection], though not so judiciously selected or arranged as it might have been, and containing many confessedly English songs, a few suppositional ballads, and several pieces unworthy of preservation, we are certainly indebted for a number of excellent and genuine compositions, never before printed, as the author of the present collection is bound in gratitude to acknowledge.44

Ritson's indebtedness to Herd included the loan of Herd's MS., and interesting side-light on the characters of the two men appear in the correspondence regarding it.

44 Ritson, p. lxxiv.
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Ritson is nowadays so much in the forefront of ballad discussions, that his position in literature may well be defined here. Henry Alfred Burd, who in 1915 published "Joseph Ritson, A Critical Biography," puts the case for Ritson into the first paragraph of his preface:

Joseph Ritson is a minor figure in the literary history of the latter half of the eighteenth century. But he was one of the chief instruments in bringing about the changes in that period of remarkable transition. Although a potent factor in reviving the interest in ballads and old poetry and in hastening the acceptance of advanced standards of editionship and criticism, he has been largely ignored in the historical appraisement of the romantic movement. This neglect was not altogether unnatural. Ritson's method of criticism was so invasiously personal and his beliefs and habits were so eccentric that attention was attracted primarily to his peculiarities, while his stable qualities were overlooked by the majority. As a consequence of the silence which early enshrouded his name, an adequate estimate of his literary place has, up to the present, been impossible.

To appraise Ritson, as in the case of any writer, it is best, generally, to go to the fountainhead, to the writer himself; and for this appraisal an examination of the Percy-Ritson controversy is illuminating. To this end a dissertation written by Ritson in 1783 will serve as a beginning. Ritson was a collector of literary antiquities, and one of his earliest publications was "A Select Collection of English Songs," to which he prefixed a dissertation entitled "A Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song." This was inspired directly by the essay "On the Ancient English Minstrels," with which Percy had prefaced his "Reliques" almost twenty years earlier, and which had appeared unchanged in two subsequent editions. Percy's essay was designed to show that minstrels were composers, musicians, poets and singers, quite often all four functions being combined in one person; and as such they held an exalted position not only in the Anglo-Saxon court, but continued to do so for hundreds of years after the Conquest. Percy embellished his essay with the fruits of scholarship in the form of lavish quotations, anecdotes and conjectures; and as proof positive, he quoted a letter from an eye-witness of an entertainment given in 1575, where one of the entertainers was garbed as "an ancient MINSTREL." A note of modern verisimilitude was injected into the romantic picture: "A pair of pummas on his feet, with a cross cut at his toes for corns no new indeed, ye cleanly black with soot, and shining as a shoon horn." The pleasant discursive essay accorded well with the agreeable texts and notes of the Reliques. Pinkerton loudly admired it in 1776, repeated his admiration in 1781, and again in 1783, just before he read Ritson. But Ritson had not been idle. Un-
impressed by either Percy's romance or his realism, and with the fanatical zeal and painstaking labour which characterized him in all his undertakings, Ritson, in his "Historical Essay" refuted and ridiculed Percy's cherished theories. His method was to give facts, not to make generalizations, and he gathered together a store of references, all to show that Percy was gravely misinformed. According to Percy:

The Minstrels seem to have been the genuine successors of the ancient Bards, who . . . sung verses to the harp, of their own composing. . . . Our Saxon ancestors . . . had been accustomed to hold men of their profession in the highest reverence. Their skill was considered as something divine, their persons were deemed sacred, their attendance was solicited by kings, and they were everywhere loaded with honours and rewards.

This indiscriminate use of the term "minstrel" to cover a whole group of entertainers was summarily dismissed by Ritson in his "Observations on the Ancient English Minstrels":

Under this comprehensive term minstrel . . . we are to include the trouvère, or poet, the chanteur or vocal performer, and the mendiant, or musician; not to mention the fablier, conteur, jugleur, baladin, &c. all which were sometimes distinct professions, and sometimes united in one and the same man.

Ignoring the evidence Percy had amassed, Ritson declared that Percy's statements were pure conjectures. Like Hume, he asked for testimonies.

Percy was not the only author to feel the sting of Ritson's jibes. Pinkerton also was attacked, with vehemence bordering on brutality, for his collections of songs and ballads, and particularly for his observations on his material. Burd believes that the attack was intensified because of Pinkerton's nationality, since it is true that "Scotchmen [Ritson] entertained an aversion as pronounced as that of Dr. Johnson." But Thomas Warton had been castigated in like manner years before, for his History of English Poetry (1774-81), the history in which he gave three chapters to Scottish verse, thus being the first Englishman to discuss critically and historically the work of Scottish poets. No attack, however, was more scathing or vindictive than Ritson's uncompromising denunciation of well-meaning Percy. Percy, declining to take public action, tried through private intervention to make explanations to his critic, but in vain. Ritson would not be silenced, neither could he be ignored. Ritson was embarrassingly

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convincing. Even Percy’s admirer, John Pinkerton, although one who had also suffered at the hands of Ritson, had finally gone over to the enemy’s camp, and in a letter to Percy admitted the error in his thinking:

I must confess myself thoroughly convinced that Minstrel only implied Musician, and was never used for a bard, maker or poet; were I reprinting any former production in this way I would retract all my opinions to the contrary, though often repeated.

After suggesting a rearrangement of Percy’s essay to distinguish the minstrel proper from the poets and reciters, Pinkerton added:

Even granting all the passages cited in your favour, you must contend against hundreds on the opposite side. For a part, Ritson’s book may be referred to.46

In 1791, a third edition of Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, Heroic Ballads, etc. appeared, which Thomas Wilson Bayne, writing in the Dictionary of National Biography, describes as being “manifestly without Herd’s supervision.” No fewer than forty-one of Herd’s songs were omitted, and their places supplied by modern compositions, some of them popular songs by Burns. There was no preface, and Herd’s notes were omitted. While there is no evidence that Herd offered any objection to this pirating of his text, or to the misspelling of the word “Scottish,” in the title, it would appear that some readers found the new edition unsatisfactory, and hoped for another. George Chalmers wrote to a friend: “You talked of a new edition of Mr. D. Herd’s Songs, to be edited by Mr. W. Scott. Is this almost ready for the public? I hope Mr. Scott will not touch the text.”47 Scott’s edition, if it had ever been projected, did not appear—it will be remembered that he acknowledged the use of Herd’s MS. in his own Minstrelsy. More than a hundred years went by before a page-for-page reprint of the edition of 1776 was published.

In the meantime, three years after the publication in 1791 of Herd’s Songs in its mutilated form, a fourth edition of the Reliques was released, but not under the editorship of Bishop Percy. The task of editing, explaining and apologizing had been left to a nephew, who was also a namesake, Thomas Percy.

Do we find once more that Johnson is a dangerous person to disagree with? Was it his criticism that hurt Percy? We remember

46 Ibid., pp. 163-164.

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that it was for the convenience of the great man that Percy had had the folio bound in the first place; and the sad mishap caused by the binder. But we remember also:

Dr. Johnson resisted to the end what he considered a deplorable deviation from neoclassical standards. In 1777, "he observed that a gentleman of eminence in literature had got into a bad style of poetry of late. . . . Boswell: That is owing to his being much versant in Old English Poetry. Johnson: What is that to the purpose, Sir? If I say a man is drunk and you tell me it is owing to his taking much drink, the matter is not mended. No, Sir — has taken to an odd mode." (And he then produced his famous parody: 'Hermit how, in solemn cell')."\(^{48}\)

In 1794 Percy’s nephew found it still necessary to defend his relative, and stated in his introduction:

The appeal publicly made to Dr. Johnson in the first page of the following Preface, so long since as the year 1765, and never once contradicted by him during so large a portion of his life, ought to have precluded every doubt concerning the existence of the Manuscript in question.

The indifference may have been due to the venom with which Ritson had attacked, or it may, though less probably, have been due to private acknowledgment on the part of Bishop Percy of the superior quality of Herd’s variants of ballads. It may even have been caused by grief suffered on the death of his young son, the son for whom he had destined the folio MS. and of whom he had great hopes for assistance in this work. Whatever the cause, the younger editor explained in the "Advertisement" to the fourth edition:

Twenty years have nearly elapsed since the last edition of this work appeared. But, although it was sufficiently a favourite with the public, and had long been out of print, the original Editor had no desire to revive it. . . . More important pursuits had, as might be expected, engaged his attention; and the present edition would have remained unpublished, had he not yielded to the importunity of his friends, and accepted the humble offer of an Editor in a Nephew.

Posteriority has not accorded importance to the pursuits in which the Bishop was engaged in Dromore; his fame rests solely on the Reliques.

The text of 1794 was a great improvement on that of all previous editions. Percy had not held out against his critics; and the edition of 1794 is a lesson in how gracefully a gentleman who considers it more important to please the reader than to instruct him will accept correction. The famous essay on minstrels was changed, although all mention of the changes was relegated to a footnote:

\(^{48}\) Hodgart, p. 148.
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Wedded to no hypothesis, the Author hath readily corrected any mistakes which have been proved to be in this Essay; and considering the novelty of the subject, and the time, and place, when and where he first took it up, many such had been excusable. — That the term minstrel was not confined, as some contend, to a mere musician, in this country, any more than on the Continent, will be considered more fully in the last note . . . at the end of this Essay.

The title of the essay was subtly altered from "An Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels," to "An Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England," and the difficulties of the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans thus gently overcome. Nor did Percy any longer insist on the greater antiquity of the minstrels. The essay began:

The Minstrels were an order of men in the middle ages, who subsisted by the arts of poetry and music, and sang to the harp verses composed by themselves, or others. They also appear to have accompanied their songs with mimickry and action; and to have practised such various means of diverting as were much admired in those rude times, and supplied the want of more refined entertainments.

In this way he encompassed the indiscriminating term "minstrel."

Unfortunately not enough changes were made. The preface was couched in the same polished eighteenth-century diction the Bishop was accustomed to use, and the younger Percy was equally addicted to ambiguity and half-statement:

These volumes are now restored to the public with such corrections and improvements as have occurred since the former impression; and the text in particular hath been emended in many passages by recurring to the old copies. The instances, being frequently trivial, are not always noted in the margin, but the alteration hath never been made without good reason; and especially in such pieces as were extracted from the folio Manuscript so often mentioned in the following pages, where any variation occurs from the former impression, it will be understood to have been given on the authority of that MS.

Some of Percy’s methods of amending the text have been shown. That he was conscious of the lack of accuracy is clear from the defence he made of his errors in advancing lack of proof-reading in extenuation; but as Ritson had acutely observed, "[Percy] would perceive the justice of confining this excuse to the first edition." 49 It is manifestly clear today that Ritson, without access to the folio MS. was justified in declaring that Percy had "fairly and honestly printed scarcely one single poem, song or ballad." 50 Nor was this state of affairs materially mend-

49 Burd, p. 160.
ed by 1794; Percy's position remained in the end what it was in the beginning — he believed that the pieces had to be polished that they might "in the present state of improved literature be deemed worthy the attention of the public."

The honours on the score of the minstrels are today as evenly divided as when Scott wrote in the supplement to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

[U]pon a recent perusal of both these ingenious essays, we were surprised to find that the reverend editor of the *Reliques* and the accurate antiquary have differed so very little as in essential facts they appear to have done. . . . [H]ot arguments, and on one side, at least, hard words are unsparingily employed; while . . . the contest grows warmer in proportion as the ground concerning which it is carried on is narrower and more insignificant. In reality their systems do not essentially differ.\(^{51}\)

Percy's theory of antiquity was not wholly wrong, nor was Ritson's theory of the Elizabethan origin of the ballads wholly right. There is perhaps less unanimity regarding Ritson's criticism of Bishop Percy's methods of editing the ballads. Ritson had said:

If the ingenious editor had published all his imperfect poems by correcting the blunders of puerility or inattention, and supplying the defects of barbarian ignorance, with proper distinction of type, it would not only have gratified the ausrest antiquary, but also provided refined entertainment for every reader of taste and genius.\(^{52}\)

In this Burd agrees with Percy:

Modern critics and historians of literature following [Percy's] lead, declare with one accord that the plan pursued was the only one which would have insured a kindly reception to these rude remains of antiquity.\(^{53}\)

Nevertheless one can say with Ritson, while apologizing for his syntax, "As a publication of uncommon elegance and poetical merit, I have always been, and still am, a warm admirer of Bishop Percy's *Reliques*;"\(^{54}\) and continue to agree with him when he says more strongly:

To correct the errors of an illiterate transcriber, to supply irremediable defects, and to make sense of nonsense, are certainly essential duties of an editor of ancient poetry, provided he act with integrity and publicity;

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\(^{52}\) Burd, p. 162.

\(^{53}\) *loc. cit.*

\(^{54}\) *ibid.*, p. 159.
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but secretly to suppress the original text, and insert his own fabrications
for the sake of providing more refined entertainment for readers of
taste and genius, is no proof of either judgment, candor, or integrity.55

Proof that the public was not quite so tender-minded with regard
to its ballads as Percy and Burd might have us believe, is found in the
reception accorded to Herd's first volume, which was so rapidly sold
out that augmented volumes were published a few years later; and when
Herd did not accede to public demand and issue a third edition, the
pirated volumes of 1791 went on the market. Herd was, in the particu-
lars given above, an editor after Ritson's own heart. More proof is
found in the fact that Ritson's own collections, Ancient Songs, Pieces of
Ancient Popular Poetry, English Songs and Scotch Songs, all unboudler-
ized and without poetic effort on the part of the editor, were also given
a warm welcome. If the charming woodcuts by John and Thomas Be-
wick which illustrate the first edition of Pieces of Ancient Popular
Poetry are adduced as reason for the popularity of Ritson, it may be
noted that they are not present in his other volumes. The popularity
of the chapbooks by Robert and Andrew Foulis, and nearer the end of the
century, of the "penny numbers" published by Brash and Reid, indicate
also that the climate of opinion was favourable to "the rude remains of
Antiquity" in their unpolished state.

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55 Ibid., p. 162.

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