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The Case against Peter Buchan

Sigrid Rieuwerts

It is a well-known fact that the North East of Scotland is particularly rich in traditional songs and ballads. In The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, almost one-third of Child’s A texts—those he considered the oldest and best examples of a specific ballad type—come from this area. One of Aberdeenshire’s chief and most voluminous collections of traditional ballads in the nineteenth century was undertaken by Peter Buchan (1790–1854). He not only edited important collections like Gleanings of Scarce Old Ballads (1825) and Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland (1828) but also left invaluable manuscript collections of songs, ballads, and tales.

And yet, far from being held in great honor and esteem, Peter Buchan has been the most criticized ballad collector ever. In his lifetime, he was generally regarded as a forger, and Scottish scholars (among them William Walker, Gavin Greig, Alexander Keith, and David Buchan) have been trying to clear his name ever since. Instead of rehearsing old arguments, I will discuss the case against Peter Buchan by focusing on F. J. Child’s changing view of the Aberdeenshire ballad collector and editor.

When Child published his first, eight-part ballad collection, English and Scottish Ballads, in 1857–59, he meant it to be the most comprehensive collection of these ancient narrative songs that had ever appeared. Thus, he explained in his preface, any traditional ballad was to be included in the collection, however mutilated or void of aesthetic value. He felt, however, obliged to justify the inclusion of what he felt to be particularly bad examples, namely those from Peter Buchan’s ballad compilations, by adding the following footnote: “Some resolution has been exercised, and much disgust suppressed, in retaining certain pieces from Buchan’s collections, so strong is the suspicion that, after having been procured from very inferior sources, they were tampered with by the editor” (Child 1857–59, 1: ix).

In the second, substantially revised edition of 1860, this footnote has been withdrawn, and Child—for the first time in his career as a ballad collector and editor (see Rieuwerts 1994: 8–10)—employs the distinction between the “poetry of the people” and the “poetry of art.” No longer is disgust expressed at Peter Buchan’s traditional ballads but rather, at the lowest form of art poetry, namely broadsides of the Roxburgh and Pepys type.
For his third and ultimate collection of traditional ballads, Child felt at a loss about Peter Buchan. He took Svend Grundtvig’s *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* as his model but surprisingly did not accept his friend’s advice on the Scottish collector/editor. In his first letter to Child, Grundtvig pointed out that Buchan’s “much abused but very valuable collections” might appear spurious but were nevertheless genuine. “I am able to prove, through a comparison with undoubtedly genuine Scandinavian ballads, the material authenticity of many of those pieces, which consequently may safely [be added] to the English ballad store” (Grundtvig to Child, 17 February 1872, quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 244). So close is the connection with traditional Scandinavian material that Grundtvig chose many of Buchan’s texts (in addition to those of Motherwell and Scott) for his translations into Danish. The collection appeared in 1842 under the title *Engelske og Skotske Folkeviser med oplysende Anmærkninger fordanskede af S. G. Kjøbenhavn*.

Grundtvig was very much aware of the fact that English scholars had slighted Peter Buchan. Years after the Percy Society had published *Scottish Traditional Versions of Ancient Ballads* in 1845, he took issue with the editor, J. H. Dixon, for not giving Buchan the credit he deserved. After all, the Percy Society’s publication was based on two of Buchan’s manuscript volumes, containing ballad versions taken from oral tradition in the north of Scotland, yet not a word was said about Peter Buchan’s own ballad collections. Why was it, Grundtvig asked, that “it is not even mentioned, that this same Mr. Buchan has published three different collections of traditionary songs, and, in fact, is the man who has rescued, and for the first time published, more traditionary ballad versions than any other antiquary in Great Britain that we know of? (Grundtvig 1855: 21). Grundtvig pointed out that two-thirds of the texts published by the Percy Society had already appeared in print. As it was a printing society devoted to making unpublished material available to its members, this fact would have caused an outcry. At the time, Grundtvig placed his defence of Peter Buchan in *Notes and Queries* on 14 July 1855; however, the Percy Society had already been dissolved for three years.

What he could not have foreseen, and what would have infuriated Grundtvig even further, was the fact that Dixon’s Percy Society publication was to be reissued two years later by Robert Bell as part of his *Annotated Edition of the English Poets*. (Note the word “English.”) All references to Peter Buchan or Scotland were eliminated and the full title ran *Ancient Poems, Ballads, and Songs of the Peasantry of England, Taken Down from Oral Recitation, and*
Transcribed from Private Manuscripts, Rare Broadsides, and Scarce Publications, Edited by Robert Bell.

This book, incidentally, sparked Child’s first ballad collection of 1857–59. Asked to model an American series of British poetry on Bell’s rather successful Annotated Edition of the English Poets, Child copied many parts of the British publication. The only place where he thought he could do better was the anonymous poets of the British Isles. He regarded Dixon’s and Bell’s collections as dreadful and, instead of reissuing a very similar, if not identical, collection, he printed his eight volumes of English and Scottish Ballads. In trying to put his stamp on his edition, Child directed his criticism at Peter Buchan’s ballads, the very material Dixon and Bell had used without acknowledgment. He felt, as he wrote time and again, disgusted by the sheer vulgarity of Buchan’s versions, differing in quality and markedly longer than the ones Child regarded as the genuine ballads of the people. Child wrote to Grundtvig (26 March 1872) in response to his Danish friend’s endorsement of Buchan’s texts: “From the internal evidence, the extraordinary vulgarity, especially, of many of his ballads, I should think that he must have tampered very extensively with his originals, if even he did not invent out and out. I should wish to sift that matter thoroughly” (quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 248). Grundtvig did not want to let the matter rest and took issue with Child over Buchan’s presumed “vulgarity.”

The extreme elegance and exquisite taste exhibited in many of Scott’s texts is to my eyes a strong direct proof of their want of genuineness, while on the other hand what you term the “vulgarity” of the Buchan texts is to me the best proof of their material authenticity;...very often what now to delicate eyes and ears may seem “vulgar,” is in fact of the old stamp.

(Grundtvig to Child, 2 June 1872, quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 249)

Still, Child felt on sure ground, for he had one proof that old Peter Buchan was a cheat.

Dr. John Hill Burton testifies that a part of the ballad called Chil Ether was drafted by a friend at his bedside when he was recovering from an illness and was sent to Buchan, with the intention of taking the measure of his honesty. Peter was so happy as to be able to supply all that was missing from the recollections of the peasantry.—I had
reason to believe in Buchan’s dishonesty before, but I wanted explicit proof. (Child to Grundtvig, 1 July 1873, quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 257)

Child was right: “Chil Ether” was indeed a forgery. Only a note can be found in Buchan’s manuscripts that he printed the text from a different source. Joseph Robertson and John Hill Burton, later George Kinloch’s and Robert Chambers’s coworkers, passed on their ballad to the unsuspecting Peter Buchan. Furthermore, they were abetted by Dean Christie, who claimed later that he had found the tune of that “popular” ballad.

Grundtvig was undoubtedly familiar with these accusations, as they were reiterated in Notes and Queries by J. C. R. and T. G. S. (1855: 95, 135) in response to his praise of Buchan in that journal. He seems to have accepted Buchan’s failings, but he still holds out hope that the publication of Buchan’s manuscripts will clear his name: “What now ought to be done is this, that the whole ballad portion of Mr. Buchan’s MSS. should be published from the MSS., but with all the additions and variae lectiones of the published collections of Mr. Buchan thrown into the notes” (Grundtvig 1855: 22). Therefore, he is extremely interested in Child’s passing remark that Buchan’s papers are now in the British Museum and he will have copies made. What Child does not tell Grundtvig is that he was instrumental in arranging their deposit at a public library. Just before Buchan’s sudden death in London on the 19 September 1854, at the age of sixty-four, he had sold the rights to his manuscripts to the publishers Ingram and Co., who subsequently left them to their broker, the poet Charles Mackey, who used them for his Illustrated Book of Scottish Songs.

As is well known, Child was very eager to have all the genuine old ballads of the English language in their authentic versions, not touched up by editors. Having the use of the ballad collector’s and editor’s original manuscripts was therefore of paramount importance. And in tracing the various manuscripts Child employed one of the most industrious scholars of the time, the ever-helpful Frederick James Furnivall. At Child’s request and insistence, the latter had earlier secured Percy’s folio manuscript, often described as the foundation document of English ballad lore. Furnivall, again being Child’s agent, now persuaded Mackey to sell the two volumes of Buchan’s manuscripts to the British Library. Thus, they were deposited in 1873, and, in the summer of that same year, Child was able to consult them in London.

Naturally Grundtvig was very anxious to learn what Child had found in the manuscripts and also added in his letter to Child, “The impression (or the proofs) you have got, as to the trustworthiness (or untrustworthiness) of the editors, for
instance, Peter Buchan” (25 March 1874, quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 26). Having made up his mind about Peter Buchan, Grundtvig did not even want to wait for Child’s response, for he enclosed in the same letter a long series of generally favorable comments on individual ballads in Buchan’s Ancient Ballads and Songs.

Taking his friend’s advice on all matters but Peter Buchan, Child could not lay the matter to rest: “Now it is a very serious question what to do with Buchan” (quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 264). The copies of the British Library Buchan manuscripts did nothing to dispel his doubts. It became clear, after close examination, that Buchan’s manuscript sources from which the ballads were supposedly printed differed considerably from the printed versions. Quite a number of the ballads from Buchan’s 1828 ballad collection were in the manuscript, but since only minor alterations between handwritten and printed copy were detectable, the manuscripts could not be used as proof against Peter Buchan. They did nothing to clear his name, either, for some of the material was as vulgar as Child had predicted.

Child, as he confessed to Grundtvig, was now at a complete loss about the Scotsman. Buchan’s texts were so different from all the other versions Child had that he could not use the texts for collation only. Should he therefore print them in smaller type? Child knew that he had to print the whole of Buchan’s collection if he wanted to abide by his principle that The English and Scottish Popular Ballads should contain “every bit of genuine ballad lore, and consequently all that may be genuine, and...all that has been so” (Child to Grundtvig, 25 March 1874, quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 260). Buchan’s style of expression was, he said, far from “volksmäßig,” and therefore it was more likely that the ballads came from a man and not a class of people. He could not understand that similar ballad collections from the North East of Scotland (for example, Kinloch’s), did not exhibit the same artificial vulgarity. On the other hand, Child did not believe that Buchan had “enough wit” to forge a complete ballad.

Always eager to print from manuscripts or oral tradition, Child planned to get to the bottom of the Buchan problem by probing into the Scottish ballad tradition. Encouraged by recent finds of traditional ballads by a Danish schoolmaster, he sent an appeal to about two thousand schoolmasters and ministers in Scotland, asking them to note every bit of traditional songs and ballads. He was seriously considering going to Scotland himself in the summer of 1877, but Murison, English master at Aberdeen Grammar, advised against it. He and his wife collected for Child instead. From Child’s Christmas letter to Lowell, we learn of his utter disappointment: “I have had an Aberdeen man, rather his wife, noting
down what can now be collected in Old Deir, and such trash I get! Better work the mines of Spain & Denmark” (Child to Lowell, Christmas 1877, quoted in DeWolfe Howe and Cottrell 1970: 31). Two years later, he still had not given up on the idea of going to the North East of Scotland: “There must be ballads there:—how else have the people held out against poverty, cold & darkness?” (Child to Lowell, 21 December 1879, quoted in DeWolfe Howe and Cottrell 1970: 45). Not wanting to delay the publication of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* even further, he eventually began to print without having been able to judge the situation in the North East of Scotland for himself.

When the first installment of Child’s major work came out in 1882, he was immediately taken to task in a review for including “freakish” and “monstrous” verses, and the reviewer added, “…even some whole ballads from the collection of Peter Buchan, as well as from some less heinously offending collections.” From that reviewer’s perspective, Buchan’s collection was one of the worst possible examples of ballad lore:

> It contains many genuine and precious fragments of old ballads; but these are so mixed up with bald doggerel, either written by the collector himself or palmed off on him by some one having as little feeling as himself for the true ballad style, that it is almost worse than useless. It will never be of any value until some person with the proper qualifications, goes over it thoroughly and separates the chaff and tares from the sound grain. (Davidson 1909: 468)

In fifteen pages, the review went to extraordinary lengths in dismissing any claims Peter Buchan’s collection might have on representing the genuine ballads of the people in the North East of Scotland. Child should have been more careful in admitting the work of such a forger, he argued. Child’s A text of “Leesome Brand” (Child 5), for example, was described as a fabrication. The author of the review lent particular weight to his accusations by adding that he had grown up in Aberdeenshire, spoke the dialect, and even sang some of the ballads mentioned.

Child, always eager to receive advice, did not take issue with any of these accusations in public, perhaps because the author of the review was Thomas Davidson, an American scholar of Scottish extraction who had become a friend a couple of years earlier. We learn more about Davidson from one of Child’s letters:
Is it not odd that, after having flooded Scotland with circulars addressed to schoolmasters & ministers, with scarcely a perceptible effect, I should find a man in this very town whose mother knows (as he says) 164 ballads? This man is a scholar, & knows whereof he is talking. His mother lives in Old Deer. I have tried to make him abandon all worldly business and go back to Aberdeenshire—where others, I think, besides his mother still retain ballads—and collect all that he can find. In default of willingness on his part to come up to this manifest duty, I have accepted his mediation with two persons three thousand miles nearer the source and I hope that good may be the result. The same gentleman thinks that he may be able to get some light concerning P. Buchan’s proceedings.

(Child to Murdoch, 2 February 1876, Murdoch MSS. no. 21; see also Lyle 1976: 137–38)

Thomas Davidson clearly felt strongly about Buchan. Since Grundtvig had died just after the first installment of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Child became heavily dependent on Davidson in all matters relating to Aberdeenshire. His influence was substantial, for he gave Child not only invaluable information on his home county but also supplied him with contacts in Aberdeenshire and, last but not least, with ballads. Davidson firmly believed that Peter Buchan was a cheat. He felt particularly insulted by Buchan’s claim that his ballads were derived from oral tradition.

With Grundtvig dismissing the case against Buchan, and Davidson strenuously trying to prove it, Child sat on the fence, feeling less well equipped to be a judge on these matters than his two friends. He could not dismiss the ballads outright, as Furnivall, Ebsworth, Chappell, and other English editors had done. He did, however, feel their disgust at the vulgarity of some of Buchan’s texts. He printed them, nevertheless, unlike Kittredge, who deliberately omitted them from his later one-volume edition.

One of the oft-quoted pieces of evidence against Peter Buchan was his letter to the Earl of Buchan, published in Motherwell’s review of *Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland*. In this letter, Peter Buchan described how his ballad collection of 1828 came about.

The Ballads and Songs were all taken down from the recitation of very old people, during a ten or twelve years siege that I stormed
their straw-covered citadels, and by many good judges they have been considered the most original and best collection hitherto published, having been given in their primitive truth and order. The task was really laborious and expensive, as I kept a wight of Homer’s craft, an old Senachial veteran, constantly in pay...still it has come short of rewarding me for the time, trouble, and expense I have been at in creating it out of a chaos of rude materials.

(Buchan, quoted in Motherwell 1828: 648; emphasis mine)

The choice of the word “creating” was seen as an indictment against the authenticity of his published versions. At the time, however, the prevailing attitude was that incomplete or mutilated copies from tradition had to be improved by collation with versions obtained from different quarters. Filling in missing verses, or improving existing ones, was common practice among singers, and it was difficult for editors to refrain from doing the same. Since Peter Buchan worked in the broadside trade and boasted more than once of the great stock of ballads he had accumulated in print, it was reasonable to assume that some stanzas had been lifted from these sources.

The source Buchan named, “a wight of Homer’s craft” he kept in constant pay, was seen as further proof. James Rankin, a blind beggar, had been a colorful contributor indeed, and not even Buchan trusted him completely. In his note to “The Scottish Exile” in the manuscript, Buchan says Rankin has “deceived him again” (see Walker 1887: 59, 166).

Although Motherwell and Buchan were both field collectors, they also employed people to collect ballads. The quality—and definitely the authenticity—of the ballad collected depended to a large extent on these intermediaries. Exchanges between collectors were frequent, and thus James Nicol’s ballads, for example, appear not only in Peter Buchan’s manuscripts but also in the collections of Motherwell, Maidment, Sharpe, and Scott (for further details, see Buchan 1972: 223–43). James Nicol was probably a middleman who sold ballads he had abstracted from a great variety of sources. Child describes him in his note on “Young Bearswell” (1882–98, 5: 178) as “a respectable voucher.” And while Motherwell’s collector Thomas McQueen is also above suspicion, James Rankin was largely responsible for bringing Peter Buchan’s collection into disrepute. In sum, Peter Buchan was to Child anything but the ideal ballad collector/editor.

The only thing that would have decided the case against Peter Buchan one way or the other was a publication of all his manuscripts—Grundtvig was right.
When Buchan was forced to sell his library in 1837, a great number of ballad manuscripts were listed, among them “about twelve or more volumes of Manuscript Scottish Ballads and Songs exactly as taken down from the singing and sighing of the old Dames and Carles amongst the mountains and glens in the North Countrie, Scottish Straggling Ballads, of the last century, from Oral Tradition, scarce MSS. and old printed copies, containing about 400 pages” (Catalogue 1837: 41–42). Only a couple of these are accounted for, and I am surprised that nobody has ever tried to trace the others. Why, for example, should the Glenbuchat manuscript not be one of the missing Buchan documents? In my view, this is a possibility and worth investigating.\(^1\)

Summing up, it is really no wonder that Child and his contemporaries were confused about the different Buchan manuscripts. The one deemed original extends from 1816 to 1827. Buchan gathered in one huge folio volume (about 1,112 pages) all the songs and ballads he intended for publication: 220 items in total. It passed through many hands and was offered to Child several times, but having seen Buchan’s manuscripts in the British Library, he gave them little importance (C. K. Sharpe had testified that everything was faithfully recorded in the copies after the first sixteen pages).

When Child mentioned to William Macmath, on 29 June 1892, that he would still like to see David Scott of Peterborough’s Buchan manuscripts, despite their modernized and “stylized” spelling, Macmath was intrigued. He and Murdoch had had the chance to buy them. Apparently, on that missed occasion, Scott bought one Buchan volume at an auction in Edinburgh for twenty pounds; Murdoch had offered eighteen for it. According to both of Child’s main Scottish correspondents, it was not worth more than that. To Macmath, it seemed that all the pieces were in the printed book, and furthermore, he said, there was the question whether the printed book, or the manuscript, came first. In any case, he concluded, the manuscript was not a copy from tradition, and thus Child was led to believe that there was no great loss in not having it. (For Child’s correspondence with his Scottish friends, see: Child MSS.)

Unlike Motherwell’s own manuscripts, the Buchan manuscript is not a working copy. It gives very little insight into the oral tradition from which he was gathering. Only a few of the contributors are named, and the circumstances of collection—the singer’s identity and the time and place—remain unrecorded. A field notebook, like the one Motherwell kept, does not seem to have survived, if indeed it ever existed. Furthermore, Buchan did not focus on songs and ballads from oral tradition as much as Motherwell did, instead collecting at random from
broadside, periodicals, and earlier songbooks. But since he wanted to give his collection a distinctly “northern” touch—balancing Sir Walter Scott’s Border collection—his attention inevitably turned to the yet uncollected stores of ballad lore in the North.

William Walker eventually secured the Buchan manuscripts for Harvard College Library, but Child did not live to see them. I doubt, however, that the manuscripts—valuable as they might have been to him—would have changed his mind. They would have answered many of his philological questions, and certainly he would have seen for himself how much (or rather how little) Buchan’s Ballads of the North of Scotland differed from the manuscript versions (see Child to Walker, 19 November 1891, in Walker 1930: 6–7). This manuscript alone, however, cannot answer the crucial question as to whether Buchan’s recordings of traditional ballads are trustworthy.

Child, in the end, gave Buchan the benefit of the doubt, but he was far from James Dingwell Walker’s estimation of Peter Buchan as “the saviour of the ballad minstrelsy of the north” (1887: 388). To the very end, what Child confided to Grundtvig at the beginning holds true: “When I come to Buchan, I am in difficulty. I must confess that my treatment of his ballads both seems and was capricious” (Child to Grundtvig, 8 May 1874, quoted in Hustvedt 1970: 264).

Notes
1. The Glenbuchat manuscript was being prepared for publication by the late David Buchan; the work is being extended and completed by James Moreira.

References