

**BORDER BALLADS; WITH  
AN  
INTRODUCTORY ESSAY  
AND TWELVE ETCHINGS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649493920

Border Ballads; With an Introductory Essay and Twelve Etchings by Andrew Lang & C. O. Murray

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Cover @ 2017

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**ANDREW LANG & C. O. MURRAY**

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92314  
WITH AN INTRODUCTORY  
ESSAY BY ANDREW LANG  
AND TWELVE ETCHINGS  
BY C. O. MURRAY

LONDON: LAWRENCE AND BULLEN  
NEW YORK: LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.

1895

Edinburgh: T. and A. CONSTABLE, Printers to Her Majesty

## PREFACE

THE origin and date of the more ancient European ballads, and of the Scottish ballads, which are but an important element in the general mass, have puzzled all inquirers. Ballad-collecting, in England, began to be fashionable under the Restoration, but the pieces collected were cheap popular leaflets. No questions of date and origin were raised, and, when oral versions began to be written down, altered, edited, and published, as by Allan Ramsay and Bishop Percy, the ballads were generally attributed to 'the old minstrels.' The hypothesis was vague enough. It was known that 'minstrels,' whether settled in noble houses, or wandering at adventure, had existed. Their poems were not easily to be found, and, on the other side, here were the ballads, poems with no known authors,—'masterless,' as the Greeks said. The inference was that the masters without songs had composed the songs without masters.

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The first hints which led to a comparative study of the topic were given when the Danish and other Scandinavian popular ballads, with those of France, Brittany, Italy, Modern Greece, Finland, and other European countries, began to be published, at the end of the last, and throughout the present century. It was soon seen that the popular orally preserved poems of Europe closely resembled each other in style, in recurring formulæ, in ideas and superstitious beliefs, and even in sequence of incident and plots: though here very close resemblances are not common. The conclusion is that popular poetry, in Europe at least, is only a branch of folk-lore in general. The causes which account for the striking analogies between the *Märchen*, or popular tales of the world, must also account for the common features in the ballads of Europe. There is first a store of common ideas, beliefs, superstitions, and simple conventions in expression. Then some sequence of incidents, some story plot, probably attracted, in one country, or in several, the attention of some unknown singer, or singers. One poetical



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version had merit enough to survive in the general memory, and was transmitted from place to place, in the course of commerce, war, and travel. We know that songs and dances, or corroborees, are thus transmitted among the natives of Australia, in spite of the diversities of language which prevail. In the same way a successful and taking ballad, dealing with universally diffused ideas, superstitions, and customs, or with romantic incidents of universal interest, might easily spread all over Europe. Retained only in memory, and subject to the caprice of singers or reciters, themselves poets in their way, a ballad would come to present many variants, even in a single country, and would undergo great changes in countries widely divided from each other.

Again, it might easily happen that kindred but varying versions of the same *Märchen*, or traditional popular tale, would be independently versified in distant lands,—in Norway and in Portugal, for example. It seems certain that in Europe, as also in Africa, there existed a class of oral compositions in which verse

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and prose occur alternately, as they do now in some entertainments of the music-halls. The celebrated *Cante-fable* of *Aucassin and Nicolette* is the only old literary example of this form which survives. Jamieson in *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* (p. 379), and Motherwell in his *Minstrelsy* (p. xv), give two popular examples of the *Cante-fable* in alternate verse and prose from Scandinavian and Scottish sources. Manifestly, in some cases, the verse might well degenerate into prose, when we should have a *Märchen*, or the prose might be versified, as time went on, when we should have a ballad. The authors might either be professional wandering *jongleurs* or rural amateurs, such as Hogg would have been had the Shepherd never learned to read and write.

The stock of common conventional formulæ made ballad composition easy, to a man of some fancy. The fittest ballads would survive in general recollection, as we have said, and the mannerisms of the ballad were perpetuated, after education became more widely diffused, and found a place in such more recent compositions

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as the ballads on events in the history of the Covenanters.

Thus considered, the analogies of topic, style, and plot in the ballads of Europe cease to seem so very perplexing. Again, the very high relative merit of Scottish ballads, as compared with English, may partly be explained by the more romantic character of a mountain-dwelling people, partly by the circumstance that the Scottish ballads were collected from oral recitation, while those of England, collected from published leaflets, had passed into print through the deadening hands of the very lowest literary hacks. Once printed, as Hogg's mother said to Scott, a ballad ceases to be remembered and handed down in oral tradition. Fortunately Scott, and others, came in time, before the 'lively tradition' of the Border had expired.

These points may be illustrated, by aid of the erudition of Professor Child of Harvard, from the pieces in this collection.\*

\* See Mr. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. This vast collection, with all known variants, derived from manuscript sources, is still incomplete, and is being published in numbers. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston, U.S.