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The Beauty of Paper Flowers
Jonathan Hicks


But now is this rose out of England exiled,  
This certaine truth I will not laine;  
But if itt please you to sitt a while,  
I’le tell you how the rose came in againe.  
('The Rose of England', Child 166)

In 1876 Francis James Child (1825-1896) was appointed Harvard University’s first Professor of English. A year later he moved to 67 Kirkland Street (formerly ‘Professor’s Row’), whereupon he took charge of a rose garden. This was some place in life for the son of a local sailmaker. And it was a place Child used, most famously, to promote the study of what he considered ‘popular’ poetry: strophic songs, with or without a stated tune, and not necessarily intended for singing, which came to be grouped together as ‘ballads’. For those literary, social, and musical historians who work in this area, Child’s biography is already well known. Yet the centrality of his ideas to this recent volume of twelve essays, edited by David Atkinson and Steve Roud, suggests that the story bears repeating.

The volume’s central call, to complicate the ‘print and oral traditions’ of its subtitle, is welcome, if long overdue, and constitutes one of the many ways in which this new body of work responds to long-running concerns. With the exception of Ffion Mair Jones’s contribution on ‘Welsh Balladry and Literacy’ all of the authors here focus on Anglophone culture, with seven of the chapters circumscribed by geography (Birmingham, Newcastle, Scotland, Wales, Dublin, America, and Newfoundland) and a further five, including Roud’s introduction, structured thematically according to issues of book history, song collecting, and mediation. Roud notes early on how Child was both dependent on published material in order to carry out his research, and ‘highly ambivalent about broadsides and other print media’ (p. 8). Atkinson backs him up by calling Child’s ‘hierarchy of media’ (p. 25) a prejudice we need no longer uphold. Nevertheless, the constitutive distinction lives on in both the last sentence of Roud’s introduction – ‘we hope that this volume will set a trend in train that will help expand both folk song studies and street literature studies to the benefit of both’ – and in his two Indexes, available online via the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library site, of ‘Folksong’ and ‘Broadsides’. There is also a telling uncertainty throughout the volume about whether or not to place terms like ‘folk’, ‘traditional’, or ‘the people’ in scare quotes. By looking again at the legacy of nineteenth-century scholarship, as well as nineteenth-century song, we might provide some context for a set of debates that continue to shape the field, more than 100 years on from when Child passed his rose beds – and his song catalogues – into other people’s care.
After excelling at Boston’s Grammar, English, and Latin Schools, ‘Frank’ Child earned a scholarship to Harvard, finishing top of his class in 1846. He was even selected Class Orator and gave the valedictory speech to his peers on graduation. Next came a series of tutorial roles at his alma mater; then a period of philological study in Göttingen and Berlin. It was in the latter city, at the Humboldt University, that the bright young Bostonian attended lectures by the brothers Grimm, events that stoked his fascination with the vernacular traditions of European storytelling. On returning to Harvard – still in his mid twenties – Child was promoted to a Professorship in Rhetoric and Oratory, a post he held for the next twenty-five years. Such a long period of professional stability allowed Child to pursue wide-ranging interests in Anglophone poetry, including his first published collection of *English and Scottish Ballads* (8 vols, 1857-8), and also to consolidate his cultural and intellectual capital: among his friends in elite political and literary circles were the poet and diplomat James Russell Lowell, the social critic and art historian Charles Eliot Norton, and the Europhilic novelist Henry James. Just as important for Child’s social standing was his marriage, in 1860, to Elizabeth Ellery Sedgwick, a member of one of the best-established families in Massachusetts. While Frank devoted the next decade to one sort of genetic editing – preparing dramatic and poetic texts for publication – Liz occupied herself with another, producing three girls and a boy in quick succession. It is a marker of Child’s achieved status that he can now be found – along with his friend Norton, who married into the same family – in the eccentric (and concentric) ‘Sedgwick Pie’ section of the Stockbridge cemetery.

I mention all this here because, to adapt Marx, the history of all hitherto existing ballad scholarship is, to a great extent, the history of class struggle. Child, no doubt, would have disagreed: his milieu was by turns liberal and romantic; his career has the contour of a class-free American Dream. Yet it is hard, I think, to appreciate the dynamics of this field of scholarship without taking into account the social and institutional affiliations of the principal scholars. The fact that many ballad texts are concerned with conflicts or partnerships defined by asymmetries of power is not beside the point. Nor is the socio-spatial marginalisation of ballad sellers and singers, and sometimes their readers and listeners, to which a number of authors in the present collection draw our attention (Chris Wright’s chapter, for example, addresses the ‘Forgotten Broadsides and Song Tradition of the Scots Travellers’).

However, my main point is more specific: what Child’s biography reminds us, and what much of the volume under review confirms, is that ballads and their advocates have gained only a precarious foothold in the modern academy. This may seem a strange statement to make given the success Child enjoyed as a Harvard Professor, not to mention the publication of this new research by an academic press. But we would do well to remember that English literature was a discipline in its infancy during the nineteenth century and did not confer the same prestige as, say, mathematics, history, or political economy (all subjects Child taught before turning to philology) – especially not when the texts one studied could be dismissed as ‘low’ or ‘vulgar’. Likewise, Atkinson and Roud have each published a great deal on ballads – Roud’s aforementioned Indexes
are widely acknowledged as the successor to Child’s – but neither of them holds a permanent academic post. In fact, of the eleven contributors to Street Ballads, only two – Ffion Mair Jones and Tom Pettitt – work primarily within the higher education sector.

There are, of course, further exceptions: a number of political and cultural historians, such as Mark Philp and Vic Gatrell, have drawn on ballad texts and practices within broader studies of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain; Roud’s first footnote (p. 1) cites a range of ‘recent’ research (some of which dates from the 1970s and ’80s); and all but one of the contributors to the previous Ashgate volume – Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800, edited by Anita Guerrini and Patricia Fumerton (2012) – pursue their research within university settings. But it is no coincidence that these scholars are primarily concerned with the early modern period (Roud makes the same point in his introduction). To offer a more aesthetically appropriate chronological marker, however, they are all concerned with the period before the canonisation of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads (1798), which came to symbolise an elevated literary project at some remove from the street-level fare we encounter in Atkinson and Roud’s new book. Indeed, two of the more influential monographs on balladry published in the present century – Maureen McLane’s Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry (Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Daniel Karlin’s The Figure of the Singer (Oxford University Press, 2013) – do so by considering the idea of ballad singing, as much as its historical practice. Partly because of increasing separation of elite and popular forms during the nineteenth century, it has been easier, professionally speaking, to study actual vernacular poetry pre-dating industrial capitalism; the vast quantity of material produced thereafter has, until fairly recently, been the preserve of performers, collectors, librarians, and local historians; or, in Child’s case, a conservative apologist who worked hard to obscure the social origins of his beloved ballads, first by discrediting the printed collections in which he found them – ‘veritable dung-hills’, as he put it, ‘in which, only after a great deal of grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel’ (quoted pp. 8, 24, and 38) – and then by applying principles of textual criticism that had the dubious virtue of acknowledging no distinction between Shakespeare, satire, and Holy Scripture.

For Child, such methodological weeding and pruning was a means of protecting his family tree: although his upbringing was relatively comfortable – we know, for example, that Joseph Child, the sailmaker, had sufficient wealth to pay $826 (roughly $25,000 in today’s money) of his son’s $1,937.11 college fees – Frank was evidently not of the same class as the family he later joined, nor the majority of the Harvard undergraduates with whom he boarded and studied. Crucially, what he had in his favour, which meant a great deal in nineteenth-century New England, was a genealogical link to that other England across the ocean: like the Sedgwicks descended from Robert and Joanna (née Blake), who arrived in the colony in 1636, both of Child’s parents, Joseph and Mary (née James) could trace their ancestry to English migrants of the mid seventeenth-century. When cast in this light, Child’s scholarship might be thought an act of double recovery: the painstaking search for jewels in the dung-hill was also a
means of securing his own place in a society where the sons of shipyard traders could not rise above their station without being reminded that they had done so. To take the example of ‘The Rose of England’, excerpted at the top of this review: we might read the ballad both as the record of an historical battle – the exiled rose as an allegory of the House of Lancaster, eventually victorious at Bosworth Field (1485) – and as a nostalgic token of a never-known homeland. To borrow from Benedict Anderson: roses mattered to Child because, in both the leaves of ancient poetry and the grounds of 67 Kirkland Street, they provided a point of access to an imagined Anglophone community.

Thinking of Child in this way places him alongside those other collectors of time-honoured tales, the foreign gentlemen whose lectures at the Humboldt so inspired his research. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm enjoyed a comfortable childhood in Steinau; but the death of their father in 1796, and then their grandfather two years later, made the young men acutely aware of the barriers erected in the face of financial hardship, not least when they struggled for admission to the University of Marburg. Their subsequent work was, in part, an attempt to construct the sort of collective tradition in which men of their kind could participate. In pursuing this aim the brothers drew explicitly on Herder’s theories of an intimate relationship between Volkspoesie and national identity. Without wishing to collapse the differences between all of these individuals, their talents, and their various circumstances, one might hazard that Herder also came to prominence from a background of relative poverty. In short, there seems to be a pattern, however faint, whereby folk scholarship, perhaps especially in the long nineteenth century, goes hand in hand with a negotiation of social difference and the possibility of overcoming it. For Herder this entailed a profound rethinking of the relationship between the individual and the state; for the masters of the ‘fairy tale’ genre it was a case of repackaging ancient lore for a modern, increasingly bourgeois readership. Later in the century Child seems to have lived by the motto ‘I catalogue, therefore I belong’, and while aspects of all three attitudes can be found in contemporary ballads research, it is Child’s legacy that looms largest in English-speaking circles. Street Ballads is a case in point.

Child has the greatest number of entries in the general index (second and third place belong, respectively, to the publisher James Catnach and the collector Sabine Baring-Gould) and his famous dung-hill quote appears in each of the first three chapters. No fewer than half of the chapters (1, 2, 3, 5, 9, and 10) discuss Child directly, and a further two (11 and 12) reference his work, or work about him, in footnotes. Of course, this continued prominence could be attributed to Child’s editorship of key reference works; but that is only half of the story. In the course of preparing ten volumes of The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1882–98), Child established a commitment to curatorial work and bibliographic research that remains very much alive in current scholarship on the nineteenth-century ballad. Indeed, the imperative to catalogue is cited explicitly in Roud’s introduction as part of the rationale for the present volume: the late sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century is a period for which not only is there a fair amount of primary material but that material is pretty much under bibliographic and critical control. ... The same,
however, cannot be said for the later eighteenth and especially nineteenth century, when the seemingly chaotic printing trade produced a huge mass of material which has survived in great numbers but in scattered and largely uncatalogued collections (pp. 2-3).

This concern with a lack of ‘bibliographic and critical control’ is a recurring theme through the volume: ‘In its current phase’, Roud tells us, ‘the study of this later street literature is a prime example of a field in which investigation at the micro level is still necessary before medium and higher level theories will become feasible’ (p. 2). The book’s next chapter, by Roud’s co-editor Atkinson, reads like a second introduction and makes the same assessment:

The ballad tradition manifest among singers and recorded by folk song collectors is ... inseparable from the tradition of printed ballads. The strength and extent of that connection is currently uncertain and open to negotiation, and it is largely the case that the sort of detailed studies of printers, sellers, and singers, and of individual ballads, at particular times and places, that typify the remaining chapters of this book will gradually enable scholars to build up an overall picture of the interface between oral and print traditions (p. 19).

On one level such remarks are nothing unusual; they amount to the old scholarly stand-by of ‘more research remains to be done’. And, to be clear, much of the material here is fascinating: Jones’s chapter on Welsh balladry, for example, approaches the familiar oral/print dichotomy via the particular concerns of religious education, whereby the ability to read aloud was understood primarily as a means of conveying the Word of God. Yet the frequency with which the authors in this volume profess the contingency of their knowledge (and not in a post-modern, post-structuralist sense) ought to give cause for reflection. Peter Wood’s chapter on Newcastle song chapbooks, which focuses on the collection of Robert White (1802-1874), notes that: ‘We rarely have enough numerical data to make definitive statements about the output of street literature from particular towns or regions’ (p. 61). Towards the end of his chapter on Scots travellers, Wright observes that: ‘In trying to determine whether a broadside such as The Shepherd’s Daughter represents the original or an intermediate text from which oral versions derived, we do not always have enough evidence to draw a firm conclusion’ (p. 104). Similarly, Anna Kearney Guigné begins her chapter on the ballad ‘Old Brown’s Daughter’ with another admission of provisional findings: ‘In Newfoundland, although a vibrant exchange exists between traditional song and popular culture, not enough is known about the specifics of these exchanges’ (p. 245). One final example: Martin Graebe’s chapter on Sabine Baring-Gould, which more than any other foregrounds the connections between the history of ballads and the history of ballad collecting, ends with an anecdote about the joys of accidental discovery: ‘Not long ago’, Graebe confides, ‘I was scanning the shelves of the [Devon Heritage Centre] library at Killerton House, when my eye was caught by the unlikely sight of Enid Blyton’s Happy Hours Story Book. Pulling it out to look at it, I found a small, slim book beside it which, when I opened it, turned out to contain six chapbooks from the 1820s, carefully bound, in excellent condition, but uncut’ (p. 194). As if the primacy of identifying ‘new’ material
were not already apparent, Graebe concludes his essay with the words: ‘I live in hope of finding more.’

It seems safe to say that the lure of comprehensiveness is part of the Child legacy – as is a pronounced tendency towards taxonomy. For the inexperienced reader, the latter can be hugely useful: the prefatory material to Street Ballads includes working definitions of ‘Broadside’, ‘Chapbook’, ‘Garland’, ‘Slip song’, and ‘Songster’, all of which help to bring into focus the material history of ballad culture subsequently addressed in the essays. Atkinson’s response to William St Clair – who argued in The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (Cambridge University Press, 2004) that from around 1774 there had been a ‘mass extinction of old ballads’ on account of a burgeoning culture of cheap print – involves a tripartite classification: by categorizing ballads according to observable extinction, decline, or persistence, Atkinson finds continuities beyond 1774 that might put pressure on St Clair’s thesis of terminal decline. Elsewhere, however, taxonomies appear more tangled, and their purpose less clear: in his account of the Newcastle chapbooks, Wood first concedes that: ‘Since the printers used many variant titles it can be quite tricky to spot every instance of a particular song’ (p. 66). He then goes on to suggest that the 1,912 songs he has identified ‘can be considered under several different heads, as national songs (157), local songs (258), and a selection of “popular” (144) and “less popular songs” (1095). Quite why the remaining items (258 according to my sums) escape categorization is nowhere explained. The more pressing problem, however, is the fact that Wood’s distinctions barely survive into his following paragraph: ‘Some 157 of the songs are recognizable at a glance because they are “well known” ([Desmond] Bland’s term) or “national” (my term). Many of these songs are Scottish and accordingly perhaps not strictly “national” in Newcastle, but they are nonetheless very familiar.’ At the risk of appearing pernickety: if the term ‘national’ is synonymous with ‘well known’ and ‘very familiar’, then how does it differ from ‘popular’? Moreover, can a song be ‘less popular’ and still ‘national’? And is it possible for a ‘local’ song to travel across national borders? Rather than confronting such questions, Wood opts for further subdivisions:

The most popular subject for the chapbook songs is that of personal relationships of various kinds – ‘love and lust’. By far the majority of the chapbook songs fall into Bland’s category of ‘general sentimental’, where ‘general’ excludes songs about soldiers, sailors, or farmer’s boys, and very few indeed into his ‘bawdy’ category – in contrast to the situation with broadside songs (p. 69).

While the relative bawdiness of chapbooks and broadsides is, no doubt, a topic of interest, the piling of category on category risks leading to false distinctions: might we not speak of ‘bawdy sentiments’? And what about love and lust for farmer’s boys? Such faith in drawing boundaries is surely misplaced. Child, again, may be at the back of this. He rightly determined that songs circulated in cheap print would not pass muster in the halls of Harvard until they had first been disciplined according to accepted principles of cataloguing and classification. While one might hope such anxieties had waned over the years, the present volume contains numerous examples of treating its material with
the most objectifying of methods. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the recourse to metrics.

Roy Palmer’s chapter on ‘Birmingham Broadsides and Oral Tradition’ is a local case study of the relationships between print and performance – i.e., precisely the sort of ‘micro level’ investigation the editors have promised. But Atkinson’s methodological warnings about ‘the sort of material that ballad scholarship has favoured’ (p. 36) do not seem to have been heeded. Despite the notoriously selective approach taken by nineteenth-century collectors, we find a table detailing the songs in ‘Birmingham printers’ outputs also found in oral tradition’ (p. 39). Given the margin of error for these figures, it is difficult to read anything into the ‘remarkable 23 per cent’ average that Palmer records. The fact that it is similar to Wood’s figure – ‘Approximately 25 per cent of the chapbook songs have been collected from singing’ (p. 75) – may say more about the average success of collectors than the more general ‘interface between print and oral traditions’ with which the volume is concerned. Besides, Roud has his own figure: ‘Modern scholars estimate that as much as 90 per cent of “traditional” repertoire appeared on nineteenth-century broadsides and in other cheap printed material’ (pp. 7-8, repeated p. 11) – though the modern scholarship cited here amounts to an unpublished doctoral thesis from 1974, a Folklore Forum article from 1975, and ‘personal communication’ from ‘researchers currently working on the material’.

When Palmer offers an example of a ballad that would seem to have ‘move[d] from oral circulation into print’ (p. 40) the numbers are similarly inconclusive: he cites Charlotte Sophia Burne – the first female president of the Folklore Society and author of Shropshire Folk-Lore (3 vols, 1883-6) – in support of the claim that ‘The Loppi’ton Bear’ was ‘made up in about 1822 by villagers from Loppington, in Shropshire’. Palmer then asserts that: ‘This was evidently the source for a broadside printed in Birmingham by T. Bloomer under the title The Cobler Frightened’ (p. 41). Yet the citation here, for the Birmingham print, is dated ‘1817-27’, which suggests the urban broadside may have predated the rural ‘making up’ of the song in 1822. Such conundrums ultimately prove a distraction: the more serious effect of counting culture can be that questions of meaning, function, and – why not? – aesthetic worth are necessarily relegated to the background. This is especially apparent in the next ballad Palmer mentions, ‘The Wanton Seed’, offered as an example of a print for which ‘there is no definitive evidence of a source’ (p. 42) in oral circulation. While we learn the approximate dates of the ballad’s Birmingham and London publication, and the exact date of the first, ‘indeed, the only’ recording of an oral version, Palmer has far less to say on the subject matter of the eight stanzas – reprinted in full – wherein a man propositions a woman in a field leading to a moment half way through where ‘she sewed high and I sowed low, And under her apron the seed did grow’. I would even venture that in the following stanza we hear an orgasm on a plosive consonant that blends with the surrounding birdlife:

The cuckoo sings all on the tree
He sings a song that pleases me well,
Sings me a song and it p-leases me well
And it’s Oh! My charming love farewell
In fairness, Palmer does not remain silent about the content of the ballad; he informs us that “some gaps were left in the words [of the printed version], presumably for reasons of delicacy” (p. 43). But his only other sentence on the matter serves to foreclose discussion before it has begun: ‘In fact, though, this is a tender lyric celebrating mutual sexual pleasure and looking forward to its results in fertility.’ Such combinations of wild sex and studious counting might again take us back to Child: during his years as Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory he wrote a libretto for a one-act pasticcio, entitled Il pesceballo (The Fish-ball), with music from some of the best-known Italian opera composers. Of all the Mozart arias at his disposal, Frank chose Leporello’s ‘Madamina, il catalogo è questo’ – the so-called ‘catalogue aria’, which makes a laundry list of Don Giovanni’s sexual conquests.

Street Ballads will, I hope, prove a valuable contribution to the field, not least because of its presentation of unresolved tensions. But by setting out the problem in terms of quantity and methodology, rather than history and ideology – arguing simply that we need more micro level studies of newly-digitized source material – the editors attempt to draw the sting from long-standing complaints against cheap print and inauthentic song. I, for one, am not convinced this strategy entirely works; such complaints were always deeply implicated in complex issues of class and cultural power. The persistent use of Child-like techniques suggests that scholarship on the nineteenth-century ballad needs a little less data and a little more dialogue with related disciplines. Musicology, for example, has had its own moment of soul searching over text/act oppositions and could certainly raise a few questions about performance, which is more or less absent from the present volume. There might also be more to say about the class position of the current generation of ballad scholars: judging by the prevalence of abbreviated first names (Steve Roud, Chris Wright, Pete Wood, Tom Pettitt) there may be an element of self-conscious distancing from a perceived establishment norm, along the lines of Dave Harker, author of Fakesong: The Manufacture of British "folksong" 1700 to the Present Day (Oxford University Press, 1985) and even Terry Eagleton, Marxist literary theorist. Whatever the case, Frank Child’s rose garden model of folk song stewardship is ideologically freighted and ill suited to the study of printed ballads. Perhaps it is time for a new theory, on the beauty of paper flowers.