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THE SCOTCH-IRISH  
AND  
THE BRITISH TRADITIONAL BALLAD  
IN AMERICA

WILLIAM H. TALLMADGE

When Cecil Sharp visited the Southern Appalachian Mountains for nine weeks in 1916, he was surprised to find an environment where the folk-song tradition was a living thing, where “. . . I could get what I wanted from pretty nearly everyone I met, young and old. In fact, I found myself for the first time in my life in a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal a practice as speaking.”<sup>1</sup>

From a study of the music which he heard, particularly the gapped scales, Sharp (quite correctly) deduced the ethnological origin of the Appalachian highlanders to be the north of England, or the Lowlands, rather than the Highlands, of Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

Sharp believed that the original settlers had emigrated from England or Scotland in the latter part of the eighteenth century or the early part of the nineteenth. This, too, is very close to the truth. However, the settlers of the area in question did not emigrate from Scotland or England, but from Ulster, Ireland. Their actual emigration to Ireland from the Lowlands of Scotland began in 1610, over one hundred years before their main emigration to America beginning in 1717.

The extensive collections of Frank C. Brown in North Carolina, Cox in West Virginia, Reed in South Carolina, Davis in Virginia, drew upon areas where the Scotch-Irish were the first to settle in great numbers, and where their original culture had remained relatively hermetic and isolated.

Elsewhere in the country, particularly in New England, we can no longer be certain that the Scotch-Irish constituted the

core of traditional British balladry; nor was the society in other areas of the country in the early twentieth century such as to promote traditional British balladry as a living folk-art. While perhaps as many or even more traditional British ballads have been found in New England as have been found in any one particular southeastern area, the ethnic background of the singers is almost impossible to trace, and as Wilgus remarks regarding the Barry, Eckstorm and Smyth *British Ballads from Maine* (1929): ". . . one is certainly not impressed by a flourishing tradition."<sup>3</sup> Even in those areas of the United States where we cannot prove the Scotch-Irish to have constituted the mainstream of the transmission of the British balladry, there are good reasons for suspecting that they nonetheless constituted an important tributary.

Perhaps it should be mentioned here that a few writers have noted the importance of the Scotch-Irish to the British ballad tradition in America. Belden mentions that "when . . . the wave of Scotch and Scotch-Irish came across the water to the New World, they brought their old songs with them."<sup>4</sup> Laws writes that: "With the Scotch-Irish predominating in the Southern Mountains, it is not surprising to find that the Scottish forms of many ballads have been preserved among them."<sup>5</sup> Laws supports this statement with a quotation from James Watt Raine, who traveled among the mountain people and then wrote of his impressions: "The Mountain People are the inhabitants of the region whimsically, but happily, called Appalachia. They are descendents of the Scotch-Irish, driven from the North of Ireland by the stupidity of the Stuart Kings . . . From these pioneers the Mountain People sprang."<sup>6</sup> Raine's conclusions are correct but his book never pretended to be scholarly and so nothing in it is documented. Beyond a few unsupported generalizations such as those just mentioned, the Scotch-Irish have generally suffered a scholarly neglect as far as their relationship to British balladry is concerned.

In this study it is to be suggested, first, that emigration trends

in this country and in Great Britain and Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, together with a consideration of the social conditions during those centuries in all those areas, offer clear and convincing evidence that the great body of British-American traditional balladry in this country began its active life during the Colonial period, particularly during the eighteenth century, and second, that the transmission of this material was essentially accomplished by the Ulster Scots from Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

Implied indirectly, of course, in this assertion is the belief that the English and Scots coming directly to this country from England and Scotland before the Revolution have had much less to do with the transmission of British traditional balladry than is generally believed.

John Adams described New England as late as 1775 as ninety-eight per cent pure English with the Scotch-Irish on the frontier areas.<sup>8</sup> The Puritan influence dominated the culture. Significant numbers of immigrants began to come to New England in 1630 under the auspices of the Massachusetts Bay Company. Between the years 1629 and 1642 "some twenty thousand English came to New England. . ."<sup>9</sup>

Allen French in *The Puritan Upheaval* concludes that

Having so few statistics, we can only generalize on the places of origin of all these people. Such figures as have been gathered point to the conclusion that the heaviest emigration came from East Anglia and London and from the western county block of Devon, Somerset, and Dorset, while few came from north of a line drawn from the Bristol Channel to the Wash.<sup>10</sup>

While essentially rural in origin, the New Englanders of the seventeenth century, according to James Truslow Adams, were "with scarcely an exception . . . from the middle and lower classes . . . These earliest Americans were laborers, tradesmen, artisans

and such, with a slight sprinkling of moderately well-to-do and educated gentlemen.”<sup>11</sup>

Concerning seven-hundred passengers (Puritans) leaving from Southampton c. 1630 French writes: “Of nearly 250 possible heads of families only one in ten was ‘of a social rank above that of yeoman. Besides Wilson and Phillips, the two ministers, Saltonstall was knight; Fiennes was the son of an earl; Winthrop and Johnson were esquires; four were gentlemen; and seventeen were entitled to be ‘Mr.’ Of the lower class there were five each of armourers, bakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, merchants; three each of clothiers, chandlers, coopers, military officers, physicians, and tailors; two each of fishermen, herdsmen, and masons; one tanner, and one weaver. The rest were all yeomen or husbandmen.’ ”<sup>12</sup>

In general, the above list of occupations accords with M. James’ statement that: “By the end of Elizabeth’s reign (1603) it had already become apparent that Puritanism had special affinities with certain sections of the community. It struck its deepest roots among the rising middle classes. . . .”<sup>13</sup>

From the very beginning, New England’s policy was very selective. New arrivals were scrutinized with painstaking care as to the contributions they could make, and, in Massachusetts, some arrivals were sent back to England “as persons unmeet to inhabit here.”<sup>14</sup> “In Rhode Island, both Providence and Portsmouth decreed that only such newcomers should be allowed to remain as were accepted as freemen or inhabitants by a vote of the town.”<sup>15</sup>

In view of these statements, one wonders whether the Puritans coming in the seventeenth century could have brought a flourishing ballad tradition with them. It would be foolish to deny that a great many ballads were conveyed to New England, particularly by the husbandmen mentioned above, and by others. Also, ballads were everywhere present in that part of England from which they came; the collections of Sharp in Somerset, if

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William Penn began his colonization of Pennsylvania in 1681. Quakers came there not only from England but from other countries — Ireland, Wales, and from Germany. It is hardly likely that balladry flowered among them. Pennsylvania's liberal policy, however, opened up land to all comers, and soon there was to arrive there in ever increasing numbers a people who came indirectly from the great ballad country of the Lowlands of Scotland.

The colonization of North Ireland by the Lowland Scots began in 1610. The social situation in Scotland at that time was such that we have very good reason to believe that balladry was a living folk art. James G. Leyburn writes:

One searches in vain the writing of the century following the Reformation in Scotland for any reference to the great European authors who were bringing literature to new heights — Shakespeare, Spenser, Bacon, the Elizabethan dramatists, Milton, and the Restoration poets in England; Corneille, Racine, and Molière in France; or to earlier authors, like Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Villon, and Montaigne. Painting and sculpture were all but unknown: certainly no artist practiced his craft in Scotland, and the dozens of portraits (*not* likenesses) of Scottish kings painted on the walls of Holyrood Palace were a job-lot performed at a reduced price by a fifth-rate itinerant. There was no theater in Scotland. Patrons for artists did not exist — and surely the Kirk would not be a patron, for it held that the eye and the other senses should not be distracted from the one essential matter of hearing and expounding of God's Word. No collections or libraries had been formed in any baronial castle or in any burgh. Architecture was practical and mostly crude. Music produced haunting folk melodies and reels and marching tunes, but composers and opera were unheard of in that age that ran from Palestrina and Di Lasso to Purcell and Lully. This is to say, then, that the Scottish people, with their minds on other things, had as yet missed not only the satisfactions but also the stimulation of all the fine arts flourishing elsewhere in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

In the periodic wars to subdue Ireland, Lord Mountjoy, under Queen Elizabeth, finally succeeded in driving out or killing the chieftains of North Ireland who had put up successful resistance for many years. "Starvation and defeat made the Irish submit just as the Queen lay dying (1603). The depopulation of the region because of the wars made a new plantation scheme in Ulster appear more feasible."<sup>20</sup> England felt it was necessary to have a strong Protestant bulwark in Ireland against the Catholic South; and so it was under King James I of England (VI of Scotland), that the colonization of Ulster by the English and the Scots began.

In Scotland itself "economic distress in the Lowlands and economic opportunities in Ulster were the predominant causes for migration during the first fifty years after the plantation scheme had begun in 1610. Thereafter, for the next thirty years, religious difficulties provided the chief incentive."<sup>21</sup> The incentives to emigrate must have been powerful "if, as the estimates indicate, there were forty thousand able-bodied Scots living in Ulster after the first thirty years of the colonization project."<sup>22</sup> Emigration continued to be very heavy throughout the seventeenth century. It was estimated that "fifty thousand Scots had come over to Ulster in the decade between 1690 and 1700."<sup>23</sup>

Difficult economic conditions and religious problems coming as a result of trouble with England was the cause of the mass migration from Ulster to the American Colonies which began in earnest in 1717 and continued in great waves until the Revolution, at which time it has been estimated that "200,000 Ulstermen had migrated."<sup>24</sup>

As to traditional balladry in Ulster, little or nothing is known. Scotch collectors in the eighteenth century and British in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seemed never to have searched the area. Irish collectors were of the South and concerned themselves almost entirely with the Gaelic folk songs. Donal O'Sullivan, authority on Irish music, refers only in passing to the "Anglo-

Irish song" of Ulster and remarks concerning the Ulster Scots that "they must have brought their folk songs with them" from Scotland.<sup>25</sup>

Not only must they have brought their folk songs with them, but conditions in Ulster were such that they must have preserved them. Their society remained essentially agrarian; and they as a people preserved their own culture in closed geographical areas. Leyburn, who devoted a chapter to the subject, believed there was little intermarriage with the Irish.<sup>26</sup> Other authorities agree with him.<sup>27</sup> Even the broadside ballad probably exerted a less pernicious effect upon traditional balladry in Ulster, as the best known printers of ballads in Ireland were in the southern counties. Hugh Anderson mentioned six by name, only one of which was in the north.<sup>28</sup>

In view of the above, the lack of ballad documentation in Ulster becomes almost as mysterious as the origin of the ballad itself. Even the sources of what little British balladry in Ireland we possess are uncertain, as the collectors have been seemingly unconcerned as to whether the singer of a particular ballad collected in Ireland was of English, Scottish, or Irish descent.

An examination of the material in Bronson's, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, Volumes I and II, and that in Flanders' *Ancient Ballads Traditionally Sung in New England* (1960-63), gives us a fairly good idea of the British traditional ballads which have been collected to date from Ireland and also of those which have been collected in this country and ascribed to Irish provenience. One is not only surprised at the little which was collected, but also at the uncertainty of source as mentioned above. I was only able to locate twenty-three Child ballads and ballad versions mentioned as having been collected in Ireland. Of these twenty-three, nine (Child 2, 10, 12, 75, 43, 44, 45, 53, 84) were simply designated as collected in Ireland. Eleven (Child 4, 12, 73, 46, 46, 73, 84, 92, 10, 12, 12) were collected in Catholic Ireland from Counties Mayo, Wexford,

Galway, Limerick, Cork, and Kerry. We are not informed as to whether the singers were English or Irish (pockets of English culture existed in the eastern counties). The remaining three (Child 2, 92, 110) were collected in Ulster in Counties Tyrone and Derry. But here even more than in Catholic Ireland, it was necessary to specify whether the singer was Irish, Scottish, or English.

Twenty-nine ballad versions collected in the United States had been learned in Ireland, or had been learned from a parent or grandparent who had lived in Ireland. The singers of eleven (Child 4, 12, 12, 17, 43, 53, 54, 84, 84, 95) give no other source than Ireland. Singers of ten ballad versions specify the counties in Catholic Ireland and singers of eight versions (Child 4, 4, 44, 46, 68, 110, 281) list specific counties in Ulster. The fact that only three ballads were actually collected from Ulster, and only nine collected in the United States said to have had Ulster as their source can reasonably mean but one thing—that no organized search has ever been made for them in that area. Had there been a search at an early enough period, it is highly probable that a fertile field of balladry would have been discovered.

One refuses to believe that all of the ballad singers migrated to America without leaving a single trace. One also refuses to believe that the singers of the "best of the ballads of Britain, those of the Scottish Lowlands"<sup>29</sup> remained at home, while only those minus the ballad tradition went to Ulster. In any case, the facts in America speak for themselves; wherever the Scotch-Irish settled in considerable numbers, there the ballads were found. Wherever they settled and remained in isolation from urban influences, British balladry was found live and in a healthy condition.

Between 1714 and 1720, fifty-five ships of Ulster Scots docked at New England ports. They were not made welcome in the settled areas so they formed communities in the frontier areas. Pennsylvania, however, welcomed them, so the next wave of

1725-1729 took up land in that colony. The migration was so large that Secretary Logan of the Pennsylvania Province wrote: "It looks as if Ireland is to send all its inhabitants hither . . . The common fear is that if they thus continue to come they will make themselves proprietors of the province."<sup>30</sup>

Famine struck Ireland in 1740 and was certainly the principal reason for the third large wave which continued for the next decade. This wave moved beyond Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia into North and South Carolina. The fourth exodus was caused by drought in Ulster. These people continued into Carolina and Virginia. The final wave took place between 1771 and 1775. Conditions in Ulster and favorable reports from America attracted them. "And so by 1775 probably 200,000 Ulstermen had immigrated."<sup>31</sup>

"By 1776, when the Revolutionary War had effectively stopped immigration, possibly nine-tenths of the Scotch-Irish in America were living in these regions: Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina."<sup>32</sup> After the Revolutionary War, Virginians began moving west into Kentucky and Tennessee.

Those areas which had a live tradition of British balladry, the areas in which Cecil Sharp, Frank C. Brown, C. Alphonse Smith and Reed Smith collected, were areas of greatest Scotch-Irish concentration. The hermetic social conditions and the lack of a broadside tradition in this area provided a favorable environment in which balladry could develop and be preserved.

The only thing which might invalidate a statement to the effect that the Scotch-Irish were the main carriers of the ballads to this country would be evidence that English or Lowland Scots came directly to these areas sometime at the end of the eighteenth century or early nineteenth century as Cecil Sharp believed they did. Emigration patterns do not support such a belief.

During the first half of the eighteenth century (1713-1742) "not many Englishmen emigrated to this country. Religious oppression was no longer a spur to migration, and industrial expan-

sion at home absorbed whatever hands agriculture could not employ.”<sup>33</sup> There was little emigration from England during the Seven-Years War (1754-1763). After this war, times turned prosperous in the United States. “The expansion of commerce, ship-building, agriculture, lumbering, transportation, and manufacturing, required additional man power . . . Workers crowded the Atlantic ships, eager to bind themselves to temporary servitude for the rewards that would ensue.”<sup>34</sup>

Englishmen attracted to the Colonies for these reasons would not migrate in great numbers to Virginia and the Carolinas. In addition, even if they had gone there, as undoubtedly some did, it will be recalled that traditional balladry was already long past its flowering in England, and broadside balladry was dominant. Percy was to publish his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. His title suggests the state of British balladry at that time. Even if the English had brought but a spark of balladry to the ballad areas of the Appalachians at the end of the eighteenth century, it stretches the imagination to believe that it could have fanned itself into the flame which Sharp found.

A study of the book *Colonists from Scotland* (Graham) indicates that it would be unlikely that colonists coming directly to this country during the eighteenth century from the Highlands of Scotland would have contributed much if anything to the balladry which flourished here.<sup>35</sup> The total number of Highlanders was relatively small (less than 10,000 in all).<sup>36</sup> Most settled in the Cape Fear Valley of North Carolina; others settled in the Mohawk and upper Hudson Valleys in New York, the Altamaha Valley in Georgia, and in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.<sup>37</sup>

The Highlanders did not speak English, a fact which would inhibit ballad transmission to their neighbors. During the Revolution they fought on the side of the Crown and were defeated at the hands of the Americans. After the defeat in 1777, many reemigrated to Canada.<sup>38</sup>

In Scotland, "the panic of 1772, and the ensuing depression in commerce and manufacturing . . . gave an impetus to the emigration of skilled craftsmen (from the Lowlands) to the Colonies . . . The bursting of the financial bubble threw thousands of weavers and other town-dwelling 'mechanics' out of work. At the same time, the inflation of monetary values, by inducing the landlords to raise their rents, caused emigration from Lowland farms . . . The townsmen indentured themselves in order to get to America, while the ruined small farmers joined together in associations and companies to finance and organize their removal to the New World."<sup>39</sup>

"Throughout the eighteenth century . . . there was a steady, but moderate, flow of indentured servants from the Scottish Lowlands to the mainland colonies in America, especially to Pennsylvania and the Southern colonies . . . There was little promotion of emigration in bulk."<sup>40</sup> A few Lowland Scots moved into the Appalachian areas with the Scotch-Irish but on the whole they "played little part in this pattern of development."<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere the pattern of their dispersal in the Colonies is "difficult to trace."<sup>42</sup>

From this description of social conditions in the Lowlands, the class patterns of the persons who emigrated, the patterns of their dispersal, and the relative paucity of their number when compared with the English and Scotch-Irish, together with the fact that they left the Lowlands over a century later than did the Scots of Ulster, suggests that it was not this group of Lowland Scots who transmitted a thriving ballad culture to this country. The facts presented above seem to point directly to the Scotch-Irish as the principal carriers.

Because of the lack of documentation of balladry in Ulster itself, it does not seem nearly so surprising that the editors of the important ballad collections in the Appalachians did not arrive at this point of view. Phillips Barry, on the other hand, has indicated by a number of remarks in *British Ballads from*

Maine (1929), that he was on the trail of the Scotch-Irish in that area. He remarks that Child ballads are "far better known to Irish singers than is generally supposed."<sup>43</sup> And the following: "The Irish element in eastern Maine is much greater and much earlier than it generally is supposed to be . . . It has done more than its share in preserving the old songs. Our own observation is necessarily limited, but so far as it goes we find the old Cape Cod stock (West Country English) having small influence upon the traditional singing. We have recovered nothing from it so far as we know, and, moreover, in a lifetime's acquaintance with their descendants we have never known one who sang the old songs."<sup>44</sup> "It is from singers with some Irish blood that we have obtained the most songs."<sup>45</sup>

In view of the fact that the Catholic Irish emigration to this country did not take place to any great extent before the nineteenth century, Barry's remarks seem to indicate that even in those areas of the United States where we cannot prove the Scotch-Irish to have constituted the mainstream in the transmission of British balladry, there is good reason to believe that they were at least an important tributary.

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Songs From the Southern Appalachians* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, Second Impression, 1952), I, xxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

<sup>3</sup> D. K. Wilgus, *Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> Henry M. Belden, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1952), II, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm G. Laws Jr., *Native American Balladry* (Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1964), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> James Watt Raine, *The Land of Saddle-Bags* (New York: Council of Women for Home Missions and Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1924), pp. 95-96.

<sup>7</sup> References to traditional balladry indicate material such as that found in the James Francis Child collection.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Allen French, *The Puritan Upheaval* (Cambridge: Houghton-Mifflin, The Riverside Press, 1955), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>11</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., Twentieth Printing 1959), p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> French, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

<sup>13</sup> M. James, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1934), XIII, p. 3.

- 14 Marcus Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration 1607-1816* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940), p. 32.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 19 James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish, a Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), pp. 76-77.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 25 Donal O'Sullivan, *Irish Folk Music and Song* (Dublin: Colm O Lochlainn, First Edition, 1952, Reprinted 1956), p. 46.
- 26 Leyburn, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- 27 See Eric Strauss, *Nationalism and British Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) also John Harrison, *The Scot in Ulster* as quoted in Leyburn, *op. cit.*, p. 138.
- 28 Hugh Anderson, *Farewell to Old England* (Adelaide: Rigby Ltd., 1964) p. 17.
- 29 Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt, *Ballad Criticism in Scandinavia and Great Britain During the Eighteenth Century* (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1916), p. 15.
- 30 Leyburn, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 33 Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 35 Ian Charles Cargill Graham, *Colonists from Scotland* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1956).
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 94-104.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 43 Barry, Eckstorm and Smyth, *British Ballads from Maine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 66.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 489.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 486.