

## **The Implicated Ballad**

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We used to think of the classic oral ballad of the British Isles and English-speaking North America as ancient, timeless, eternal. Indeed, we used to think of most folklore genres as equally ancient, timeless, and eternal. But the evidence is mounting that as a genre in English and Scots oral tradition the classic ballad may be very time-bound. At its start, obviously, the genre could not have emerged before the beginning of vernacular stanzaic song, nor indeed before the English and Scots languages emerged in the thirteenth century. The evidence of the written record (and the parallel written record of Scandinavian balladry) suggests, moreover, that the form originated as a literate entertainment of late medieval elite culture, and did not settle comfortably into oral tradition until the mid-sixteenth century, taking on at that time the oral characteristics that have been described by Andersen (1985), Buchan (1972), and others. Ironically, this first appearance of an oral ballad tradition in the British Isles is almost exactly contemporary with the rise of popular culture, and especially a popular press, in those islands. As a result, from the very beginning the tradition has been “contaminated” by popular broadside texts.

But the element of popular culture that may have had the strongest impact on this oral tradition is the cheap guitar that began to be available late in the nineteenth century. The guitar affected both tune and text. Singers who accompanied themselves by strumming chords on a guitar naturally adapted the tonality and contour of their tunes to fit classic harmonic structures. The tonality shifted from monophonic modal airs to major and minor tunes with implied harmony. (Some Dorian tunes survived because airs in this scale—like the minor, but with a raised sixth—are usually adaptable to an accompaniment consisting of two successive minor chords, such as Dm and Em). This loss of melodic freedom was accompanied by loss of rhythmic freedom. An unaccompanied singer is not forced to be rhythmically regular, but once the singer starts strumming, regularity follows. Such rhythmic regularity in melody in turn forced increased regularity in prosody. The old four-beat or three-beat line with variable numbers of non-accented syllables still appeared in some unaccompanied performances, but alongside these appeared ballads in a more even

alternation of accented and unaccented syllables. Thus the guitar edged the ballad tradition closer to popular culture melodically, harmonically, and prosodically.

Nonetheless, we could still speak unambiguously about an oral tradition (that is, a family or community tradition passed on in face-to-face communication) until some time in the middle of the twentieth century. Over the first half of that century people who knew and sang ballads were already becoming aware of other versions and other songs on the radio, on records, in books, and elsewhere. But by the 1960s, automobiles and paved roads meant that singers could easily gather at festivals, share at folk clubs, visit one another, and get to record stores. All this sharing was facilitated by both entrepreneurs and academics. Soon there was no excuse for any interested singer not to know many more ballads and other folk songs than were available in the immediate family or community (oral) tradition. As a result, today, through the agency of academia, the electronic media, and modern transportation, the ballad tradition is so thoroughly implicated in popular culture that it is impossible—were it even desirable—to disentangle it. The ballad is very much alive, but it is no longer the ballad of classic Scots and Appalachian oral tradition. Still, four hundred years isn't bad for an oral tradition. Homer may not have had any more.

Ballad scholars today are much interested in this implication of balladry in popular culture. But scholars also study the great singers and collectors of the past, the textual record, the aesthetic, prosodic, structural, and other characteristics of the ballad from the classic era, and the implication of the ballad into the lives of singers and into the eras in which they lived. There are abundant opportunities to study the ballad of today and the singers who perform, teach, record, and re-create the tradition. But thanks to several group efforts to make available great collections from the past, including the just completed Greig-Duncan collection (Shuldham-Shaw, Lyle et al. 1981-2002), recent publications of the Scottish Texts Society, the forthcoming Glenbuchat Ballad Manuscript (Buchan), and the project to digitize and publish the Carpenter Collection ([www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter](http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter)), our window on the oral tradition of the ballad is widening considerably. It remains to be seen how scholars will take advantage of these new opportunities.

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The James Madison Carpenter Collection Online Catalogue. Julia C. Bishop, Project Director. University of Sheffield.