

'A gift of nature's first fruits': Scott and the making of his collection of popular Scottish ballads 'The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border', an essay by Alistair Johnson

In 1799, a young Scottish lawyer made an attempt to achieve literary fame with his play '*The House of Aspen*'. Although rehearsals by the Kemble Company at Drury Lane in London appear to have taken place, the Company never performed the play in public. The author was a young advocate from Edinburgh, Walter Scott (1771-1832). Then aged 28, Scott had so far failed to find a distinctive voice as a writer. John Buchan in his biography of Scott points out that:

“Wordsworth, a year his senior, and Coleridge a year his junior, had already published their epoch-making *Lyrical Ballads*. At twenty-eight Byron and Shelley had written most of their best verse, and long before that age Keats had completed his immortal bequest, while Scott had nothing to show but a few indifferent lyrics and “Germanised” brats of artificial ballads.”

‘Sir Walter Scott’ by John Buchan, 2nd ed., London, 1932, p.60

Despite this failure, Scott was soon to start on a new literary project; one which would prove a popular success. However his early literary reputation was not to be made as a result of his own creative writing. It was the three volumes of collected folk ballads '*The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*' (1802-1803) which helped Scott to establish his name as a 'man of letters'.

In producing such a work, Scott was following in a long Scottish tradition of writers, who were interested in the folk songs and ballads of their nation. Allan Ramsey (1686-1758), Robert Fergusson (1750-1774), Robert Burns (1759-1796), James Boswell (1740-1795), Lord Byron (1788-1824) and James Hogg (1770-1835) all collected or wrote songs in the folk tradition. Furthermore there was an increasing intellectual fashion for folk song and music amongst the 18th century European intelligentsia. The French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) argued that the classical music of his day was decadent and needed to return to the primitive simplicity of folk melody. German writers and philosophers such as Goethe (1749-1832) and Herder

(1744-1803), also looked to the supposed purity of national folk cultures to provide a new source of inspiration for German artists.

Scott was steeped in the traditional song and music of his country. As a result of developing polio in 1773, Scott was sent from Edinburgh to his grandfather's farm 'Sandy-Knowe' in Roxburghshire. His relatives were a link to a living folk tradition which was quickly absorbed by the impressionable child. Scott said that:

"The local information ... I conceive had some share in forming my future taste and pursuits. I derived from the old songs and tales which then formed the amusement of a retired county family. My grandmother in whose youth the old border depredations were matter of recent tradition, used to tell me many a tale of Watt of Harden, Wight Willie of Aikwood, Jamie Telfer of the fair Dodhead, and other heroes...".

'Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott', by J. G. Lockhart, London, 1900, Vol., p.14

From an early age Scott was to start collecting popular songs and ballads from books, chapbooks, broadsides, and newspaper cuttings. The *'Minstrelsy'* was thus a logical progression of a life-long interest in his native land's folk culture.

The origins of the *'Minstrelsy'* can be traced back to the period after the failure of *'The House of Aspen'*. Scott had first met the celebrated 'Gothic' author Matthew Gregory 'Monk' Lewis' (1775-1818) in Edinburgh in 1798. They had struck up a friendship based on their common liking for modern German literature, the supernatural and folk ballads. Lewis in 1799 was looking for contributors to his new work *'Tales of Wonder'* (1801) and he suggested to Scott that he might like to contribute something to this project. Scott's response began in the summer of 1799 at his country cottage in Lasswade. Here he wrote what he said were his 'first serious attempts at verse'. These were the ballad imitations *'Glenfinlas'*, *'The Eve of St. John'*, and *'The Fire King'*, all of which were to be included in the *'Tales of Wonder'*.

Scott's prospects in his legal career also improved in December 1799. Through his 'kinsman' Henry Scott, the 3rd Duke of Buccleuch (1746-1812) and the goodwill of Henry Dundas,

Viscount Melville (1742-1811), he was appointed Sheriff-Depute of Selkirkshire. This had the important consequence of reconnecting him with the border country and the ballad culture of his youth. Scott was also to meet many borderers while carrying out his legal duties who shared his interest in border ballads, and who were consequently only too willing to help him as he began to take a serious antiquarian interest in ballads.

By the end of 1799 Scott had decided that ballads might be a way to establish his name in the world of letters. Scott began to formulate the idea of producing a slim volume of ballads, which would be both cheap and accessible, but also maintain a high standard of scholarship. This 'slim' volume was eventually to grow into the three volumes that made up the first edition of the *'Minstrelsy'*. Scott was fortunate to find a sympathetic publisher who was both an old school colleague and a fellow lawyer.

Scott first met James Ballantyne (1772-1833) when attending Kelso Grammar School in 1783. Like Scott, James went on to study law at Edinburgh University, returning to Kelso in 1795 to set up in practice as a solicitor. The following year he launched the staunchly pro-Tory newspaper the Kelso Mail, which he both edited and printed. Ballantyne had already printed two pamphlets for Scott: *'An apology for tales of terror'* (containing some of the ballads he had written or translated for the much delayed *'Tales of Wonder'*) and *'The Eve of St. John'*. Scott was so pleased with the typographical excellence of these two slim volumes that he offered James the opportunity of printing the collection of border ballads that he was in the process of gathering.

Scott's use of a friend to publish the *'Minstrelsy'* set a pattern in the creation of his collection of ballads. Although Scott took the credit on the frontispiece for the *'Minstrelsy'*, the work was in fact the result of close collaboration with other ballad scholars. Scott was to prove a very successful 'networker' using his charm to get other ballad enthusiasts to lend him their manuscripts and expertise. These collaborators included antiquarians such as Joseph Ritson (1752-1803), Richard Heber (1773-1833), Bishop Percy (1729-1811), George Ellis (1753-1815), Robert Surtrees (1779-1834), and Robert Jamieson (1780-1846).

Legal friends from the borders such as Robert Shortreed ((1761-1829) and Charles Erskine helped Scott establish contacts with

other borderers who were able to provide material for the *'Minstrelsy'*. John Leyden (1775-1811), an impoverished and highly eccentric student, also proved an important early collaborator. Indeed it was Leyden who suggested to Scott that a single volume would be a '...thin thing...I have more than that in my head myself; we shall turn out three or four such volumes at least." The *'Minstrelsy'* in its first edition stretched to two volumes.

Scott in fact seems to have done little work in the 'field' to create the *'Minstrelsy'*, preferring to use manuscripts that belonged to other ballad collectors. His celebrated 'raids' with Robert Shortreed (1761-1829) into remote Liddesdale were centred on visits to see the ballad collector John Elliot of Cleugh-head, rather than an attempt to collect material first hand from ballad singers. Rare exceptions were performances of 'The Fray of Support' by Jonathan Graham at Elliot's house and James Hogg's mother chanting of 'Auld Maitland'.

Having collected numerous versions of a ballad Scott would then proceed to create a 'restored' version from the variants he had collected. Scott held the view that ballads had been 'composed' by professional minstrels (hence the title of his book), but that the ballads had become corrupted as they had entered the oral folk tradition. Scott believed that:

"Editorial 'authenticity' is ... achieved through the 'restoration' of the original ballad text as well as through the provision of as full a story as possible. The 'leaping and lingering' which modern scholarship understands to be one of the hallmarks of narrative strategies in the traditional ballad is viewed by Scott as a shortcoming which has to be corrected, if necessary through the insertion of stanzas or lines either from other variants of the same ballad or by the editor".

'Scott and the folk tradition', by W.F. N. Nicholson contained in *Sir Walter Scott: the long forgotten melody*, ed. by Alan Bold, 1983

Even in Scott's lifetime such 'restoration' of ballads was controversial. Joseph Ritson was highly critical of the editorial work of Bishop Percy in his 'Reliques,' who held similar views to Scott about the authorship of ballads. Ritson argued that there is no such thing as a standard ballad text from which other variants are

corrupt versions. This is now the view accepted by most modern ethnomusicologists.

However, Scott was being faithful to oral folk culture in another respect. His so-called 'restoration' of ballads was in reality a 'recreation' of the material he had collected. While ethnomusicologists see each ballad variant as unique and precious in itself, Scott used them as raw material to be twisted and contorted to his own aesthetic ends. Scott's irreverent attitude towards his sources is similar to the behaviour of ballad singers. They are quite willing to alter words, locations, historical era, and personages as it suits them. Only the storylines of ballads tend to remain stable in the oral folk tradition.

'The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border' appeared in February 1802. The *'Minstrelsy'* sold well on both sides of the border, and the first edition was exhausted in six months. German, Danish, and Swedish translations soon followed. Enlarged by the third volume of modern ballads in May 1803 there were successive re-editions in 1803, 1806, 1810, 1812, and 1821. Among bibliophiles and scholars there was little dissent in the chorus of praise for Scott's achievement. Even Joseph Ritson, who should have disapproved of Scott's editorial methods, reportedly told Scott that the *'Minstrelsy'* was 'the most valuable literary treasure in his possession'. Modern commentators have also given it great praise. Tom Crawford states that:

"Scott never wrote better, in verse or prose... his best verse does not occur in his own professed compositions... but in the traditional ballads that passed through his hands. Scott's editorial method was sometimes so creative as to resemble a kind of original composition"

'Walter Scott', by Thomas Crawford, Edinburgh, 1982, p.21

Scott, having achieved success as an antiquarian scholar, was shortly to fulfil his wish to be known as a creative writer. In 1800, Scott, after hearing a recitation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *'Christabel'*, decided to create 'a romance of Border chivalry and enchantment which will extend to some length'. This romance was to be included in the third volume of the *'Minstrelsy'*. After receiving encouragement from William and Dorothy Wordsworth, this romance turned into an independent project; *'The Lay of the Last*

Minstrel'. With its publication in January 1805, Scott finally achieved his dream of becoming a literary celebrity. Within three years, there were six editions of '*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', with sales rising to 27,000 copies within a decade, figures unparalleled for poetry at the time.

Scott's plan in 1799 for a 'slim' collection of ballads which had arisen out of the failure of '*The House of Aspen*' had indirectly set him on the path to fame and fortune as a poet and a novelist. However the '*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*' is itself a significant achievement which should not be overlooked by his later literary works. Scott's versions of border ballads are amongst the best examples of Scottish folk poetry and have helped establish Scotland's ballad repertoire as one of the finest in Europe.