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Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century

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Popular Ballads

Rhythmic Remediations in the Nineteenth Century

M I C H A E L C O H E N

If “the ballad” has always been a genre of the past, its place there has long been implicated in conflicts over the present. Whether mediating ideas of history, culture, nationality, or identity, ballads have been contested property since at least the eighteenth century.¹ Susan Stewart argues that the “ballads” formulated by three centuries of Anglo-American scholarship are a “distressed genre,” “imitations of the antique,” which, even if they are not literally forged, “characterize the invention of the folk” and involve “an attempt to recoup the voice of orality in all its presumed authenticity of context” for a self-authorizing elite.² According to Stewart, ballad scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries designed ways to sanction relics of the antiquated past, making them available as a nation’s heritage. In work ranging from Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) to Francis James Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98), this heritage was presented as an oral antiquity that had been superseded long ago by a literate modernity, in which the folk traditions forged in certain designated forms—most prominently, the orally composed “popular ballad”—could be preserved beyond the demise of oral culture by specially designed critical

anthologies. Most studies of ballad discourse have strongly criticized “the writing of folklore” for being, in Stewart’s words, “a method for making oral genres extinct.”³ Such a critique is not my focus. Rather, this chapter examines how practices of anthologizing ballads, and the fantasies about the cultural and national past they fostered, became particularly important to the nineteenth-century project of national reconstruction in the United States.

Media histories often posit a diachronic tension between “oral” and “literate” cultures, in which the transition from the first to the second is the central moment in a culture’s modernization.⁴ Paula McDowell has shown that although oral communication was very much in competition with both writing and printing during the eighteenth century, by the 1760s antiquarians had come to define orality as the archaic and outmoded precursor to a literate era constituted by the widespread diffusion of print.⁵ This model of media shift from the oral to the written or printed word remains a compelling narrative of the past, which inscribes an antiquity, authenticity, and unity to the oral culture and assumes these to have been scattered and lost with the introduction of reading, writing, and printing. The mid-eighteenth century, the period at which McDowell locates the formation of this story, was also the moment when ballads began to be formally collected and studied as the premier objects of oral culture. By collecting such songs in books, scholars sought to monumentalize and make permanent these oral cultures as histories of the present. Ballads and ballad anthologies thus mediate cultural and national history in two senses: they stand between the present and the past, marking historical difference (mediation as intercession); but they also bring the past into the present, collapsing historical distance (mediation as transposition).⁶ Popular ballads and the anthologies that re-present them therefore might best be understood in terms of “remediation,” which Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe as “the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy” that render mediation (intercession and transposition) both transparent and opaque.⁷ As cultural institutions in the era of nation building, ballad anthologies and collections offered the prospect of materializing the vanishing traditions of antiquity, thereby stabilizing the folk past and making it immanent to the fragile present.

The process of making cultural history in the form of the ballad appears prominently in Percy’s *Reliques*, which he presented as the “select remains of our ancient English Bards and Minstrels,” a national inheritance that, in his anthology, could be returned to the Countess of Huntingdon,

his patroness, “by a kind of hereditary right.”⁸ Percy felt the need to defend his rough reliques in a “polished age,” but in an important sense their roughness *was* their defense, because it distinguished them from modern imitations and therefore authenticated them as “the ancient literature of our own country” (*R*, xiv). Percy elaborated the value of roughness in an essay “On the Alliterative Metre, without Rhyme, in Pierce Plowman’s Visions,” which described a verse form “the harmony of which neither depended on the quantity of the syllables, like that of the ancient Greeks or Romans; nor on the rhymes at the end, as in modern poetry; but consisted altogether in . . . a certain artful repetition of the sounds in the middle of the verses” (*R*, 265). This was the meter of “Anglo-Saxon” poetry, and “though the ravages of time will not suffer us now to produce a regular series of poems written in it,” traces could be found throughout the manuscript fragments and antique ballads stored in his collection (*R*, 266). Roughness distinguished Anglo-Saxon from modern meters: “After all, the old alliterative and anapestic metre of the English poets being chiefly used in [a] barbarous age, and in a rude unpolished language, abounds in verses defective in length, proportion, and harmony; and therefore cannot enter into a comparison with the correct versification of the best modern French writers” (*R*, 269).

This dependence on roughness and fragmentation to mark the national-metrical line evokes strongly ambivalent desires throughout the *Reliques*: rough meters and poetic fragments elicit Percy’s curatorial passions and cultivated sensibilities but also his red pencil. Because the fragments instantiate the fantasy of plenitude through the pathos of loss, their capacity to conjure lost authenticity also arouses a drive for completion. Percy’s text for “The Child of Elle,” for example, is “given from a fragment in the Editor’s folio MS.: which though extremely defective and mutilated . . . excited a strong desire to attempt the completion of the story. The reader will easily discover the supplemental stanzas by their inferiority, and at the same time be inclined to pardon it, when he considers how difficult it must be to imitate the affecting simplicity and artless beauties of the original” (*R*, 87). Because the original is both artlessly beautiful and also mutilated and defective, Percy inscribes on it his “strong desire” for completion, making the song a portal to the past that brings the past forward into the present, fulfilling and redeeming it. This desire elides the historical breach marked by the manuscript’s mutilation; Percy’s ballad now embodies both sides of the divide, with only an aesthetic sensibility to guide readers between the original and the supplemental.

Here is Percy’s unpardonable sin, in the view of later editors: polishing the roughness of fragmentary authenticity effaces its value as an origin. Thus, when a facsimile copy of Percy’s manuscript was published in the 1860s, the facsimile’s editors, Frederick J. Furnivall and John W. Hales, announced the original manuscript’s “poor fragment” of “The Child of Elle” “to be now printed for the first time, as in the ‘Reliques’ it is buried in a heap of ‘polished’ verses composed by Percy”:

There are 200 [lines] in the thing called the “Child of Elle” in the “Reliques.” But in those 200 lines all the 39 originals do not appear. Now and then one appears, always . . . a little altered to fit it for the strange bed-fellows with which the polishing process has made it acquainted, its good manners corrupted, so to speak, by evil communications. On the whole, the union of the genuine and the false—of the old ballad with Percy’s tawdry feebleness—makes about as objectionable a *mesalliance* as that in the story itself is in the eyes of the father.⁹

To polish is to corrupt with “evil communications,” and the editors indict Percy for stealing a poetic birthright through a kind of editorial bad marriage, “the union of the genuine and the false” that smooths away the rough patrimony of English poetry.

After Percy, the recuperation of history through balladry became a paradoxical process of restoring fragmentation, of undoing the misbegotten alliances forged by prior generations—of rendering mediation transparent. Percy’s rough alliterative verse is transformed into Furnivall and Hales’s “poor fragment,” as the following example from “The Child of Elle” shows. Here is Percy’s:

But light nowe downe, my deare ladyè,
Light downe, and hold my horse;
While I and this discourteous knight
Doe trye our valour’s force.

(*R*, 89, lines 133–36)

This textbook ballad quatrain nicely illustrates Percy’s alliterative metrics, while balancing the lady and knight within a neat pattern of romantic images, signaled in the rhyme of “horse” and “force.” Furnivall and Hales return the stanza to the “extremely defective and mutilated” state in which Percy found it:

but light now downe, my lady gay,
 light downe & hold my horsse,
 whilst I & your father & your brether
 doe play vs at this crosse.

(*PFM*, 1:134, lines 33–36)

Now alliteration is muted significantly, and Latinate lines such as “While I and this discourteous knight, / Doe trye our valour’s force” become the unpolished “whilst I & your father & your brether / doe play vs at this crosse,” which restores typographic peculiarities along with an almost flamboyant metrical irregularity. Furnivall and Hales were driven not only by paradigm shifts in the study of culture but also by national imperatives to secure claims to literary history. Their remediation of the reliques shows how nineteenth-century ballad scholarship focused on protecting “our” folk literature from imitators, forgers, misguided editors, and the depredations of modernity—literacy, writing, and print. In late and literate times, archaic roughness and rude form would mark the oral origins of genuine ancient poetry, and the ballad scholar’s work would be to collect, authenticate, anthologize, and preserve, thereby shoring up national culture in the pages of a book.

This scholarly effort is exemplified by the most important nineteenth-century anthology of ballads, the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads (ESPB)*, which was published in five volumes between 1882 and 1898, and edited by Francis James Child. This anthology created the genre of the “Child ballad,” a term still used by folklorists, and it has never gone out of print. Child, the son of a Boston sailmaker, was a scholarship student at Harvard; after graduating, he studied philology at Humboldt University in Berlin, where he attended lectures by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, and the University of Göttingen, where he received an honorary doctorate. After he returned to the United States in the 1850s, he taught at Harvard and remained there the rest of his life, eventually becoming Harvard’s first professor of English. He was a founding member of the Modern Language Association and the American Folk-lore Society, thus helping to institutionalize literary and folklore studies in formations that endure today. When Child died in 1896, he was eulogized as one of America’s greatest scholars.¹⁰

Child’s first effort as an anthologist was an eight-volume collection, *English and Scottish Ballads* (1857), published as part of a 130-volume reprint series of British authors. In the preface to the second edition (1860),

Child explained that while his anthology contained “all but two or three of the *ancient* ballads of England and Scotland, and nearly all those ballads which, in either country, have been gathered from oral tradition,” it was entirely “compiled from the numerous collections of Ballads printed since the beginning of the last century.”¹¹ The printedness of Child’s sources made him unhappy; though he strongly differentiated “true popular ballads, the spontaneous products of nature” from “the artificial literature” of the later “professional ballad-maker,” he had no choice but to depend on printed collections that may have included both sorts, because he had no access to oral tradition or manuscript archives: “We have not even the Percy Manuscript at our command, and must be content to take the ballads as they are printed in the *Reliques*, with all the editor’s changes” (*ESB*, 1:vii, xi). Thus Child prefaced “The Child of Elle” by acknowledging how little of the “genuine composition” remained: “So extensive are Percy’s alterations and additions, that the reader will have no slight difficulty in detecting the few traces that are left of the genuine composition” (*ESB*, 3:224). Percy’s assurance that readers would have little trouble distinguishing original from supplemental material is replaced by Child’s deep pessimism that the traces of the genuine composition could ever be recovered. Without the manuscript sources of printed anthologies, and removed from the oral tradition that, in his view, should have served as the basis for both manuscript and print collections, Child felt himself embarrassingly complicit with the emendations and errors of previous editors such as Percy. His prefatory apology therefore reversed Percy’s—Child begged readers to excuse his ballads’ polish and refinement, “the editor’s changes” he could not help but include.

The source Child coveted most was the commonplace book that had been the basis of Percy’s *Reliques*: “The greatest service that can now be done to English Ballad-literature is to publish this precious document. Civilization has made too great strides in the island of Great Britain for us to expect much more from tradition” (*ESB* 1:xii). Percy had famously rescued this manuscript from Humphrey Pitt’s maid, who was using it to start the fires at Pitt’s estate in Shropshire when Percy visited there in the 1750s. But because of the scabrous accusations of forgery made against him by Joseph Ritson in the 1780s, Percy’s family had allowed no one to see this manuscript for nearly a century. Finally, in 1867, the Percy Society (organized expressly to acquire this document) succeeded in publishing a three-volume facsimile of it. Furnivall and Hales, the editors, dedicated

it to Child, writing that “the cause of the printing of Percy’s MS., of the publication of this book, was the insistence, time after time, by Professor Child, that it was the duty of English antiquarian men of letters to print this foundation document of English balladry”:

As an Englishman one could not but feel it a disgrace that an American should take more interest in an English MS. than oneself, and the more a disgrace that in this case the genuineness or falsity of the text of a score of our best ballads was involved. Was one to acknowledge that the old Sidney spirit had taken flight from its native land, and found a new home even in that noble North which had at last gone “thorough” for the slave, fighting the worthiest fight one’s life had seen? (*PFM*, 1:ix, x)

The preface made clear that a nation’s claim to its ballads was not perpetual but required constant reassertion and dedication. Several motives propelled the publication of *Percy’s Folio Manuscript*: scholarly discourse stipulated that the oldest available forms were the most authentic, obliging the Percy Society to publish the manuscript source of “a score of our best ballads.” But behind this disciplinary motivation lurked a nationalist impulse—Furnivall and Hales felt pressure as Englishmen to promote the cause of English balladry, and they worried about the consequences of an international discourse on a history of English poetry stabilized by popular ballads. Percy’s *Reliques* might contain “our best ballads” according to Furnivall and Hales, but the right of possession was predicated on maintaining a national balladic spirit that seemed alarmingly mobile: “the old Sidney spirit” could fly from its “native land” and settle elsewhere, taking the ballads with it.

The publication of the folio manuscript revealed what scholars had long suspected: Percy had extensively “retouched and repaired” the poems “to suit the ‘improved state of literature’ in his time,” as Child commented in a review of the facsimile’s first volume.¹² Percy had derived “The Heir of Linne,” for example, from an “original . . . found in the Editor’s folio MS., the breaches and defects in which, rendered the insertion of supplemental stanzas necessary” (*R*, 214). According to Furnivall and Hales, Percy’s version “was polished till he could see his own face in it,” while “the best version of the ballad—the purest and neatest—is, to our thinking, the one now given *in puris naturalibus*” (*PFM*, 1:174). Percy’s *relique* describes the wanderings of the prodigal Lord this way:

Popular Ballads: Rhythmic Remediations in the Nineteenth Century

Away then hyed the heire of Linne
Oer hill and holt, and moor and fenne,
Untill he came to lonesome lodge,
That stood so lowe in a lonely glenne.

(*R*, 216, part 2, lines 1–4)

The metrical alliteration, patterned repetition, and legendary incident of these lines are nowhere apparent in the later remediation, which reduces Percy’s two-part, 216-line narrative to a 125-line, fragmented dialogue. Again, the editors’ return to the pure naturalness of the manuscript restores lexical and typographical idiosyncrasy and metrical irregularity, which highlights Percy’s interpositions while eliding their own:

he had not beene in Edenborrow
not 3 quarters of a yeere,
but some did giue him, & some said nay,
& some bid “to the deele gang yee!”

(*PFM*, 1:177, lines 45–48)

The facsimile is both less and more than the *relique*, both older and more modern, as its remediation derived from a contemporary paradigm that valued roughness and fragmentation as signs of antiquity. The methodology of Furnivall, Hales, Child, and other philologically oriented scholars also maintained a hierarchy of transmission for the collecting of folklore: they assumed manuscript sources to be more authentic than printed ones, and oral transcriptions most authentic of all. The publication of Percy’s manuscript therefore scandalized in another way, for the facsimile showed that only a small number of poems in the *Reliques* actually came from the manuscript, while a far greater number were based upon the broadside collections of Pepys, the Diceys, the British Library, and other print archives.¹³ Rather than bringing to light vestiges of the oral tradition from which “a score of our best ballads” had come, the Percy manuscript was revealed to be a heterogeneous amalgam of “shreds and patches” containing “ballads and romances” as well as “moral and didactic dullness” and, worst of all, “rank and noxious specimens of comparatively modern dirt, such as would suit the age of Charles II.”¹⁴ Child wrote privately to James Russell Lowell that the Percy manuscript was “[p]oor stuff most of it and in the main not new,” with “an

appendix of 'Loose Songs' . . . just as dirty as they can be."¹⁵ Rather than moving scholars closer to the vanished oral antiquity, the Percy manuscript circuited ballads back into print traditions that were embarrassingly modern, ephemeral, and "Loose." England's folk heritage seemed scattered into "rank and noxious specimens," its oral traditions—"our best ballads"—scandalously adjoined to the "modern dirt" of delinquent print culture.

Or not. The Danish folklorist Svend Grundtvig wrote to Child that the facsimile would have been better had Child edited it, because Child "knew how to distinguish the very different kinds of poetical productions, older and later, popular and artificial, which by English editors, ever since the time of Bishop Percy, have been mixed up indiscriminately under the general head of 'Old Ballads.'"¹⁶ The Englishness of Furnivall and Hales did nothing to enlighten them about "their" best ballads, in Grundtvig's view, because no English editor could distinguish the ballad generically. In England, "Old Ballads" were, like Percy's *Reliques* or his manuscript, simply repositories for "poetical productions older and later, popular and artificial," thrown together without distinction or discrimination. Editors who were more discerning knew better.

In a review of the complete facsimile, Child addressed the Ballad Society, an organization founded by Furnivall to publish "all the known collections of English ballads."¹⁷ Describing the Pepys and Roxburghe collections of broadside ballads as "about as dull and useless reading as in a considerable acquaintance with worthless literature we have ever met with," Child asked this society:

[Why] should not the Ballad Society put its best foot forward, and print the manuscript ballads *first*? . . . Give us, then, first, all that is left, or all that can be found, of the genuine ballads of the people. Ransack the public libraries. . . . Hunt up private manuscripts. . . . And next, where are the Mrs. Farquhars, the Mrs. Browns, the Mrs. Arnots, the Miss Rutherfords themselves, and the nurses who taught them ballads? . . . [It] cannot be that the diffusion of useful knowledge, the intrusion of railroads, and the general progress of society, have quite driven all the old songs out of country-women's heads. . . . From these sources, public libraries, parish scrap-books, and the memory of living persons, it is probable that much might be gathered.¹⁸

Tradition is not mediated the way we might expect: oral tradition, libraries, and manuscripts afford equal access to "the genuine ballads of the people,"

and all sources are susceptible to corruption and mutilation by the ingenuity of editors—no kind of material ("parish scrap-books" or "the memory of living persons") assumes absolute privilege. Whether it was sung, written, or printed, the aspiring editor wanted it all. The urgency of Child's appeal expressed a fear that access to "the genuine ballads of the people" dwindled as modernity ("the diffusion of useful knowledge," railroads, and social progress) overtook the world. In his view, the oral tradition carried by "the Mrs. Farquhars, the Mrs. Browns, the Mrs. Arnots, the Miss Rutherfords" had to be replaced by the critic and his anthology, which would preserve and transmit popular ballads long after modernity had "driven all the old songs out of country-women's heads." In modern life, popular ballads would necessarily be objects of the book, dependent on good critical methods for their survival.

When Child began working on the revised and expanded *ESPB* in the late 1860s, his major effort was to collect every available version of any ballad he considered genuinely "popular," using material gleaned only from manuscripts or oral transcription. Child never defined the term *popular ballad* (he died before writing a theoretical introduction to the final volume of his anthology), and his criteria for determining whether or not a ballad was "popular" have long puzzled scholars.¹⁹ However, in an 1874 essay titled "Ballad Poetry," Child located the popular ballad "anterior to the appearance of the poetry of art, to which it has formed a step, and by which it has been regularly displaced, and, in some cases, all but extinguished": "The condition of society in which a truly national or popular poetry appears explains the character of such poetry. It is a condition in which the people are not divided by political organization and book-culture into markedly distinct classes, in which consequently there is such community of ideas and feelings that the whole people form an individual. Such poetry, accordingly, while it is in essence an expression of our common human nature, and so of universal and indestructible interest, will in each case be differenced by circumstances and idiosyncrasy."²⁰ Child's account of the popular ballad cared little for formal description: after a glancing generic definition ("a narrative song, a short tale in lyric verse" characterized by "the absence of subjectivity and self-consciousness"), he devotes the essay to analyzing the ballad's emergence, the social conditions of its production, and the causes of its eventual disappearance.²¹ Child's interest in "popular ballads" lay with the "popular," not the "ballad." Popular ballads, according to Child, were the boundary between two cultural and social epochs, and they contained within their form the vanished orality and the

characteristic “circumstances and idiosyncrasies” of the folk who had created them. Popular ballads were made the objects of a fantasy in which a collective people acted like an individual—a fantasy, therefore, about nation-states, which also figure disparate populations into singular personifications. This balladic fantasy about a singular folk resonated powerfully in the postbellum United States: Furnivall and Hales may have identified English balladry with the American Civil War, “the worthiest fight one’s life had seen,” but the political, sectional, and racial conflicts of the postwar era were fatally challenging efforts to instantiate a sense of national American identity and culture. In the context of Reconstruction (which ended in 1877 after decisively failing to reconcile sectional animosities into political unity), Child’s effort to establish an authoritative and exhaustive anthology was, consciously or unconsciously, a project of literary nation-building: by providing access to an English and Scottish folk heritage, *ESPB* offered to make popular ballads the wellspring of an American national imaginary that could transcend the sectionalism and discord of historical time.²²

Yet given the kind of unity projected by the term *Child ballad*, the heterogeneity of the “ballads” in *ESPB* is shocking. Indeed, the label *Child ballad* is a misnomer: for each of the 305 titles in the anthology, Child printed as many as twenty different versions, variants, and fragments, which often bore little resemblance to each other. Like Percy’s manuscript, which cohered a hodgepodge of print-based “shreds and patches” into a mythic oral tradition, each “Child ballad” brought together a motley array of poems, songs, and fragments under the fiction that they derived from one source, be it a folk tale, an impulse, an idea, or a musical or metrical “air.” He argued for a unity among all these variants in the scholarly prefaces, which sometimes ran to over thirty pages. “Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight” (Child ballad 4), for instance, was prefaced with a thirty-two-page introduction and featured texts with opening stanzas as different as the following:

A. Fair lady Isabel sits in her bower sewing,
Aye as the gowans grow gay
There she heard an elf-knight blowing his horn.
The first morning in May.

B. There came a bird out o a bush,
On water for to dine,

Popular Ballads: Rhythmic Remediations in the Nineteenth Century

An sighing sair, says the king’s daughter,
“O wae’s this heart o mine!”

C. False Sir John a wooing came
To a maid of beauty fair
May Colven was this lady’s name,
Her father’s only heir.²³

The entry includes six complete versions, some of which are themselves collations of three or four different print and manuscript sources, so that the singular “Child ballad 4” is progressively disaggregated into a dozen variations as one reads the entry from beginning to end. Formal, metrical, or linguistic features do not stabilize this “ballad”: only A, for instance, includes a traditional burden; B and C (and D) have a standard 4/3 ballad meter, but A does not (neither do E and F); only some versions deploy Scots dialect, legendary action, or specific locales such as “Wearie’s Well” (B) and “Bunion Bay” (D); finally, although every text tells a compressed story, the stories are all complete—no version typifies the roughness or fragmentation that Child or his contemporaries identified with the orally composed, antiquated “poetry of nature.” Indeed, these ballads seem no less polished than Percy’s reliques; only collectively do they conjure the fragmentation characteristic of Child’s “genuine ballads of the people.”

As I hope this example indicates, *ESPB* is a wonderfully bizarre and disorienting object, in which each illusory “Child ballad” devolves into a series of disparate, discrepant instances. Child provides order by drawing out structural parallels among the texts’ stories and, most important, by locating comparable poems and stories in the popular literatures of other European (and sometimes non-European) countries. The prefaces therefore emphasize the paths of circulation along which songs and stories moved among traditions; although Child defined popular ballads as the natural property of the particular “people” who sang them, in his anthology a ballad’s widespread diffusion through many different literary and linguistic traditions authenticated it as folk culture. Child’s introduction to “Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight” catalogues versions in Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, German, Polish, Wendish, Bohemian, Serbian, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Breton, Magyar, and Transylvanian traditions. The sheer accumulation of details and specimens transforms a collection into a theoretical

argument—the overwhelming amount of variations and versions paradoxically makes plausible the claim for a folk unity among all the examples.

To complete his project as he intended, then, Child required material. Through the initial stages of the project, he issued circulars that entreated “the aid of gentlewomen in Scotland, or elsewhere, who remember ballads that they have heard repeated by their grandmothers or nurses” and asked “clergymen and schoolmasters, living in sequestered places, to exert themselves to collect what is left among the people.”²⁴ Yet despite his inclination toward oral transcription, most of the songs Child anthologized came from printed collections or manuscripts, and as a consequence, his “popular ballads” were largely a collation of collections made by others. For all of Child’s celebrated genius at authenticating popular ballads, his relentless acquisition of manuscripts and rare books was the more far-reaching implication of his work (today Harvard’s libraries—including the Child Memorial Library—house perhaps the world’s premier collection of folklore).²⁵

From his position at Harvard, which was rapidly expanding and modernizing (both intellectually and economically) under the leadership of Charles W. Eliot (1869–1909), Child was empowered to spend freely to acquire British and European materials, and his letters are replete with details about the money he had available.²⁶ In one letter to Lowell, he noted that because “we can spend nigh 16000 a year now, one gets pretty much what he asks for” (*SF*, 37). To a degree strikingly unusual for a humanities professor (then and now), his resources matched his ambitions, and thus *ESPB* embodied not only a particular moment in ballad study but also, funded by the wealth that flowed into Harvard in the late nineteenth century (when its endowment increased tenfold), exemplified more general postbellum American expansionism.²⁷ Child was not shy about asserting this prerogative. For instance, he liked to joke that Lowell, who spent nearly a decade as ambassador to Spain and the United Kingdom, could order the European folk to bring forth their ballads like so much treasure. While Lowell served in the Spanish foreign ministry (1877–80), Child wrote him, “We are receiving a lot of Catalan things (Milás & others) just now, but no ballads. Milás ballads are so good that your excellency ought to . . . sweep the province” (*SF*, 31). Later, Child put the joke more bluntly: “Can’t you make somebody collect the ballads in other parts of Spain as they have been collected in Catalonia (and Portugal)? . . . There must be a great lot that could be recovered in Spain—no country more likely to be rich in them” (*SF*, 41). These lines followed a larger pattern

of relations between the United States and Spain, the remaining colonial domains of which were the objects of American imperial ambition in the 1870s; Lowell’s ambassadorship coincided with a period of heightened tension that culminated in the Spanish-American War of 1898 (coincidentally, the year *ESPB* was completed). Child’s jokes thus align inadvertently with the entry of the United States onto the stage of global imperialism, and such exchanges continued throughout Lowell’s years in Europe. During his tenure as British foreign minister (1880–1885), the students of St. Andrews University elected Lowell rector. Child congratulated him, declaring, “Was there ever such a series of conquests, triumphs, sports, since Caesar?”: “As Rector of St Andrews, thou art naturally lord of all Scotland. Let thy first decree be that every ballad known to any lady, maidservant, fishwife, dairywoman or nurse be given up under penalties of misprision & praemunire to all that shall be art & part in the withholding of the same” (*SF*, 57). Here the joke sounds nastier: not only will ballads be taken down from the lips of old Scottish crones, but the women will be seized and stripped of their songs should they resist the imperial authority of Child’s (or Lowell’s) appeal (both “misprision” and “praemunire” were crimes against the Crown resulting in the forfeiture of property): the Scots must give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s—“their” ballads. My point is not that Child and Lowell were acquisitive Yankees plundering Europe’s cultural treasures like characters from a Henry James novel. Instead, I want to emphasize that the rising political and economic power of the United States gave Child’s project a set of meanings and consequences that go well beyond a particular ballad theory or scholarly methodology. At least some European contemporaries saw this. The Scottish folklorist John Francis Campbell, for instance, rebuffed Child’s efforts to buy Campbell’s manuscript collection: “[Though] I entirely understand your hunger after writings, & collections, I rather prefer to keep mine ‘for Scotland and for me’ as the song says. . . .—Now sir the very classes from whom I made my very large collections of Folklore of all known kinds *orally* have migrated in tribes to America. . . . If you will do in Yankeedoodledom as I did here, you may gather a bigger harvest orally than I did, for *the people* of this old country are now in the New World; legends, stories, ballads, and all.”²⁸ Campbell’s ethnographic language indicates that, like Child, he believed songs inhered in people: as the “tribes” of Scottish folk “migrated,” they took their “legends, stories, ballads, and all” with them. Child could “gather a bigger harvest” by delving among them in the New World than by purchasing Campbell’s manuscript.

If oral transcripts seem to trump written records here, Campbell also used the ideal of orality to resist the westward flight of the Scottish folk and folklore by keeping his written record “for Scotland and for me,” as the song said. In the song, Robert Burns’s Jacobite ballad “The Highland Widow’s Lament,” an emigrant widow comes “to the low Countrie . . . / Without a penny in my purse” and contrasts her penury with her past “in the Highland hills,” when “Nae woman in the Country wide / Sae happy was as me”:

I was the happiest of a’ the Clan,
Sair, sair may I repine;
For Donald was the brawest lad,
And Donald he was mine.

Till Charlie Stewart cam at last,
Sae far to set us free;
My Donald’s arm was wanted then
For Scotland and for me.

Their waefu’ fate what need I tell,
Right to the wrang did yield:
My Donald and his Country fell
Upon Culloden field.²⁹

A foundational event in the development of English nationalism, the political and ideological consolidation of “Britain” and, according to Ian Baucom, Atlantic modernity at large, the Jacobite uprising of 1745 and its crushing defeat at Culloden in 1746 established English hegemony over the so-called Celtic fringe but also created a new mode of imagining national identity across Britain and Ireland in the terms of a melancholy or romantic historicism, or what Baucom calls “the news of loss.”³⁰ Depicted most famously in *Waverley* and other novels by Walter Scott, the defeat of the ’45 redefined Scottish identity in cultural-literary rather than political terms, but what the ghosts of the vanquished clans lost in political force they more than recovered in cultural power. The sources of this power can be glimpsed in Burns’s song. “The Highland Widow’s Lament” invokes “Donald’s arm,” a figure for Scottish resistance, as the guarantor “for Scotland and for me,” but this guarantor defines itself through failure, when “right to the wrang did

yield . . . / Upon Culloden field.” The song characterizes this defeat as the loss of a clannish world of plenty, but the double loss of Scottish heroes and the Scottish nation is countered by songs such as “The Highland Widow’s Lament,” which emerged from Culloden as new spaces for the collective identification formerly provided by the clans and the highlands. “The Highland Widow’s Lament” exemplifies this new order by remediating an old meter for a modern song about the loss of traditions.

Burns wrote “The Highland Widow’s Lament” for James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803), and it deploys one of the “fugitive airs” he had collected for that project.³¹ The song’s burden, “ochon, ochon, ochrie,” adapts the burden of “Oh ono chrio,” an older Scots song that Child also included as a variant of ballad 106, “The Famous Flower of Serving Men.”³² Like Burns’s song, “Oh ono chrio” tells “the news of loss,” beginning this way:

Oh was not I a weary wight!
Oh ono chri O! Oh ono chri O!
Maid, wife, and widow, in one night,
Oh! onochri onochri O!³³

According to Burns’s annotation, this song refers to the Glencoe massacre, an atrocity committed against the Highlanders in 1692 after the first Jacobite uprising. By transforming “Oh ono chrio” to “ochon, ochon, ochrie,” Burns links into a tradition of metrical dissonance. The burdens resist the language and disrupt the meter of the poems; although to English ears they might sound like typical nonsense ballad refrains (“Oh hey diddle diddle,” and so forth), both are Gaelic lamentations, and as such they work against the manifest content of the poems. The material difference between the Gaelic words and the English line, the way they resist scansion according to English metrics, matters more than the semantic content of the phrases (roughly, “Woe is me!”). Though each song tells news of loss, the Gaelic burdens speak otherwise by conjuring a tradition of rebellion that resists ascription to the emergent world order of Anglo-Atlantic modernity. Cast out upon “the low countrie,” the scattered fragments of the vanished clans reunite through the airs of their songs, as the Highland Widow calls them back through a metrical invocation starkly materialized in the burden “ochon, ochon, ochrie!” At least, this is the function served by Campbell’s invocation of “The

Highland Widow's Lament" in his correspondence with Child, where Scottish nationalism is collapsed into the manuscript that they both desire, and the nationalization of this desire is circulated through the traces of the song.

It was fitting, then, that Campbell invoked this ballad to oppose the predations of "Yankeedoodledum," a figure for the United States likewise made in terms of a popular tune. This exchange reveals much about the nineteenth-century uses of ballads such as "The Highland Widow's Lament" and anthologies such as *ESPB*. Campbell invoked Burn's song as a representative not for Scotland but for his manuscript collection of "legends, stories, ballads, and all." That is, "The Highland Widow's Lament" did not naturalize a national imaginary (Scottish or otherwise); instead, it figured a manufactured assemblage of texts, whose construction into a tradition of "legends, stories, ballads, and all" both mediated and was mediated by the cultural fantasies encoded in the ballad genre. Campbell's invocation of "The Highland Widow's Lament" calls attention to the remediating work of balladry: Child and Campbell valued the contents of the manuscript but also the manuscript object itself, which made tradition visible as a constructed entity even as it seemed to collapse the distance between the past and the present, the oral and the written, the folk and the nation.

Campbell's refusal to share his manuscript is all the more striking because on other occasions he willingly transcribed songs and secured manuscripts for Child, including a collection held by Hugh Hume Campbell that proved crucial to the completion of *ESPB*.³⁴ The protracted negotiations for Hugh Campbell's collection lasted several years and involved not only J. F. Campbell and Lowell but also Granville Leveson-Gower, British minister for foreign affairs, and Alvey A. Adee, U.S. assistant secretary of state. Lowell had the manuscript sent to Washington, D.C., via official diplomatic pouch to avoid "all question of Custom Houses," and when Child finally received it, he triumphantly announced, "I almost felt that I was the American nation personified" (*SF*, 55). Whereas in the essay "Ballad Poetry" Child had fantasized about a collective folk who created poetry as an individual, here the individual—the ballad collector—fantastically morphed into the nation. Thinking through ballads became a way to imagine "the American nation" as a person, but beyond the spaces of particular songs, this balladic nationalism resided in the process of anthologization, which converted disparate texts, fragments, and variants into mythic folk traditions. This remediating power of the ballad anthology, its ability to conjure the fantasy of the

nation's folk origins, is what ultimately enabled *ESPB* to be received as an "American" inheritance, offering a particularly "American" folklore.

In the context of the ongoing violence of the postbellum era, this was an important outcome. To put it differently, the Jacobite uprising was not the only "lost cause" remediated by the meters of ballads such as "The Highland Widow's Lament." Child's anthology was part of a postbellum literary reconstruction of the United States, which reimagined the American Civil War as the origin of a distinct "American" literature serving a newly united "American" people. With political reconstruction a failure, literature assumed the burden of mediating (standing between and also bringing together) sectional conflicts and political differences to create a source of national identification. A shared inheritance of English and Scottish (and not, say, Irish or African) songs and ballads was vital to this effort. *ESPB* is thus a Reconstruction text, and the "Child ballad" a Reconstruction genre, both of which became imagined origins for a national American literature, as contemporaries immediately noted: "Independently of the pride which an American may properly take in every enterprise which shows how rapidly scholarship in this country is progressing, there is a special reason why he may be pleased that the English folksong should have first received adequate attention and study in the United States. It seems to attest his claim of co-proprietorship in the treasures of the language. In particular, many of these ballads have been handed down and sung, from generation to generation, in the New England as well as in the Old."³⁵ In fact, few of the versions in Child's anthology came from American sources, but the reviewer's point was well taken: the publication of *ESPB* claimed these popular ballads as the sources for an American literary identity. The orality of ballads, authorized by Child's scholarly anthology, transported them to America; identifying the popular ballads of "our tongue" (regardless of the Scots dialect) identified them as "ours." This ambiguous shift from tongue to nation made "co-proprietorship" in "the language" the basis for co-proprietorship in the "treasures of the language," a move that allowed ballads to be as easily and prolifically handed down in "the New England as well as in the Old."

William Wells Newell, a student of Child's and the first president of the American Folk-lore Society, described this sort of ballad history this way: "The English ballad was already born when Canute the Dane coasted the shore of Britain[:]. . . its reproductive period was at an end when Columbus enlarged the horizon of Europe to admit a New World; it was a memory of the past when the American colonies were founded; but even in its last echoes

there lingers we know not what mysterious charm of freshness, poetic atmosphere, and eternal youth."³⁶ Although only "a memory of the past," the "English ballad" still displayed an imperial trajectory from Canute to Columbus to "the American colonies," where its "last echoes" yet lingered. Coinciding with Anglo-American history from its earliest imagined origins, ballads stood poised to move with the future course of empire as the "charm of freshness" and the "poetic atmosphere" of American literature (indeed, just twelve years after the completion of *ESPB*, John Lomax published his first anthology of cowboy ballads collected in the American Southwest). As the vestiges of an idealized orality sung down the generations on both sides of the Atlantic, popular ballads became a form of public culture irresistibly available to the uneasy present, the rhythmic echoes of the songs offering a tradition both fixed and mobile, ancient and modern.

Notes

1. There is a vast critical literature on popular ballads. Sources I have used include Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1961); David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); Tristram Potter Coffin, *The British Traditional Ballad in North America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); William McCarthy, *The Ballad Matrix: Personality, Milieu, and the Oral Tradition* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990); Natascha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 339–56; and Paula McDowell, "The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*: Broadside Ballads in Long-Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse," *Eighteenth Century* 7, no. 2–3 (2006): 151–78.
2. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 67, 68.
3. Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 104. For a strong critique of ballad antiquarianism, in addition to the studies already cited, see Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British "Folksong" 1700 to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985).
4. Some of the most influential media histories of this type are Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologization of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).
5. Paula McDowell, "Defoe and the Contagion of the Oral: Modeling Media Shift in *A Journal of the Plague Year*," *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 87–106.

6. On this point, see John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 341–42.
7. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5.
8. Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London: Dodsley, 1765), ix, viii. Hereafter abbreviated *R* and cited parenthetically.
9. Frederick J. Furnivall and John W. Hales, eds., *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, 3 vols. (London: N. Trübner, 1867–68), 1:132–33. Hereafter abbreviated *PFM* and cited parenthetically.
10. For Child's biography, see George Lyman Kittredge, "Professor Child," *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1896): 737–42. Critical accounts of Child's career include Walter Morris Hart, "Professor Child and the Ballad," *PMLA* 21, no. 4 (1906): 755–807; Sigrid Rieuwerts, "The Genuine Ballads of the People": F. J. Child and the Ballad Cause," *Journal of Folklore Research* 31, no. 1–3 (1994): 1–34; and Tom Cheesman and Sigrid Rieuwerts, eds., *Ballads into Books: The Legacies of Francis James Child* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997).
11. F. J. Child, ed., *English and Scottish Ballads*, 8 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1860), 1:vii. Hereafter abbreviated *ESB* and cited parenthetically.
12. F. J. Child, "Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript" [1867], reprinted in *Journal of Folklore Research* 31, no. 1–3 (1994): 28.
13. For a detailed accounting of Percy's sources, see Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 145–92.
14. Child, "Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript," 29.
15. Child to Lowell, 23 June 1867, reprinted in *The Scholar-Friends: Letters of Francis James Child and James Russell Lowell*, ed. M. A. DeWolfe Howe and G. W. Cottrell, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 18. Hereafter abbreviated *SF* and cited parenthetically.
16. Grundtvig to Child, 17 February 1872, reprinted in Sigurd Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 243.
17. F. J. Child, "Ballad Books" [1868], reprinted in *Journal of Folklore Research* 31, no. 1–3 (1994): 32.
18. Child, "Ballad Books," 32–33.
19. Hustvedt, whose 1930 *Ballad Books and Ballad Men* remains the best study of Child's work, wrote that the "popular ballad may be taken to mean the sort of verse so named by Child" (4). Thelma James indirectly defines Child's principles by tracking the changes he made to the contents of his 1857, 1860, and 1882–98 anthologies; she includes a useful table of these changes. See James, "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads of Francis J. Child," *Journal of American Folklore* 46, no. 179 (1933): 51–68.
20. F. J. Child, "Ballad Poetry" [1874], reprinted in *Journal of Folklore Research* 31, no. 1–3 (1994): 214.
21. Child, "Ballad Poetry," 214.
22. On the "balladization" of nineteenth-century American culture, see Michael Cohen, "Whittier, Ballad Reading, and the Culture of Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *Arizona Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2008): 1–29.

23. F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882; New York: Dover Publications, 1965), 1:55–56.
24. F. J. Child, “Old Ballads—Prof. Child’s Appeal,” *Notes and Queries* 4 January 1873: 12.
25. For more on Child’s collection networks, see E. B. Lyle, “Child’s Scottish Harvest,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 25, no. 2 (1977): 125–55; and Mary Ellen Brown, “Child’s Gallant Army of Auxiliaries,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 43, no. 2 (2006): 89–108.
26. Samuel Eliot Morison refers to Eliot’s presidency as Harvard’s “Olympian Age”; among other reforms, Eliot championed the study of English literature and established the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, both of which materially advanced Child’s career and anthology. See Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard: 1636–1936* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 323–99.
27. Between 1869 and 1909, Harvard’s endowment increased from \$2,387,232 to \$22,716,759, its faculty expanded from 45 to 194, and its student body grew from 1,050 to 3,882. See Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Development of Harvard University since the Inauguration of President Eliot, 1869–1929* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), lxxxix–xc.
28. Quoted in Lyle, “Child’s Scottish Harvest,” 143.
29. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 2:877–78.
30. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 226–27, 217.
31. James C. Dick, ed., *Notes on Scottish Song by Robert Burns* (1908; repr., Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1962), xlvi. “The Highland Widow’s Lament” was published in 1796.
32. Burns, *Poems and Songs*, 3:1515; Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 2:430.
33. James Johnson, *The Scots Musical Museum*, 2 vols. (1787; repr., Portland: Amadeus Press, 1991), 1:89.
34. See Lyle, “Child’s Scottish Harvest,” 142–48.
35. “English and Scottish Popular Ballads,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1883): 406.
36. William Wells Newell, *Games and Songs of American Children* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), 11.

nine

Blank Verse and the Expansion of England

The Meter of Tennyson’s Demeter

CORNELIA PEARSALL

“The lavish profusion . . . in the natural world appalls me,” Tennyson once observed, “from the growths of tropical forest to the capacity of man to multiply, the torrent of babies.”¹ He does not specify the location of the torrential babies, but the association of this image with the “tropical forests” suggests that the infantile hail is a feature of climates distant from his own. Yet Tennyson in his late years came to conceive of a way to embrace and thus control the threat of extravagant fecundity, thereby not merely accommodating but also appropriating generative global populations. His late poem “Demeter and Persephone” ends with a fantasy of the “lavish profusion” of a natural world of unfettered reproduction. This 1889 dramatic monologue marks a return to one of Tennyson’s earliest extant poems, his childhood translation of Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae* into heroic couplets. Deeply rooted as she is in classical grounds and in Tennyson’s early and abiding fascination with rapture, however, Demeter’s expansive vision correlates in particular to late Victorian imperialist ideologies espoused by the poet and articulated in