

**SIR WALTER SCOTT  
AND THE BORDER  
MINSTRELSY**

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Sir Walter Scott and the Border Minstrelsy by Andrew Lang

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**ANDREW LANG**

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## 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 MS. 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>1</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>2</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 Etrick, 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, with-

<sup>1</sup> Child, part vi. p. 513.

<sup>2</sup> Child, part x. p. 294.