Sir Alexander Gray is already one of the most important translators of Danish ballads with his existing books, *Four-and-Forty* (1954) and *Historical Ballads of Denmark* (1958). He left unpublished a third volume called, with characteristic ironic humor, “Posthumous Ballads.” With the publication of this work, Gray will arguably be the most significant of all the ninety translators of the Danish *folkeviser*. The key critical study finds that his translations work well as real ballads in Scots, a rare quality in any target language (Graves and Thomsen forthcoming).

Gray made major contributions as professor of political economy at Aberdeen and Edinburgh, as a poet in English and Scots, as a translator of folk and lyric songs into Scots, and in public service on a series of Royal Commissions and boards of review (Syndergaard 2000: 455–58, 463). Fortunately, Gray and his son John saw that his papers went to the National Library of Scotland (MSS 26009–26014), and his Danish consultant Elias Bredsdorff retained all the letters he received from Gray—all now key resources in examining his work.

In this essay, I want to consider the surprising fact that Alexander Gray maintains a tartly antischolarly stance throughout his ballad translations, reaching a peak in his “Posthumous Ballads” and letters to Bredsdorff. This is surprising from a lifelong academic, a prominent professor at prominent universities, a poet and translator whose enormous learning shows continually, and the third generation of a Scots family that rose impressively through education (Syndergaard 2000: 457, 463). Yet the archives and letters show a savvy use of scholarly resources, a penetrating understanding of scholarly problems, and the acquisition of requisite knowledge, in short: a scholarly intellect in full employ.

This curious divergence is traceable in part to Gray’s own nature. But besides idiosyncracy this case also asks us to think about the nature and place of “ballad scholarship.” It is a term we all use, not always remembering that its dimensions may be complex and our embrace of it ambivalent. Gray’s case also lets us interrogate relationships between the translator and ballad scholarship, as well as the qualities we ask of a translator. My main goal is to understand,
rather than prove a particular thesis. In discussing Gray, of course, I mean not the total man but that voice one constructs from publications, letters, archives, and interviews. I will use “we” in a rather porous way to include Danish ballad scholars but also many of the rest of us on an ad hoc basis. It may be helpful to keep in mind the opposing poles in Gray’s own mantra: “I am a ballad-monger, and not a ballad-scholar” (Letter to Elias Bredsdorff, 9 November 1953; subsequent citations will include only the letter’s date).

Let us begin with the evidence against “scholar” and for “monger.” We have, above all, Gray’s dismissive and ironic characterizations of his own work in his translation paratexts—introductions and commentaries—and his letters. As well as ballad monger, he calls himself an “ignorant amateur” (30 July 1956) “skating on thin ice” (1958: 130) and “an alien” (1958: x; 4 February 1955) committing “outrages” on the Danish material (6 October 1959). He labels his introductions as “patter” or “explanatory gossip” (MS 26012: fol. 3; 1958: 1; 19 November 1958). He insists that his translation is an “innocent pastime,” a “harmless hobby,” an “old man’s amusement,” a self-indulgence generally. His translation work occupies those marginal parts of life when he is not doing more-important things—retirement, weekends, the enforced leisure of travel (30 January 1959; 28 August 1958; 30 November 1952; 14 November 1952; 29 June 1953; 23 May 1955). In fact his *Four-and-Forty* may be the only book ever dedicated “to British Railways, who provide the ideal environment for the practice of verse-translation” (1954: v). He comes to call *Posthumous Ballads* the more-comical *Bad Boys’ Book of Bloody Ballads* (6 January 1960). There is a recurring hint of false pretences.

Moreover, Gray is often ironic, humorous, or even dismissive toward the work of established ballad scholars, mainly the prominent Danish editors whose collections he owned—often calling them collectively “the commentators,” “the experts,” “the learned,” or “austere scholarship” (1954: 140; “Posthumous Ballads”; fols. 41–42, 100, 227; 1958: 72, 154). He does not exclude even the iconic Svend Grundtvig: “Of some slight interest to the historian is that the Battle of Lena was the last occasion on which the God Odin made a personal appearance in what we now call an armed conflict. It is Grundtvig who hands on this information. This may explain the slaughter of 16,982 Danes” (1958: 43).

In styling himself a ballad monger, Gray also certainly refers to his activities in the mass media. His translations regularly appeared in *The Scotsman* newspaper; he read them on the air in the BBC “Scottish Programme,” and he even prepared for an early television presentation that fell through (1958: 19–20; J. Gray 1999b). He also presented his ballad translations and commentaries in what he styled “variety entertainments” or “penny readings” for interested

Many of us would probably agree that Gray’s collections do not, in fact, look very “scholarly.” The introductions have few footnotes; the works cited are generally restricted to source editions and other translations, and the commentaries sometimes avoid provenance, dating, diffusion, analogues, and ancient connections—favorite grist for our scholarly mills—to concentrate on the narratives themselves. In addition, the language is unpretentious in diction, sometimes humorous, and utterly, utterly clear.

But the most telling judgments on whether Gray is scholarly come in reviews of his books by Erik Dal, who must certainly be one of the two most important Scandinavian ballad scholars of the latter half of the twentieth century. Dal accepts the Scots language and the readability of Gray’s translations; he accepts the irony and humor, and he appreciates Gray’s feeling for the material. He partly accepts Gray’s “transplantations” into Scots place names and personal names (1955: 129–30; 1959: 145; 1962: 75). But Dal’s very telling reservation is that both books “have no scholarly pretensions” (1955: 129; 1959: 145). He could “very well recommend Sir Alexander Gray’s light and agreeable dish, at least as an appetizer” but maintains that another translator’s work, E. M. Smith-Dampier’s A Book of Danish Ballads, remains the best general introduction for the anglophone reader (1955: 130). Possibly the same qualities of irony and humor that please Dal also tempt him to resist taking these books altogether seriously. In any event, “light appetizer” sounds more monger than scholar.

The ballad establishment had spoken, and although this criticism might seem merely to endorse what Gray himself says, he was not happy with the first review, especially Dal’s preference for Miss Smith-Dampier, most of whose ballads Gray regarded as “simply lousy, smelling of being translations” (30 January 1959). Dal gets at the heart of the matter, and we will return to this. But first, what of the personal equation on Gray’s side? For the manifestations of the scholarly always exist in negotiation with the rest of the self.

At the shallowest level, like the rest of us, Gray simply wants it both ways. He likes to denigrate his own efforts in a familiar defense against falling short, but throughout his poetic career, he also seeks recognition from the Erik Dals of this world. As a younger man, he keeps meticulous records of every review and appearance of his poetry (J. Gray, Talk: 8). He works to get his ballad-translation books reviewed (21 September 1954; 24 October 1958) and as he nears death, his distribution list for a last, honorary, anthology begins not with his family but the
British Museum (1966b). A concern with falling short of his promise regularly pursued Gray—itself ironic in such a versatile, productive man (J. Gray, Talk: 6).

But Gray’s self-irony in fact runs deeper: it is a way of seeing the world in which multiple truths both coexist and undercut each other. (Such a vision is familiar to all students of Chaucer, for example.) Any scholar who seeks to resist oversimplification and the categorical in a complex world should understand Gray’s irony as a more-entertaining expression of the same position. Thus, he is able both to look up to the Danish ballad scholars as being far above him in knowledge and to see their limitations, as when he likens their approach to paleontology (1958: 6).

Gray has his own scholarly adequacies and strengths, however much he calls himself a ballad monger. His command of Danish develops from marginal to good, though he never tackles the “archaic Danish” of many original texts (1958: x). He uses the National Library’s imposing lexical resources, and his seeking out Danish scholar Elias Bredsdorff at Cambridge as his consultant on language and background I see not as a sign of inadequacy but as the efficient use of the ideal scholarly resource. His Danish certainly becomes good enough to let him challenge his mentor (“Posthumous Ballads”: fol. 9; 1 December 1957) and see when his supposed betters, including his nemesis, Smith-Dampier, go wrong or finesse the tough spots (4 July 1954; 26 November 1957; 1 December 1957). He is more honest about insoluble problems than are most translators (“Posthumous Ballads”: fol. 47). In fact, when Gray complains about his own inadequacy, one is tempted to ask, “Compared with what?” Elias Bredsdorff endorses his Danish (telephone interview, 1998), but Gray compares it with his German and Dutch, both good enough for counterpropaganda war service in “The Lie Factory” (J. Gray, Talk: 8).

“Ballad scholarship” in many minds means editing ballads, classifying them, and attempting to determine their provenance, dates, analogues, and historicity. Such studies involve examining great amounts of detailed evidence and forming hypotheses, sometimes to be disputed to near exhaustion. These are not Gray’s focuses and strengths, either in translation work or, except for his first book (Davidson and Gray 1909), in economics.

Rather, Gray is that analytical scholar who sees the larger picture and cuts through to essences, in both his writing and teaching (J. Gray 1999a). He assimilates theory and can make it accessible, but he is not a theoretician. His common sense rises to the uncommon as a scholarly attribute, and he has a keen eye for imbalance and compulsions in scholarship, such as the early quest for the historical within Danish ballads (1958: 17–32, 50, 87, 128, 154–55).
Gray also has the rare scholarly ability to banish jargon, writing informally and with total clarity for a multileveled audience. If we do not see the scholarly judgment at work behind the informal diction, the limitation is ours. Gray’s “mongering” in *Four-and-Forty* includes a position in an important language debate in Scotland, and in *Historical Ballads of Denmark*, he offers an insightful treatment of what we look for in so-called historical ballads—both essays significant, if limited, contributions and disarmingly clear (1954: xvi–xxvi; 1958: 1–17).

Similarly, Gray is a scholar ahead of his time in his attention to the popular media as venues for his ballad translations and commentaries. He also served on advisory boards for the BBC. If we accept “ballad monger” because of a perceived categorical opposition between the scholarly and the popular media, again the problem is ours. (Perhaps the Modern Language Association is following Gray’s lead fifty years later with its new radio series, “What’s the Word?”) Gray is a doer, as a scholar and otherwise, not one for prolonged, inconclusive discussion: “It is so much more satisfying in every sphere of life to get on with the job… than to talk incessantly about the job, so that in the end, in the multitude of words, we all prevent each other from doing anything” (1954: xvi).

By now I believe we see the most important thing Gray reveals in his ironies: the ballad-monger/ballad-scholar opposition is a false one; ballad translations done in a scholarly, responsible way may, and should be, “mongered” to the widest audience.

Let us return to the revealing tension between the voice of Erik Dal, the ultimate ballad scholar, and that of Gray, whose ballad-monger sobriquet we now see as ironic. We may then recognize certain broader tensions among views of ballad scholarship and translation. Dal actually finds a great deal to praise in Gray, especially if we read beyond his reviews (1976: 17–18, 26). Even so, Gray’s works are without “scholarly pretensions,” especially because they translate from popular anthologies of redacted ballads by Danish editors and not from the great scholarly edition, *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* (Grundtvig et al.: 1853–1976). Moreover, his sampler work *Four-and-Forty* does not include the “introduction to the world of the ballads” that Dal expects. Finally, Gray’s translations do not retain some well-established formulas and incremental repetitions found in the originals (Dal 1955: 129–30; 1959: 145; 1962: 75). Dal prefers Smith-Dampier’s *A Book of Danish Ballads*, certainly because it translates the “masterful introduction” in Axel Olrik’s popular anthology, probably because it is simply more comprehensive (1955: 129; 1956: 375), and perhaps because she is a “trained Scandinavist” (1970: 91). Dal is asking Gray as translator to privilege the source ballads as performed in tradition, asking for stricter fidelity to Danish ballad
conventions, and asking for an introduction which digests the voluminous scholarship on Danish balladry. He is asking, in fact, for exactly the excellent features he as editor—but not translator—gives his own *Danish Ballads and Folk Songs* (1967).

What, from his side, does Alexander Gray want? His creative and scholarly energies go, above all, to forming Scots ballads that work as entire poems, and those energies certainly succeed (Graves and Thomsen forthcoming). Only secondarily is he concerned with representing Denmark, through its ballads, to the English-speaking world. We may identify two factors here. First, for Gray, Scotland’s own balladry is a treasure poetically dependent on its life among ordinary rural people. Thus, any ballad may get lost if enveloped in scholarship that becomes an end in itself. (Gray’s own ballad roots are in the ancestral village of Letham.) Second, translating the Danish ballads occurs during Gray’s growing emotional and intellectual focus on his Scots being, and thus he is more driven to express what he calls the “spirit of Scotland” in these powerful ballads than to express Danish culture (Syndergaard 2000: 455–58).

In recreating the *folkeviser* as good Scots ballads, Gray is much concerned with narrative consequence, with developing coherent, internally consistent stories with organic refrains. He does not like rough edges or narrative dawdling. Part of his scholarly effort goes into delving into the massive *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* to try to resolve just such perceived problems. He therefore sometimes replaces repetitive and formulaic elements that he thinks will grate on the Scots sensibility (15 June 1959; 1 February 1963). More importantly, he tends to choose the most straightforward (13 February 1952 to 7 August 1959), and usually the briefest, example of the narrative among his source versions (“Posthumous Ballads”: fols. 122–23, 191–92; 9 June 1957 and throughout).

In this goal lies Gray’s most important limitation, at least in that particular scholarly vision exemplified by Svend Grundtvig, Erik Dal, and probably many of us in the community of ballad scholars. In translating from redactions, not faithful editions (*Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* or Tang Kristensen), and selecting the most “coherent” narratives, he is not privileging the cultural artifact as created in tradition. Despite reading extensively in *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, he seems not to have accepted the key paradigm established by Grundtvig in that pivotal work. Gray also seems to want scholarship to produce “usable” results, by implication some kind of permanent gain in consensus understanding of the subject. This is by no means what he always finds in the literature.

Gray owned all the most important redacted editions of the Danish ballads in the twentieth century, representing an astonishing collective scholarly effort.
and power. Yet their redactions for the same ballad type may be startlingly different, as are, often, their commentaries (28 March 1954; 11 April 1954; “Posthumous Ballads”: fol. 54). No resolved questions here. And as Gray researches the literature to develop his introductions, he sees that ballad scholarship has its own cycles of fashion—the pursuit of antiquity, the pursuit of historicity, skepticism about historicity (1958: 2–20, 42–3, 154–55; “Posthumous Ballads”: fols. 49–50, 79, 111, 218–19)—and that scholarly discussion may simply defeat itself by its own “inordinate” mass (“Posthumous Ballads”: fol. 63; and throughout the letters). An ironic scholarly mind like Gray’s sees both high accomplishment and futility in this great web of work, and, accordingly, his language acknowledges the scholarship yet characterizes it as an option: “The curious” may access “the literature of the learned” elsewhere (“Posthumous Ballads”: fols. 218–19).

We have now explored Gray’s position. What can we learn by expanding this discussion to include ballad translation and scholarship more generally?

Even if translating from redactions and not from tradition-bearers’ texts is unscholarly, Gray has excellent company. In the surprisingly large collective enterprise of Danish ballad translation, only one major collection in the nineteenth century (Prior) and one in the twentieth (Dal 1967) translate from unredacted texts.

Moreover, making redacted ballads available for a broad audience is exactly what most of the giants of Danish ballad scholarship have used their learning to do: Olrik, von der Recke, Frandsen, Grüner-Nielsen, and yes, Svend Grundtvig—twice (1867, 1882)—have all produced redacted collections for general and school use. This list includes three of the four dominating editors of the ballad edition that established the scholarly vision, “All that there is, all as it is” (Danmarks gamle Folkeviser). English speakers who read Gray’s translations do not get the narratives as performed in Danish tradition, but neither do most Danes. To overstate somewhat, as scholars we have insisted on recording the poetry of the people exactly as performed, but we have given it to the people mainly with our considerable intervention.

What, by way of the scholarly, have we customarily asked of ballad translators? Notably, we have not usually demanded, through the marketplace nor in scholarly reviews, that they use unredacted sources. We have, on the other hand, expected an adequate command of Danish, and here the “mere ballad-monger” Gray is superior in fidelity to the majority (Syndergaard 1995: analytical tables). We have wished for “introductions to the world of the ballads,” as Dal puts it, but in the other two major twentieth-century collections we have not
asked that the translator be the scholar who generates them (Smith-Dampier 1939; Dal 1967). Unfortunately, we have not generally asked for translations that sound like ballad poetry. In other words, Alexander Gray has been asked for more of the scholarly than others. In his self-dismissive way, Gray himself has, in fact, joined this chorus. Ironically, he has hardly been asked for the poetic accomplishment that he has supplied.

I offer two final perspectives on Gray’s work and the scholarly. First, a new field of scholarship, translation studies, has evolved with an empirical focus on what is created in the target text and on the translation strategy, rather than the traditional focus on the source text within a script of inevitable loss (Syndergaard 1996). This scholarship mandates that we examine Gray’s pioneering strategy of translation into dialect, and his poetic and cultural parameters, very carefully.

Finally, studying Gray’s translation work may compel us to ponder the place of the scholarly in the larger scheme of things. Gray’s work on the Danish ballads begins shortly before his retirement and becomes a central focus of that period of his life. The activity gives structure; the intellectual jousting and poetic creation are satisfying. This seems to come straight from a “Have a Healthy Retirement” checklist.

But my mother-in-law tartly says, “The golden years aren’t,” and Gray writes that his were indeed “a bit of a swindle” (29 December 1964). The letters chronicle a diminishing curve of focus on ballad work and a rising arc of fatigue, operations, illness, frustration, with slowing, then stopped, work, and approaching mortality (30 April 1956 to 19 January 1967). Making the Danish ballads into Scots poems remains satisfying, but the obligatory scholarly work does not. Certainly some part of the aging Gray’s ironic treatment of the scholarly is a reaction to having to force himself to the library or write repeatedly to Elias Bredsdorff on difficulties in reconciling “the experts” (1 December 1957). How vital is this scholarly detail work as health runs down and time becomes finite? Would we trade half the translations in “Posthumous Ballads” for introductions more “scholarly” by 25 percent?

This same irony mirrors Gray’s much larger disaffection with many of the products of his academic life (26 January 1964). He finds nothing of his distinguished career in economics worth reprinting in the final, honorary collection, A Timorous Civility (7–9), and this is all part of a final retreat into, or reaffirmation of, his Scottishness (Syndergaard 2000: 455–58). Gray has always seen the limitations of scholarship that seems to pore over details, I suspect in part because he knew what it was to focus his learning toward the great national cause in the World War. In a query to Bredsdorff on yet another ballad detail, he jokes,
“By God, dont [sic] we waste our time and attention on awful nonsense which is of no significance whatsoever in winning the next war?” (22 November 1957). Ironic as usual, but also a reminder of due proportion: There are lesser and greater causes in this world.

What still does matter, in the austere reassessments of a long and productive academic and public life by this powerful, creative, and morally aware mind, is hardly the scholarly. Rather, it is identifying the “spirit of Scotland” within these kindred ballads and creating Scots poetry from them. That is a sobering vision for any ballad scholar to contemplate.

References


