The Flowering Thorn

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Published by Utah State University Press

Mckean, Thomas.
The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9249.

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Regions, Reprints and Repertoires
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Ballad and song collection had its main origins in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century search for regional and cultural identities in the face of sweeping political and cultural change; there is no better barometer of this trend than the song tradition itself. Whether reflecting strong family ties, as with the Dickie and Fowle families of New Deer in the North East of Scotland (Katherine Campbell), or the regional, quasi-national Flemish tradition (Isabelle Peere, Stefaan Top), this movement always needs further investigation. Within themes of regionality and nationality, Stefaan Top explores the issues involved in selecting and reprinting song collections for current performers and scholars. Who exactly is the audience? What do they require in a reedition? What influence do these needs have on the collections we choose? Following on these questions, Isabelle Peere takes a closer look at one of these collections, Chants populaires flamands (1879), suggesting that it is probably largely the repertoire of a single individual. In conjunction with Katherine Campbell’s study of two related singers, it seems pertinent to remember that regional tradition is really only a fusion of several sets of personal tradition. Here ballad scholarship can repay some of the rewards it has enjoyed over the centuries, illuminating the role of the individual and, in some cases, returning repertoires to performers and enthusiasts through carefully reprinted and annotated collections.

Given the strong regional identities in song in Flemish-speaking lands and the Scottish North East, there is some mystery in the almost total lack of a solid corpus of French ballad tradition, which is addressed by Michèle Simonsen, who asks, what can we really mean by a “national” tradition in a country as linguistically and culturally diverse as France? Is any particular corpus homogeneous enough for us to make general claims? Once again, the persistent notion of individuality within regional and national traditions surfaces; the more we investigate, classify, and analyze, the more individuality emerges from ballad types, communities, and subcultures.

As touched upon in the general introduction, songs and ballads travel in oral tradition and writing with almost equal facility, each medium having its own effect on the material. The move from the oral realm to print usually comes through the efforts of an individual, collector, or printer who stands to earn something from the process, whether social or academic approbation or monetary profit. (In former days, the latter motivation was more effective, to say the least.) Songs then find their way into print in book or broadside form, where they languish or become part of the corpus of “standards” which academics know and use, or
they may reenter oral tradition via an enthusiast who resurrects them (more on the theme of resurrection in the next section). But this process, as has been noted, goes both ways. Some traditional songs are recast by literary artists, and, conversely, ballads originating in the literary tradition are made traditional by oral transmission and memory (Marjetka Golež Kaučič).

Songs also travel between cultures as well as media, though, as has been noted, with less ease than often assumed by scholars. Scotland’s ballad corpus, with influences ranging from the continent to the Scandinavian periphery that surrounds its northern arc, is rich and has a long history of collection, controversial editing practices, and publication touched upon later in this volume. Here Frances Fischer explores the ballad in Shetland, Scotland’s most Scandinavian islands, showing how politics and history mix with national myth and legend in the creation, metamorphosis, and preservation of a tradition.

The sung tradition is the focus of Mary Anne Alburger’s essay on Simon Fraser’s collection of melodies for Gaelic song. Most collections and broadsides do not include music but, rather, rely on such headings as “to the tune of…,” naming some song the purchaser is expected to know. Hence, Fraser’s early work (1816), in concentrating on melody, is particularly interesting, given that music is a key element in the transmission and preservation of song traditions.

The work in this section addresses a rich admixture of individuality and specificity to present an overview of the ballad genre in discourse with the cultures from which the songs themselves arise.