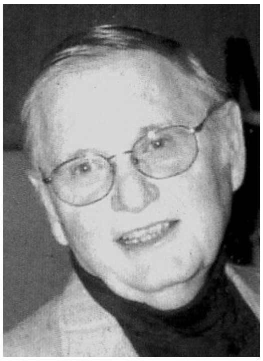
The Ballad World of Francis James Child

By Charles W. Darling



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The single most important work in Anglo-Scottish balladry was compiled by Francis James Child, who between 1882 and 1898 published a five-volume collection of 305 ballads, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads.* Even in the 21st century, the ballads, including variants and offshoots, retain the Child catalog number; the popular ballad “Barbara Allen” is known to researchers as Child number 84. But who was this compiler and what caused his magnificent obsession, analyzing ancient balladry?

Francis James Child was born February 1, 1825, in Boston. He entered Harvard in 1842, one of a freshman class of just over sixty. He graduated first in his class in 1846, was immediately hired by Harvard College, and taught there until his death. At first a tutor in mathematics, he transferred to history and political economy, later becoming a Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric, and, eventually, Professor of English. His published works include *Four Old Plays*, written when he was 23 years old; *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser* in five volumes; additional monographs on Chaucer and others; finally, the crowning achievement, editing *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, five volumes, 1884-1898. Child died in 1898 while working on the bibliography and introduction to the *Popular Ballads* (Kittridge in Child, I, xxii-xxxi).

Francis James Child’s obsession with the old British ballads was based on his fascination with linguistics and how changes occurred in the English language. Another factor may have been the desire to do for British ballads research what the Grimm Brothers had done for German folk tales. That and an almost infallible instinct for detecting true folk ballads led him to dedicate his life to the study of the English and Scottish ballads.

Ballads, Professor Albert B. Friedman wrote, “are songs or performances, not poems. They are not literature, but illiterature” (Friedman ix). Unlike poems, which are written for the printed page, folk ballads were made to be sung, flourishing best among those who could not read. Ballads were altered, either deliberately or accidentally, with almost every singer. By the middle of the 20th century, ninety-two variants of Child 84, “Barbara Allen,” had been uncovered in Virginia alone. Ballads also differ from most poems in that they are anonymous. Originally composed by an individual, probably a minstrel, a ballad became a community expression as it was passed down generation after generation.

Child’s research was laborious. He drew on not only the secondary sources of English and Scottish ballads, such as Sir Walter Scott, but also the primary manuscripts of Bishop Percy, David Herd, and many others. His five volumes included as many ballad variations as he could find, tracing their ancestry wherever possible, in the process uncovering attempts by some editors to embellish the songs with language that hardly would be sung by minstrels. But Child had limitations. He was mainly interested in the ballads as pieces of poetry rather than as songs and was almost completely unaware of the huge mine of balladry that was being sung in North America—in the southern and northern Appalachians, in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. His was a library approach to folk ballads, unaware of the creativity that surrounded his Harvard College milieu.

Characteristics of the Folk Ballad

Ballad scholar MacEdward Leach defined a ballad as “a narrative folk song that fixes on the most dramatic part of its story and impersonally lets the story move of itself, by dialogue and incident, quickly to the end" (Leach 10).

Folk ballads have four basic characteristics. One, they generally focus on a single scene; two, they are highly dramatic; three, the narrator is impersonal; and four, first person dialog is the rule. Child ballads tell stories, but the action is concentrated around the climax. Undoubtedly these ballads were originally as detailed as any conventional narrative, but the folk process of generational change removed slower and less dramatic elements of the story, leaving only the hard core of tension. The folk are not concerned with the why, but the drama and the characters' reaction to it.

A fine example is Child 95, "The Maid Freed From the Gallows," or "The Hangman." The ballad was so popular that the rock group Led Zeppelin recorded a version. A woman (or man in some variants) is about to be hanged—why, where, by whom? She asks the hangman to slack the rope because she sees her father, mother, brother, etc. coming to pay the fee. They all reply no, they've come to see the hanging! Finally, her "true love" comes and, yes, he does pay the fee. The ballad gets right to the dramatic moment—the hanging is almost accomplished. Yet survivals from earlier times include the back-story that the folk have stripped away: a young woman stolen from her husband by pirates who demand a ransom, which her relatives cannot pay or refuse to pay until finally the husband ransoms her. As the oral process discarded the details, the ballad gains in intensity and the plot becomes clear—relatives and friends may betray you, but not your true love. The final stanzas follow:

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, have you brought me gold?
Have you paid my fee?
Or have you come to see me hung,
Beneath the hangman's tree."
"Oh, I have brought you gold,
And I have paid your fee,
And I have come to take you from
Beneath the hangman's tree"
(Darling 70; unless otherwise noted all ballad excerpts are from this book.)

Communal versus Individual Authorship

From the late 19th century on into the 20th, scholarly debate raged over how the ballads were created. Were they created by the community (a Marxist viewpoint) or by individuals (an Adam Smith perspective). Communalists believed that folk poetry sprang spontaneously from people and therefore was composed collectively. Folk scholar George Lyman Kittredge kidded his readers that the communal theory did not mean ballads were "composed collaboratively by a tribe of neolithic, skin-clad enthusiasts dancing round a campfire to the notes of a tom-tom" (Wilgus 4). William Wells Newell felt that ballads were dance songs that survived from antiquity. Francis Barton Gummere in *Old English Ballads*, 1894, became the prime supporter of the communal school. He believed ballads were the work of literary evolution and survivals of primitive poetry.

Francis James Child's position in the controversy is unclear, for he died before completing his introduction to his five-volume work. However, he denied three fundamental dogmas of the communalists: that ballads were dance songs, of group authorship, and of peasant or classless origin. Rather, he believed that ballads were composed by "a man and not a people," and while they were "popular," their origin was "in that class whose acts and fortunes they depict—the upper class" (Wilgus 7). Child clearly recognized individual authorship: "Though they do not 'write themselves,' as William Grimm has said, though a man and not a people has composed them, still the author counts for nothing, and it is not by mere accident, but with the best reason, that they have come down to us anonymous" (Wilgus 8). Furthermore, there is little in the Child ballads drawing upon the professional poets and writers whose works go back to medieval times. Folk ballads originated in the late Middle Ages and the Child collection of 305 has fewer than two dozen that descend from medieval culture.

Ballads were created for the upper class, either by a member or, more likely, a servant versed in both poetry and music. The story-songs were sung to amuse, flatter, annoy, or fascinate the guests of the manor house. Wandering minstrels circulated the ballads among the folk, remembering some lines, forgetting others, the oral folk process continuing until eventually they were written down. Thus, both sides in the controversy are victorious!

Styles of the Ballads

At least five main styles or techniques are common to the Child ballads.

Style One: Rapid movement with occasional lingering. Characters, places, events shift rapidly from one scene to another as is the case in Child 58, "Sir Patrick Spence."

The king has written a braid letter,
And sign'd it wi' his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,
Was walking on the sand.

But sometimes a ballad lingers for a dramatic or emotional effect as does "Sir Patrick Spence" when two women wait for their men, not knowing they have drowned.

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,
Wi' thair fans into their hand,
Or eir they se Sir Patrick Spence
Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,
Wi' thair gold kems in their hair,
Waiting for thair ain der lords,
For they'll se thame na mair.

Style Two: First person dialogue is terse and to the point. The use of the first person is a tip-off that it is either a Child ballad, or a British or American broadside found in the two volumes of ballad scholar G. Malcolm Laws. In Child 2, "The Elfin Knight," the young man asks his true love:

"Can you make me a cambrick shirt,
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Without any seam or needle work?
And you shall be a true lover of mine."

Style Three: The language is straightforward, with uncommon words banned, and certain words or clusters repeated in many ballads. Horses are generally steeds, but with varied colors—black, berry-brown, milk-white, dapple-grey, yellow. "True lover" can be so imbedded that a ballad can speak of a "false true lover." Phrases and even stanzas travel from one ballad to another. One of the most traveled is the "who will shoe my pretty little feet" stanza. Once it was thought to originate with Child 76, "The Lass of Roch Royal," but now it is considered a wandering stanza in ballads and songs.

"Oh who will shoe my bonny feet
And who will glove my hand
And who will kiss my rosy cheeks
While you in a far off land?"

Style Four: Repetition is an important part of Child balladry. It may be emotional, as indicated in the example from "Sir Patrick Spence," or a reenforcement device to aid in the musical rhythm, or simply a mnemonic device to aid the storyteller. Suspense could be built bit by bit rather than all at once, as in "He had not gone a mile, a mile, a mile but barely three. . ." Incremental repetition is also employed, phrases and stanzas repeated but with significant changes leading up to the final dramatic stanza. "The Hangman" is an example, but perhaps a more powerful example is Child 12, "Lord Randall," with its chilling conclusion. The lord returns from hunting telling his mother he is weary and must lie down. She continues to question her son and discovers that he as well as his hawks and dogs have eaten fried eels prepared by his "true love." With the death of the animals, the mother knows her son is poisoned. She asks what will he leave his father, brother, sister, and his "true love." The final stanza dramatically ends:

What will you leave your sweetheart,
Lord Randall, my son?
What will you leave your sweetheart,
my beloved one?
The tow and the halter that hangs on
yon tree,
And there let her hang for
a-poisoning me.

The folk turned the outlaw into a hero, much the same as American ballads turn Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and other cutthroats into role models.

Child ballads are generally not humorous, but there are exceptions such as Child 274, "Our Goodman." It is also repetitious–a drunken husband comes home to confront his wife who had been in bed with another man. His suspicions are aroused when he spies: 1) a horse in the stable, 2) a hat on the rack, 3) a head on the pillow. The wife says he's too drunk to recognize: 1) a Jersey cow, 2) a frying pan, 3) a cabbage head. The final stanza in this upstate New York variant, "Three Nights Drunk," confirms the husband's suspicion:

"I've traveled this world over,
Thirty thousand miles or more,
But I never saw a cabbage head
With a mustache on before."

Style Five: Hyperbole vs. understatement. Exaggeration for effect may be used in balladry, but understatement is more customary. In the border region between England and Scotland, there was little distinction between rich and poor, and understatement reflects the life of folk and is therefore found in Child balladry. A crucial stanza in Child 81, marks the death of Mattie Groves:

And the first stroke little Mattie
struck,
He hurt Lord Arlen sore,
And the next stroke Lord Arlen
struck,
Little Mattie struck no more,
Little Mattie struck no more.

Subject Matter

The subject matter of the 305 Child Ballads can be divided into four main headings: folk tales and legends, historical events, dramatic local events, and drifters.

Folk Tales and Legends. There are various sub-groupings under this heading:

1. The enchantment of elves, sprites, fairies, leprechauns, mermaids. 2. Revenants or the dead who returned temporarily to warn of excessive grief. 3. Humans transformed into loathsome creatures. 4. Certain plants, including rosemary and thyme, associated with sexual behavior. 5. Riddle ballads, which versified poems in folk culture.

Legends were also part of Child balladry, especially those surrounding Robin Hood (Child catalogued 38 separate Robin Hood ballads). The folk turned the outlaw into a hero, much the same as American ballads turn

Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and other cutthroats into role models.

In the supernatural ballad "Tam Lin," Child 39, Tam Lin is kidnapped by elves, then saved from sacrifice by his "true love," Janet. The Queen of Fairies curses Janet for saving Tam Lin:

> Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,
> Out of a bush o broom;
> "Them that has gotten young
> Tam Lin
> Has gotten a stately groom."
> Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,
> And an angry woman was she;
> "Shame betide her ill-far'd face,
> And an ill death may she die,
> For she's taen awa the boniest knight
> In a' my companie."

Historical Events. Most of these related to local episodes, mainly in the border regions between Scotland and England. Important battles such as Agincourt are ignored in Child balladry, and the ballads are occasionally historically inaccurate. The Battle of Otterburn, fought August 19, 1388, was a disastrous English defeat; their losses far surpassed those of the Scots, due to a rash midnight attack by the English on the Scots' fortified camp. Child 161, "The Battle of Otterburn," distorts details, depending on where it was sung. The capture of Sir Henry Percy (Shakespeare's Hotspur) is highlighted in Scottish variants but watered down in English versions. Child believed the ballad may have been modernized from early texts, but warns that "I am not aware that there is anything in the text to confirm such a supposition" (Child III 293). Herd's *Scottish Songs*, 1776, ends:

> This deed was done at Otterburn,
> About the breaking of the day;
> Earl Douglass was buried at the
> braken-bush,
> And Percy led captive away
> (Child III 299).

Dramatic Local Events. Fully half the Child ballads can be so categorized. They involve love, jealousy, adultery, incest, murder, theft, betrayal, pride, honor, courage, humor, seduction, horror, and rape. Two brothers fight over a woman, one killing the other; a woman murders her two illegitimate children; a lover jilts his woman, she kills him and throws his body in a river; a young man is poisoned by his "true love"; and so on. They sound like episodes of television crime drama, and were certainly as popular in their time.

"Sheath and Knife," Child 16, is one of the most spectacular of the incest ballads with its stark dramatic form and striking poetic devices. A severely abridged ending follows:

> It's whispered by the ladies, one
> unto the other,
> "The king's daughter goes with
> child, to her own brother."
> He's ta'en his sister down to his
> father's deer park
> With his yew-tree bow and arrow
> slung fast across his back.
> "Now when that you hear me give
> a loud cry,
> Shoot from thy bow an arrow,
> and there let me lie."
> He has made a grave both long
> and deep,
> He has buried his sister with their
> babe all at her feet.
> . . . The ladies asked him, "What
> makes thee in such pain?"
> "I've lost a sheath and knife,
> I will never find again"
> (Child V 210 for complete version).

Drifters. These were international ballads brought to the British Isles by sailors and wanderers. Most came from the Scandinavian countries, but there were many sources. "Barbara Allen" has roots in Italian balladry, and there is even a Bulgarian forest outlaw equivalent to Robin Hood called Stoyan.

Conclusions

Although Francis James Child looked upon folk ballads as poetry and ignored the accompanying music, ballads are meant to be *sung*, not read. Child believed that the ballads were, for the most part, dead. In 1956, folk scholar Albert B. Friedman agreed: "On its own proper level and as a living art, balladry has almost ceased to exist and could only be revived by setting back the clock and civilization several hundred years" (Friedman xxxiv-xxxv). He attributed this decline to first, broadsides and universal education, and later to newspapers, the phonograph and radio.

Have literacy and competing diversions doomed the folk process of oral transmission from one generation to another? Perhaps there is hope. Even in the late 20th century a rural New York housewife, Sara Cleveland, was singing the refrain in Child 2, "The Elfin Knight," as "Every rose grows merry in time," rather than "Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme." unaware of the herbs' symbolism in ancient fertility rites. And a child was heard to sing "this lamp is my lamp" instead of "this land is my land."

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