

Ballads in the West

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One form of literature which has lasted three hundred years is now becoming absolutely and irretrievably extinct—the Ballad Literature of the people. From the time of Elizabeth and, no doubt before that, the ballad was the means of telling a story. The rhymer sang his tale to the accompaniment of the lute or some other instrument, and his audience did not weary of a long drawn-out tale.

It is otherwise now. The people have their daily paper and are impatient of a long story. Everything must be cut short to suit their impatience. So the ballad is dead. It lingered on last as a narrative of murders, or as a political engine ; but it is now extinct in both forms.

The old broadside has disappeared. Messrs. Besley of Exeter, and Messrs. Keys of Devonport, who were wont to issue large numbers of such sheets, have ceased to do so some thirty years. Broad-sides and chap-books which were common in our childhood are now rare, and are eagerly bought up.

Catnach of Monmouth Court, Seven Dials, issued enormous numbers from his press. His successor Fortey advertised that he had four thousand different sorts for sale. There were other publishers of broadsides in London, Birt of 39, Great St. Andrew Street, Seven Dials; Hodges, 31, Dudley Street, Seven Dials; Paul, 22, Brick Lane, Spitalfields; Ryle, Monmouth Court, Bloomsbury; Pitts, 6, Great St. Andrew Street, Seven Dials; Taylor, 67, Steelhouse Lane; Sharp, 30, Kent Street, Borough; Watts, Lane End; Marks, Brick Lane, Spitalfields; Batchelor, 14, Hackney Road Crescent, Shoreditch; Disley, 57, High Street, St. Giles; Such, 177, Union Street, Borough; Mitchelson, 51, Turnmill Street, Clerkenwell; Neesom, Brick Lane, Spitalfields; Hill, 14, Waterloo Road; etc. In the provinces, there were Messrs. Keys of Devonport; Messrs. Besley of Exeter; Jacques of Manchester; Walker of Durham; Dodds of Newcastle; Webb of Leeds; Pratt of Birmingham; Ford and Cock of Sheffield; Jackson of Birmingham; King of Birmingham; Watts of Birmingham; Harris also of Birmingham; Fordyce of Newcastle and Hull; Ainsley of Durham; Thompson of Liverpool; Harkness of Preston; Walker of Lincoln; Williams of Portsea ; Ross of Newcastle; and many others.

The ballads printed at these establishments were on very thin paper and were sold at fairs for a halfpenny each. No collection at all complete has been made of them. In the British Museum are nine folio volumes of broadsides collected by Mr. Crampton, but of these only one volume is devoted to the provinces; and it contains nothing like a complete collection of those issued in London.

Now – the question arises – Whence did these printers obtain the ballads and songs they issued from their presses? Mr Hindley tells us that Catnach and no doubt the other Publishers had a staff of men who rhymed for them, or who collected ballads. For each new one produced the pay was half-a-crown. Those that they themselves composed are chiefly, if not wholly, on passing events, on murders, on political events, or on the fashions and foibles of the time. Those that they picked up were either traditional, or were such as had acquired an ephemeral popularity from having been sung at Vauxhall-gardens, Surrey-gardens, or in other concert places. When the rhymer

produced a modern song, before Catnach, Fortey, Such, or another of the great purveyors of broadsides it was printed with tolerable accuracy; but when they gave up a traditional ballad, they were pretty sure to make a hash of it. They took from oral recitation, and in course of traditional recitation the ballads became very corrupt. It is, perhaps, as remarkable a feature of this literature as any, that the unintelligent rendering of the ballads, the manifest blunders and transpositions, altering sense and destroying rhyme, are left uncorrected.

Not only so, but the rhymers mixed up their ballads and songs, taking a little bit of one and a little bit of another, jumbling them together in a most curious and stupid fashion.

For instance, there is a song, which was printed on a broadsheet by Mr. E. Keys, 7, James Street, Devonport; called

"The Streams of Lovely Nancy" I will give it from the broadside:

- 1 "The streams of lovely Nancy divides in three parts,
Where young men and maidens do meet their sweet-hearts;
In drinking good liquor which makes me to sing,
And the sound of the vallies makes my heart for to ring.
2. In yonder high mountains a castle there does stand,
It is built with ivory near to the black sand;
It is built up with ivory and diamonds so bright,
It is a pilot for strangers in a dark stormy night.
3. As a sailor was walking, a walking along,
Says a sailor to his true love I will sing you a song;
It is a false-hearted woman which makes me to say,
Fare you well lovely Nancy for I must away.
- 4 On yonder high mountain there wild fowl fly,
There is one amongst them that flies very high;
My heart as an eagle's wings when they are spread,
Soars high when I think on my angelic maid.
5. We sailed from London to fair Liverpool town,
Where the girls they were plenty, some white and some brown;
But of all the bonny lasses that ever I did see,
At the sign of the Angel is the darling for me.
6. I'll go down unto the nunnery and there end my life,
And I never will be married, nor yet he made a wife,.
So constant and true-hearted for ever I'll remain,
And I never will he married till my love comes again."

Now this is made up of three distinct ballads. The first, second and fourth verses belong to a ballad, called 'The Sweet Streams of Nance.' The third verse belongs to quite another ballad; and the fifth and sixth to a third.

The person who brought the song to the printers made a patchwork of it. In the first place he made this stream unto Nancy, then that led him to tack on a verse about a sailor's parley with his true love Nancy. Then, as the song was still short, he filled it out with two verses from another ballad altogether, one relative to a trooper who rides down from Manchester according to one version; "Out of the North," according to another. This is a very long ballad, and the composer of the patchwork arbitrarily took two of the verses, one from the middle and one from the end so as to fill out his copy for the printer.

Now in the song of "The Sweet Streams of Nance," that which makes the heart to ring is, of course, the viols, and this the unintelligent parrot-like repeater has converted into "vallies:" The original ballad is still sung by very old men in Devon, to a remarkably sweet quaint melody; it ran originally thus :-

"O the sweet streams of Nance
They divide in three parts, (Qu. Two parts.)
Where the young men at dance
They do meet their sweethearts.
And 'tis drinking strong ale
That doth wake my heart sing,
And the sound of the viol
That doth make my heart ring."

Then the song goes on to compare the true love to a castle of ivory set with diamonds and roofed with gold, and to a wild fowl flying high over the mountain. It is clearly an early song which has become degenerated.

In collecting ballads and songs from oral recitation one has to distinguish, there are some that come to us from the very old men who can neither read nor write, and such are usually much more correct than the versions sung by younger men, who can read, and who have taken theirs from broadsides. Thus we find side by side the same ballad sung in two ways, the corrupt form which issued from the press where a printer's mistake may have made nonsense of the words, or his necessity which prompted him to tack on to an over short ballad a scrap of another. When, however, this printed ballad can be found – not always an easy matter – then the source of the error is discovered, and something more on the other hand, the errors which have crept in in singing, can be corrected by the printed texts.

I have not gone over any great area in my search for songs or ballads still sung by our peasantry (or rather let me say still remembered by the oldest men as having been sung by them,) but within the narrow area that I have worked, I have come, upon the following:-

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| 1. The Outlandish Knight. | 17. The Lady and the Dragoon. |
| 2. The Shepherd's Daughter and Sir William. | 18. The Buxom young Tailor. |
| 3. The Baffled Knight. | 19. The Grey Mare, |
| 4. The Jolly Sportsman. | 20. The Golden Vanity. |
| 5. Childe the Hunter. | 21. Henry Martyn. |
| 6. The Thresherman and the Alderman. | 22. The Good Comrade. |
| 7. The Golden Glove. | 23. The Ploughboy and the Fair Lady. |
| 8. The Lace Merchant. | 24. The Undutiful Daughter. |
| 9. Richard Melvine. | 25. Green Broom. |
| 10. Arthur of Bradley. | 26. Roving Jack the Journeyman. |
| 11. Pretty Barbara (a version of Barbara Allen.) | 27. The Brisk young 'Drover. |
| 12. Brennan on the Moor. | 28. "Cold blows the wind, tonight, sweetheart." |
| 13. The Gipsy Countess. | 29. The Contented Farmer's Son. |
| 14. The Mole Catcher. | 30. Cupid the Ploughboy. |
| 15. Young Riley. | 31. The Miraculous Hen. |
| 16. The Brisk Young Serving Maid. | 32. A Penny in the Pocket |

There are a good many others that might be classed between ballad and song, and there are some ballads of much later date, as "The West Country Farmer and the King;" and there are various sea, hunting, and criminal ballads.

A good number of the above have been printed in one collection or other, but I have not met with all – some indeed belong to a state of social and moral rudeness that prevent their publication

now-a-days – not by any means have all been printed on broadsheets. So far, I have been unable to trace " Henry Martyn," which I here give. I have obtained three versions of it, one filling out *lacunae* in the others, from three old men of over eighty years, all sung to the same fine melody:-

HENRY MARTYN."

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| <p>1. In merry Scotland, in merry Scotland
There liv'd brothers three,
They all did cast lots which of them should go,
'A robbing upon the salt sea.</p> <p>2, The lot it fell on Henry Martyn,
The youngest of the three,
That he should go rob on the salt, salt sea,
To maintain his brothers and he.</p> <p>3. He had not sailed a long winter's night,
Nor yet a short winter's day,
Before that he spied a rich merchant-ship,
Come sailing along his way.</p> <p>4. O when she came by Henry Martyn,
'I prithee now let us go.
'Nay nay, God wot ?' said Henry Martyn
' For that never at all will do.'</p> | <p>5. How far, how far,' cried Henry Martyn,
'How far are you going?' said he,
For I am a robber upon the salt seas
To maintain my brothers and me.'</p> <p>6. They merrily fought for three long hours
They fought for hours full three,
At last a deep wound gave Henry Martyn
All upon the salt, salt sea.</p> <p>7. 'Twas broadside to a broadside then,
And a rain and a hail of blows,
A shot bored a hole, and there ran in the sea,
And down to the depths she goes.</p> <p>8. Bad news, had news for proud England,
Bad news has come to town,
For a rich merchant vessel is cast away,
And all her brave seamen drowned. '</p> |
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The 'Golden Vanity' was the "Trinity," one of Raleigh's vessels, and the ballad concerning it is printed by Mr. Ashton in his "Century of Ballads," it was issued in the 17th century, but the ballad as given by Mr. Logan, in "A Pedlar's Pack," from a broadside printed by Pitts of Seven Dials, agrees with our West of England version, and contains the story of the cruel treatment of the little cabin boy who bored holes in the Turkish galleon and sank her.

"Cupid the Ploughboy" is a curious instance of unintelligent rendering. The ballad concerns a fair maid who looks over a stile and sees Cupid ploughing. Then ensues a dialogue in which she gets the worst of it. He is ploughing to sow the seeds of love. In the broadside version, all winds up with Cupid marrying the young lady. And, indeed, one of the younger singers I have heard give this ballad, so finishes the story, and converts Cupid into Cubick; being absolutely unconscious of the real meaning of the piece. In like manner 'The Outlandish Knight' is converted into 'The Outlandish Cat,' and "Sir William' into "Sweet William,' in the ballad of 'The Shepherd's Daughter'. Richard Melvine is a long story of a wife who sends her husband to fetch, 'The Water of Absalom' – a long journey – and entertains the parson whilst he is away, or, as she thinks, absent. The waggoner, however, put his master in a sack, and stood him in the chimney nook, where he heard all that was said. It is a version in ballad form of an incident in the story of Friar Rush. "The Brisk young Serving Maid' is about a Falmouth girl who served in London and then put her money in a box on her head and started on foot for Falmouth. She fell in with a tinker who tried to rob her, but she knocked him on the head, and then, running away encountered a squire, told him that she had killed a man, and they returned to the spot. There, in the tinker's 'budget' was found a whistle. The squire put it to his lips, when, at the call, the rest of the gang came up. The brisk young maid with one pistol, and the squire with another of the pair found in the tinker's budget, disposed of the other robbers, and of course are married and live happy ever after.

" The gentles all within the land
They made the greatest strife,
The which of all that maid should win,
And take her for his wife.
But none of them could touch her heart,
But he who in the fight
Had stood by her, and her he made
To be his lady bright."

" The Jolly Sportsman" is an early and very curious ballad but hardly one to be printed; it is not exactly gross, but exhibits an extremely rude and simple state of society. 'Pretty Barbara' though running on the same lines as 'Barbara Allen' is an independent rendering, and is sung to an entirely distinct melody. It begins:-

"O once I was a bachelior,
From London town I came,
I courted pretty Barbara,
And Barbara her name.
But she was proud and lofty,
Her fortune was so high,
And for another bachelior
She scorn'd and passed me by."

In a more modern version in the mouths of younger singers the bachelor is converted into sailor :-

"When six long months were ever gone
Were over gone and past,
The maiden she was taken sick,
With love was sick at last.
She sended for the doctor-man
For him she fain would see, She sended for the bachelior
Whose wife she wished to be."

He comes, and she pleads; he refuses:-

Her rings from off her hands she took,
Her rings by two and three,
'Then take, O take these golden rings,
By them remember me."

It ends somewhat savagely. The bachelor says:-

O no! thou haughty Barbara,
So long as I have breath,
I'll dance above your green, green grave
Where you lie dead beneath."

'The Gipsy Countess' is a long ballad in two parts, or perhaps two ballads connected. Both are found in broadsheets, but the first in an entirely re-cast form. It consists of a dialogue between an earl and a gipsy maid, whom he persuades to become his countess, but she has great misgivings at heart. In the broadside she is made to say:-

Oh, Oh! How can a poor gipsy maiden, like me
Ever hope the proud bride of a noble to be? etc."

The very metre is altered. Here is one of the verses of the original:-

"I'll take you up, I'll carry you home,
I'll set you in a room so high.
I'll put a safeguard over you there,
That ne'er a gipsy shall come nigh."

The second part tells how her three brothers came under the castle and sang one night. Then her heart ached, and she came downstairs:-

They sang so sweet, they sang so shrill
That fast her tears began to flow,
And she put off her silken gown,
Her golden rings and all her show."

She runs away. At past midnight her lord comes home, finds she is gone, girds his sword to his saddle-bow, and rides after. As she refuses to return, he cuts her down with his sword. There are two Scottish ballads which are variants of this, and pretend to concern a Lady Casillis who ran away with Johnny Faa, who came in the disguise of a gipsy, for which he, not she, suffered. As Bishop Burnet was related through his wife to the Casillis family, this ballad, in its Scottish form, was sung by the Jacobites who hated Burnet. But I cannot help thinking that the original ballad related to a gipsy becoming a countess and then feeling *heim weh* for the wandering life, and running away; and that all the ballad of Lady Casillis and Johnny Faa, if there be any truth in the story of her elopement, which is doubtful, is a mere re-casting of an earlier ballad to suit the incident. As it is, in the broadsides the ballad assumes various forms.

That the old ballad still remains, lingering on around us, I have the best evidence to show, but it will not remain so long: it is most unfortunate that no attempt has been made in the past to do for the West of England what has been done for Scotland and the Borders. A large number of so-called Scottish ballads are simply English ballads that have been appropriated, given "a local habitation and name," and then assumed to be Scottish in origin. Of many of our old ballads, the broadside copies are all that exist, and these are utterly vulgarised and debased. It would be well if some of the readers of the *Western Antiquary* were to take the subject up and work it throughout the West. Questions relative to West Country ballads have been asked repeatedly in its columns, but no one seems to have gone to the right, indeed the only sources for them. "The Stout Cripple of Cornwall" and the Armada ballads have been printed over and over again. Untraceable ballads can only be recovered from very aged men between 75 and 85 years old, especially such as cannot read, and such as are the sons of old song-men. With them the ballads are traditional, having been handed down from father to son, and in a form usually more pure than can be found in broadsides. It is of no use seeking early forms of ballads from a later generation, as that generation has acquired its stock from the broadsides in the greater number of cases. I will give an instance of the treasures that may be picked up. The other day I heard a hunting song from an aged tanner in Launceston, a Liskeard man by origin. Now this identical song was composed concerning a hunt of Villiers, Duke of Buckingham and was printed in black letter broadside in the reign of James I or thereabouts. The ballad or song is published in the Roxburgh Collections, but with no music, and as far as I am aware never has been published with its melody. The air, however, I have obtained from the tanner. I find that from the farmer class no such ballads are to be recovered, all – or very nearly all – the songs they know are of the didactic nature of the songs of the end of last century or the beginning of this, and have all been published, but this is not the case with our illiterate aged now, and that is the bed to be worked for this recovery of our ancient ballads: it is probably the only bed. In conclusion I give a very charming little ballad, not very

ancient but fresh and quaint; obtained from an old fellow the other day, which will appear with its equally delicious and fresh melody in my Third Series of "Songs of the West," which, however, will not be published for some months.*

‘THE LADY AND THE PLOUGHBOY’

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| <p>1 " O the ploughboy was a ploughing,
With his horses on the plain,
He was singing a sad song upon the lea,
Since I have fall n in love,
If the parents disapprove,
'Tis the first thing that will send me to the sea,</p> | <p>Saying, I am forced to rove,
For the sake of my true love,
Who is but a little ploughboy from the lea.</p> |
| <p>2. When the parents came to know,
That their daughter loved hint so,
O they sent a gang and pressed him for the
[sea,
And they made of him a tar,
To he slain in bloody war, ,
Who was but a little ploughboy front the lea.</p> | <p>5, Now the first she did behold,
O it was a sailor bold,
' Have you seen my little ploughboy ?'then
[said she,
They have press'd him to the fleet,
He is tossing on the deep,
O he's but a little ploughboy from the lea.'</p> |
| <p>3. The maiden sore did grieve,
And without a word of leave,
From her father's house she fled secretlie
In male attire dress'd
With a star upon her breast
All to seek her little ploughboy on the sea,</p> | <p>6. Then she went to the Captain,
And to him she made complain
' p a little ploughboy's run away from me.'
Then the Captain smiled, and said,
"Why Sir - surely you're a maid, . -
So the ploughboy I will render up to thee.</p> |
| <p>4. - Then she went o'er hill and plain,
And she walked in wind or rain,
Till she came up to the brink of the blue sea,</p> | <p>7. Then she pulled out a store,
Five hundred crowns and more, -
And she strewed them o» the deck, did she.
Then she took him by the hand, -
And she rowed him to the land.
Where she wed the little ploughboy back from
[sea.</p> |

* Copies of "The Songs and Ballads of the West," harmonised and arranged for voice and pianoforte, Parts I. and II. contain 52 pieces, to be had of Rev. S. Baring-Gould, Lew Trenchard, N. Devon, *post free*, 6/4, or each part separately. 3/2.