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Earthly and unearthly powers collide [On the Ballads, Robert Kirk and the Marquis of Montrose]

Alan Riach

The Border Ballads are stories in song, and great poems. They're characterised by succinct expression, terrible poignancy and razor-keen humour. As such, they're the ancestors of the best modern crime fiction. But the poetic power in each one comes from their form: the tension between the unpredicted story that unfolds and the metrical regularity with which it's told. In good performance or attentive reading, uncannily, they never tire.

All poems have some relation to song, even simply in the music of the voice, and the ballads have developed this tradition across centuries. They are still memorised and performed in Scotland today. One great medieval ballad, "Greysteel", survives in a version that would take about two hours to sing, yet when Andy Hunter recorded it for John Purser's radio series *Scotland's Music*, Purser discovered that the hypnotic, incantatory, eerie tune could sustain musical as well as narrative compulsion well beyond a conventional attention-span. This indicates a perhaps obvious yet crucial fact about the impact of oral literature generally: that its effect is uniquely powerful in performance, so we should pay appropriate attention to performance, and not rely only on written accounts. The School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University has an extensive archive of this material recorded and collected from a living tradition. Will Scottish television ever make good use of it? Or even the BBC?

Walter Scott, in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-03), suggested the ballads could be divided into categories: "historical" and "romantic", the latter including what we call the "supernatural".

Of "historical" ballads, we referred to "Johnny Armstrong" in a recent article on the Scottish Borders ("Mysterious voices and lasting truths" March 10):

"To seek het watter beneath cauld ice
Surely is a great folie
I have asked for grace at a graceless face

But there is nane for my men and me.”

This ballad is based on an actual event of 1530, when King James V, who had promised Armstrong and his thirty-six men safe conduct, hanged them all at Caerlanrig chapel, ten miles south west of Hawick, where a memorial was erected in the chapel graveyard. The ballad survived through the anthology of older Scottish verse called *The Ever Green* (1724) brought together by Allan Ramsay (1686-1758), where it was said to be “copied from a gentleman’s mouth of the name of Armstrang, who is 6th generation from this John”. So the legitimacy and continuity of the story over many generations is claimed.

This suggests how difficult it is to date the composition of the ballads securely. “Sir Patrick Spens” may be based on events of the late 13th century, though no clear parallel historical episode exists. “Traditional” ballads may have flourished in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, but they’re a living component of oral cultures predating Christianity and are still a valid currency today. In each ballad immediate presence is re-enacted in the moment, whenever it is sung, read or heard. Embellishing, changing, adapting words and tune across generations keeps the matter fresh and alive, and might refashion the significance of the event depicted for different audiences. “The Battle of Harlaw” exists in numerous versions from different periods, and while it ostensibly refers to a battle of 24 July 1411, the verses aptly leave us in some doubt about whether any side could claim it as a victory:

Oot o’ sixty thoosan’ redcoats
Went hame but thirty-two
And ninety thoosan’ Hielanmen
Went hame but forty-three.

The descendants of “The Twa Corbies” can still be seen sitting on fences or branches of trees by the roadside waiting for roadkill. In the ballad, they are waiting to get at a slaughtered knight, talking to each other about how, fortunately, not only has his hawk gone to the hunting and his hound left to fetch the wild fowl, but even his lady has taken another husband, thus confirming the fickleness of love and its betrayal. But things are not all bad. The corbies themselves can look forward to an enjoyably uninterrupted meal.

Mony a ane for him maks mane

But nane sall ken whaur he is gane

Owre his white banes when they lie bare

The wind sall blaw for evermair

Like the knight in “The Twa Corbies”, the historical Bonnie Earl o’ Murray will not come riding back in his ballad, and in the ballad of “Bonnie George Campbell”, we are told that this fine and handsome man “rode oot on a day”: “Hame cam’ his saddle a’ bluidy tae see, / Hame cam’ his guid horse, but never cam’ he.” However they might be categorised, historical, romantic or supernatural, and whenever they might be dated, the ballads embody essential truths, as vividly realised as those of Jacobean drama, and as perennial.

The story of “True Thomas” refers to the historical Thomas of Ercildoune, but there are other ballads, traditional and more recent, that involve journeys to the other world, including one of “Orpheus” recorded from Shetland in which the musician and his beloved Euridice return to the surface of the earth from the underworld and thus deliver a happy ending. The mysterious poem “Kilmeny” by James Hogg (1770-1835), was written at a time when Walter Scott, Hogg himself and not long before them Robert Burns had been taking down songs from the oral tradition and publishing them with their music for performance in polite society in the cities and the drawing rooms of the big country houses. Mysterious travels, mythical locations, grim portents, potent images and narrative tension that keeps resolution suspenseful – all these animate the ballads.

Most clearly “supernatural” is “The Wife of Usher’s Well”: three ghostly sons return to visit their mother after she has heard of their deaths, then have to leave her for a second and final time:

“The cock doth craw, the day doth daw,

The channerin worm doth chide;

Gin we be missed oot o’ oor place

A sair pain we maun bide.”

The intensity of this last leavetaking cuts deep. As with many ballads, the power of its meaning crosses history and continents. One pre-eminent example of this is “The Demon Lover”. The lover seduces the good lady who loved him long ago into following him on board his ship, leaving behind her husband and two small children, only for her to catch a glimpse of his cloven foot before he breaks the ship in two and sinks it to the ocean floor. A remarkable study of this ballad, tracking various versions of it from Scotland to America and back again is Dylan’s *Daemon Lover: The Tangled Tale of a 450-Year Old Pop Ballad* (1999) by Clinton Heylin. This follows the song through various permutations, demonstrating its effect in numerous contexts. There’s also a brilliant concert interpretation for full orchestra by John Blackwood McEwen (1868-1948) on *Three Border Ballads* (Chandos CD CHAN9241). Likewise transformative, both in subject and application, is “The Great Selkie o’ Sule Skerrie”. The Great Selkie is a man upon the land and a “selkie” or seal, in the sea, who in human form marries and has a child, and who returns to the sea with the child, knowing that they are likely to be killed by hunters, leaving the widowed mother bereft. Different versions of this ballad and stories related to it are recounted in *The People of the Sea* (1954) by David Thomson.

Supernatural visitation and psychological truth are joined in “The Cruel Mither”. A young, unmarried mother kills her two babies at birth, then is tortured to damnation by her own guilt. Looking out at young children playing with a ball, she sees them turn to her and become her own murdered bairns, saying reproachfully: “For nou we’re in the heavens hie, / And ye’ve the pains o’ hell to dree.” In this ballad, the implied patriarchal context of hierarchy, subjection and stigma, a common human world of physical desire and need, the pain of childbirth, the speed and horror of the killing, the long agony of guilt, all are evoked in tiny phrases and chilling, unelaborated, utterly unsentimental construction.

The otherworldliness of the ballads is an essential part of the character of Robert Kirk (c.1641-1692), a distinguished poet in Gaelic, whose famous – or notorious – prose work *The Secret Commonwealth* (1691) delivers an account of the relation between the material world and that of the “elves, fauns and fairies” who live “under the hill”. Like the ballads, Kirk’s world is social, material, palpable, and even when haunted, earthly. When you go to Aberfoyle, just north of Glasgow, where he spent his final years as a minister, you can visit Kirk’s grave, though his remains are said not to be there, and the story goes that in fact he did

not die but was taken under the hill himself, shortly after completing his book. No copy of the first edition appears to have survived, though Walter Scott published an edition in 1815 which was then republished by Andrew Lang in 1893 with a dedication to Robert Louis Stevenson. It is a classic “mysterious book”, in which a sense of Christian piety and a rather unChristian sense of liminality or the numinous potential of life and the aura of locations sit weirdly together. It has a long legacy, haunting the narrative of James Robertson’s novel *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006). When you walk up Doon Hill at Aberfoyle, the atmosphere is indeed otherworldly.

By contrast, the worldliness and violence characteristic of the border ballads, along with a bold sense of Christian piety, informed the short and bloody life of James Graham, Marquis of Montrose (1612-50). He was a royalist soldier and strategist who fought for King Charles I against the Covenanters, was ordered by the King in 1646 to desist and went into exile in France, but he proclaimed his loyalty to Charles II on his accession in 1649 and returned to Scotland, becoming his captain-general. He was betrayed and captured at Ardvreck Castle on Loch Assynt, taken to Edinburgh and hanged. He had the grace to give orders in 1645 that his fellow-poet William Drummond (whom we met last week) and his property of Hawthornden should be protected from the ravages of war, and he had the hard-headed realism to face his own death with sanguine equanimity and unintimidated presence of mind. On the eve of his execution, as legend has it, he wrote on the window of his prison cell with the point of a diamond, his “Metrical Prayer”:

Let them bestow on ev’ry Airth a Limb;
Open all my Veins, that I may swim
To Thee my Saviour, in that Crimson lake;
Then place my pur-boil’d Head upon a Stake;
Scatter my Ashes, throw them in the Air;
Lord (since Thou knows’t where all these Atoms are)
I’m hopeful, once Thou’lt recollect my Dust,
And confident Thou’lt raise me with the Just.

But his most memorable set of lines remain these, from the second stanza of “Montrose to his Mistress” (“My Dear and Only Love”), a poem which might stand as a dangerous but helpful motto for any one of us on some occasions in our lives:

He either fears his Fate too much,

Or his Deserts are small

That puts it not unto the Touch

To win or lose it all.

The paradoxical logic here belies the flamboyant sense of rightness and loyalty to something greater than yourself and the self-determined conquest of timidity which the lines convey so convincingly. Hard reality, and the facts of the spirit, what is at stake and what we might risk, are at the heart of the work of Kirk and Montrose, as they are likewise the essence of the ballads. Their truth is always pertinent. Sometimes, you really do have to “put it to the Touch.”

[Boxed off:]

You can find any number of ballads in the 20th and 21st centuries, but the crossover between traditions of song and literature is figured in this new poem, in which medieval, ballad and folk conventions are applied with literary flair to a scenario loaded with contemporary political application.

W.N. Herbert

The Parliaments of Birds

go says the crow
stay says the jay

aye says the magpie
naw says the daw

they're bluffin says the puffin
all news is fake nods the corncrake

when says the wren
noo says the doo

what's the rush asks the thrush
God save ye says the mavis

surly and shirky grumbles the turkey
all troubles unlocked claims the bubblyjock

what is the harm, again? wonders the ptarmigan
sic labour'll fail ye says the capercaillie

ungrateful peasants sneers the pheasant
a flu on both houses curses the grouses

You wastrels cries the kestrel
They'll baulk says the hawk

let them loose cries the goose
get tae fuck yells the duck

little shits shout the tits
ye're affy says the chaffie

who'll hug ye asks the speuggie
the way is narrow says the sparrow

it grows dark says the lark
be tenty says the lintie

we'll thole it says the houlet
at a pinch says the finch