Graves and the Scottish Ballads

When in 1957 Robert Graves brought out his Heinemann edition of *English and Scottish Ballads*, he wrote that the traditional form had been ended as a folk tradition by modern technology:

> ... the old minstrel ballads continued until a few years ago to be sung in the chimney corners of English and Scottish farmhouses, as also in the hills of Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, where seventeenth-century settlers had taken them.... However, the radio, the cinema, and television have killed all that.

Writing from his home in Majorca, Graves not only over-estimated the penetration of television signals into remote (or even well-populated but rural) areas, he also seems to have been unaware of the continuing fieldwork of the Library of Congress and of the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies, both of which remain active today and were particularly so in the twenty years after Graves wrote the above words. At any rate, by 1961 he seemed to be aware that his opinion was at least premature, for he wrote a brief blurb to be included in the liner notes of two long-play records (*The Child Ballads, Volumes 1 and* 2) that appeared in the United States on the Caedmon label and in Britain on Topic Records Ltd. After four years' reflection, he could write:

> This is a faithful and authentic recording. Nineteenth century collectors lay under the mechanical disadvantage of being unable to perpetuate the voices, accents, grace-notes and tempo of the singers. The folk songs they harvested, and too often bowdlerized, lost most of their poignant magic when regularized as drawing room ballads with piano settings. Here, nothing is lost or falsified.

Clearly, modern technology had turned out to be, not the villain of the piece, but its hero.

In fact, the radio was playing so many hit versions of ballads and other folk songs in the late 1950's and early 1960's that the handed-down traditions of Appalachia and of the British Isles' itinerant "travelling people" could not help but be re-invigorated, so that both are still relatively strong even today. For the purposes of this article, however, I will restrict the period of inquiry to the two

decades after Graves first addressed the subject (i.e., 1957 through 1977). During these years, had fieldworkers found considerable, even insurmountable, difficulties in locating contemporary versions of the Scots ballads Graves himself selected for inclusion in the Heinemann collection? A brief survey of recordings made in the field and still available to the general public in late 1991 would indicate otherwise, just as had been true between Graves's first book on the ballads (1927) and his second and last thirty years later.

The portable recording equipment available by the late 1920s, when electrical recording was first introduced, had allowed for many ventures into the "field" (sometimes a quite literal term!); and during the postwar period before Graves wrote in 1961, British, Irish and American scholars had found versions of most of the Scottish ballads he had selected for the 1957 collection. In fact, these number eleven just on the Caedmon/Topic recordings issued in 1961; they are as follows: "The False Knight on the Road" (Child #3), "The Twa Sisters of Binnorie" (Child #10), "Lord Rendal" (or "Lord Donald, My Son") (Child #12), "The Dead Brother" ("My Son David" or "Edward") (Child #13), "Young Beichan" ("Lord Bateman") (Child #53), "Barbara Allen" (Child #84), "Hugh of Lincoln" ("The Jew's Garden") (Child #155), "Johnny Faa, the Lord of Little Egypt" ("The Gypsy Laddie") (Child #200), "Henry Martin" (a variant of "Sir Andrew Barton") (Child #167 and #250), "The Gaberlunzie Man" ("The Jolly Beggar") (Child #279), and "The Golden Vanity" (Child #286). It should be clear why Graves, when presented with this evidence, had to reverse himself on the four-year-old opinion that these songs had been "killed." The British-isles work of such scholars as Sean O'Boyle, Alan Lomax, Hamish Henderson, Seamus Ennis, Peter Kennedy, Marie Slocombe, Patrick Shuldham-Shaw, and Maud Karpeles had proven overwhelmingly convincing.

Graves was not alone in seeing a moribund folklore, for even the earliest ballad-hunters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were convinced from the outset that they were putting down on paper the last fragments of a dying tradition. Print, both in book and broadside form, did undoubtedly help the songs' survival into our own century, just as radio, television, and sound-recording continue the ballads' survival into the next. The tradition we are interested in here, however, is that of songs passed down within families, homes, and communities where the singers have begun to regard the ballads as "their own" and even to convince others that this view is at least partially true. The singer may therefore be unhappy with publication, as was the case when Sir Walter Scott and William Laidlaw visited the elderly mother of James Hogg just after the first appearanrce of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. She told them

> "There was never ane o' my sangs prentit till ye
> prentit them yoursel', and ye have spoilt them
> awthegither. They were made for singin' and no' for

> readin', but ye have broken the charm now, an' they'll
> never be sung mair. And the warst thing o' a',
> they're nouther right spell'd, nor right setten down."

Her editorial interest in correct grammar, complete accuracy, and supernatural intervention would certainly have appealed to Graves, as his notes to the Heinemann collection (as well as his "Introduction" to it) concern themselves largely with such considerations. Nevertheless, editorial liberties may have been less acceptable to such other early ballad collectors as Bishop Percy, John Leyden, William Motherwell, James Maidment, George Ritchie Kinloch, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe and William Hamilton, younger of Airdrie. Often these men were as conservative and eccentric as the singers they found. Here is John Buchan on Charles Kirkpartick Sharpe:

> "... connoisseur, antiquary, reactionary and wit, who
> walked the streets in a fantastic wig, and in a thin
> soprano voice poured scorn on a vulgar world and on
> all in it that was not long-descended. But Sharpe was
> a sound scholar in his way and had a heart beneath his
> corsets...."

Those are not the politics of Robert Graves, nor indeed of any contemporary folklorists, but such an attitude undoubtedly did contribute to accurate setting down of ballads, so we must perforce be respectful of such early workers in the tradition.

Whereas the mobility of the British itinerants has given them the close family relations necessary to preserving these ballads, in America it is apparent that a certain "mountainous" isolation and static family existence have best kept alive the songs over the past three centuries. Graves has mentioned the southern Appalachian region, but the songs are as easily found in the Adirondacks and Ozarks. Between 1957 and 1977, fifteen Scots ballads from the Heinemann collection by Graves were recorded in the field—both in Scotland, where Aberdeenshire now proves even more fruitful than the Borders, and in a variety of locales in the United States. Sandy Paton recorded "The False Knight in the Road" by Betty Smith of Marietta, Georgia, in 1975 and "The Two Sisters" by Lee Monroe Presnell in Beech Mountain, North Carolina, in 1961. Kenneth Goldstein found "Lord Randall" in a version by the famous Jean Ritchie of Viper, Kentucky, in 1961; and Paton has recorded three performances: Frank Proffitt in Reese, North Carolina, in 1962; Lawrence Older in Middle Grove, New York, in 1963 ("Johnny Randall"); and Sara Cleveland in Brant Lake, New York, in 1968 ("My Bonny Bon Boy"). Goldstein also recorded Ritchie's "The Cherry Tree Carol" (Child #54) in Viper in 1961, while Paton found Lena

Armstrong at Beech Mountain in 1964 singing "The House Carpenter" ("The Demon Lover" in Graves—Child #234). In 1962 in Butler, Tennessee, Paton recorded Joseph Able Trivett's "The Golden Willow Tree" (Graves's "Golden Vanitie"); and Mark Wilson found many retentions (rhyme scheme, characters of cabin boy and captain, etc.) of this song in Almeda Riddle's singing of "The Merrimack at Sea" in Heber Springs, Arkansas, in 1972 (this version may be closer still to Child #289).

Not only did Peter Cooke discover a version of "Young Beichan" by Campbell MacLean in 1974 in Edinburgh, Scotland; but Paton found Buna Hicks singing her "Young Beham" on Beech Mountain in 1964, while Wilson recorded Nimrod Workman's interpretation of "Lord Baseman" in Chattaroy, West Virginia in 1976. Goldstein recorded Ritchie singing "The Unquiet Grave" (Child #78) and "The Wife of Usher's Well" (Child #79) both also in 1961, while Hedy West of northern Georgia, who became a professional singer like Ritchie, did a version of the latter sung for A. L. Lloyd in London in 1967. Not surprisingly, "Johnny Faa" has enjoyed the greatest measure of popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. The great Jeannie Robertson sang "The Gypsie Laddies" in 1959 in Linburn, Scotland, for Hamish Henderson and Fred Kent; and Ailie Munro and Henderson recorded John MacDonald of Pitgaveny singing "The Roving Ploughboy" in 1974. In America, Sandy Paton recorded 1962 versions by Proffitt ("Gyps of David"). "The Dead Brother" has been found in Goldstein's 1961 recording of Ritchie's "Edward," in Wilson's 1976 recording of Workman's "What is That Blood on Your Shirt Sleeve?" and in Wilson and Bill Nowlin's 1972 and 1975 recordings of Riddle's "The Blood of the Old Red Rooster." Although found less often in recent years in Britain, "Barbara Allen" has proven stubbornly pervasive in Virginia, where by 1967 (ten years post-Graves's remarks for his Heinemann selection) ninety-two different versions had been recorded in that single state! West did hers for Lloyd in the 1967 recording session. The pirate ballad "Sir Andrew Barton" was recorded by Paton in Older's "Elder Bordee" in 1963, proving that a sea-farer's song could work its way up into the Adirondacks and take permanent hold there.

Finally, the Graves selections of "Waly Waly" and "The Gaberlunzie Man" illustrate a frequently made point about Victorian prudery hanging on in the American mountains while the relaxed bawdiness of Britain's itinerant "tinkers" and "gypsies" seems to have been untouched by the nineteenth-century Queen's influence. A cautionary verse or two of the former ballad is all that remains in the Paton-recorded 1962 "Fair and Tender Ladies" of Trivett and of Jean Ritchie's sister Edna (also of Viper, Kentucky). In 1968 Paton found Sara Cleveland's version ("Come All You Maidens") and recorded it at Brant Lake. All three singers' renditions would certainly be seen as suitable for mixed company of all ages. In 1974 Edinburgh, however, Kent and Munro recorded Lizzie Higgins (the daughter of Jeannie Robertson) singing a version of "The

Jolly Beggar" learned from her justly famous mother. That the song is supposedly autobiographically concerned with the amorous exploits of a king of Scotland has not made it any more acceptable to singers in America, where even today the citizenry are appalled by the lack of their political leaders' concern for what is euphemistically called the "character issue."

To sum up, despite the fears of Percy, Scott, and Graves, the ballads of the Scots Borders, Lowlands and Highlands are still alive and well. They may be "spoilt" in Mrs. Hogg's view, but they have not yet been killed, so the charm was not broken by the ballad-hunters' printing, nor by their more recent employment of the tape-recorder. The "muckle sangs" go on being sung for entertainment and instruction of self, family, and community—as well as in the concert hall, on popular recordings, over the radio, and upon the silver screen. Graves did well to revise somewhat his 1957 statement about their demise.

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