Ballads: Scottish and English (1877)

By Lauren Farnsworth

**Physical Description**

Physically, this book was clearly very old, to the point where I was fearful to pick it up or flip through the pages. It is neither a very large nor a very thick book, being seven inches long and five inches wide; it likely wouldn't have been too unwieldy for a child or woman to hold. The cover is made of a dark pine-green cloth, shiny with either age, wear, or some combination thereof. The cloth is both faded and frayed along the corners and spine, and part of the spine appeared to be peeling away from the pages of the book. Despite the clear age of this book, however, it still manages to convey the stylistic tastes of the Victorian era; this is a highly decorated little book. For the most part, it is decorated with both blind and gilt. The design on the front cover has been blind-stamped in a design of oak leaves and acorns, while the borders have been decorated with gilt. This pattern frames a rather incongruous floral design, a bouquet of assorted flowers, with a full, white flower being the focal point. This bouquet is painted or printed on a smooth white paper with a scalloped edge that has begun to crack and discolor in a combination of age and dirt.

The oak tree motif is carried over into the spine of the book, where a very symmetrical oak tree is stamped with gilt paint or gilded directly onto the binding. Near the top of the tree is a stylized depiction of a harp (interestingly, considering that harpists have starred in a few of the ballads, notably “Glasgerion”), which is a scroll proclaiming “Ballads.” There is a definite motif of oak in the decoration of this book. Many Victorians had a special interest in florigraphy (Baker)—assigning particular meaning to flowers and other plants—so while the oak-leaf motif could be coincidental, it could also serve to symbolize bravery and independence (Greenaway), two virtues traditionally valued by Scotland.

When this book is opened, it is easily seen that the glue holding the binding together has deteriorated; the cover is only loosely attached to the rest of the book. As an aside, this book smells wonderful, but the scent is not one to which I am accustomed in a book. Rather than the usual musty smell of old paper and ink, this book smells oddly sweet and even “syrupy”; rather like pecan pie or artificial maple syrup flavoring.

The first couple of pages are blank; the paper is clearly very old and delicate, with some of the edges of the pages crumbling. I believe that this paper was not of particularly high quality and that this quality—or lack thereof—is contributing, along with age, to the book's current state of frailty. Although the paper is deteriorating, it is still possible to see most of the gilt edges of the pages, although the gilt is fading and flaking in certain areas. As the paper aged, it turned a rather odd color; rather than yellowing, it turned a cool, delicate shade of brown, closer to the shade of coffee than the warmer tone of tea. The paper is slightly darker around the outer edges, having a creamier color near the center of the page. The font used in printing is small, smaller than what we would call 12-point font, and the ink has held up quite well; it has not faded or turned rusty. There is, however, an occasional slight unevenness in the lettering, perhaps caused by a combination of lower quality control and a flaw in the printing press.

The first illustration we come to in this book is that of the frontispiece, which takes up a full page. Colored paintings of leaves, flowers, and birds surround an elaborate plate proclaiming—in very ornamental font colored in black and red—the series to which this book belongs (Nimmo's Popular Poets). There was either a chemical reaction between the paper used and the ink or the ink used was of low quality, because the preceding page carries a dark brown stain that mirrors the bolder patterns of the frontispiece almost exactly. The rest of the book's illustration are simply black ink, portraying an event in one of the ballads. There is usually a line of text from whatever ballad has been illustrated included at the bottom of each illustration.
Publication History

This particular book was compiled and published in 1877 by the publisher William P. Nimmo. It was apparently printed in Edinburgh, Scotland, though the publisher also seems to have had an office in London (14 King William Street, Strand, to be exact). Near the beginning of my research, I believed that this book was a first-edition copy because the frontispiece did not say otherwise; usually, when the edition of a particular book is not mentioned, the book in question is a first edition. Later, however, while exploring WorldCat, I, with help from my professor, found a still earlier edition of this book which dated to 1868, nine years before what I had thought to be my first-edition copy. I was not able to find much information about the publisher William P. Nimmo, per se; I did, however, discover quite a lot of what this company published. Nimmo seemed to put out quite a variety of books, from books of general information, cheap novels, “classics,” and poetry, all sold for prices as low as a shilling each. Given this book’s cheaper binding and composition, then, along with the rest of Nimmo’s output, I would say that these books were targeted towards the lower classes. Cheap, decorated (“handsomely bound in cloth,” “beautifully illustrated”), and ranging through a broad spectrum of subjects, these books would have been ideal for those who wanted to gain more knowledge or seem more affluent.

Authorship

Many of these ballads seem to be lacking known authors. This should not surprise us; ballads are often traditional folk tunes which may date back as far as the medieval period (Birney). Played by wandering minstrels, adapted by countless singers, spread across the British countryside, it is little wonder that there is little evidence in many ballads of a single author. Nonetheless, there are a few ballads in this book that were either written by or adapted by known authors. One of the more recognizable authors (for me, at least) was Sir Walter Scott.

When I first began research for this project, I believed that William P. Nimmo may have plagiarized some of the work of Francis James Child, but as far as I can currently tell, I was mistaken in that belief. The accusation of plagiarism is a sticky one to make when relating to folkloric subjects like ballads, which only rarely have known authors. While we can usually figure out a country of origin and an era for these ballads, the authors remain elusive. This is likely because, as I mentioned earlier, ballads were handed down through the generations, likely changing a bit with each new singer. Although Child’s work contains some of the same ballads as Nimmo’s, this is understandable because they are drawing from the same source material.
This book focuses on—unsurprisingly—English and Scottish ballads. It predates what many see as the authoritative collection of ballads, Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (incidentally, this book is much slenderer than Child’s, the latter being a quick, short read of about 2,500 pages). Rather than offer much history or background of the ballads, this book focuses on simply being a collection of the ballads themselves. In this way Nimmo’s edition differs slightly from Child’s collection, which often prefaces the ballads with a short analysis or history. Perhaps lack of analysis and history is further evidence that Nimmo didn’t simply lift the bulk of his text from Child’s work.

This book of ballads is largely written in either archaic English or Scots. It seems clear that the intended audience need not have been scholars in such things, however; whenever a more archaic word is used, a footnote usually offers adequate explanation and clarification. The footnotes also will give information regarding certain locations of Scotland that might not have been well-known. This, along with other factors, leads me to assume that this book was not intended for a more scholarly audience. An academic who specialized in the history of Scotland or in ballads and folklore likely would not have needed these clarifications.
Works Cited


Oh this is absolutely gorgeous and informative! I own three different copies of this book, but not this lovely version (which now I’m gonna have to find for sale so I can add it to my collection lol). Thank you all much for posting this so I could gain since more insight on my favorite old book!

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4 Characteristics of English & Scottish Ballads Dramatize a single incident—the story begins abruptly, often in the middle of the action. Little attention is paid to characterization or background. Little reflection or expression of sentiment—focus is simply on telling what happened rather than on what people think or feel. A strong, simple beat and uncomplicated rhyme scheme, or pattern—they contain repetition of a key word, line or phrase to emphasize ideas, to heighten the emotional content & add musical quality. Refrain: a regularly repeated line or phrase at the end of each stanza—the refrain allows listeners to join in the chorus and gives them time to remember the verses. The tendency to suggest rather than directly state—ballads often contain sharp psychological portraits. Harvard’s first professor of English, the American scholar Francis James Child (1825–96) had previously prepared a collection of English and Scottish ballads, published in 1857–9, before he embarked on producing this definitive critical edition. Organised into five volumes and published in ten parts between 1882 and 1898, the work includes the text and variants of 305 ballads, with Child’s detailed commentary and comparison with ballads and stories from other languages. Although he did not live to fully clarify his methods of selection and classification, modern scholars still refer Project Gutenberg’s English and Scottish Ballads Volume I (of 8), by Various. This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.net. Title: English and Scottish Ballads, Volume I (of 8). Author: Various. Editor: Francis James Child.