

A. LANG



SIR WALTER  
SCOTT  
AND THE BORDER  
MINSTRELSY

# **Sir Walter Scott and the Border Minstrelsy**

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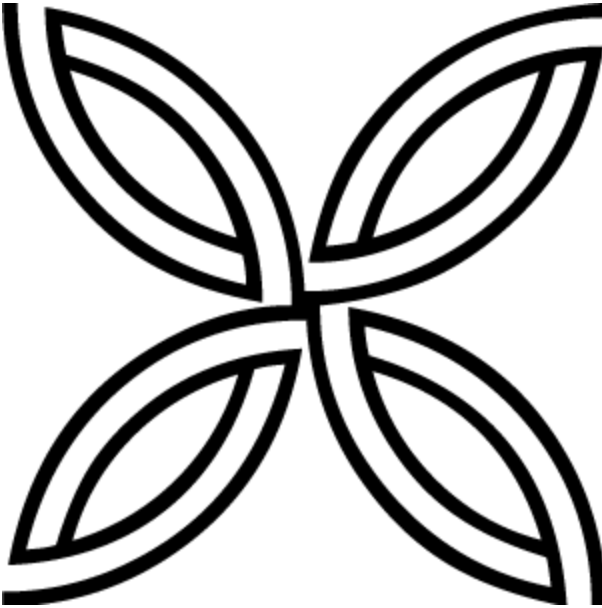
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# **Sir Walter Scott and the Border Minstrelsy**

**Andrew Lang**



# PREFACE

Persons not much interested in, or cognisant of, “antiquarian old womanries,” as Sir Walter called them, may ask “what all the pother is about,” in this little tractate. On my side it is “about” the veracity of Sir Walter Scott. He has been suspected of helping to compose, and of issuing as a genuine antique, a ballad, *Auld Maitland*. He also wrote about the ballad, as a thing obtained from recitation, to two friends and fellow-antiquaries. If to Scott’s knowledge it was a modern imitation, Sir Walter deliberately lied.

He did not: he did obtain the whole ballad from Hogg, who got it from recitation—as I believe, and try to prove, and as Scott certainly believed. The facts in the case exist in published works, and in manuscript letters of Ritson to Scott, and Hogg to Scott, and in the original copy of the song, with a note by Hogg to Laidlaw. If we are interested in the truth about the matter, we ought at least to read the very accessible material before bringing charges against the Sheriff and the Shepherd of Ettrick.

Whether *Auld Maitland* be a good or a bad ballad is not part of the question. It was a favourite of mine in childhood, and I agree with Scott in thinking that it has strong dramatic situations. If it is a bad ballad, such as many people could compose, then it is not by Sir Walter. The *Ballad of Otterburne* is said to have been constructed from Herd’s version, tempered by Percy’s version, with additions from a modern imagination. We have merely to read Professor Child’s edition of *Otterburne*, with Hogg’s letter covering his MS. copy of *Otterburne* from recitation, to see that this is a wholly erroneous view of the matter. We have all the materials for forming a judgment accessible to us in print, and have no excuse for preferring our own

conjectures.

"No one now believes," it may be said, "in the aged persons who lived at the head of Ettrick," and recited *Otterburne* to Hogg. Colonel Elliot disbelieves, but he shows no signs of having read Hogg's curious letter, in two parts, about these "old parties"; a letter written on the day when Hogg, he says, twice "pumped their memories."

I print this letter, and, if any one chooses to think that it is a crafty fabrication, I can only say that its craft would have beguiled myself as it beguiled Scott.

It is a common, cheap, and ignorant scepticism that disbelieves in the existence, in Scott's day, or in ours, of persons who know and can recite variants of our traditional ballads. The strange song of *The Bitter Withy*, unknown to Professor Child, was recovered from recitation but lately, in several English counties. The ignoble lay of *Johnny Johnston* has also been recovered: it is widely diffused. I myself obtained a genuine version of *Where Goudie rins*, through the kindness of Lady Mary Glyn; and a friend of Lady Rosalind Northcote procured the low English version of *Young Beichan*, or *Lord Bateman*, from an old woman in a rural workhouse. In Shropshire my friend Miss Burne, the president of the Folk-Lore Society, received from Mr. Hubert Smith, in 1883, a very remarkable variant, undoubtedly antique, of *The Wife of Usher's Well*.<sup>[0a]</sup> In 1896 Miss Backus found, in the hills of Polk County, North Carolina, another variant, intermediate between the Shropshire and the ordinary version.<sup>[0b]</sup>

There are many other examples of this persistence of ballads in the popular memory, even in our day, and only persons ignorant of the facts can suppose that, a century ago, there were no reciters at the head of Ettrick, and elsewhere in Scotland. Not even now has the halfpenny newspaper wholly destroyed the memories of traditional poetry and of traditional tales even in the English-speaking

parts of our islands, while in the Highlands a rich harvest awaits the reapers.

I could not have produced the facts, about *Auld Maitland* especially, and in some other cases, without the kind and ungrudging aid, freely given to a stranger, of Mr. William Macmath, whose knowledge of ballad-lore, and especially of the ballad manuscripts at Abbotsford, is unrivalled. As to *Auld Maitland*, Mr. T. F. Henderson, in his edition of the *Minstrelsy* (Blackwood, 1892), also made due use of Hogg's MS., and his edition is most valuable to every student of Scott's method of editing, being based on the Abbotsford MSS. Mr. Henderson suspects, more than I do, the veracity of the Shepherd.

I am under obligations to Colonel Elliot's book, as it has drawn my attention anew to *Auld Maitland*, a topic which I had studied "somewhat lazily," like Quintus Smyrnæus. I supposed that there was an inconsistency in two of Scott's accounts as to how he obtained the ballad. As Colonel Elliot points out, there was no inconsistency. Scott had two copies. One was Hogg's MS.: the other was derived from the recitation of Hogg's mother.

This trifle is addressed to lovers of Scott, of the Border, and of ballads, *et non aultres*.

It is curious to see how facts make havoc of the conjectures of the Higher Criticism in the case of *Auld Maitland*. If Hogg was the forger of that ballad, I asked, how did he know the traditions about Maitland and his three sons, which we only know from poems of about 1576 in the manuscripts of Sir Richard Maitland? These poems in 1802 were, as far as I am aware, still unpublished.

Colonel Elliot urged that Leyden would know the poems, and must have known Hogg. From Leyden, then, Hogg would get the information. In the text I have urged that Leyden did not know Hogg. I am able now to prove that Hogg and Leyden never met till after Laidlaw gave the manuscript of *Auld Maitland* to Hogg.

The fact is given in the original manuscript of Laidlaw's *Recollections of Sir Walter Scott* (among the Laing MSS. in the library of the University of Edinburgh). Carruthers, in publishing Laidlaw's reminiscences, omitted the following passage. After Scott had read *Auld Maitland* aloud to Leyden and Laird Laidlaw, the three rode together to dine at Whitehope.

"Near the Craighbents," says Laidlaw, "Mr. Scott and Leyden drew together in a close and seemingly private conversation. I, of course, fell back. After a minute or two, Leyden reined in his horse (a black horse that Mr. Scott's servant used to ride) and let me come up. 'This Hogg,' said he, 'writes verses, I understand.' I assured him that he wrote very beautiful verses, and with great facility. 'But I trust,' he replied, 'that there is no fear of his passing off any of his own upon Scott for old ballads.' I again assured him that he would never think of such a thing; and neither would he at that period of his life.

"'Let him beware of forgery,' cried Leyden with great force and energy, and in, I suppose, what Mr. Scott used afterwards to call the *saw tones of his voice*."

This proves that Leyden had no personal knowledge of "this Hogg," and did not supply the shepherd with the traditions about Auld Maitland.

Mr. W. J. Kennedy, of Hawick, pointed out to me this passage in Laidlaw's *Recollections*, edited from the MS. by Mr. James Sinton, as reprinted from the *Transactions* of the Hawick Archæological Society, 1905.



# SCOTT AND THE BALLADS

It was through his collecting and editing of *The Border Minstrelsy* that Sir Walter Scott glided from law into literature. The history of the conception and completion of his task, “a labour of love truly, if ever such there was,” says Lockhart, is well known, but the tale must be briefly told if we are to understand the following essays in defence of Scott’s literary morality.

Late in 1799 Scott wrote to James Ballantyne, then a printer in Kelso, “I have been for years collecting Border ballads,” and he thought that he could put together “such a selection as might make a neat little volume, to sell for four or five shillings.” In December 1799 Scott received the office of Sheriff of Selkirkshire, or, as he preferred to say, of Ettrick Forest. In the Forest, as was natural, he found much of his materials. The people at the head of Ettrick were still, says Hogg, <sup>[1a]</sup>like many of the Highlanders even now, in that they cheered the long winter nights with the telling of old tales; and some aged people still remembered, no doubt in a defective and corrupted state, many old ballads. Some of these, especially the ballads of Border raids and rescues, may never even have been written down by the original authors. The Borderers, says Lesley, Bishop of Ross, writing in 1578, “take much pleasure in their old music and chanted songs, which they themselves compose, whether about the deeds of their ancestors, or about ingenious raiding tricks and stratagems.” <sup>[2a]</sup>

The historical ballads about the deeds of their ancestors would be far more romantic than scientifically accurate. The verses, as they passed from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation, would be in a constant state of flux and change. When a man forgot a verse, he would make something to take its place. A more or less



appropriate stanza from another ballad would slip in; or the reciter would tell in prose the matter of which he forgot the versified form.

Again, in the towns, street ballads on remarkable events, as early at least as the age of Henry VIII., were written or printed. Knox speaks of ballads on Queen Mary's four Maries. Of these ballads only one is left, and it is a libel. The hanging of a French apothecary of the Queen, and a French waiting-maid, for child murder, has been transferred to one of the Maries, or rather to an apocryphal Mary Hamilton, with Darnley for her lover. Of this ballad twenty-eight variants—and extremely various they are—were collected by Professor Child in his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (ten parts, 1882-1898). In one mangled form or another such ballads would drift at last even to Ettrick Forest.

A ballad may be found in a form which the first author could scarcely recognise, dozens of hands, in various generations, having been at work on it. At any period, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cheap press might print a sheet of the ballads, edited and interpolated by the very lowest of printer's hacks; that copy would circulate, be lost, and become in turn a traditional source, though full of modernisms. Or an educated person might make a written copy, filling up gaps himself in late seventeenth or in eighteenth century ballad style, and this might pass into the memory of the children and servants of the house, and so to the herds and to the farm lasses. I suspect that this process may have occurred in the cases of *Auld Maitland* and of *The Outlaw Murray*—"these two bores" Mr. Child is said to have styled them.

When Allan Ramsay, about 1720, took up and printed a ballad, he altered it if he pleased. More faithful to his texts (wherever he got them), was David Herd, in his collection of 1776, but his version did not reach, as we shall see, old reciters in Ettrick. If Scott found any traditional ballads in

Ettrick, as his collectors certainly did, they had passed through the processes described. They needed re-editing of some sort if they were to be intelligible, and readable with pleasure.

In 1800, apparently, while Scott made only brief flying visits from the little inn of Clovenfords, on Tweed, to his sheriffdom, he found a coadjutor. Richard Heber, the wealthy and luxurious antiquary and collector, looked into Constable's first little bookselling shop, and saw a strange, poor young student prowling among the books. This was John Leyden, son of a shepherd in Roxburghshire, a lad living in extreme poverty.

Leyden, in 1800, was making himself a savant. Heber spoke with him, found that he was rich in ballad-lore, and carried him to Scott. He was presently introduced into the best society in Edinburgh (which would not happen in our time), and a casual note of Scott's proves that he did not leave Leyden in poverty. Early in 1802, Leyden got the promise of an East Indian appointment, read medicine furiously, and sailed for the East in the beginning of 1803. It does not appear that Leyden went ballad-hunting in Ettrick before he rode thither with Scott in the spring of 1802. He was busy with books, with editorial work, and in aiding Scott in Edinburgh. It was he who insisted that a small volume at five shillings was far too narrow for the materials collected.

Scott also corresponded with the aged Percy, Bishop of Dromore, editor of the *Reliques*, and with Joseph Ritson, the precise collector, Percy's bitter foe. Unfortunately the correspondence on ballads with Ritson, who died in 1803, is but scanty; nor has most of the correspondence with another student, George Ellis, been published. Even in Mr. Douglas's edition of Scott's *Familiar Letters*, the portion of an important letter of Hogg's which deals with ballad-lore is omitted. I shall give the letter in full.

In 1800-01, "*The Minstrelsy*" formed the editor's chief

occupation," says Lockhart; but later, up to April 1801, the Forest and Liddesdale had yielded little material. In fact, I do not know that Scott ever procured much in Liddesdale, where he had no Hogg or Laidlaw always on the spot, and in touch with the old people. It was in spring, 1802, that Scott first met his lifelong friend, William Laidlaw, farmer in Blackhouse, on Douglasburn, in Yarrow. Laidlaw, as is later proved completely, introduced Scott to Hogg, then a very unsophisticated shepherd. "Laidlaw," says Lockhart, "took care that Scott should see, without delay, James Hogg." <sup>[4a]</sup> These two men, Hogg and Laidlaw, knowing the country people well, were Scott's chief sources of recited balladry; and probably they sometimes improved, in making their copies, the materials won from the failing memories of the old. Thus Laidlaw, while tenant in Traquair Knowe, obtained from recitation, *The Dæmon Lover*. Scott does not tell us whether or not he knew the fact that Laidlaw wrote in stanza 6 (half of it traditional), stanza 12 (also a ballad formula), stanzas 17 and 18 (necessary to complete the sense; the last two lines of 18 are purely and romantically modern).

We shall later quote Hogg's account of his own dealings with his raw materials from recitation.

In January 1802 Scott published the two first volumes of *The Minstrelsy*. Lockhart describes the enthusiasm of dukes, fine ladies, and antiquarians. In the end of April 1803 the third volume appeared, including ballads obtained through Hogg and Laidlaw in spring 1802. Scott, by his store of historic anecdote in his introductions and notes, by his way of vivifying the past, and by his method of editing, revived, but did not create, the interest in the romance of ballad poetry.

It had always existed. We all know Sidney's words on "The Douglas and the Percy"; Addison's on folk-poetry; Mr. Pepys' ballad collection; the ballads in Tom Durfey's and

other miscellanies; Allan Ramsay's *Evergreen* ; Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* ; Herd's ballad volumes of 1776; Evans' collections; Burns' remakings of old songs; Ritson's publications, and so forth. But the genius of Burns, while it transfigured many old songs, was not often exercised on old narrative ballads, and when Scott produced *The Minstrelsy* , the taste for ballads was confined to amateurs of early literature, and to country folk.

Sir Walter's method of editing, of presenting his traditional materials, was literary, and, usually, not scientific. A modern collector would publish things—legends, ballads, or folk-tales—exactly as he found them in old broadsides, or in MS. copies, or received them from oral recitation. He would give the names and residences and circumstances of the reciters or narrators (Herd, in 1776, gave no such information). He would fill up no gaps with his own inventions, would add no stanzas of his own, and the circulation of his work would arrive at some two or three hundred copies given away!

As Lockhart says, "Scott's diligent zeal had put him in possession of a variety of copies in various stages of preservation, and to the task of selecting a standard text among such a diversity of materials he brought a knowledge of old manners and phraseology, and a manly simplicity of taste, such as had never before been united in the person of a poetical antiquary."

Lockhart speaks of "The editor's conscientious fidelity . . . which prevented the introduction of anything new, and his pure taste in the balancing of discordant recitations." He had already written that "Scott had, I firmly believe, interpolated hardly a line or even an epithet of his own."

[8a]

It is clear that Lockhart had not compared the texts in *The Minstrelsy* with the mass of manuscript materials which are

still at Abbotsford. These, copied by the accurate Mr. Macmath, have been published in the monumental collection of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, in ten parts, by the late Professor Child of Harvard, the greatest of scholars in ballad-lore. From his book we often know exactly what kinds of copies of ballads Scott possessed, and what alterations he made in his copies. The *Ballad of Otterburne* is especially instructive, as we shall see later. But of the most famous of Border historical ballads, *Kinmont Willie*, and its companion, *Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead*, Scott has left no original manuscript texts. Now into each of these ballads Scott has written (if internal evidence be worth anything) verses of his own; stanzas unmistakably marked by his own spirit, energy, sense of romance, and, occasionally, by a somewhat inflated rhetoric. On this point doubt is not easy. When he met the names of his chief, Buccleuch, and of his favourite ancestor, Wat of Warden, Scott did, in two cases, for those heroes what, by his own confession, he did for anecdotes that came in his way—he decked them out “with a cocked hat and a sword.”

Sir Walter knew perfectly well that he was not “playing the game” in a truly scientific spirit. He explains his ideas in his “Essay on Popular Poetry” as late as 1830. He mentions Joseph Ritson’s “extreme attachment to the severity of truth,” and his attacks on Bishop Percy’s purely literary treatment of the materials of his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765).

As Scott says, “by Percy words were altered, phrases improved, and whole verses were inserted or omitted at pleasure.” Percy “accommodated” the ballads “with such emendations as might recommend them to the modern taste.” Ritson cried “forgery,” but Percy, says Scott, had to win a hearing from his age, and confessed (in general terms) to his additions and decorations.

Scott then speaks reprovingly of Pinkerton’s wholesale