"Purement scientifique et archeologique": The Mediating Collector

Published by

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

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“Purement scientifique et archéologique”:
The Mediating Collector
The work of ballad collectors is many faceted and, answering F. J. Child’s aspiration that he “should wish to sift that matter thoroughly” (Hustvedt 1970: 248), this section addresses their diverse legacies. There has always been an element of resurrectionism in ballad studies, with collectors using words reminiscent of anatomists exhuming corpses (“Leur but est purement scientifique et archéologique”; see Lootens and Feys [1879] 1990: ii), reflecting, in a nutshell, the basic agendas of the time: excavation and the creation of the national and regional identities explored in the previous section.

Not only did ballad traditions apparently require excavation, but innumerable collectors also charged themselves with restoring their former glory. One such was Peter Buchan, one of Scotland’s best and most notorious collectors. “Peter as usual…managed somehow (we wish we always knew how) to attain that completeness which is the despair of other ballad collectors,” wrote Gavin Greig, “They may be ‘fashed’ with blanks; Peter never is” (1963, article 157). While collecting was ostensibly undertaken for scientific and literary interest, it was also socially and financially profitable and earned Buchan a substantial fortune. Greig admired Buchan’s tenacity and success as a collector while chiding his penchant for filling in the gaps himself, though, fortunately, he was quite good at it. As Kenneth S. Goldstein noted, in relation to anthropological and folklore fieldwork,

The collector chooses types of problems that need solving, informed by training in culture theory and based in part on his aesthetic.... The existence of the collector’s aesthetic is a fact—a fact that comes into frequent play in the collector’s communications with informants. In response, the informant’s selection of the song or ballads to be performed is tempered by his knowledge of the collector’s taste. Simply put, collectors, intentionally or unintentionally, pass on such information to their informants who in turn sing ballads or songs they believe will please the collector.


Subsequent editors must, of course, reach their own conclusions about the extent of the fieldworker’s influence. Sigrid Rieuwerts’s essay deals with exactly
this issue in the context of F. J. Child’s troubled attitude toward Peter Buchan’s reliability; even that great editor was not able to come to any firm conclusions. Over and above various gradations of forgery, mediators of traditional song, as they are fashionably called, have been accused of cultural appropriation and worse. The collector as invader is an idea that has become more popular in the postcolonial era. Valentina Bold’s essay offers a reflexive look at a fieldworker’s place in the centuries-old procession of collectors to and through the Borders and North East of Scotland, surely one of the most heavily mined areas of ballad tradition anywhere in the world.

Finally, this section offers an academic and personal appreciation, from James Porter, David Engle, and Roger de V. Renwick, of the wide-ranging contribution of the late D. K. Wilgus to international ballad scholarship: his emphasis on the texts and related contextual information; his ideas of cataloging by narrative and thematic units, rather than whole ballads types; and his magnificent achievement of summarizing the complex, sometimes ill-tempered debates in a century of folk-song scholarship since the death of Francis James Child (see Wilgus 1959: chaps 1, 2).

References

Greig, Gavin. 1963. “Folk-Song of the North-East: Articles Contributed to the Buchan Observer from December 1907 to June 1911.” In Folk-Song in Buchan and Folk-Song of the North-East, with a foreword by Kenneth S. Goldstein and Arthur Argo. Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates.

