

# **POETIC ORIGINS AND THE BALLAD**

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Poetic origins and the ballad by Louise Pound

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**LOUISE POUND**

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AND THE BALLAD**



## PREFACE

The leading theses of the present volume are that the following assumptions which have long dominated our thought upon the subject of poetic origins and the ballads should be given up, or at least should be seriously qualified; namely, belief in the "communal" authorship and ownership of primitive poetry; disbelief in the primitive artist; reference to the ballad as the earliest and most universal poetic form; belief in the origin of narrative songs in the dance, especially definition of the English and Scottish traditional ballad type as of dance origin; belief in the emergence of traditional ballads from the illiterate, that is, belief in the communal creation rather than recreation of ballads; belief in the special powers of folk-improvisation; and belief that the making of traditional ballads is a "closed account." The papers making it up are reprinted, with a few modifications and considerable additional material, from the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, from *Modern Philology*, from *The Mid-West Quarterly*, and from *Modern Language Notes*. A few are printed for the first time, and the chapter on "Balladry in America" is indebted to a chapter on "Oral Literature in America" published in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. Thanks are due to the publishers for permission to utilize passages from the latter. The polemical tone of the papers, which is so marked as to need explanation, is to be accounted for by

the fact that each was written to urge a distinctive point of view or to oppose some accepted position, i. e., was a piece of special pleading. It was impossible to eliminate the argumentative note without re-writing the articles *in toto*.

Much attention is given in the course of the volume to the subject of folk-song in America.

The author wishes to express grateful acknowledgment to Professor H. M. Belden of the University of Missouri, who first encouraged her to interest herself in the study of folk-song, and to Professor H. B. Alexander of the University of Nebraska, to whom she owes her interest in poetic origins and in much more besides. Both have read the manuscript in parts and to both she is indebted for generous assistance. Adequate acknowledgment of their help cannot be dismissed with a phrase.

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# POETIC ORIGINS AND THE BALLAD

## CHAPTER I

### THE BEGINNINGS OF POETRY

Certain [Indian] societies require that each member have a special song; this song is generally of the man's own composition, although sometimes these songs are inherited from a father or a near relative who when living had been a member of the society. These individual songs are distinct from songs used in the ceremonies and regarded as the property of the society, although the members are entitled to sing them on certain occasions. When this society holds its formal meetings a part of the closing exercises consists of the simultaneous singing by all the members present of their individual songs. The result is most distressing to a listener, but there are no listeners unless by chance an outsider is present, for each singer is absorbed in voicing his own special song which is strictly his own personal affair, so that he pays no attention to his neighbour, consequently the pandemonium to which he contributes does not exist for him.

The foregoing paragraph from Miss Alice C. Fletcher's account of Indian music<sup>1</sup> reads like a travesty of the accepted view of primitive song, its character and authorship. There is the familiar primitive "horde," engaged in festal singing, without onlookers. Yet instead of col-

<sup>1</sup> *The Study of Indian Music*. Reprinted from the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 1, p. 233. 1915. According to Miss Fletcher, the Indians are sitting as they sing.

Compare a custom among the Karok, an Indian tribe of California (Stephen Powers, *Contributions to North American Ethnology*, vol. III, p. 29, Washington, 1877).

laborative composition, improvisation, and communal ownership of the ensuing "ballad," we have individual authorship and ownership, and individual singing. This is the testimony of a specialist who has spent many years among the people of whom she writes, studying and recording their songs and their modes of composition. Easily recognizable is the homogeneous primitive group, singing in festal ceremony; but this group does not conduct itself in the way which literary historians have insisted that we should expect.

The songs of primitive peoples have received much attention in recent years, especially the songs of the American Indians. An immense amount of material has been collected and made available; and this has been done in a scientific way, with the help of countless phonographic and other records. Instead of having to rely on the stray testimonies of travellers, explorers, historians, and essayists, the student of primitive poetry has now at his disposal an amount of data unavailable to his predecessors. He need not linger among the fascinating mysteries of romantic hypotheses, but can supply himself with the carefully observed facts of scientific record.<sup>2</sup>

In this matter it cannot be valid to object that we should not look among North or South American Indians, or Es-ki-

<sup>2</sup> References of chief importance for the American Indians are Frederick R. Burton, *American Primitive Music*, with especial attention to the songs of the Ojibways, New York, 1909; Natalie Curtis, *The Indian's Book*, New York, 1900; and the following thorough studies: Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, in *Bulletins* 45 (1910) and 53 (1913) of the *Bureau of American Ethnology*, and *Teton Sioux Music*, Washington (1918); Alice C. Fletcher, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music*, *Papers of the Peabody Museum*, vol. 1, No. 5, 1893, *Indian Story and Song*, Boston, 1900, *The Hako: a Pawnee*

mos for "beginnings." It cannot reasonably be said that these tribes are too advanced, too highly civilized, to afford trustworthy evidence as to aboriginal modes. As a matter of fact, we can go little farther back, in the analysis of culture, than these people, if we are to stay by what can be demonstrated. When we have learned what we can learn from the primitive tribes on our own continent, in South America, Africa, Australia, Oceania, we know very nearly all that we can surely know. If we go to the prehistoric, we are conjecturing, and we ought to label our statements "conjecture." In general, gradations of "primitiveness" among savage peoples are difficult to make. A social group may show the simplest or least organized social structure, and yet be relatively advanced in musical and artistic talent. Another group may show advance in social organization, yet be backward in song and story. And certainly even the most advanced of the Indian communities (with the exception of civilized Mexico and Peru) are every whit as primitive as the mediæval peasant communes, from whose supposed ways we are constantly asked to learn as regards poetic beginnings.<sup>3</sup> If, as we

*Ceremony*, 22 Report (1904), *Bureau of American Ethnology*, and *The Study of Indian Music* quoted *supra*; James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion*, 14 Report, *Bureau of Ethnology*, Part II, 1896. Excellent pieces of work are "Hopi Songs" and "Zuni Melodies," by B. I. Gilman, published respectively in the *Journal of American Ethnology and Archaeology*, vol. I, 1891, and vol. v, 1908, but nothing is said in these regarding the composition or presentation of the songs recorded. Many references are cited later, especially books, studies, or special articles dealing with South American, African, and Australian tribes.

<sup>3</sup> See F. B. Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry*, 1901, and *The Popular Ballad*, 1907. See also *Primitive Poetry and the Ballad*, *Modern Philology*, I, 1904.