



# Nicol, Scott, and the Ballad Collectors

DAVID D. BUCHAN

THE FIRST third of the nineteenth century saw a remarkable outpouring of Scottish ballad books. David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* had earlier led the way but it was undoubtedly Scott's *Minstrelsy* that stimulated the extraordinary run which included, amongst others, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe's *A Ballad Book* (1823), James Maidment's *A North Countrie Garland* (1824), Peter Buchan's *Gleanings of Scotch, English, and Irish Scarce Old Ballads* (1825) and *Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland* (1828), and William Motherwell's *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* (1827). Scott's ballad collecting, of course, has claimed due notice but the sources, methods, and relations of Scott's contemporaries have received comparatively scant attention.<sup>1</sup> One source of ballad texts was James Nicol of Strichen in Aberdeenshire; hitherto associated mainly with Buchan, he actually served Scott and a number of contemporary editors as well. An examination of his balladry and its editorial fortunes both reveals the extent and importance of Nicol's repertoire and provides an insight into the methods and interrelations of the early nineteenth-century Scottish ballad collectors. It also answers a longstanding query about the Abbotsford Ballad MSS.

James Nicol was no uneducated farm labourer. Though he received only a basic schooling he was, besides being something of a character, a well-read and intelligent man, a disciple of Tom Paine, and the author of some pamphlets which set forth views quite advanced for his time: *Letters written in 1816, on infant education, etc. Some few thoughts on the feeing markets, on robbing of kirk-yards, and on begging, Some thoughts on crimes and punishments,*

<sup>1</sup> M. R. Dobie, 'The Development of Scott's *Minstrelsy*,' *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions*, II: 1 (1940), 67-87; William Montgomerie, 'Sir Walter Scott as Ballad Editor,' *Review of English Studies*, N.S., VII (1956), 158-63, 'William Macmath and the Scott Ballad Manuscripts,' *Studies in Scottish Literature*, I (1963), 93-8, 'A Bibliography of the Scottish Ballad Manuscripts 1730-1825: Part 1,' *Studies in Scottish Literature*, IV (1966), 3-28.

and *Some thoughts on deism and on Agur's prayer*.<sup>1</sup> While a young man he spent three years in America, and on his return worked at his trade as a cooper before setting up in a shop where he dispensed books and ballads along with the groceries. On his death in 1840, he left a bequest of £400 to establish 'a free school in the village of Mormond (Strichen) for the teaching of poor children in the elementary branches of education, reading, writing, and arithmetic.' In 1852 a teacher was engaged, after a nine-hour examination, and she ran Nicol's Free School until 1889, when it was merged with the local parish school.<sup>2</sup>

Although Nicol's ballads were published by Peter Buchan, his texts have escaped the censure accorded some of Buchan's versions. Child, for example, had no doubts about their authenticity as he, while lamenting the 'flimsy and unjointed' condition of 'Young Bearwell' (302), declared that it required 'a respectable voucher, such as Mr Nichol undoubtedly was, for the other five pieces communicated by him were all above suspicion, and have a considerable value'.<sup>3</sup> Though he mentions only six pieces here, Child actually printed seven ballad texts which he marked as Nicol's: 'Kemp Owyne' (34A), 'Hind Etin' (41C), 'The Clerk's Twa Sons o Owsenford' (72D), 'The Knight and Shepherd's Daughter' (110E), 'Archie o Cawfield' (188D), 'Redesdale and Wise William' (246A), and 'Young Bearwell' (302). Of these, six were communicated by Nicol to Buchan who sent copies to Motherwell, and one (72D) must have been communicated straight to Motherwell, for it is found only in Motherwell's MS.

These seven texts stand as Nicol's known repertoire but are far from constituting Nicol's entire stock. Buchan writes to Motherwell on 17th January 1826:

'Lord Salton' — 'Bonny John Seton' — 'Mary Hamilton', and the 'Burning of Frenndraugh', [sic] were sent by my old friend Mr James Nicol, who resides near this, to Mr David Webster, Bookseller Edinb. — and printed by him in 'A North Countrie Garland'.

... It was the same Mr Nicol who also gave the copies to me of the

<sup>1</sup> Peterhead, 1823; Aberdeen, 1831; Aberdeen, 1832; Aberdeen 1835.

<sup>2</sup> William Walker, *Peter Buchan and Other Papers* (Aberdeen, 1915), p. 126; Alastair Shanks, 'Strichen School', *Aberdeen University Review*, XLII (1967), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1882-98), v, 178. The number and letter after a title refer to the position of the ballad-story and ballad-text in the Child collection; 'Kemp Owyne', for example, is ballad-story 34, and Nicol's text is the A or primary version.

above. In addition to them I have lately received a packet from him containing upwards of twenty sheets of foolscap, closely written with old Ballads, but have not as yet got time to examine them.<sup>1</sup>

If Nicol could send Buchan more than twenty sheets of ballads, his repertoire (even allowing for Buchan's tendency to exaggerate) must have far exceeded the handful of acknowledged texts. To the original seven we can immediately add the four mentioned in Buchan's letter, which were published without ascription in his *Gleanings* and, as he notes, were also published the previous year in *A North Countrie Garland*. James Maidment's preface to the *Garland* furnishes a further clue to Nicol's ballad stock: "Lord Thomas Stuart", — "The burning of Frendraught", — "Child Wyet", — "Bonny John Seton", — and two or three others, of minor importance, had long been preserved by tradition, in Aberdeenshire; and were procured from an intelligent individual, resident in that part of Scotland.' Two of these four texts were ascribed by Buchan to Nicol, so he must be this 'intelligent individual'. As Maidment writes that the sources of his remaining texts are given, the 'two or three' Aberdeenshire ballad texts turn out, by a process of elimination, to be: 'Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie' and 'Mary Hamilton', also ascribed by Buchan to Nicol in the letter; the 'north-country' 'Earl of Errol', a similar version of which is printed next to the other four Nicol ballads in Buchan's *Gleanings*; 'Eppie Morrie', and the 'north-country' 'Katharine Jaffray'.<sup>2</sup> The Nicol corpus now amounts to sixteen — the original seven and these nine: 'Lord Ingram and Chiel Wyet' (66A), 'Mary Hamilton' (173M), 'The Fire of Frendraught' (196A), 'Bonny John Seton' (198A), 'Katharine Jaffray' (221G), 'Eppie Morrie' (223), 'The Earl of Errol' (231D), 'Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie' (239A), and 'Lord Thomas Stuart' (259).

This information clears up a minor mystery concerning Scott's Abbotsford MSS, for eight of these nine Nicol ballads make up the bulk of the Scott manuscript entitled 'North Country Ballads'. We can now safely recognise that the source of the collection was

<sup>1</sup> Harvard University Library, Peter Buchan: A Collection of 17 Letters. Printed by kind permission of the Harvard College Library.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Garland*, four pieces are ascribed to Pitcairn; one ('O! what a Parish!') is unasccribed but appears in Pitcairn's MSS; and one ('The Jolly Hawk and the Tearscl') is taken from a printed source. Nicol must also have furnished the text of 'The Young Laird of Craigstoun', for it turns up again in the 'North Country Ballads'.

Nicol rather than Hugh Irvine of Drum, as Child tentatively suggested, though it is possible, of course, that Irvine acted as middleman between the singer and Scott, as James Skene did with the Old Lady's ballads.<sup>1</sup>

The Nicol trail does not end here, however. Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe owned an independent transcript of Nicol's 'North Country Ballads', and possessed in his 'Second Collection' what must have been yet another batch of Nicol's songs. This collection contains two ballad texts ('Kemp Owyne' and 'Redesdale and Wise William') marked as Nicol's by Buchan and Motherwell; two song texts found also in Nicol's 'North Country Ballads' ('There is a talk in Glasgow town' and 'You lasses of Cairn/Cordill Village'); five songs all with a strong Northeast flavour ('The Guise at Tyrie', 'The Marquis of Huntly's Retreat', 'The Banks of Ugie', 'The New Buchan Market', and 'When Willy came to the windmill brae'); and five more ballad texts — 'James Grant' (197), 'Tam Lin' (39D), 'Jellon Grame' (90B), 'Lady Maisry' (65B), and 'Burd Isabel and Earl Patrick' (257C). All five also appear in Motherwell's MSS, though not in his *Minstrelsy*, and one (65B) is noted as deriving from Sharpe; one (197) was printed by Buchan in his *Ballads*; and one (39D), described by Motherwell as 'a North Country version', is published by Maidment in *A New Book of Old Ballads* (Edinburgh, 1844) and turns up in Pitcairn's MSS, having been 'procured by David Webster, Bookseller, from tradition.' This David Webster who provided Maidment and, in the one instance, Pitcairn with Nicol's ballads was also, it turns out, the middleman between Nicol and Sharpe. From a letter written by Sharpe to Scott in the summer of 1824, when Sharpe was contemplating publishing another ballad book, we learn that Webster had provided Sharpe with two 'cargoes' of ballads from a single source: 'I send . . . a cargo which Webster got from the man who furnished the last; and if, at your leisure, you could give me any notices about them, I shall be much obliged. I shall print my second volume of stuff very soon . . .'<sup>2</sup> All the evidence points to these cargoes being the 'North Country Ballads' and the 'Second Collection', and the man being James Nicol of Strichen.

<sup>1</sup> v, 223.

<sup>2</sup> Letters, II, 309. Scott's 'notices' on the pieces in the 'Second Collection' are printed in Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, *A Ballad Book*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, 1880), pp. 144-6.

A reconstruction of Nicol's dissemination of his texts produces a picture along these lines. In the early eighteen twenties Nicol sent a parcel of ballads to David Webster. The year was not later than 1822 as Pitcairn, whose Nicol text of 'Tam Lin' was procured from Webster, dates all three of his manuscript volumes 9th Nov. 1822. At some time before 1824, the publication date of *A North Countrie Garland*, Webster gave out Nicol texts to Maidment. Between 1823, when *A Ballad Book* appeared without any Nicol versions, and the summer of 1824, Webster provided Sharpe with almost the same batch of texts; and in the summer of 1824 he furnished Sharpe with another cargo of Nicol's versions. Both these collections came into the hands of Scott, who had one set copied out, and provided Sharpe with notes on the other. Probably in the same year, 1824, Nicol himself sent to Buchan the texts which were published in the 1825 *Gleanings*, and near the beginning of 1826 sent him the large parcel of more than twenty foolscap pages. Nicol apparently communicated at least one text direct to Motherwell, who received other Nicol texts from both Buchan and Sharpe in time for inclusion in the 1827 *Minstrelsy*, and later on still more from Sharpe, who by this time had obviously given up the idea of another ballad book.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Nicol ballad texts are distributed among the collectors thus:

	BUCHAN	MOTHERWELL	MAIDMENT	SHARPE	SCOTT
34A	x	x		x	
39D*		x	x	x	
41C	x	x			
65B		x		x	
66A		x	x	x	x
72D		x			
90B		x		x	
110E	x	x			
173M	x		x		
188D	x	x			
196A	x	x	x	x	x
197	x	x		x	
198A	x		x	x	x
221G			x	x	x
223			x	x	x
231D	x		x	x	x
239A	x		x	x	x
246A	x	x		x	
257C		x		x	
259			x	x	x
302	x	x			

\* Also in Pitcairn's MSS.

Nicol's ballad corpus, then, is quite sizeable. There may be more unascribed texts in print, but at least twenty-one ballad versions are certainly Nicol's; of these, four are of ballad-stories recorded nowhere else and six are Child's A-texts. This tripling of his known ballad repertoire raises some interesting points. The twenty-one ballad-stories sung by Nicol are represented in Child by no fewer than sixty noted 'versions.' Given this inflation, it is legitimate to wonder, first, whether the number of variant texts recorded by Child is actually much smaller than it at first seems, and, second, whether the number of singers represented in the early nineteenth-century Scottish ballad collections is also much smaller than it at first seems. Certainly the case of Nicol would suggest that many collectors were poaching in the same pools.

The collectors of this period, it is apparent, were not necessarily field-collectors. Certainly the regional recorders, Motherwell and Buchan, gathered songs in their own areas, but even here some qualification is needed as they also used sub-collectors, James Macqueen and daft Jamie Rankin respectively, and Motherwell was not averse to gleaning versions from other editors. The bulk of their material, however, was gathered personally; the same could hardly be said about the ballads of the Edinburgh antiquarians. William Montgomerie has shown that the extent of Scott's actual field-collecting has been considerably exaggerated;<sup>1</sup> likewise, Sharpe (at least in later life), Maidment, and Pitcairn were sedentary collectors. These ballad editors were less 'collectors' than retailers who relied on friends or correspondents or a wholesaler like Webster to stock their ballad shelves. Webster himself published only one volume in this area, *A Collection of Curious Old Ballads and Miscellaneous Poetry*, but obviously occupied a key position, hitherto unsuspected, in the ballad transactions of the eighteen twenties.<sup>2</sup>

One remarkable feature of these transactions is the freedom with which ballads passed among those interested in the old songs: Motherwell in Paisley garners Nicol texts from Buchan in the

<sup>1</sup> *RES*, VII, 158-60; *SSL*, IV, 22-4.

<sup>2</sup> Edinburgh, 1824. It contains just one text included by Child, a version of 'The Elfin Knight' (2B), which is 'partly from an old copy in black letter, and partly from the recitation of an old lady'. According to Motherwell, this slim volume was merely the first part of a projected work (*Minstrelsy*, p. xcix).

Northeast and Sharpe in Edinburgh, and altogether, the texts of this one singer appear in the manuscripts of six collectors. There is little indication of the hoarding that one might expect from collectors and editors of material in rather limited supply. One should not make too much of this, perhaps, since sometimes material was passed on only after an editor had relinquished any intention of publishing another ballad book, but even so, the manager was surprisingly free of curs. The most logical explanation for the relative harmony is that they enjoyed the camaraderie born of a common purpose — the purpose defined by Scott in a well-known passage of the *Minstrelsy*: ‘By such efforts, feeble as they are, I may contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally.’<sup>1</sup> A shared determination to record the old Scotland would also account for the actual amount of ballad collection and publication that occurred in the first third of the nineteenth century. Scotland at this time was undergoing a crisis of national identity, because the effects of the agrarian and industrial revolutions, and a pervasive anglicisation, were fast destroying the Scotland that had been. The ballad collectors responded to this situation, not with a barren antiquarianism, but with a practical recognition that Scotland’s distinctively Scottish culture was to a considerable extent the traditional or folk culture. When they preserved and published its narrative songs they were, besides promoting a fashionable kind of romantic poetry, actively contributing to the search by a nation in flux for a national identity. It is an ironic but accurate reflection of the many dichotomies in this national identity that the best-known preserver of the traditional culture was a sheriff, a laird, and a Tory, while our representative of the culture, the man whose ballads were collected by Scott and his contemporaries as evidences of the old Scotland, was a free-thinking radical intent on social change.

<sup>1</sup> I (Kelso, 1802), cix–cx.