

THE BALLAD AND THE FOLK

David Buchan

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Volume 1

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DAVID BUCHAN

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The Ballad and the Folk

David Buchan



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For Moyra, Rhona and Gavin

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is an exercise in an interdisciplinary discipline which is firmly established in many countries but has been rather neglected in Britain. The discipline is known variously: in Scandinavia as *Folkliv*, in Central Europe as *Volkskunde*, and in North America as Folklore. Since 'folklore' in Britain connotes mostly triviality and untruth, a happier term for the subject is Folklife Studies, although its practitioners retain the name of folklorists. Folklorists are concerned with traditional culture, that is, the culture maintained and transmitted by word-of-mouth and by custom and practice rather than by printed document. The literary folklorist, it follows, is concerned with the literature created and transmitted by traditional means within that culture. He is also concerned with the relationship between the literature and the social and cultural context: especially with how the literature in quality, substance, and style is determined by the conditions of the society that produces it. In the following pages I have attempted to show the social context of a ballad tradition and its effects on the literature, and, conversely, the functions of the literature in the social context.

The correlation of literature and society is particularly necessary in the field of oral literature, a once vague area that has been given new definition by the groundbreaking studies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Working in a new field like oral literature, however, poses certain problems, and not the least of these is the lack of adequate terminology. Inevitably, one is forced into minting terms; I have tried to avoid an undue barbarity in the neologisms, but ask for sufferance. There are, again inevitably, other topics on which I crave the sufferance of that declining species, the gentle reader. Since this volume is long enough as it stands, it does no more than touch on two subjects which ideally

Preface and Acknowledgments

require fair-sized books to themselves. One is ballad music (though I hope the comments in chapter 20 may provoke an ethnomusicologist into investigation), and the other is the relationship between Scandinavian and Scottish (especially Northeast) balladry. A work not referred to in the text because it appeared after the relevant parts of the manuscript were completed is T. C. Smout's *A History of the Scottish People 1560–1830*; this excellent book is now the standard work on the subject.

I am very grateful to a number of people and institutions for their ready co-operation in allowing me to publish excerpted material. The quotations from the Will Walker Collectanea are printed by permission of the Corporation of the City of Aberdeen; from the Will Walker MSS. by permission of Aberdeen University Library; from *Ballads and Curious Tracts, Scotland* by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum; from Peter Buchan: A Collection of 17 letters, Francis James Child MSS., James Gibb MS., Letters and Papers Relating to the Harris MS., Robert Jamieson-Brown MS., George R. Kinloch MSS., Alexander Laing of Brechin MS., William Motherwell MSS., William Motherwell: A Ballad Note-Book 1826–27, North Country Ballads (Abbotsford MS.), Robert Pitcairn MSS., William Tytler-Brown MS. by permission of the Harvard College Library; from H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, by permission of Cambridge University Press; from Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, by permission of Harvard University Press; and from Henry Hamilton, *Selections from the Monymusk Papers 1713–1755*, by permission of the Council of the Scottish History Society.

The *ur*-version of the book that follows was a thesis accepted for the Aberdeen Ph.D., and I would like to thank the University of Aberdeen for the award of the Gordon Bottomley Fellowship, and to record my debt of gratitude to the late Professor John M. Lothian and to Dr James Michie. I am grateful also to the staffs of various libraries, especially those of King's College, University of Aberdeen, and the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Above all, I am grateful to my wife, whose ability to exercise both critical intelligence and domestic tolerance has given me a pristine appreciation of that unfashionable word, helpmate.

Two final notes: parts of chapters 4 and 17 originally appeared

Preface and Acknowledgments

in *Journal of the Folklore Institute* and *Ariel* and I thank their editors for permission to use them here; numerals in brackets after a ballad title refer to that ballad-story's number in the standard collection, F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Ballads*.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations employed in the notes:

<i>AUR</i>	<i>Aberdeen University Review</i>
<i>FSNE</i>	<i>Folk-Song of the North-East</i> , 2 vols (Peterhead, 1909, 1914). 1 vol. (Hatboro, Penn., 1963)
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>SHR</i>	<i>Scottish Historical Review</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Scottish Studies</i>
<i>TBC</i>	<i>Transactions of the Buchan Field Club</i> (1887–1908) <i>Transactions of the Buchan Club</i> (1908–)

Abbreviations employed in the diagrams:

H	=	He, Hero, Leading Male Character	
S	=	She, Heroine, Leading Female Character	
S ²	=	Other Woman, and (103) Second Heroine	
H ²	=	(103) Second Hero	
M	=	Mother	F = Father
Br	=	Brother	Sr = Sister
Sn	=	Son	b = boy
K	=	King	Q = Queen
V	=	Villain	V ² = Second Villain
P	=	Porter	BB = Belly Blin
bw	=	bowerwoman	

Capitals indicate one of the three major interacting characters; lower case indicates a narrative agent.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Ballads are awkward things. Few literary genres give so much pleasure to so many kinds of people and yet pose such refractory problems for the scholar and critic. These tales of marvel, love and butchery, told in a style strikingly distinct from that of most poetry, appeal to a diverse audience, but yet provoke questions which have never been satisfactorily answered. The most fundamental of these are, 'What is a ballad?' and 'Who were the folk who sang the ballads?' The problems involved in answering these questions, problems of authorship, definition, terminology, and classification, make up what one critic has called the 'ballad enigma'.¹ This book is an attempt to unriddle the enigma. Through an examination of the ballads and the folk of one particular regional tradition it tries to answer the basic questions about 'the' ballad and 'the' folk.

The only commonly accepted answer to the question, 'What is a ballad?' is 'A folksong that tells a story', where folksong means a song that has been transmitted by word-of-mouth rather than by print.² The use of the laborious 'by word-of-mouth' instead of the more obvious term 'orally' is intentional because the word 'oral' raises the most formidable, and the most significant, of the subject's terminological problems. This key word is, unfortunately, ambiguous, and much confusion has arisen from its ambiguity. It is used specifically, to refer to the tradition of non-literate societies, and it is also used generally to refer to that tradition *and* the word-of-mouth tradition of literate societies. Even from an *a priori* position one would suspect what actually is the case, that the tradition and transmission of a nonliterate society differ significantly from the tradition and transmission of a literate society. Anthropologists have recognized this by drawing a distinction between *primitive literature* and *folk literature*, the

latter denoting word-of-mouth material affected by literate influences, and the former word-of-mouth material relatively unaffected by literate influences. Just as the use of 'folk' in this instance illustrates how confused is the available terminology, so do the ambiguities inherent in 'oral'. Henceforth 'oral' will be employed only in the specific sense—to refer to nonliterate tradition—and 'verbal' will be employed for the word-of-mouth tradition of a literate culture. The necessity for distinguishing between oral tradition and verbal tradition has been dramatically emphasized in recent years by a number of works which have opened up for study the virtually unknown field of oral literature.

The three works which have done most to intensify our awareness of oral literature are the Chadwicks' *The Growth of Literature*, Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, and more tangentially, Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.³ The Chadwicks chart the oral literature of many peoples; Lord elucidates the nature of oral composition and the patterns of oral narrative poetry; and McLuhan, who describes his book as complementary to Lord's, explores the modification of oral consciousness brought about by the introduction of printing. Of these three it is Lord's work which is of most direct concern here. *The Singer of Tales* is a complete expression of the ideas on oral literature first adumbrated in the pioneering articles of Milman Parry. Prompted initially by the complexities of the Homeric question, Parry and Lord investigated the living oral tradition of Yugoslavia and, in doing so, revealed the workings of the oral technique of composition and its effects upon oral poetic form. Their writings have produced far-reaching reverberations. The most important extension of their work has appeared, appropriately enough, in Homeric scholarship, where Cedric Whitman builds a literary critique on oral data in his *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*; but the general application of their findings to a broad range of literatures, from Anglo-Saxon to medieval Greek, has provoked reconsiderations not only of individual literary traditions but also of our preconceptions about literature and literary composition.⁴

Balladry, it has been said often enough, is a genre of oral literature. But whereas 'oral' in the phrase 'oral literature' is normally used in the specific sense, most references to balladry as oral literature have used it in the general sense. By analysing the processes of transmission in a nonliterate culture Lord, how-

ever, has provided the means whereby one can see whether balladry is in fact a genre of oral literature in the specific sense. If ballads were oral literature, were originally composed and transmitted by nonliterate people, then many of the ballad riddles would be solved. But surely, the objection may come, this approach will not hold good for British balladry: hasn't Britain had a literate culture since the late Middle Ages? The reply is that only parts of British society had a literate culture. Lord shows that, 'While the presence of writing in a society *can* have an effect on oral tradition, it does not *necessarily* have an effect at all'. The written tradition of the Southern Slavs 'had no influence on the form of the oral tradition until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The two existed side by side, not, of course, within the same group, but certainly within the same district'.⁵ Even though a society may have literate members who are acquainted with book-learning, oral transmission can, and does, flourish in the unlettered groups within that society. Even though the England and the Scotland of the ballads' recorded history had strong written traditions, many groups of people in these countries were, for most of that time, nonliterate, and it is in these groups that oral transmission would have flourished. This emphasizes how important it is when dealing with traditional material to correlate, as nearly as possible, a society and its literature—in this case, the folk and their ballads. Many years ago Louise Pound denounced in uncompromising terms the standard wrong approach to 'the folk':⁶

Surely theorists and dictionary makers should know by this time that there is no mysterious national 'folk', 'the masses', the 'common people' of the old folklorists. . . . all oral tradition is necessarily regional or group lore, a generalisation too often overlooked. There is never any one folk from the point of view of folklore, but instead many folk groups, as many as there are regional cultures or occupations or racial groups within a region.

This dictum Entwistle applies to British balladry when he tentatively outlines the various regional traditions with their separate folks and separate balladries: 'I suspect that the phrase "English and Scottish" is too simple and that southern England,

the Midlands, the Borders, the Scottish Lowlands, and Aberdeenshire have each their own balladries with distinctive content and timetable.⁷ One of these regions, then, must provide the tradition whose folk and balladry will be the objects of scrutiny.

For answers to the central questions posed earlier—‘What is a ballad?’ and ‘Who are the folk?’—the ideal region would be one which has a strong ballad tradition and which was affected by large-scale literacy so recently that the ballads, the folk, and the processes of transmission can be studied in both oral and post-oral states. There is, in fact, one region in Britain which comes as close to fitting this description as is practically possible. That region is the Northeast of Scotland. The area, which consists mainly of Aberdeenshire, possesses a rich ballad tradition and was substantially affected by literacy only in the later eighteenth century. Its recorded ballads include some that a singer learned by 1759 and some that were composed this century. The recorded tradition of this region, therefore, covers the tail-end of the nonliterate period and all of the literate period. The following account of this regional tradition has two parallel aims, one specifically literary—to investigate the ballad as oral literature—and one broadly ethnographic—to set the regional tradition in its social context. The initial chapters examine a nonliterate society to discover what factors besides nonliteracy helped foster its ballad tradition; the middle chapters analyse the processes of composition and transmission in the oral ballad; and the later chapters consider the changes which removed nonliteracy, altered social patterns, and seriously affected the ballad tradition.

THE REGIONAL TRADITION

Northeast balladry constitutes the richest regional tradition in Britain. The warrant for this assertion lies in both the quantity and the quality of the area’s ballads: the tradition has more recorded ballads than any other and it includes what good authority has judged the ‘best’ ballads. Using the near-definitive Child collection as a yardstick, William Walker once showed⁸ that one-third of Child’s Scottish texts and almost one-third of

his A-texts come from Aberdeenshire; and after Child's collection there appeared Alexander Keith's edition of Gavin Greig's *Last Leaves*, which contains 107 versions of ballad-stories found in Child, as many as have been recorded to date in North America. 'Last Leaves', as it turns out, is a misnomer, for the field is still being gleaned. In the last two decades the Fellows of the School of Scottish Studies have collected from the north-east several thousands of folksongs, among which are a fair number of ballads. And recently there have come to light the Glenbuchat MSS., a collection which contains fifty-eight Child ballads gathered in Aberdeenshire before 1818.⁹ The tally of the region's collectors and collections that forms the Appendix testifies even further to the sheer bulk of the northeastern tradition.

But quantity alone is not everything. More and more it becomes obvious that the place of the individual singer within a tradition is of the utmost importance, and that the study of a tradition should begin with the individual singer and then work concentrically outwards.¹⁰ The Northeast is fortunate in having a singer with a sizeable recorded corpus for each of the significant stages of the tradition's evolution. One of these singers is Mrs Brown, of whose ballads Child declares there are none 'superior in kind', an opinion corroborated by Kittredge, Gerould and Bronson.¹¹ And in a letter to Will Walker, Child stresses the quality of northeastern ballads in general: 'The original derivation of many of the ballads cannot be determined, but that the best Scottish ballads are from the North there can be no doubt.'¹² In Child, as in most other nineteenth-century scholars, the vague 'North' refers, not to the Celtic Highlands as one might expect, but to the Northeast.

To lay special emphasis upon the contribution of the northeast to British balladry might appear to be tilting at windmills, but it is necessary, for the Border fallacy still lingers on. It was reaffirmed as recently as 1961: 'Undeniably, the stronghold of British balladry since the sixteenth century has been the Lowlands of Scotland and the North of England.'¹³ The Borders have a strong regional tradition characterized by a distinctive group of stirring ballad-stories—the Riding Ballads of the Border—but in neither quality nor quantity does this tradition equal that of the Northeast. The tendency to preface automatically

Introduction

'Ballads' with 'Border' gained its initial and probably later impetus from the popular acclaim which greeted the many editions of Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. This book, it was naturally assumed, represented a large number of ballads, the 'Abbotsford Collection', gathered by Sir Walter in the Borders. Despite the romantic accounts of his 'raids into Liddesdale', however, Scott does not appear to have been much of a field-collector himself; he preferred to garner texts from people who were.¹⁴ Many of his ballad correspondents came from the Northeast, and through them Scott had access to most of the northeastern ballads then collected. The Abbotsford Collection contained at one time or another substantial recordings from Mrs Brown, the Old Lady, and James Nicol, and individual ballads gathered by Hugh Irvine of Drum, James Skene of Rubislaw, and Williamson Burnet of Monboddo in the Mearns. Mrs Brown's contribution to the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* is large enough to invalidate Scott's title: 'Mrs Brown's material was to affect the whole character of the *Minstrelsy* . . . The Romantic section of the *Minstrelsy*, which is largely indebted to Mrs Brown, is perhaps that part of the work which is best known today.'¹⁵ Ironically, then, many of the Scott ballads that helped establish the Borders as the pre-eminent ballad area come from the Northeast. The peculiar notions entertained about Scottish geography in one quite reputable ballad handbook perhaps exemplify how the fallacy, once accepted, was fostered. The author of the handbook goes astray, not by ignoring the other ballad regions of Scotland, but by assuming they all belong to 'the Borders'. Illustrating the book with a 'Border' scene of Perthshire, and her arguments with excerpts from 'Border' ballads indigenous to the Northeast, the writer claims that the atmosphere of the Border ballads derives from the borderers' having 'England to the south and the wild Highland clans to the north as enemies'.¹⁶ This neat division of Scotland into 'Highlands' and 'Borders' would not be very well received in Edinburgh or Glasgow, as it is, of course, merrily oblivious to the existence of the entire Central Lowlands, where today live four-fifths of Scotland's population.

The northeastern tradition possesses a few general features which, although not of direct relevance to the topics in hand, are worthy of note. Almost two-thirds of the Anglo-Scottish

ballad-stories in Child have been recorded in the Northeast tradition; some of these stories have been found only in the Northeast, and others are distinct Northeast oikotypes. The tradition includes two substantial and interesting groups of ballad-stories, the local-historical and the supernatural. While the first group demonstrates how the tradition was deeply rooted in local life, the second indicates how it was open to external influences, for the supernatural ballad-stories display close affinities with those of Scandinavia. In this they reflect a general characteristic of the region's balladry.

Since the days of Child and Grundtvig the relationship between British and Scandinavian balladry has received much attention—too much attention for our overall perspective, say some critics.¹⁷ Still, there exists no definitive account of the relations between these balladries, a peculiar lack when one considers that the Scandinavian tradition is undeniably the British tradition's nearest sibling. While Britain has the national tradition most closely allied to the Scandinavian, the Northeast has the most closely allied regional tradition. The affinity is hardly surprising because, from the twelfth century onwards, the burgh of Aberdeen was an important commercial centre which traded with the continent rather than the rest of Britain. The provisions regarding merchants' losses that appear in the 1266 Treaty of Perth signed by Scotland and Norway would indicate a thriving trade between Aberdeen, then the major port north of Berwick, and at least one part of Scandinavia by the middle of the thirteenth century. Trade between the countries helped produce the steady political interaction that gave rise to a few royal marriages and, on one occasion, the events of 'Sir Patrick Spens' (58). And in post-medieval times the large number of Northeast mercenaries in the Scandinavian armies would undoubtedly have stimulated the exchange of material between traditions. The individual ballads show many correspondences:¹⁸

of all the British ballads those of Aberdeenshire are most reminiscent of Scandinavian versions. The resemblances between Peter Buchan's Aberdeenshire gleanings and Danish ballads were so frequent and striking that a translator of the latter, three-quarters of a century ago, was moved to accuse Buchan of stealing from the Danish

versions. Of modern parallels a single example will suffice. Of Child's twenty-seven versions of 'Binorie' ('The Twa Sisters') two are from Aberdeenshire. These two and one other in his collection make the elder sister 'dun' and the younger a blonde, as in most of the Norse versions. Eleven Aberdeenshire versions recovered since Child's death have the same characteristic. Again, in none of Child's records does the drowning sister refuse to give up her lover to her rival and murderess: some of the Norse forms contain this refusal; and it occurs—for the first time in the British ballad—in four of the eleven recent Aberdeenshire texts.

Introductions to individual ballads throughout *Last Leaves* contain further evidence of the close relationship between northeastern and Scandinavian ballads.

Northeast balladry also has links with the folk-culture of the neighbouring Gaels. Although this relationship, like the former, is worth fuller study, certain facts stand out. In Gaelic folksong there is a marked absence of the classical ballad themes, and where they do appear, the objectivity that is such a dominant characteristic of most European balladry is missing. Instead of the ballads Celtic society had its heroic Ossianic poetry, a genre notably dissimilar to Anglo-Scottish balladry in both content and style.¹⁹ There is little likelihood here of the kind of interaction that produced the correspondences between the northeastern and Scandinavian ballads. One should, however, bear in mind that much of British folklore might have a Celtic base, and that the Northeast, being a Celtic territory for centuries and later a border region, might well have a strongly Celtic base for its folklore.²⁰

Although the texts have few correspondences, the tunes show some striking similarities. In *Last Leaves* Keith rather misleadingly says only that 'the weird lament and the temperamental fervour of the Celtic music are alike absent' from the folk-music of Aberdeenshire.²¹ This is true enough, but ignores what Greig himself emphatically points out, that Northeast folk-music in general owes a considerable debt to Gaelic folk-music. The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman incomers of early medieval times adopted as their own a great deal of their

predecessors' melody. The evidence for this is the high proportion of Northeast tunes constructed on the basis of a Celtic form of the melodic quatrain, and the way in which the cadences of the northeastern folk-tunes are modelled on Gaelic prototypes. This body of folk-melody was presumably taken over from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, but even after that time the Gaelic influence was reinforced by the Northeast's assimilation of individual Gaelic tunes.²² There is an interesting parallel between what happened to Gaelic culture in the Northeast and what happened to it in North America. There also, apart from such isolated enclaves as Cape Breton Island and Nova Scotia, the music was in large measure adopted while the bulk of the culture atrophied.²³

Northeast tradition, then, has been uniquely individualized, in its texts by Scandinavian influences and in its tunes by Celtic influences. One prominent feature of the region itself also lends a distinctive cast and colouring to its ballads—its native dialect. This expressive speech, known locally as 'the Doric', is today the Scottish dialect most stubbornly resisting anglicization. Still capable of baffling the untutored ear, it provided many puzzles for Child last century, as his Glossary's preface indicates; in it he thanks no fewer than fourteen northeasterners for their linguistic help. What he had to contend with is made clear in the comments of one of these helpers, Thomas Davidson:²⁴

The combination of two words into one . . . is not rare in Scotch, nor is the reverse process. For example, the word 'hypochondriac' is turned into 'keepach and dreeach', and the two parts often used separately. 'I'm unco keepach' and 'I'm unco dreeach' are common expressions among old people. Imagine an etymologist, ignorant of the facts, trying to discover the etymology of 'keepach' or of 'dreeach'.

This dialect, the main sub-dialect of Northern Scots, is a composite speech whose basic Anglo-Saxon is enriched by graftings from the Scandinavian, French, Dutch and Gaelic languages. Just as its composition mirrors forces affecting local history, its vocabulary and idiom portray certain characteristics of the local folk. Northeastern speech, says David Murison succinctly, 'reflects the people, superficially somewhat grim, blunt, sardonic and non-committal, and yet beneath the surface durable, self-reliant

Introduction

and sentimental in the better sense of the word'.²⁵ These comments on the folk and their language, when considered in the light of the dominant ballad tones, illustrate how the north-eastern folk have stamped their personality on their ballads, and how they have made the ballad a vehicle for the expression of a regional ethos and identity. The dialect's history also provides one important guideline for the study of local ballads. Since Scots drove out Gaelic and firmly established itself through most of the region only between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the mid-fourteenth century must mark the early chronological boundary for the first period of the regional tradition, just as the latter half of the eighteenth century, and the advent of general literacy, marks the later boundary.

Part I

The Oral Tradition: the Folk

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Chapter 2

The Land and the People

The Northeast has been described as ‘the cold shoulder’ of Britain.¹ Neither its climate nor its soil is naturally hospitable, but generations of stubborn farming folk have forced it into productivity by dint of the northeastern cure for most of life’s ills—hard work. Though the Laigh of Moray to the west and the Howe of the Mearns to the south may, for folklore purposes, be taken as secondary areas of influence, the region itself consists of the counties of Aberdeen and Banff and the northern part of Kincardineshire. Topographically, these shires vary greatly as they stretch westwards from flat, treeless Buchan through the uplands of Strathbogie and the Garioch to mountainous Mar and the highest land-mass in Britain, the Cairngorms. Bounded by these mountains to the west, the sea to the north and east, and the Grampians or the Mounth to the south, the Northeast is a distinct geographical entity.

Historically, the most important feature of Northeast geography has been the southern boundary, the Mounth. From the seventh century onwards, it served as a political or administrative dividing line. Once the frontier between the North and South Picts, in early medieval times it helped shape the administrative division of Scotland into Lothian, Galloway, Scotland ‘south of the Mounth’ and Scotland ‘north of the Mounth’.² The poet John Barbour, a fourteenth-century Archdeacon of Aberdeen, found it quite natural to refer to his country as the land ‘benorth the Mounth’. In the sixteenth century one ecclesiastic, Bishop Leslie, described the Mounth in this fashion:³

In the bordirs of Marr and Mernes the gret hill named
Grampie, sa meikle renouned in the alde Romane histories,
begins nocht far frome the cost besyd Abirdin, extending

through the mid-cuntries, sum tymes braider, sum tymes
narrower, evin to the West Sey, ay quhil it cum to
Dunbartane, ye and til Argyle.

Another ecclesiastic, John Major, declared that these 'Alps of Scotland' were 'impassable by horsemen'.⁴ These comments clearly indicate how the Mounth was then regarded: it was the eastern part of a mountain barrier that in effect bisected Scotland. As roads were not materially improved during the next two hundred years, the Mounth remained a large obstacle to travellers until the late eighteenth century. Inevitably, the comparative isolation brought about by the Mounth's existence fostered the growth of a regional culture; cut off from the Lowlands, the Northeast developed its own lore, customs, and dialect. But it did not remain a backwater. Although the Mounth curbed large-scale social and commercial intercourse with the Lowlands, it helped turn the Northeast's attention to the continent. Consequently, while relative isolation enabled the regional culture to grow in its own ways, interaction with continental cultures prevented its succumbing to provincial stagnation. What the Northeast lost through lack of contact with southern Scotland it more than gained through contact with the continent, as this interaction helped create a rich diversity in the local folk-culture.

The Northeast's remoteness encouraged the development of a regional type of personality. Rather curiously, the foreigner's comic stereotype of the Scotsman corresponds very closely to the Scotsman's comic stereotype of the northeasterner. Scotsmen, says the foreigner, are canny; northeasterners, says the Scotsman, are the canniest. Scotsmen are dour; northeasterners are the dourest. Scotsmen are mean; Aberdonians are the closest-fisted. Scotsmen are natural-born lawyers; Aberdeen lawyers outdo all in professional rapacity.⁵ The northeasterner, it would appear from the stereotypes, is the Scotsman writ large.

Yet the local folk differ somewhat from other Scotsmen in their ethnic composition. Around 2000 B.C. the region was settled by a race from Holland, known from a distinctive burial habit as the 'beaker people'. Analysis of their skeletons this century has demonstrated close physical correspondences between the beaker people and the contemporary rural population.⁶ Although this basic strain in the ethnic make-up of the Northeast is not

The Shires of
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3 v H. Moll Geograph.



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found in concentration anywhere else in Scotland, the other strains are; only the proportions of the mixture differ. The Picts and the Celts were the next people after the beaker folk to colonize the region on a large scale, and their domination covered a thousand years, until the twelfth century. From then till the fourteenth century, the Celts were gradually absorbed or pushed westward into the mountains by the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman incomers. Many of the English settlers arrived at the instigation of David I (1124–53) whose policy it was to encourage foreign traders to settle in newly-established burghs. His inducements also attracted many Flemings to the east coast and particularly to Aberdeenshire; so, for a second time, the region received an important influx of people from the north-western lowlands of Europe.⁷

These varied ethnic elements have combined to produce in the northeastern folk a distinctive breed. Their essential characteristics are well caught in this account of the Northeast farmer; he is:⁸

canny and not in the least given to gushing. He has an extreme dislike to superlatives in conversation, and prefers to state his opinion in moderate language. The Nor'East is and always was the centre of Moderatism. In all things it prefers, with Aristotle, wise men, the *via media*. None the less it is sincere. But its sincerity and truthfulness are thoroughly consistent with a character that is cautious and a temperament inclined to the phlegmatic.

To these traits that reflect the northeasterners' kinship with the Netherlanders were allied strong social propensities: 'They are in general fond of going to markets and public places of resort; and they mix together frequently in society, especially in the winter months'.⁹ The innate 'Moderatism' of outlook that characterizes the northeasterner shows clearly in his attitude to religion during the post-Reformation centuries. The Northeast accepted the Reformation late and with singularly little enthusiasm. For long the most solidly Catholic part of Lowland Scotland, the Northeast gradually adapted itself in the reigns of James I and Charles I to Episcopacy, which was found particularly congenial to its moderate spirit. So congenial was it in fact that there grew up in Aberdeen an Episcopalian culture, whose scholars, 'the Aberdeen Doctors', had a European reputation.

When, in the eighteenth century, Episcopalianism became dangerously associated with Jacobitism, its popularity waned and it was replaced in the Northeast by a very moderate kind of Presbyterianism.¹⁰ It would appear that the folk, like their pagan ballads, were more concerned with the hard facts of living than with the abstract luxuries of dogma.

The people of the Northeast are rarely thought of as highly 'imaginative'. Up to the nineteenth century the region produced few writers and almost no written lyric poetry, and this was not due simply to the smallness of the literate community.¹¹ The imaginative energies of the northeasterner have normally been expended on the more practical arts of living or channelled into areas where passion is an encumbrance—mathematics, the sciences, philosophy—which is what one would expect from a race not given to overt displays of emotion. Yet the immediate forebears of such Scottish writers as Fergusson and Burns hailed from Aberdeenshire and Kincardine; northeastern genius, it seems, requires one or two generations' time in the south to thaw out. After literacy, of course, the region produced a fair number of good writers, most notably Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

Though phlegmatic and ostensibly unemotional, the northeasterner has a strong sense of the dramatic; in pre-Reformation times Aberdeen was the Scottish burgh most renowned for its plays and pageants.¹² And the hallmark of the old northeastern ballads is that they are dramatic, the best of them integrating lyric emotion and narrative event within powerfully dramatic wholes. Here, perhaps, is one key to a psychological understanding of why the Northeast folk liked their ballads. Not a demonstrative race, they found their aesthetic form in the ballad, where emotions were objectified in near-ritualized terms and subordinated to the dramatic recounting of factual event. In this society the ballads served a cathartic function, for they provided a dramatic yet disciplined outlet to the emotions denied regular expression by the dour, canny, undemonstrative, northeastern folk.

Chapter 3

The Agricultural Society

Recent folklore scholarship has stressed the necessity for exploring the relationship between the folk-group and the lore of the group. Because the character of the group will, naturally, condition the character of the lore, an understanding of the social context is essential to a proper understanding of that lore. This folkloristic truism applies as much to Scottish balladry as to Breton beliefs or Bantu riddling.¹

The *sine qua non* of traditional ballad societies was their non-literacy. As Lord says:²

In societies where writing is unknown, or where it is limited to a professional scribe whose duty is that of writing letters and keeping accounts, or where it is the possession of a small minority, such as clerics or a wealthy ruling class (though often this latter group prefers to have its writing done by a servant), the art of narration flourishes, provided that the culture is in other respects of a sort to foster the singing of tales. If the way of life of a people furnishes subjects for story and affords occasion for the telling, this art will be fostered.

Other factors besides nonliteracy that fostered the singing of tales in a culture can be identified from the striking similarities in social pattern that occur among European folk-groups where traditional ballads flourished. The Spanish, Yugoslavian, and Danish ballad societies that produced much of the best in the Romance, Balkan, and Nordic balladries had a great deal in common. J. E. Housman outlines the common factors when he describes the archetypal ballad society: 'It seems probable, then, that traditional balladry . . . thrives best in a homogeneous feudal and agricultural society, and preferably in a border region

subject to political or social tension'.³ An examination of how these factors operated in the Northeast should, then, reveal how the way of life in this particular ballad culture furnished both 'subjects for story' and, the first concern, 'occasion for the telling'.

Entwistle describes the chronology of the European ballad societies as, in a wide sense, 'medieval', that is, they begin 'after the great migrations and crusades have subsided, and medieval man has settled down to cultivate his own acre' and they end with 'the practice of reading'.⁴ In the Northeast of Scotland medieval man had little chance to settle down and cultivate his own acre before the middle of the fourteenth century. From the twelfth century onwards, the regional society had been in a state of flux as the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman incomers gradually supplanted the Celtic inhabitants. And in the first part of the fourteenth, mainly because Bruce's powerful enemies, the Comyns, held much of the Northeast, the land suffered considerably during the Scottish Wars of Independence. After the turning-point of the first war, the Battle of Barra, Bruce laid waste to the countryside in the savage 'herschip' (harrying) of Buchan that people remembered for fifty years, and later, when secure on the throne, he redistributed the lands among his own adherents. Only after all the turmoil had subsided, and a common language had been established, could the regional ballad tradition have taken firm root. But the patterns of society which emerged at this time were to remain, basically unchanged, for the next four centuries.

The social patterns that obtained in the rural Northeast from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries undoubtedly provided an atmosphere conducive to the singing of traditional tales. It was an agricultural society but, more important, it was a particular kind of agricultural society. The methods of land management and cultivation and the concomitant settlement type all point to a form of social organization that was communal in spirit and co-operative in its activities. This particular kind of agricultural society provided conditions in labour and living where an oral culture would naturally thrive.

The main settlement type in the Northeast was the *fermtoun*, a small farming township consisting, on the average, of eight houses, whose inhabitants held their lands and dwellings directly