

## DANISH BALLADS

### INTRODUCTION

IT may be assumed that the student who approaches the Danish Ballads has already acquired some acquaintance with the prevailing theories as to the origin of Ballads in general. On that dark and debatable question I am unqualified to enter. To the earnest beginner I commend Dr. T. F. Henderson's excellent Cambridge Manual *The Ballad in Literature*, where the opinions of Child, Gummere, Kittredge, and other authorities, are discussed with lucidity, learning, and common-sense. Suffice it here and now to say that those who push to extremes the theory of Communal Authorship must be capable of belief in that mythological personage who was born of nine mothers. While some Ballads (with their Incremental Repetition and so forth) were obviously created between leader and chorus in the Dance, others, no less obviously, were the work of individual poets. As the nineteenth century had its Walter Scott and its Hawker of Moorwinstow,

B

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-69154-4 - Danish Ballads  
 Translated by E. M. Smith-Dampier  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## 2 DANISH BALLADS

so earlier ages had the anonymous minstrels who stamped the mark of original genius on “Niels Ebbeson” and “Sir Patrick Spens.”

“At the period when these songs were born, classes were mingled together, or rather did not as yet exist. The people was one; it was the *élite*, the best among them, who interpreted what all felt, but all could not express—who sang in the name of all. And thus it is that this poetry belongs to the populace as a whole. . . . It resembles a stone constantly rolled by the waves” (Pineau).

Child, moreover, points out that the British Ballad “was not originally the property of the common orders among the people” — and in Denmark, says Henderson, “it was fostered and favoured more particularly by the upper classes, and was for some centuries the chief medium of literary expression and culture.”

In Denmark, as elsewhere, the more primitive forms of the Ballad were closely connected with the Dance—the *carole*, or circular dance with joined hands, accompanied by the voice; a pastime which still survives in the Faroë Islands. The word *Ballad*, indeed, is derived from the South Italian *ballare* = to dance, which in its turn comes from the Greek. The Teutonic tribes, whose sword-dances are mentioned by Tacitus, may, in the beginning, have learnt dancing from the Celts. Be that as it may, the round dance became popular

## INTRODUCTION

3

throughout Europe during the early Middle Ages (roughly speaking, between 1149–1400), and took the North by storm, from the King's court to the Icelandic farmstead. The dance-songs made light of frontiers, just as the Australian corroborees pass, irrespective of language, from tribe to tribe. Vainly did Saxo Grammaticus record his opinion that "such mountebank antics" (*gøglerspring*) were unworthy of persons of quality. Every knight had his own dancing-ground—as do Papuan chiefs at the present day. Vainly did the Church frown on a pastime associated with Beltane fires, and other unhallowed survivals of paganism. Absalon, it is true, when in 1158 he became Bishop of Sjælland, put a stop to light-heeled frolic among the merry monks of Eskilø. The Copenhagen clergy in 1425 forbade "heathen" songs and dances on the Feast of S. John. But the churchyard was still the popular place to dance in, especially on the wake-nights of the greater festivals, when the people assembled from far and near. England behaved no better; a shocking record exists of an English priest, so obsessed by the refrain which had rung in his ears all night, that he began the Mass with "myn hertë swete!"

The leader of the Dance sang the Ballad proper: the other dancers came in as chorus with the Burden or Refrain. Some Burdens merely imitate

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-69154-4 - Danish Ballads  
 Translated by E. M. Smith-Dampier  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

#### 4 DANISH BALLADS

instrumental music ; such are our own Hey nonny nonny, Tirly low (the shepherd's pipe)—the Danish Hejt lejt lejtli, tra fal de ral, etc. Others were derived from the Ballad itself, which was originally a lyrical outburst improvised by the singer.

Here is a gay example from the Icelandic :

“ Fair the swan is singing  
 All the summer-tide :  
 Sweet it is to dance and play  
 My lily white !  
 Fair the swan is singing ” (Burde n).

Or, in graver mood :

“ Heavy are my sorrows,  
 A load of lead to bear,  
 Burnt are all the castles  
 Were builded new and fair. ”

(This was sung by the Icelander Thord Andresson when treacherously captured by Gissur the Earl, 1264.)

A list of Icelandic Dance-Burdens is given in the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*.

The beginning of the thirteenth century inaugurated a new fashion. Narrative poetry—originally a separate art—was combined with the dance-lyric. Fables, for instance, were borrowed from the Troubadours, the Minnesingers, and the various foreign minstrels attached to the Danish

## INTRODUCTION

5

court. The lyrics were sometimes retained as introductory stanzas, sometimes broken up into Burdens. Thus the song :

“The King he rules the castle  
 And over all the land,  
 And over many a warrior bold  
 With shining sword in hand,”

lent its first line as Burden to a Ballad of King Didrik :

“King Didrik sits in Brattingsborg,  
 And far and wide looks he :  
 Oh, none know I in all the world  
 Who may my equal be !  
 The King he rules the castle.”

Every Ballad, in time, came to have its own introductory stanza, calculated to arouse the hearer's attention and attune it to the story which followed—had also its own Burden, which echoed the principal theme. But many have survived shorn of both adjuncts : and a few have borrowed Burdens, sometimes far from appropriate.

The Danish Ballads, like all others, deal with love, warfare, and witchcraft. Like all others, they are pagan at heart. Some of their themes are peculiar to Denmark, some common to all Europe. The similarity, for instance, between certain Danish and Scottish Ballads suggests that the one country borrowed them directly from the

## 6 DANISH BALLADS

other. The editors of the *C.P.B.* (where a list may be found) give the lead in the matter to Scotland ; but other authorities are of a different opinion. Generally speaking, it is acknowledged that Denmark's literary output was influenced far less by Britain than by France and the other Latin countries.

But, be the themes what they may, the Danish Ballads inform them with their own characteristic spirit—the glamour and grimness of the North. The battle-scenes show us glimpses of Bersark fury, and weapons with demon souls. The Dark Powers in the Ballads of magic are those born of long winter nights and misty waters. Here and there we meet with the gods of Valhalla, and the heroes sung in Old Norse Lays. Woman, in the love-ballads, is no Troubadour's divinity, but a human helpmeet of warriors—brave, shrewd, strong-minded, occasionally strong-armed to boot. As for humour, while we have rollicking man-at-arms fun of the “Kinmont Willie” type, and some dry, pawky, Scots-like wit, a few Ballads charm us with such a delicate, wistful archness as flowers again in Andersen's fairy-tales. There are, indeed, a number of Satirical Ballads, whose characters—gaffer and gammer, wandering fiddler, Bishop's Daughter, and Mighty Maid—burlesque the heroes and heroines of the Ballads of chivalry.

## INTRODUCTION

7

These, however, from the poetical standpoint, are of little or no significance.

The social conditions depicted in these Ballads are, in many respects, peculiar to Scandinavia. The atmosphere is distinctly democratic. Denmark had no school of court-poetry, no minstrel-class corresponding to the Troubadours and Minnesingers. Her kings made foreign marriages, and imported foreign talent; no petty courts, princely or ducal, existed to serve as centres of culture.<sup>1</sup> The native singers found patrons among the native gentry, or lesser nobility—the Knights, whose position in many respects was that of the old-time English country squire. With the tastes, interests, and outlook of this class the Ballads as a whole are chiefly concerned.

Apart from such ballad-cycles as those dealing with the two Valdemars, the King mostly appears merely as a power in the background—a *deus* (or, more frequently, a *diabolus*) *ex machinâ*. Of devoted loyalty, of patriotism identified with the royal person, we find traces only in the most ancient historical Ballads—with an occasional after-echo such as the Page's words in the "King-Slaying in Finderup" (No. 6). His courtiers and

<sup>1</sup> With one exception—the ducal court at Gottorp in Sleswik; but its intellectual influence suffered from the constant warfare among the Holstein nobility.

8 DANISH BALLADS

“captains” are derided by the country-bred minstrel: “So long have they served in the royal court they can bear nor heat nor smoke!”

The Church, too, is only seen afar off—affects the Knight chiefly through the convent school, where young ladies are educated. The Burgher is an unknown quantity. Only in a late (fifteenth-century) Ballad do we hear of the rich merchants, with houses in “Randers street,” whose gilded vanes gleam over the walls, shaming the castles of envious Knights.

The Yeoman (Bonde) class was that with which this lesser nobility was most intimately connected—the class whence it sprang, wherein it was merged after the Peasant Revolt of 1584. Well-born youths are described as “noble yeomen’s sons” (ædelige Bøndersønner), and a yeoman’s wife makes occasional appearance as heroine of a Ballad. The Knight defends the yeoman against pillage and oppression. The two classes, however, are distinct, and keep their distance. The Knight may farm his own land—may even be found holding the plough—but he is, none the less, the yeoman’s social superior. His daughter, if she weds a yeoman, must “doff the scarlet fine, and don the wadmal grey.”

The Knight was served by his Squires (svende)—sometimes of yeoman extraction, but more

## INTRODUCTION

9

frequently landless nobles, or younger sons — his lady by her Maidens. The former received wages, and a training in chivalry ; the latter learnt polite deportment, household duties, and needle-craft. Thus in our own “ Fause Foodrage ” :

“ And ye sall teach my gay goss-hawk  
 To wield baith bow and brand,  
 And I sall teach your turtle-doo  
 To lay gowd wi’ her hand.”

The Knight’s existence, then, much resembled the Viking’s—was passed in warfare, with intervals of agriculture, of sport, or even of commerce. That it was lived chiefly “ on the land ” is shown by a thousand touches and images racy of the soil. The arrows stick “ thick as hay ” in Knight Stig’s mantle ; young Engelbret hews down his foes “ as the peasant cuts down corn.” The Knight’s absences from home are frequently mentioned—absences on foray, on trading journeys, or at the Thing—the Yeomen’s Thing or District Council, distinct from the great national Land’s Thing. There the local notabilities met to settle local affairs, conclude bargains, and dispose of their children’s hands in marriage (see “ Lovel and John,” No. 28).

As this Knight was to some extent a country squire, so his dwelling rather resembled a fortified farm than a feudal castle. Its garth (gaard),

10 DANISH BALLADS

surrounded by a palisade, contained a collection of separate buildings, mostly built of wood, and thatched with straw or reed. The linden tree which shaded the garth, and the castle gate which afforded a glimpse of the outer world, figure largely in the Ballads.

The main building contained the principal living-rooms, and was adorned with carved beams projecting from the gables—which beams, in process of time, were replaced by weather-vanes. Access both to ground-floor and upper storey (højeloft) was obtained by means of an outside gallery-staircase (svalegang, højloftssvale), where the traveller was wont to hang up his cloak (axler sit Skind) ere he entered the hall.

Refuge from attack was to be found in another building, the Stone-hall (stenstue)—or, where this was lacking, in the nearest church tower. (The term “stenstue” is occasionally applied to the main building, should it happen to be built of stone, but this is exceptional.)

“A house have I walled round with stone  
 That stands my garth within ;  
 I wot when I take refuge there  
 I fear not a hundred men !”

Another most important building was the Maiden’s Bower, richly adorned, and “locked right well” lest it be “broken” by over-importu-