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"The White Fisher: 
An Illegitimate Child Ballad from Aberdeenshire

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The James Madison Carpenter Collection was made principally in England and Scotland during the period 1929–35. This vast unpublished field collection contains a large number of ballads and other songs from the North East of Scotland, including some rare texts and tunes. Carpenter’s most prolific singer, Bell Duncan of Lambhill, in the parish of Forgue, Aberdeenshire, provided him with some sixty-five Child ballads alone, including a number of these rare songs. My encounter with her version of one such ballad, “The White Fisher” (Child 264), prompted the following examination of this little-known and seldom-studied song.

“The White Fisher” has only ever been collected in east Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Francis James Child found no international analogues of the ballad, and his commentary is based on a single text. To date, only five versions are extant, four lengthy ones (one with tune) and one markedly shorter, but not necessarily incomplete, version without a documented tune. In addition, there are two stanzas, with tune, clearly deriving from “The White Fisher” but contained within a version of “Fair Ellen” (Child 63, “Child Waters”) and another single stanza with tune which has recently come to light. All were documented during a period of just over a hundred years, from the time of Peter Buchan’s collecting in 1816–27 to the early 1930s, when Carpenter collected the ballad (see Appendix A). These bare facts alone raise intriguing questions as to whether the ballad was more widely known within Aberdeenshire and/or beyond but for some reason was not encountered by field collectors. If not, how do we account for its limited geographical distribution and relatively short life span in oral tradition?

The intrigue of the ballad increases still further when we consider its narrative content. The basic plot, as presented in the four long versions, runs as follows: After only a month of marriage, the husband of a couple notices that his wife is pregnant and asks her who the baby’s father is. She names the father (whose identity varies and will be discussed in more detail later) and implies that this man raped her. Sometime later she bears a baby boy. Her husband returns to her after an absence, either at, or just after, the birth. She instructs him
to drown the child in the sea, but instead he takes it to his mother and persuades her to take care of it. Returning to his wife, he finds her lamenting for the boy:

My bonny young son is a white fisher,
An’ he’s ower sure to the sea;
And lang, lang will I think for fish
Or he bring ony tae me. (Mrs. Annie Robb)

The husband then reveals that the child is in good hands and will be well treated. Around this basic framework of an illegitimate birth and the resolution of the difficulties which it causes, the different versions weave further refinements and subtle emphases, some of which will be explored here.

Gordon Gerould found the ballad “moving,” particularly because he regarded it as quite realistic (1932: 47). The small body of critical commentary is, however, divided about the coherence and importance of its narrative and its authenticity as a traditional ballad. Most notably, Child misconstrued the plot and wrote dismissively of its narrative and stylistic detail. In this sense, then, we can view “The White Fisher” as an “illegitimate Child ballad,” that is, both a Child ballad about illegitimacy and a ballad which Child only grudgingly thought had legitimate claim to be included in his compendium of genuine popular ballads. Subsequent commentators have helped validate the ballad’s coherence and traditional authenticity, and some have implicitly or explicitly raised questions about its moral outlook, particularly with respect to gender roles and sexual politics.

This essay pieces together what is known of the song’s history by identifying and assembling the extant verbal texts and melodies of “The White Fisher” and presenting them alongside information regarding the people who sang the song and the circumstances of its documentation. I will also make a preliminary comparison of the song’s verbal and musical texts to highlight the most salient aspects of their continuity and change and review collectors’ and scholars’ commentaries. Given that “The White Fisher” concerns rape, illegitimacy, infanticide, and adoption, and the effect of these on marital and parental relations, the critics have often addressed the ballad’s sexual politics. As we will see, closer scrutiny of these remarks often reveals implicit biases and assumptions within the secondary context of ballad scholarship itself.

The verbal texts of the song are discussed here in the chronological order of their collection. It is worth noting beforehand that the four principal versions are
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represented by remarkably full texts, given the length and complexity of the narrative, consisting of between eighteen and twenty-five stanzas (see Appendix B). Each contains four scenes:

1. The revelation of the pregnancy as a consequence of rape;
2. The labor, birth, and wife’s instructions to drown the baby;
3. The negotiations between the husband and his mother concerning the care of the baby;
4. The wife’s remorse over the presumed death of the baby and the husband’s revelation that he has resolved the situation by getting his mother to look after the child.

Some scenes are more extended in some versions than in others, and some details come and go or alter, but the basic nature and sequence of events is the same in all the long versions.

The short (four-and-a-half-stanza) version and apparent fragments of one and two stanzas are also consistent in that they start with or are constituted by the stanza(s) containing the “white-fisher” imagery (see Appendix C). As we will see, this seems to be a particularly arresting and memorable part of the song, suggesting a regional provenance for at least these stanzas and possibly the whole ballad.

a) The Peter Buchan version
The only version of “The White Fisher” known to Child was the one published in Peter Buchan’s Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland (1828) and contained in the 1816–27 manuscript on which the book was based. In this text, the wife identifies the father of the child as “a popish priest” who “vowed he would forgive my sins, / If I would him obey.” When the husband takes the child to his mother, however, she initially regards it as confirmation that “that lady was an ill woman, / That ye chose for your bride.” Undeterred, the husband persuades his mother to look after the child by claiming that it is really his, sent to him by “a king’s daughter” over the sea. Returning home, he tries to comfort his lamenting wife with a drink, but she refuses on the grounds that, if he is capable of drowning the child, he is capable of poisoning her. After the child’s true fate has been revealed, he urges her to be “a good woman,” and she gratefully acknowledges that he, not she, has saved the situation.

That the woman has been raped is communicated more overtly in this version than any of the other long versions. The scenario in stanza 4 is explicitly portrayed
as an act of blackmail and abuse of power by a trusted, and officially celibate, religious authority figure.

Child, however, clearly struggled to make sense of fundamental elements of the ballad’s plot. He interprets the husband’s invented “king’s daughter” as the same person as his real wife, inferring that it is the wife’s royal status which persuades the mother to change her low opinion. Child further misinterprets the final stanza as the wife declaring “if he had not been the father she should not have been the mother.” He goes on, “To make this story hang together at all, we must suppose that the third and fourth stanzas are tropical, and that Willie was the priest; or else that they are sarcastic, and are uttered in bitter resentment of Willie’s suspicion, or affected suspicion” (Child 1882–98, 5: 435). In other words, he thinks the stanza where she names the priest as the father and describes how he blackmailed her is somehow a figurative expression of her and her husband’s sexual relationship, or else the wife resents the husband’s suspicion to the extent that she pretends she has been raped by a priest. Thus, Child’s commentary denies the rape of the woman altogether or sees it as her own invention.

Peter Buchan himself was under no such misapprehensions about the ballad’s story. His notes to the song, which Child appears to have overlooked or ignored, indicate that he has no doubt about the identity of the rapist/child’s father or the gallantry displayed by the husband. Indeed, he relishes the opportunity to de-cide the hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic clergy:

> Those who have read the lives of the Popes; the history of the inquisition, and of the inferior orders of the clergy of the Romish church, will be nowise surprised that the ghostly confessor should, instead of administering spiritual consolation to the lady in her husband’s absence, rob her of her chastity; and betray, like an unprincipled villain, the trust reposed in him. The wicked lives and ungrateful conduct of most of the friars, monks, and priests, need no comment. (P. Buchan [1828] 1875, 1: 306)

This anti-Catholic attitude is a unique feature of Buchan’s text. The internal evidence and comparison with the other versions show fairly conclusively that this is a departure from the norm. Peter Buchan’s version appears at one time to have followed the pattern in other versions of incremental repetition between stanzas 2 and 3, but stanza 3 has subsequently been modified from “man of might”/“baron of high degree” to “popish priest,” rather than the expected “little wee page.” This and the following stanza, also unique to the Buchan version,
which elaborates on this twist in the plot, inject an overt element of sectarianism into the song and are possibly the work of Buchan himself. They certainly provide a platform for his uncompromising views. Despite roundly condemning the priest, however, Buchan immediately extenuates his crime by commenting that “it would appear from the indulgence given to the lady by her husband, that he was conscious of the priest’s treachery, and of her own innocence, in as far as she was betrayed” (P. Buchan [1828] 1875, 1: 306; emphasis added). The Catholic priest was treacherous, but Buchan is not above the suspicion that a woman may “lead a man on” to commit rape even though there is nothing in the ballad to justify this comment.

Child’s aversion to the ballads collected by Buchan and his doubts about their trustworthiness are well known and, in the case of “The White Fisher,” these lead Child to censure the ballad still further. He writes, “We need not trouble ourselves much to make these counterfeits reasonable. Those who utter them rely confidently upon our taking folly and jargon as the marks of genuineness. The white fisher is a trumpery fancy; [stanzas] 2, 7, 8, 12 are frippery commonplaces” (Child 1882–98, 5: 435). It is clear from this thinly disguised attack on Buchan that Child believed he had inserted a number of well-known ballad formulas into “The White Fisher” and invented the stanzas containing the white-fisher imagery entirely. One wonders why Child included it in The English and Scottish Popular Ballads at all, given this degree of opprobrium, and still more why Child chose to adopt the ballad’s name which contained the offending “trumpery fancy.”

b) The Bell Robertson and Mrs. Annie Robb versions
As with a number of ballads Child found only in Buchan’s books and manuscripts, he might well have modified his view of “The White Fisher” if the two versions collected by Gavin Greig had been available to him. Alexander Keith, who first published these versions, states,

It is not often that Child falls into error, but here he has blundered badly if not unaccountably. Mistakes, of the kind which here makes the child Willie’s son, are frequent in traditional balladry, but unless they are supported by the testimony of two or three independent versions, they cannot be taken seriously. In this case Child had only a solitary, unsupported text to go upon. Further, his reading of the two lines quoted above [i.e., the final two lines] is patently untenable. The lines refer to the fate, not the paternity of the
child…. Our two versions greatly modify Child’s indictment of the ballad and of Buchan. (Keith 1925: 208)

Bell Robertson of New Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire, gave Greig the ballad in 1908, but it is her second, more-complete version from 1912 which Keith printed in Last Leaves (1925). As with many of her songs, “The White Fisher” was “one of mother’s songs. I think it had been her mother’s.” Bell Robertson was born in 1841, so this would date her version to the 1850s at the earliest, and her mother, Jean Gall, was born in 1804, pushing her version back to around 1815 at the earliest. Her version consists of twenty-three stanzas and, as Keith points out, “follows Buchan’s [version] at no great distance” (Keith 1925: 208).

Greig’s other version of “The White Fisher” came from Mrs. Annie Robb (née Davidson), born in Monquhitter (Porter and Campbell 2002: 577). This version is also printed by Keith in Last Leaves, along with the note that she “lived ‘at the foot of Mormond Hill,’ and d[ied] aged 88 about 1911” (1925: 208). This makes the earliest possible date for her version around 1833. The text from Mrs. Robb is eighteen stanzas long and was in fact given to Greig in two parts. Keith states that Greig received stanzas 1–12 in 1908 and stanzas 13–18 in 1910, noting that “Mrs. Robb took them to be portions of separate ballads, but Mr. Greig recognized the connection” (Keith 1925: 208). Keith appears to be partially in error here, however, since Greig’s unpublished sixty-four volumes of folk-song words [Gw] contain “the partial text at Gw 10.79–81 [which] ends with stanza 11 and the partial text at Gw 55.109–10 [which] begins with stanza 12.” Either way, from a narrative angle, these seem odd places for the song to be divided, and one wonders if Mrs. Robb regarded either part as a complete song in itself. Keith’s phrase “portions of separate ballads” rather than “separate ballads” suggests that she saw each of them as incomplete. It is noteworthy, however, that “there is no indication that Greig had any direct contact with her,” and the several texts he received came through her son, Alexander Robb (Lyle 2002: 471).

Greig immediately grasped the significance of the texts from Bell Robertson and Mrs. Robb, and he defended the ballad and Peter Buchan against Child’s criticism. In a letter to William Walker (1912), he expresses surprise at Walker’s “harking back to Child’s muddle” regarding the plot, adding, “to me the ballad is perfectly intelligible.” He goes on: “If spared to reach the ‘White Fisher’ I hope to treat the matter frankly & fully in the interests of simple truth & fair play to the ballad and to Peter Buchan, when I should be sorry to find a good man & friend associated with Child in his hopeless position” (Greig to Walker, 5 August 1912).

Greig, alas, did not live to publish his observations on “The White Fisher,”
but Keith’s remarks in *Last Leaves* catch something of Greig’s uncompromising tone. Far from disparaging the ballad as Child had done, Keith comments that “our two versions of this ballad, particularly the first [that of Mrs. Robb], are the most interesting in our collection” (Keith 1925: 207). With the benefit of Greig’s versions for comparison, he takes Child to task for misconstruing the story and condemning the ballad and Buchan. In particular, he counters Child’s attack on the ballad’s language and imagery:

> Child called the “white fisher” idea “a trumpery fancy.” White-fishers, or line-fishers, are those engaged in inshore fishing for the home market, most of them old men and boys; and white fish are the fish caught by these inshore fishermen. “The White Fisher” is a silly title for the ballad, for the phrase in A [Mrs. Robb’s version] 15 and 16 is merely a passing figure of speech. In B [Bell Robertson’s version] 12 the expression, “till fite fish he fess hame” (repeated in B 20), is the equivalent to “till a’ the seas gang dry,” or to “till doomsday.” The commonplaces in the ballad which Child designates “frippery” cannot be so peremptorily treated. (Keith 1925: 208)

Thus, Keith validates the white-fisher metaphor through regional linguistic usage and occupational practice.

Turning to the detail of the versions collection by Greig, we find that Bell Robertson’s, as already mentioned, is close to Buchan’s in both its plot details and diction (cf., for example, stanzas 2, 5, Buchan 6/Robertson 7, Buchan 11–16/Robertson 13–18). An important difference between the Bell Robertson and Peter Buchan versions, however, is the identity of the rapist, who in the former is the father’s foot page. Here again, the rape is portrayed unequivocally, with overt emphasis on it as an act of manipulation, force, and revenge, motivated by an alleged social injustice:

> He saired my father seven years,  
> And he never paid him his fee;  
> But he got me in my bower my lane,  
> And he made me pay the fee. (stanza 4)

This ultimately lays the blame for the situation at the father’s door and also precludes any inference that the woman herself invited or colluded in the rape.
Another stanza unique to Bell Robertson’s version is the concluding one, where the wife explicitly acknowledges the husband’s chivalrous actions:

My blessin’s on yer cheek, your cheek,
     My blessin’s on yer chin,
     My blessin’s on yer red rose lips,
     For ye’re aye a woman’s frien. (stanza 23)

This no doubt helped prompt Keith’s observation that Bell Robertson’s text “emphasises all through the generous nature of the young man and the trust reposed in him by his lady” (Keith 1925: 208). Greig and Keith find this emphasis on the husband’s gallantry even more pronounced in Mrs. Robb’s version.

Mrs. Robb’s version is distinct in a number of ways from Bell Robertson’s and Peter Buchan’s. Here the rape is conveyed in the formula, “he put his hand on to my shoulder/And he made me doon to fa’. ” This is a more-subtle suggestion of rape but still implies that she was forced to the ground. This time the rape takes place “between the kitchie and the ha’,” not in the woman’s bower. As in the Bell Robertson version, though, the rapist is a servant of her father, this time his “butler-boy.” No reason is given for the rape, but the woman openly condemns the boy by using formulaic phrases like “And an ill death may he dee” (stanza 3) and “Oh woe be to my father’s butler boy” (stanza 4). Indeed, the child’s likeness to his father is cited here as the justification for drowning the boy:

Oh ye’ll tak’ up that bonnie boy,
     And ye’ll throw him in the sea,
     For like is he to his fause father,
     And he’ll get nae mair o’ me.

Oh ye’ll tak’ up that bonnie boy,
     And cast him in the main,
     For like is he to his fause father
     And sair was he to blame. (stanzas 8 and 9)

There is a possible hint that the woman favored the butler boy prior to the incident, but it is ambiguous because the attribute “fause” could apply to him as a servant rather than a lover. Meanwhile, the text makes strenuous efforts to blame the rape, or possible rough seduction, on the man alone.
A particularly distinctive element of Mrs. Annie Robb’s version is the absence of any explicit hostility to the wife from the mother. The husband simply persuades his mother to look after the boy and give him the best nursing and education possible. The invented “king’s daughter” is also absent. However, the implication that the boy is his illegitimate child is retained in the injunction, unique to the versions of Mrs. Robb and Bell Duncan (below), which he gives his mother:

An’ ye’ll tak’ care, my mother,” he said,
“When we come here to dine,
That ye’ll kiss my son, and bless my son,
But say nae that he’s mine. (stanza 13)

Mrs. Robb moves on swiftly from this point, including the lament of the wife but omitting her suspicion that her husband could poison her, and concluding not with her acknowledgment of his saving the situation, nor her blessing him, but with his issuing the parallel admonition to his wife regarding his mother:

An’ ye’ll tak’ care, my lady,” he said,
“When we go there to dine,
That ye’ll kiss your son, and ye’ll bless your son,
But say not that he’s thine (stanza 18).

Keith highlights these distinctive stanzas of Mrs. Robb’s version, commenting that this is how the husband gets over the difficulty of what Keith terms “his lady’s lapse” (Keith 1925: 208). This suggests either that Keith interprets the initial situation as rough seduction, rather than rape, or regards the woman as somehow to blame for being raped and the resulting situation.

Greig does not comment explicitly on the morality of the woman’s actions. Rather, in the light of Mrs. Robb’s admonitory stanzas, he focuses on the gallantry of the husband’s behavior. He writes to William Walker that “Willie [is] a rare hero; nay,...the greatest hero that I have encountered in all balladry” (Greig to Walker, 5 August 1912). In a later letter, he continues to enthuse to Walker about these stanzas: “Just think of it; and it really needs a bit [of] thinking to take it all in. I have grappled with it, and am free to confess that, viewed from an ethical standpoint, the whole thing impresses one more than does any other situation which I have encountered in ballad study.” Thus, Greig rightly broadens the critical focus to consider the actions of the husband as well as the wife—
although he does not mention the other key character, the mother—and he underlines the uniqueness of the husband’s actions from the perspective of ballad narrative more generally. Whether or not the husband is “the greatest hero…in all balladry,” the moral outlook(s) implied by “The White Fisher” is certainly tantalizing and worthy of further study.

c) The Miss Annie Robb and Miss Elizabeth Robb stanzas

Miss Annie Robb and Miss Elizabeth Robb were both daughters of Mrs. Annie Robb (Lyle 2002: 471; Porter and Campbell 2002: 578; Campbell 2002). Elizabeth Robb was older, born in 1856, and Miss Annie Robb was born about 1872. As adults they both lived in Strichen (Lyle 2002: 471; Porter and Campbell 2002: 578; Campbell 2002). They had a brother named Alexander Robb (1863–1940) of New Deer, who was a prolific contributor to both The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection and the Carpenter Collection but appears not to have sung “The White Fisher” to either Greig or Carpenter (Porter and Campbell 2002).

As can be seen from Appendix C, the stanzas contributed by both Elizabeth and young Annie Robb contain the white-fisher imagery, and are very close to their mother’s parallel stanzas. Both are of particular interest because they were documented with accompanying tunes and therefore provide evidence of the ballad’s melodic tradition, which will be discussed in more detail. It is difficult at this historical distance and on the evidence available to judge how active “The White Fisher” was in the repertoires of Elizabeth and Annie Robb. It seems safe to assume that they both knew what they had of the ballad from their mother, but, as noted already, she herself “knew” it as two distinct songs. Whatever the case, Greig documented a single stanza of text from Miss Annie Robb.

Intriguingly, it appears that Elizabeth Robb may have known and sung a fuller version of the ballad since “although no record was made of the tune [by Greig in relation to Mrs. Robb’s version], Arthur Barron [Greig’s son-in-law] mentions in a letter to William Walker of 31 August 1920…that Mrs. Robb’s daughter, Lizzie Robb, had sung this ballad to him the previous evening” (Greig-Duncan Collection 1983, 2: 521). This tune was not documented at the time, however, and the only available evidence of Elizabeth Robb’s knowledge of the ballad comes from the Carpenter Collection, where two stanzas of “The White Fisher” are embedded in a version of “Fair Ellen” (Child 63, “Child Waters”) she sang to Carpenter. The stanzas occur near the end of the ballad at the point where Lord William has gone to the stable to demand that Fair Ellen, whom he has previously dismissed but who has just given birth to his son, open the door to him. She replies that she cannot do so, has her son in her arms, and will be
dead before day. Then she laments, in the white-fisher stanzas, that her child has gone away and she will never see him again. This is a unique addition to this ballad as far as the textual record is concerned. The ballad concludes with Lord William breaking down the door and embracing Fair Ellen and the child, as in other versions.

The narrative implication of the stanzas is not entirely clear, and one wonders if this was an interpolation inherited by Elizabeth Robb or one she herself made, either as a consistent part of her performance or a onetime occurrence. The fact that “Fair Ellen” and “The White Fisher” were sung to basically the same melody in her family may well have facilitated the transference of these stanzas and will be discussed further. In narrative terms, the white-fisher stanzas occur in both songs immediately after the female protagonist has given birth alone, and this parallel may also have acted as a catalyst to introduce these stanzas into “Fair Ellen.” That these words crossed over from “The White Fisher” to “Fair Ellen” seems certain because they are unique to Elizabeth Robb’s version of “Fair Ellen” and central to “The White Fisher” in all its versions. Interestingly, Elizabeth Robb’s source for “Fair Ellen” was her mother, Mrs. Annie Robb, and a further handwritten note by Carpenter states, “From gra[n]dmother. Died while Mrs. Robb was y[ou]ng” (Carpenter Collection: 04836). Furthermore, Elizabeth’s brother, Alexander, also sang a version of “Fair Ellen,” learned from his mother, for both Greig and Carpenter, but his version contains no hint of the white-fisher stanzas even though, as we will see, one of his tunes for the ballad is virtually the same as his sister’s.

d) The Bell Duncan and Mrs. William Duncan versions

The Carpenter Collection contains texts and tunes of “The White Fisher” from two singers in addition to the stanzas by Elizabeth Robb. One, consisting of four-and-a-half stanzas, was sung by Mrs. William Duncan of “Tories” (Torries?) Castle, Oyne, Aberdeenshire, and was learned from her mother sixty years earlier (ca.1870). In this version, the explicit narrative element is almost entirely absent, and the song has become a lyric, focusing on the woman’s lament for a supposedly drowned son, expressed in the metaphor of the white fisher who will never return, plus the revelation of his safety and the injunction not to claim the child as her own.

Carpenter also collected a long version of “The White Fisher” from Bell Duncan. This was around 1930 when she was in her early eighties. The song was “learned from mother,” Jane Hutcheon (ca. 1809–1884) of nearby Bog fouton, Aberdeenshire (Bishop: forthcoming). This version consists of twenty-four stanzas. Because of its verbal detail and inclusion of the admonitory stanzas, it has
much in common with Mrs. Robb’s text. It is longer, however, and has a number of distinctive features.

In particular, a number of stanzas are unique to Bell Duncan’s version. In stanza 2, for example, the wife replies directly to the husband in what is, *mutatis mutandis*, a repeat of the first stanza. Stanza 7 is also unique because the husband’s departure until the time of the birth is lengthier and includes a promise of his return. More extended, though not unique to Bell Duncan since it also appears in Mrs. Robb’s version as a couplet, is the stanza where the wife laments that if she were bearing her husband’s son, she would not be alone at the birth. The arrival of her husband immediately after this, specifically “ti ease her moan,” is further dramatic proof of his sincerity toward her and the child. It is interesting to compare this with the Peter Buchan version (stanzas 6–7) and Bell Robertson version (stanzas 7–8), where the husband’s goodwill, toward at least the child, is suggested by the fact that, when he learns that his wife has gone into labor, he comes home “merrily” and “singing.”

Bell Duncan seems in a number of details to lay particular stress on the husband’s compassionate attitude toward his wife and the illegitimate child. The text transcription, for example, indicates that stanzas 1–3, 6 and 7, which form part of the husband-wife dialogue regarding the rape and pregnancy, are sung to a melody where the final line is extended with the words “dear love,” leading to a repeat of the final line:

’Tis a month an’ ’tis nae mair,
My dear, since I married thee,
An’ there is a baby atween thy sides,
An’ I’m sure an’ it’s nae tee me, dear love,
An’ I’m sure an’ it’s nae tee me. (stanza 1)

Indeed, the husband only ever refers to his wife as “my dear,” “my dear love,” and (in one instance) “my lily flooer,” whereas other versions include variations, such as the more-impersonal “my lady” and “my gay lady.” Once the child has been born, this tenderness is immediately extended to the boy, who is described as “his bonnie young son” (stanza 10). In the other versions, it is not until the next scene (the dialogue with the mother) that he calls the boy his son. Thus, Bell Duncan’s version provides a particularly dramatic foil for the wife’s ensuing instructions for her husband to drown the child since it places in even sharper relief her total conviction that, despite an indication to the contrary (he came
home when he promised to), he is hostile to the child and therefore to her. Bell Duncan’s version also intensifies the imagery of fatherly love toward the child in the third scene; he is not just “rowed...in his sleeve”/“ta’en up”/“rowd in a band” but “clasped...te his breist.”

As in Mrs. Robb’s and Bell Robertson’s versions, the rapist is a servant of the wife’s father, this time the “kitchie boy.” The reference to rape is worded similarly to Mrs. Robb’s version—“he laid his han’ on my shoulder, / An’ he caused me bak to fa’”—making it, like Mrs. Robb’s, more ambiguous than the other extant texts. Despite this and other marked resemblances to Mrs. Robb’s version, however, Bell Duncan’s differs from it in including, as in the other long versions, the mother’s suspicion of the wife and the wife’s worry that her husband could poison her.


Written in 1972, in his fourth and final volume of *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, Bertrand Bronson’s entry for “The White Fisher” noted, “Greig failed to recover a tune for the ballad, and none has yet been printed. James M. Carpenter, however, in the twenties collected one in Scotland which he may in time disclose” (Bronson 1959–72, 4: 71). Since then, it has come to light that Greig did collect a tune for the ballad and there are in fact two distinct tunes in the Carpenter Collection, which is now accessible due to its purchase by the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Research by the editors of *The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection* (1981–2002) has led to the recent discovery that

Greig made a preliminary attempt to note the tune under the title “White Fisher” at Argo 5.6 [a notebook] and noted it fully under the title “Lady Marrit” at Argo 5.10, giving a verse of “The White Fisher” opposite it at Argo 5.11. The tune was copied without words into Gm [Greig’s volumes of “Folk-Music”] under the title “Lady Marrit” and has previously been misidentified as a version of Child 74…and was given earlier in this edition [of *The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection*] as 337 “William and Margaret” B.10

This refers to the single stanza of text and tune provided by Miss Annie Robb (Fig. 2, overleaf):
Porter and Campbell (2002) have noted the tonal ambiguity of the melody:

A phrase that seems solidly pentatonic (based on G with a minor third above and flat leading note) concludes its second phrase on
the C a fourth above. This gives the impression of both parallelism
and circularity in the pentatonic conception, with a first phrase tonal
structure FGB,CD and a second phrase DFGB,C, where the
underlined note is the cadential point. (578)

There is also some uncertainty as to how Miss Annie Robb’s text fits the tune as
notated if the fourth note in the second complete bar is read as crossed out.

Carpenter recorded and transcribed several renditions of Elizabeth Robb’s
melody for “Fair Ellen,” including one stanza entitled “Fair Ellen/The White
Fisher” which specifically includes a stanza of the white-fisher:

The passing note at the end of the second complete bar, not present in Greig’s
notation from Miss Annie Robb, accommodates all the syllables of the text.
Otherwise the first half of Elizabeth Robb’s tune is very similar to her sister’s,
although it has a slightly different metrical feel in places if we can trust Carpenter’s and Greig’s transcriptions. The two diverge in the second half of the stanza, in the sixth complete bar, where Elizabeth Robb’s tune follows an inverted form—$GDCB^*$—of the first-half pentatonic pattern before returning to the cadential note $G$ via a flat seventh and a sharpened seventh.

There are two further tune transcriptions in the Carpenter Collection, both without words, entitled “The White Fisher” and “Fair Annie (White Fisher)” respectively and ascribed to Miss E. Robb.\textsuperscript{11} The latter melody is metrically more regular than the transcription just noted but diverges from it momentarily in pitch in the fifth complete bar.

It can be seen from the melodic stanzas transcribed by Carpenter from Elizabeth Robb for the other parts of “Fair Ellen,” however, that these two forms of bar 5 are characteristic of Elizabeth Robb’s renditions of this melody (Carpenter Collection: 08207). Furthermore, she also employed this same tune for “Fair Annie,” and the transcriptions evidence a similar variation in the fifth bar (for example, Carpenter Collection: 08204).

Carpenter documented two different tunes from Alexander Robb, the brother of Elizabeth and Miss Annie Robb, for “Fair Ellen.” One is almost identical to Elizabeth Robb’s but without the sharpened seventh in its penultimate bar (Carpenter Collection: 08206). The other begins in a similar manner but takes on a different melodic shape and modal character (Carpenter Collection: 08205).\textsuperscript{12}

To summarize the tune evidence from the Robb family, it seems that both Annie and Elizabeth Robb sang “The White Fisher” to much the same tune, although with a slightly different ending. The tune was prevalent in the Robb family for a number of songs with the ending employed by Elizabeth Robb.

Bell Duncan’s melody for “The White Fisher” is unrelated to the Robb family’s (see Fig. 5, overleaf). It has a wide compass (a minor tenth) and is characterized by mainly stepwise movement except at the ends of the first and final lines, where the same falling fourth figure occurs. As transcribed by Carpenter, the note on
Fig. 5. Miss Bell Duncan, “The White Fisher.” Courtesy of the James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC 1972/001, p. 08731-32). (Dotted line indicates original page break.)
which each phrase cadences (B and E respectively) tends to occur on the primary stressed beats/syllables throughout the preceding part of the phrase. As noted already, the final line of the text is often extended by the addition of the words “dear love,” followed by the repetition of the final line. Bell Duncan easily accomplished this within the tune by repeating the final three bars, starting from the second beat (modified to a single D) of the sixth complete bar. It is notable that in the two renditions transcribed by Carpenter, stanza 3 (“O is’t till a laird, o is’t till a lord”) occurs both with and without the repetition of the final line. Likewise the verbal text which Carpenter took down from Bell Duncan’s dictation (see Appendix B) contains the repetition of the final line in stanzas 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7, whereas this only occurs in stanza 3 in the verbal text of the music which Carpenter transcribed from his cylinder recordings. These facts suggest fairly unequivocally that repeating the last line of a stanza was a flexible practice in Bell Duncan’s renditions of the ballad, although it does seem to have been confined to stanzas in the first scene.

Conclusion

The comparison of the verbal texts of “The White Fisher” has highlighted the differences between them, but it should be reiterated that the extant “long” texts are remarkably similar despite the ballad’s narrative complexity. All retain the four basic scenes, although, as is evident from Appendix B, the length of each scene in number of stanzas varies. Thus, Mrs. Robb’s version is evenly proportioned throughout; Bell Duncan’s stresses scenes 1 and 4, which center on the husband-wife dialogues; Peter Buchan’s version emphasizes scene 4, where the problems presented in the ballad are resolved; and Bell Robertson highlights scene 2, the labor, birth and instructions to kill the child.

In textual details, we have seen that the versions of Peter Buchan and Bell Robertson are similar, as are those of Mrs. Robb and Bell Duncan. In musical terms, however, the extant tunes from the Robbs and Bell Duncan are quite different.

Even with all the known evidence before us, it is not possible to do more than suggest possible reasons why the ballad had such a limited geographical distribution and life span in tradition. The length of the ballad and its complicated plot may well have been a factor although this raises the question of why the ballad was apparently not abbreviated and simplified by one or more singers who encountered it. Perhaps the ballad’s moral outlook did not resonate sufficiently with singers (who, according to the evidence, were all female apart from Peter Buchan’s source, whose sex is unknown) and/or their audiences in the North
East of Scotland or beyond. Certainly, the imagery of the child as a white fisher and the stylized portrayal of “shall never” which grows out of it in the phrase “till fite fish he fess hame” (and its variants) may have had a regional currency which limited its circulation beyond this area (although the phrase “white fish” is more widespread) (*Oxford English Dictionary*; Shields 1983). It also suggests a regional provenance for the ballad. If so, perhaps distinct social conditions in this region during this period prompted and supported the limited distribution of the ballad.

Another question raised by textual analysis is the degree to which Peter Buchan’s published text may have influenced the ballad’s circulation, the perpetuation of its complex narrative, and its language. In this connection, it is notable that the small amount of tune evidence for the ballad reveals two distinct melodies compatible with, though not necessarily indicative of, print distribution of the text.

Child’s principal objections to “The White Fisher” stemmed from the fact that the story, as he read it, did not form a coherent narrative and the ballad had been subject to the textual meddling of Peter Buchan, especially in the “trumpery fancy” of the white-fisher metaphor, and was therefore of doubtful authenticity. However, we have seen that the ballad does form a coherent narrative, even in Peter Buchan’s version, although the story is an unorthodox and complex one. The white-fisher stanzas are certainly unique to the ballad, at least as far as the Child corpus is concerned, but are probably indicative of the ballad’s origins in, or at least closeness to, the culture of the Scottish North East, rather than Peter Buchan’s invention. After countering Child’s objections, it seems that “The White Fisher” may qualify as a legitimate member of the Child corpus after all.

More importantly from the standpoint of contemporary scholarship, its in many ways unorthodox representations of rape, illegitimate birth, infanticide, adoption, and marriage, when considered in the context of the real social conditions in the North East of Scotland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, make “The White Fisher” a legitimate and suggestive focus for further study.
An illegitimate Child Ballad

Appendix A: Extant versions and fragments of “The White Fisher.”
Duncan, Bell. AFC 1972/001, pp. 05919–22 (words), 07755–57 (words, see Appendix B), 08731–32 (music with words, see Fig. 5). The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Duncan, Mrs. William. AFC 1972/001, pp. 05923 (words), 07758 (words, see Appendix B). The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Words only.
Robb, Miss Annie. “William and Margaret”/“Lady Marriu”/“The White Fisher.” The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection, vol. 2, no. 337. Reprinted in vol. 8 of The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection, 348 (see Fig. 2 and the words only in Appendix C). Words and music.
Robb, Miss Elizabeth. “Fair Ellen”/“The White Fisher.” AFC 1972/001, pp. 04836–38 (words), 06924–25 (words, reproduced in Appendix B), 08208 (music with words, see Fig. 3), 11518 (music, see Fig. 4). The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Words and music.
Appendix B: Correlation of Stanzas in the Long Versions of “The White Fisher”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bell Duncan</th>
<th>Mrs. Amie Robb</th>
<th>Peter Buchan</th>
<th>Bell Robertson</th>
<th>Mrs. William Duncan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “‘Tis a month an’ ‘tis nae mair, My dear, since I married thee, An’ there is a bairnie atween thy sides, An’ I’m sure an’ ‘tis nae tee me, dear love, An’ I’m sure an’ ‘tis nae tee me.”</td>
<td>1. “It is a month, and is nae mair My love, since I married thee, And thee go with a bairnie love, And ye ken it is nae to me.</td>
<td>1. “‘Tis but a month, my gay lady, Now sin I wedded thee, Tell me fa’ an’ the bonnie baby That I see you gang wi’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. “‘Tis a month an’ ‘tis nae mair, My dear, since you married me, An’ there is a bairnie atween my sides, An’ I’m sure an’ ‘tis nae tee thee, dear love, An’ I’m sure an’ ‘tis nae tee thee.”</td>
<td>2. “‘Tis a month an’ ‘tis nae mair, My dear, since I married thee, An’ there is a bairnie atween thy sides, An’ I’m sure an’ it’s nae tee me, dear love, An’ I’m sure an’ it’s nae tee me.”</td>
<td>2. “Oh is’t till a laird? Or is’t till a lord? Or ane o high degree? Bet it’s tee my father’s kitchie boy; I’m sure ye may tell me, dear love, I’m sure an’ ye may tell me.”</td>
<td>2. “Oh is’t till a laird? Or is’t till a lord? Or ane o high degree? Bet it’s tee my father’s kitchie boy; I’m sure ye may tell me, dear love, I’m sure an’ ye may tell me.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “‘O is’t till a laird? Or is’t till a lord? Or ane o high degree? Bet it’s tee my father’s merry men? I’m sure ye may tell me, dear love, I’m sure an’ ye may tell me.”</td>
<td>3. “It is nae to a laird, nor to a lord, Nor a man o’ high degree, But it is to my father’s butler boy And an ill death may he dee.”</td>
<td>3. “Is it to a lord of might, Or baron o’ high degree? Or is it to the little wee page That rode along wi me?”</td>
<td>3. “It isna to a man o’ micht, Or a baron o’ high degree, But it is to my father’s foot-page My good lord, I’ll tell thee.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. “It wis my father’s kitchie boy Aroon the kitchie an’ the ha’ He laid his han’ on my shoulder, And he made me doon to fa’.”</td>
<td>4. “Oh, is it to a man o’ micht, Or a baron o’ high degree? Or is it to your father’s foot-page?— My lady, ye dinnie lee.”</td>
<td>4. “Oh, is it to a man o’ micht, Or a baron o’ high degree? Or is it to your father’s foot-page?— My lady, ye dinnie lee.”</td>
<td>4. “He saired my father seven years, And he never paid him his fee, But he got me in my bower my lane, And he made me pay the fine.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. “Gang tee your booer, my lily floower, Till a’ your months are gane, An’ sometimes you’ll read upon a book, An’ sometimes sew your seam. But it fell ance upon a day She fell in travail”</td>
<td>5. “Go to your booer ye lily-white flooer On a’ your months be deen, And sometimes read upon a book, And sometimes sew your seam.”</td>
<td>5. “Go to your booer ye lily-white flooer On a’ your months be deen, And sometimes read upon a book, And sometimes sew your seam.”</td>
<td>5. “It fell ance upon a day She fell in travail”</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. “An’ I’ll rank oot a bonnie boat An’ sail upon the main, An’ he it went or he it dry, That nith I will be hame, dear love.”</td>
<td>6. “An’ he got me in my bower alone, As I sat pensively; He vowed he would forgive my sins, If I would him obey.”</td>
<td>6. “An’ he got me in my bower alone, As I sat pensively; He vowed he would forgive my sins, If I would him obey.”</td>
<td>6. “It fell ance upon a day She fell in travail”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “It is a month, and isna mair, My love, since I married thee, And thee go with a bairnie love, And ye ken it is nae to me.</td>
<td>7. “Is it to a lord of might, Or baron o’ high degree? Or is it to the little wee page That rode along wi me?”</td>
<td>7. “Is it to a lord of might, Or baron o’ high degree? Or is it to the little wee page That rode along wi me?”</td>
<td>7. “It is a month, and isna mair, My love, since I married thee, And thee go with a bairnie love, And ye ken it is nae to me.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “It isna to a laird, nor to a lord, Nor a man o’ high degree, But it is to my father’s butler boy And an ill death may he dee.”</td>
<td>8. “It isna to a laird, nor to a lord, Nor a man o’ high degree, But it is to my father’s butler boy And an ill death may he dee.”</td>
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<td>8. “It isna to a laird, nor to a lord, Nor a man o’ high degree, But it is to my father’s butler boy And an ill death may he dee.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. “Had my young son been my ain gweed lord,  
   He wid hae eased my moan,  
   Had my young son been my ain gweed lord,  
   He wid hae come an’ gone.”

10. “Ye’ll tak my young son in your arms  
    An’ hae him fae me;  
    Ye’ll tak my young son in your arms  
    An’ drow him i’ the sea.”

11. “Ye’ll tak up that bonnie boy,  
    And ye’ll throw him in the sea,  
    For like is he to his false father  
    And saiir was he to blame.”

12. “He’s taen up his bonnie young son  
    An’ clasped him tae his breast,  
    An’ he’s away tae his mother’s boor,  
    Fair she his laid tae rest.”

6. She bolted the door without, without,  
   And she bolted it within,  
   She bolted her room round about,  
   None to her could win in.

7. Then word is gone to that good lord,  
   As he sat drinkin’ wine,  
   Word is gane to that good lord,  
   And merrily cam’ he hame.

8. Ye’ll open the door, my lady, he says,  
   Ye’ll open the door to me  
   Or I’ll make a vow, and I’ll keep it true,  
   In the fleer I’ll gar it flee.

9. I’ll open the door, my ain good lord,  
   I’ll open, lat you come in,  
   But a’ that I do ask o’ you  
   Is it ye come in your lane.

10. Then wi’ her fingers long and small  
    She lifted up the gin,  
    And wi’ her arms long and wide  
    She embraced her good lord in.

11. Oh, ye take here this little boy,  
    That ye see here wi’ me,  
    Oh, ye take here this little boy,  
    For like is he to his false father  
    And ye threw him in the sea.”

12. And gin he sink ye lat him sink,  
    Gin he swim, ye’ll let him swim;  
    And never let him return again  
    Till fite fish he fess hame.”

13. He’s taen up the little boy,  
    And he rowd him in his sleeve,  
    At his lady he asked nae leave.
13. “Ye’ll open your door te me, mother; You’ll rise an’ lat me in, For the dew fa’s on my yellow hair, An’ it’s weetin my bonnie young son.”


15. “But mither, ye ken I had another sweetheart Fan I wis ayont the sea, An’ this is ane o her love tokens That she’s sent hame te te me.”

16. “If that be true, my son Willie, As I trust weel it may be, There’s nae mair ill deen te your young son Than ever wis deen te thee.”

17. “Fan my lady comes here,” he says, As aft she comes te dine, Ye’ll aye be merry wi my bonnie young son, But be sure ye dinna ca’ him mine.”

18. “My bonnie young son’s te the white An’ he’s ower young for the sea, And lang, lang will I think for fish Ere he fess hame te me.”

19. “Oh, bonny was the white fisher That I sent to the faem, Lang will I mourn in bower my lane Ere white fish he fess hame!”

20. “Oh, my bonnie young son’s a white fisher, Goes fishing in yonder sea, But long, long will I think for fish Ere he return wi them te me.”
20. "My bonny young son’s tee the white fisher, An’ he’s ower young for the main, An’ lang, lang will I think for fish Ere he fish ony hame."

16. My bonny young son is a white fisher, An’ he’s ower sane to the main; An’ lang, lang will I think for fish Ere he bring ony hame.

19. "O bonny was the white fisher That ye kiest in the farm; But lang, lang will I think for fish Ere white fish he fetch hame!"

20. "I fell a slumbering on my bed That time ye went frae me, And dreamd my young son fild my arms, But when waked, he’s in the sea."


22. "I winna gang tee my bed," she says, "An’ a drink I winna tak fae thee, For them that wid a droont my bonny young son, Wid surely poison me."

23. "O haud your tongue, my dear," he said, "Say nae mair ill tee me; There’ll be nae mair ill deen tee your young Than ever wis deen tee me."

24. "An’ fan ye gang tee my mother’s booer As aft ye gang ti dine, Ye’ll aye be merry wi your bonny young son, But be sure ye dinna ca’ him thine."

17. Oh haud your tongue, my lady, he, Lat a’ your folly be, For I had your son to my mother The day or one could see.

23. "O bonny was the white fisher That ye kiest in the faem; But lang, lang will I think for fish Ere white fish he fetch hame!"

18. "An’ ye’ll tak’ care, my lady, he said, When we go there to dine, That ye’ll kiss your son, and ye’ll bless your son, The day or one could see.

19. "O bonny was the white fisher That ye kiest in the farm; But lang, lang will I think for fish Ere white fish he fetch hame!"

20. "I fell a slumbering on my bed That time ye went frae me, And dreamd my young son fild my arms, But when waked, he’s in the sea."


22. "I winna gang tee my bed," she says, "An’ a drink I winna tak fae thee, For them that wid a droont my bonny young son, Wid surely poison me."

23. "Cheer up your heart, my lily flower, Think nae sic ill o me; Your young son’s in my mother’s bower, Set on the nourice knee.

24. "Now, if ye’ll be a gude woman, I’ll neer mind this to thee; Nae waur is done to your young son Than what was done to me."

Appendix C: Correlation of Stanzas of “The White Fisher” Collected from the Robb Family

Miss Elizabeth Robb

“My bonnie young son’s a white fisher,
And he’s oweenen te the sea,
And lang, lang will I think for fish
Ere he bring any lee me.

“My bonnie young son’s a white fisher,
And he’s oweenen te the main,
And lang, lang will I think for fish
Ere he bring any hame.”

Miss Annie Robb

My young son is a white fisher
And he’s oweenen te the main
And lang lang will I think for fish
Till he bring white fish hame.

Mrs. Annie Robb (parallel stanzas taken from long version for comparison)

My bonny young son is a white fisher,
An’ he’s owrer sune to the sea;
And lang, lang will I think for fish
Or he bring omy tae me.

My bonny young son is a white fisher,
An’ he’s owrer sune to the main;
An’ lang, lang will I think for fish
Or he bring omy hame.
Notes
This article has benefited from the help and advice of a number of colleagues, especially Robert Thomson, Emily Lyle, Katherine Campbell, David Atkinson, Sigrid Rieuwerts, and the staff at the Archive of Folklife, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. I am most grateful to them for their time, interest, and insights.

1. For further information on Carpenter and Bell Duncan, see Bishop 1998a, 1998b, 2003.
2. Defining rape historically is difficult (Porter 1986) and, as Mitchison and Leneman warn, seduction could be rough without being termed rape (1989: 194–95). Consideration is given here to the specific ways in which rape appears to be suggested, implicitly or explicitly, in the ballad versions. That the ballad reports no dialogue or preceding encounter between the woman and the kitchie/butler boy, however, strengthens the impression that, as far as the text is concerned, this was a sudden and forceful attack, whose motivation had no pretensions to courtship and seduction of any kind. Singers, of course, may have had other interpretations.

3. See Rieuwerts in this volume; also D. Buchan 1972.
4. See the editorial notes to “The White Fisher” (version A, The Greig-Duncan Folk-Song Collection 1983, 2: 521), and Greig’s letter of 29 July 1912 (Greig 1907–14). I am indebted to Special Collections: Rare Books, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, for permission to quote from this and other letters in that collection.
8. I take this to refer to Elizabeth Robb’s grandmother, Mrs. Robb’s mother.
11. The title “Fair Annie” is probably a slip by Carpenter for “Fair Ellen” since the verbal texts of “Fair Annie” (Child 62) noted from Elizabeth Robb by Carpenter have no stanzas in common with “The White Fisher.” Elizabeth Robb’s melody for “Fair Annie” is nevertheless almost identical to “Fair Ellen”/“The White Fisher.”
12. It is clear from Carpenter’s notes on this page that Alex Robb used this alternative tune for a number of ballads, including “Fair Annie” (Child 62), “The Kitchie Boy” (Child 252), “Young Akin” (Child 41, “Hind Etn”) and “Edom o’ Gordon” (Child 178).
13. For more on Carpenter’s collecting methods, see Bishop 1998a: 407–08.

References


Keith, Alexander, ed. 1925. Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Ballad Airs Collected in Aberdeenshire by the Late Gavin Greig. Aberdeen: The Buchan Club.


