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THE SCOTTISH BALLADS AND THE ORIGIN OF EARLY POPULAR AUSTRALIAN POETRY

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THE key word in this rather loose title is the word *ballad*, so perhaps we should reflect for a minute or two on its meaning.¹ In contemporary parlance, it usually refers to the words of a probably rather sentimental popular song but its derivation is interesting. It stems from a word in Old French—the word *balade*—which meant to dance, and the original meaning of the modern word ballad was a song, but a specific kind of song, one that during medieval times was sung to accompany a dance.

It is therefore no surprise that the Old French word *balade* is the ancestor of not only the modern word, ballad, but also of the modern word ballet. Typically, in the early modern period and before, the *balade* would have been performed by bands of wandering minstrels or troubadours that roamed through Europe at this time, and who had their counterparts in other cultures.² A definition in 1728 said they were songs commonly sung up and down the streets that express the call of the popular.³

The ballad and the ballet may have parted ways since the early modern period, but as far as the ballad is concerned, it is still associated with song and many of the Australian ballads that we will come to later, that is the early ones, are actually songs, in that their identity includes a specific tune. There is no better example than what is effectively our national song, *Waltzing Matilda*, which as everyone knows is sung to a tune written by James Barr for a Scottish song, *Thou Bonnie Wood of Craigielee*. In writing it Barr

¹ Alan Norman Bold, *The Ballad* (London: Methuen and Co, 1979) gives an overview.

² Natascha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad 1550–1650* [English translation] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) gives a good view of how this worked in England.

³ Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) p. 23.

may have been borrowing from an earlier tune *Go to the Devil and Shake Yourself*, such is the way of music descent.⁴

Another thing to observe about the ballad is its universality.⁵ I think it is fair to say that the ballad, as a distinct literary form, sprang from the universal phenomenon of storytelling, and one of the main characteristics of the ballad, of whatever age and place, is its narrative element. All ballads tell a story. And in telling its story, a ballad gets straight to the point of its subject. Everything is clear cut, and concentrated on the most dramatic part of the tale. As we know, the essence of drama is conflict between two opposing forces, and this kind of conflict was a speciality of the traditional ballad.

In all traditions, most ballads are concise and rely on imagery rather than description. The dramatic action is often stark, telling of murder, scandal, historic battles. Many ballads also featured elements of loyalty, the supernatural, comedy and fantasy.⁶ The ballad was a universal form of entertainment; a good night's entertainment, whether in a castle great hall or a village inn, would run the gamut of the emotions.⁷

Most of the entertainers would have learned their stories orally, by word of mouth, passing them on from group to group, and from generation to generation, sometimes improving them or altering them to suit contemporary circumstance, hence the reason for different versions of the same story, and also for the use of stock images, such

⁴ John Greig (editor and arranger), *Scots Minstrelsy: A National Monument of Scottish Song* (Edinburgh: Caxton Publishing Company, 1892), suggests that Barr in turn borrowed from an earlier tune.

⁵ Charles Duffin, 'Echoes of Authority: Audience and Formula in the Scots Ballad Text', Philip E. Bennett, Richard Firth Green (eds), *The Singer and the Scribe: European Ballad Traditions and European Ballad Cultures* (Leyden and Boston: Brill, 2004) pp. 135–152. The rest of the book shows ballad culture going back to the Greeks. There were ballads in Russia, Turkey and throughout the Middle East.

⁶ Because the stories were often about the aristocratic classes, some do not see them as proletarian. See David Harker, *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).

⁷ Contributors to Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerrini, Kris McAbee (eds), *Ballads and Broadides in Britain, 1500–1800* (London: Ashgate, 2010) discuss all of these subjects.

as the intertwining roses growing out of the twin graves of a pair of tragic lovers.⁸

Both the learning of the ballad by the minstrel, and its enjoyment by the audience, would have been heightened by the use of repetition, such as a refrain or the repetition of lines according to a pattern of rhyme. The traditional ballad had a predictable verse format, though this became more relaxed as time went on. And of course there would have been musical accompaniment, probably most often comprising the harp, the lute, the dulcimer and the hand drum, and in Scotland, most certainly the bagpipes or bladder-pipes as they were called elsewhere.

After the invention of the printing press, there grew up a body of urban balladry, often reflecting working class life in the new industrial towns, and including bawdy songs, drinking songs and early journalism including disasters and political events. These were printed in huge numbers and sold in the streets or at fairs, and were known as Broadside Ballads.⁹ Although they appeared mainly in England rather than in Scotland, they contributed to what happened later in Australia.¹⁰ The well-known and unintentionally comic Scottish poet William McGonagall inherits this tradition.¹¹

From the early 18th century, scholars in Scotland were collecting ballads and folk songs they heard locally.¹² Two of Scotland's greatest literary figures, Robert Burns¹³ and Sir Walter Scott, devoted much time, effort and expertise to the collection of traditional Scottish ballads.¹⁴ Scott's collection preserves for us many of the

⁸ For consideration of the relationship of oral and written tradition see David Atkinson, *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad and its Imaginary Contexts* (Cambridge: OpenBooks Publishers, 2014).

⁹ Atkinson, *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad*, p. 51, says it is thought that as many as 90% of the ballads collected during the romantic period were in print somewhere.

¹⁰ There are large collections of these in the National Library of Scotland, Glasgow and in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

¹¹ Alistair Moffat and James F. Wilson (eds), William McGonagall, *Collected Poems*, Introduction by Chris Hunt (Edinburgh:, 2011).

¹² Newman, *Ballad Collection*, Ch. 1.

¹³ Newman, *Ballad Collection*, Ch. 2.

¹⁴ T. F. Henderson (ed.), Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*, rev. ed., 4 vols (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1892).

ballads that are still anthologised today and his *Lay of the Last Minstrel* incorporated the enduring vision of the minstrel in the past. Burns often rendered his own version of an old Scottish folk song such as he did with *Auld Lang Syne*¹⁵ and with *Scots Wha Hae*¹⁶ based on a tune ‘Hey, tutti, taiti’, rumoured to be the tune to which Bruce marched into battle at Bannockburn,¹⁷ which we could think of as a refurbished political ballad.

Interest in ballads continued into the nineteenth century with numerous collections but the man who placed the ballad at the forefront of academic literary fashion, was the first Professor of English at Harvard, F. J. Child, whose five-volume work *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published between 1882 and 1898, made a systematic study of different versions of the same ballad, (and linked the British ballads and of course there were different versions of some ballads across the border in England) with the wider European scene. Child referenced thirty different language sources and ranged through the balladry of places as remote from the British Isles, Serbia and Turkey.

Now in speaking of Scottish ballads, it should be noted that not only were they characteristic of a body of Scottish and English popular poetry and song, from the medieval period right up to the nineteenth century, they were also characteristic of the poetry and song of Ireland. This will also have particular reference to the history of the ballad form in Australian literature. These were the songs that the people who came to Australia would have brought with them and would have adapted to their new land.

The Ballads they Knew from the Old Land

Let us start by considering a fairly typical traditional Scottish ballad, and perhaps isolate its characteristics. Many ballads recount the

¹⁵ Anon, ‘Broadside Ballad Entitled “Old Long Syne” [1701]’, *The Word on the Street*, at <http://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/broadside.cfm/id/14548>, provides a version from 1701.

¹⁶ Murray Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 218.

¹⁷ William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1998), pp. 4, 84.

exploits of the noble class, and have a specific context in History such as *The Bonny Earl of Murray*.¹⁸ *Edward* recounts the fate of a woman of quality who makes the wrong decision. It first appeared in the *Reliques* of Thomas Percy in 1765 and later in Volume I of F. J. Child's collection.¹⁹ It was one of the ones 'discovered' by Sir David Dalrymple who had an active interest in old Scots ballads. In the Child collection its language clearly identifies a Scottish rather than an English origin.²⁰ The plot can be found in varying versions some of which, like *The Daemon Lover*,²¹ have a magical or surreal context. In them, we are asked to reflect on the morality of the drama. The dramatic situation at the centre of this ballad is that of a woman whose former lover returns, after she has become the wife of another, and tried to claim her. As we listen to the dialogue, the story tells of the conflict this creates and its final consequence. It was sufficiently critical to have travelled to America as well as Australia and to have spawned a range of recent copies.²² If you detected the plot of a soap-opera in that, you probably have had a similar response to that of its original audience or I should say audiences. It has the moral question, couched in a fantasy, that in its day would have created a talking point just as today we leave the theatre discussing the moral implications of a play.

In *The Three Ravens* there is a woman of a different moral quality along with a dead knight and, central to the story, three talking ravens in a narrative that can be shown to date from the Middle

¹⁸ Edward D. Ives, *The Bonny Earl of Murray: The Man, the Murder, the Ballad* (Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. I (Boston & New York: H. Stevens & Son; London: Stiles, 1882), p. 167. Child's collection are the centre of most discussion of ballads even today.

²⁰ Bertrand Harris Bronson, *The Ballad as Song* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1969) collects together a number of studies of the Ballad and its music including *Edward*, studied from an American perspective on their use and survival there.

²¹ E. David Gregory, *Victorian Songhunters: The Recovery and Editing of English Vernacular Ballads and Folk Lyrics 1820–1883* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 44.

²² Barbara Fass Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), Ch. 3, 'The Devil's Bride', tries to set the drama in a historical context.

Ages.²³ Dramatically, this ballad has beside its ravens, the voice of a narrator; and again, the moral aspect, this time of loyalty and true love, is illustrated by the narrator using one of the stock images I mentioned earlier. Another short one on the same theme, *The Twa Corbies*, almost certainly Scottish, in which two ravens, or crows, who may or may not have been the forerunners of Disney's Heckle and Jeckle, similarly discuss the source of their next meal, shows the reverse of the coin; life must go on. Again, a narrator introduces the story but the corbies have the last word.

Of course not all the ballads are tragic or macabre, there is a good range of both comic and historical incident. An example of such a one, which turns up in many versions and was collected by both F. J. Child and Sir Walter Scott is the long story of the execution in 1530, by King James V, of Johnnie Armstrong of Gilnockie. Ballads focussing on Johnnie Armstrong come in various forms in both English and Scottish broadsides and in some he cuts off the king's head before being cut down by the royal guards.²⁴ Another example is *The Douglas Tragedy*, which is also in both collections.²⁵ This poem illustrates very well the typical components and attributes of the Scottish ballad, of adventurous, murderous love ending in death, although folklorists have insisted that it owes its descent to earlier Scandinavian ballads;²⁶ which just goes to suggest the cross-cultural universality of the genre. Like the ballad *Johnnie Armstrang*, *The Douglas Tragedy* is specifically related to the Border landscape, and in fact the combat between Lord William and the Douglas has been identified by ardent folklorists as having taken place at a circle of stones near the Douglas stronghold of Blackhouse Tower in the Yarrow Valley; which would mean that Lord William would not have made it to his mother's house, as the story claims he did. But when you consider the trouble we have in Australia of knowing

²³ Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin (eds), *A Companion to Old and Middle English Literature* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group 2002), p. 62.

²⁴ Graham Seal, *Encyclopedia of Folk Heroes* (Santa Barbara, CA, ABC-CLIO, 2001), p. 12.

²⁵ James Reed (ed.), *Border Ballads: A Selection* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003) p. 14.

²⁶ Sven Håkon Rossel (ed.), *A History of Danish Literature* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 67.

precisely which waterhole Paterson's swagman drowned himself in, perhaps we could take the assertion with the proverbial grain of salt.

The Early Australian Ballads

If we now look at the origins of Australian ballads we find again the strong link with songs and singing that took us back initially to the emergence of balladry in Scotland. Like his Scottish counterparts, Burns and Scott, Australia's premier poet of the bush ballad tradition, Banjo Paterson, was a collector of old songs. His landmark publication *Old Bush Songs* was published in 1905 but he was not the first to collect Australian ballads. There had been several earlier small collections of bush songs and poems, notably *The Queensland New Colonial Campfire Song Book* which was published in 1865 and which contained 17 songs, some of them anonymous. Even earlier, there were sea shanties coming to New South Wales with the sailors, and songs coming with the convicts, especially those from Ireland where the ballad tradition was as strong as it was in Scotland. Although the earliest ballads to be adapted in New South Wales were probably derived from London street songs, it is not long before the strains of Irish poesy are discernible, for example, from Australia's second penal colony, the gloomy ballad: *Van Diemen's Land*²⁷ meant to be sung back in the homeland.²⁸ Another anonymous one collected by Charles MacAlister and published in 1907, *Jim Jones At Botany Bay*, was probably sung to the Irish tune of *Skibbereen* although MacAlister said it was sung to the Irish tune *Irish Mollie*.²⁹ Some believe that the ballad as we have it was mainly MacAlister's own work—always a suspicion when oral works are concerned.

Paterson was puritanical in his choice of ballads to include. There were no British or Celtic songs unless they had been adapted to Australia and had thus emerged as uniquely Australian. He was also extremely circumspect about the subjects of the poems he included

²⁷ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. vii.

²⁸ James Philip Macaulay, *Poetry and Australian Culture* (Canberra: Canberra University College, 1955), pp. 5, 9, 10.

²⁹ Charles MacAlister in his *Old Pioneering Days in the Sunny South* (Goulburn: Charles MacAlister Book Publication Committee, 1907).

in *Old Bush Songs*.³⁰ The folklorist Warren Fahey advances a theory for this: that Paterson, conscious of the sensitivities of potential customers, deliberately downplayed the convict origins of the early songs; and secondly, remarking that there was not one song in Paterson's collection that had to do with the Kelly gang, that Paterson disapproved of the adulation of the Kellys that had taken hold in some quarters, and would have none of it in his collection.³¹

Perhaps it would be fair to examine Paterson's own views on his modus operandi, as stated in his Preface:

Apart from other considerations, there are many Australians who will be reminded by these songs of the life of the shearing sheds, the roar of the diggings townships, the campfires of the overlanders. The diggings are all deep sinking now, the shearing is done by contract, and the cattle are sent by rail to market, while newspapers travel all over Australia; so there will be no more bush ballads composed and sung, as these were composed and sung, as records of the early days of the nation.

In other words, in editing his collection, Paterson was intending to do his bit to shape a cultural tradition for Australia; and while later collectors such as Russell Ward and John Meredith have taken a more inclusive view, it is perhaps pertinent to remember that Paterson in 1905 was publishing at the crest of the wave of Australia's rise to international prominence as a pastoral and agricultural nation, newly federated and seeking an identity with which it was comfortable on the international stage. It would be 60 years or more before convict ancestry was to become a mark of honour rather than a badge of shame.

After Paterson himself, the best-known writer of Australian bush ballads would be Henry Lawson who was quite opposed to Paterson's romanticism and wrote in the short sharp sentences of a Scottish ballad.³² In fact, his best-known ballad is I think closer to traditional form and sentiment than anything of Paterson's. It is

³⁰ Paterson brought out a revised edition in 1924, which in turn was revised and extended in 1957 by the poets Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing.

³¹ Warren Fahey and Graham Seal (eds), *Old Bush Songs Centenary Edition of Banjo Paterson's Classic Collection* (Sydney: ABC Books for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005).

³² Bruce Elder, 'In Lawson's tracks: The Henry Lawson Trail from Bourke (NSW) to Hungerford (Qld)', *Griffith Review* 19 (2008), p. 115.

probably well known by everyone. *The Ballad of the Drover* was written in 1898 and although Lawson had no Scottish roots, it has links to the Scottish traditions.

Another writer in the bush ballad tradition with Scottish roots was Will Ogilvie, an immigrant whose work is almost entirely associated with Australia. He comes from a time closer to the present, having lived from 1869 to 1963, and wrote many famous neo-ballads such as *Fair Girls And Grey Horses* and *From The Gulf*. In a way he bridges the gap between balladists writing in the traditional form such as Paterson, Lawson and Adam Lindsay Gordon, and contemporary bush writers. Here is an example of what I mean, one verse from a neo-ballad about that essential bushman's accoutrement, the hat.

My Hat!

Though it wasn't a hat you would bolt with
Or be anxious to borrow or hire,
It was useful to blindfold a colt with
Or handle a bit of barbed wire.
Though the world may have thought it improper
To wear such old rubbish as that,
I'd have scorned the best London-made topper
In exchange for my old battered hat.

Adam Lindsay Gordon, the early Australian balladist, may have his bust in Westminster Abbey, but the later balladist, Will Ogilvie, is the only Australian poet to have a cairn erected in his memory. It is on the road between the villages of Ashkirk and Robertson, not far from his birthplace near Kelso, in Roxburghshire, and was erected by a small committee of Scots who were proud of Ogilvie's growing reputation as an Australian poet. In fact, that cairn has now sparked off other memorials to the poet in Australia, including one in the Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach.

Since Paterson's landmark publication of 1905 there has been quite a number of collections of Australian ballads. The 1950s and 60s saw an outburst of interest in preserving and performing bush songs, with serious collecting and performing groups such as the Bush Music Club and others which have morphed into the many bush bands that are around today. Prominent publications include *Bandicoot Ballads* collected by John Manifold and Ron Edwards and published in 1951; Hugh Anderson's collection *Colonial Ballads* (1955); and *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* (1964), edited

by Russell Ward, Professor of History at the University of New England.

Warren Fahey says with telling simplicity: ‘it was the bush songs that opened the door to a distinctive Australian literature.’³³ And despite Banjo Paterson’s nostalgic prediction in 1905 that the days of the bush ballad were over, the genre continued. Although what is called the literary ballad, that is, a poem published by a known author and therefore not subject to oral transmission and consequent variation, has taken the place of the traditional ballad, we can still find the form being used by contemporary poets.

It was used in fact throughout the 1950s and 1960s when poets like David Campbell frequently published satirical ballads in the *Bulletin*. *The Miracle of Mullion Hill* gives us a taste of his style.

In fact, the traditional Australian ballad has inspired a whole poetic subculture, called Bush Poetry. There are now many bush poetry festivals and competitions throughout the country every year. The Australian Celtic Festival in Glen Innes, for instance, often has a Poets’ Breakfast, where many Bush Poets will congregate.³⁴ There are many self-published collections of bush poetry in the humorous and romantic vein, touching many of the same subjects as those of traditional balladry such as battling the odds (though now probably with institutions such as the banks, rather than drought, flood and fire); separation from a lover (though now probably because the poet is a truckie who spends most of his time on the road) and sentimental relationships with dogs and horses. Here is a Bush Poem with a subject that, like Will Ogilvie’s hat, is an essential item of life in the bush:

Our Corrugated Iron Tank
by Hal Gye (James Hackston)

Our tank stood on a crazy stand,
Bare to the burning sky.
White-hot as glares the desert sand,
And dismal to the eye.
Its lid was like a rakish hat,
The tap bent all awry

³³ Fahey and Seal (eds), *Old Bush Songs*, p. 25.

³⁴ The main organisation is the Australian Bush Poets’ Association, which can be found on the web at <http://www.abpa.org.au/>, accessed 20 April 2015. It provides information about competitions, new publications and the like.

And with a drip so constant that
It almost dripped when dry.

It was a most convenient tank
Wherein most things could fall;
Where snakes came from the bush and drank,
The rabbits used to call,
The mice committed suicide,
The gum-leaves sank to rest,
And in it possums dropped and died
And hornets made their nest.

This big community of contemporary bush poets, all recording personal stories of life in what is now the twenty first century will no doubt at some time in the future, be studied by literary and historical scholars. Ballad collectors will source their work and draw conclusions about our life and times, just as we attempt to do with traditional poems from Scotland and early ballads from Australia.

Here, to finish, is one of my favourites, a literary ballad, published in the now defunct magazine, *Australian Letters*, by John Manifold (†1985) a poet who, like Burns, Scott, and Paterson, collected ballads, but who also wrote his own, mostly in humorous vein but with a sardonic undertone:

On The Boundary

Young McIvor, jackarooing
On his uncle's western run
Found it lonely riding boundaries
Lonelier still at set of sun.

By the creek he found a lubra
Baiting yabbies on a line.
'Come alonga me, I'll give you
Tucker, baccy, drink o'wine.'

'I'll be no worse off staying here,
I've all the food I need.
I don't fancy wine or baccy
Thank you vey much indeed.'

'Come along and don't be cheeky
You shall have a yellow dress,'
But she shook her head in silence
And it nettled him no less.

'I don't have to give you presents,
If you scorn em that's your loss.
I could tow you in a halter

Just to show you who's the boss.'

'Who's the boss, you boundary rider?
I'm of better blood than you.
I was sired when Boss McIvor's
Brother was the jackaroo.'

Young McIvor stared his sister
out of sight and off he rode,
Muttering 'Lecherous old bastard.
Who'd've thought it!
I'll be blowed.'

