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"How Got The Apples In?" Individual Creativity and Ballad Tradition

Edward D. Ives

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THE FOLKLORE HISTORIAN

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"HOW GOT THE APPLES IN?"***INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY AND BALLAD TRADITION***

Way back in the beginning of things, almost a hundred years ago, Francis Barton Gummere not only wrote as good a description of the ballad as we've got,² he also asked a crucial if rather enigmatic question, and that question—probably partly because it was enigmatic to the point of being gnomic—caught my attention when I first read it almost half a century after it had been written: "How got the apples in?" It turns out he was quoting a humorous poem by John Wolcott (*aka* "Peter Pindar") in which King James, looking at an old woman's dumplings, wondered "How the devil got the apple in?" and Gummere used the allusion to raise the paired problems of the origins of the ballad genre in particular and the larger issue of the origins and development of poetic expression in general. What he did then was construct a curve of poetic evolution that began with ritual choral dance, moved on through epic, and ultimately soared to the heights of Lord Tennyson—that is, to what we now recognize as poetry proper. Along this curve, poetic concerns moved from the communal to the personal and authorship from the inspired group to the poet in his study—in general, then, following Herder, from the poetry of nature to the poetry of art.

As you might guess, the ballad belonged on the early slopes of this curve. Gummere never actually said that any of the ballads we have today were in fact composed by a singing, dancing throng, but they were not far from it, being clearly on the communal end of the curve. But there was the mystery—a third apple dumpling, as it were. "How," he asks, "does a song cross the gulf between this spirit of race, this latent community of sentiment, and the concrete fact of melody and words?"³ And there the mystery remained, and it remained—and still remains—a mystery. He never could quite bring himself to say that there wasn't an individual poet in there somewhere, but even so, his theory demanded that that individual be so submerged in the inspired group that it was entirely meet, right, and even our bounden duty to say of ballads, as he did, that a people, not a poet, composed them. How got the apples in? Unfortunately, Gummere left us with an answer as enigmatic as his question.

Yet that answer, known generally as the theory of communal composition, was the accepted wisdom of the academy for half a century or more. It was taught to me as an undergraduate literature student and still ruled by the time I reached graduate school (1949). In fact, anonymity was cited as a ballad touchstone—if the author was known, it wasn't a true ballad—long after the theory underpinning it had been gleefully pretty well destroyed by Louise Pound and a host of later scholars. But the touchstone remained, and it is still useful. As a matter of demonstrable empirical fact, at least ninety percent of all ballads in Anglo-American tradition *are* anonymous, and any touchstone that will work nine times out of ten is far from silly. The silliness enters in when we insist on our ignorance—the fact that we can't identify the author—as a matter of basic definition.

Communal composition was slowly replaced by a theory of "individual composition/communal re-creation," which holds that while the proto-ballad was of course created by

an individual, it became a true ballad only through being passed from singer to singer over time and through space. As early as 1932 Gordon Hall Gerould in his influential book *The Ballad of Tradition* described it as the process "by which both words and melodies keep continually changing, yet only very slowly become transformed into something quite unrecognizable as the same."⁴ That last phrase takes the concept to its extreme, to be sure. I remember hearing Maud Karpeles say more modestly, though quite positively, that such change took a minimum of three generations, but in either case oral tradition itself is seen as an alembic through which an individual poet's work has to pass to achieve that essential whatness we might call "folksongness" or more specifically "balladness." In other words, when the apples go in they aren't apples at all; their appleness is the result of a transmutation. Frankly I've never seen that transmutation satisfactorily demonstrated for any particular ballad; but under any circumstances the emphasis is on a *communal process* working on an *already existent entity*. Little attention is paid to the initial act of creation that brings a *new* entity into existence. Although anonymity of authorship is not insisted on, it is seen as a normal by-product of extensive oral tradition. Put it this way: if a ballad hasn't been handed down long enough for the author to be forgotten, it probably isn't a true folk ballad anyway. Thus, the creativity and individuality of the original author counts for little or nothing; it is the tradition that was important.⁵

Interestingly enough, both the communalists and the re-creationists share two rather basic assumptions: first, that a ballad is a *text*, and, second, that the passing on of this text is a matter of memorization. The theory of oral composition (often called the Parry/Lord theory) assumes neither, claiming that a true oral poet, steeped in the language and formulae of his metier, recomposes his song each time he sings it: the moment of performance is the moment of creation. Thus the search for an original or an author is made moot; each version is original and each singer is its author. Developed through the exploration of Serbo-Croatian heroic song to shed light on Homeric epic, it is unquestionably the most exciting narrative-poetic discovery of the twentieth century. Within the epic genre I find it wholly convincing; in its application to the British ballad—and there have been several notable attempts at such application—I find it less so. The most positive verdict I can offer is that fine old Scottish one of "not proven." Besides, even if proven, its emphasis is again on the recomposition of existent entities, not the creation of new ones.⁶

For such creation, *ex nihilo* so to speak, I would prefer a theory based on data to be found within the ballad genre itself. Can we find traditional ballads we can take back not only to their historic but to their musico-poetic origins as well? Not many—so swift is Time the effacer—but there are some, and what I would like to do now is take one specific ballad—one single apple, as it were—as an exemplar of what I have learned. To put that briefly, the originator—the poet, not the process—is the true alembic in which experience and tradition are fused with something of the poet's own to form the new ballad. That ballad then gets passed on, and while subsequent singers almost certainly will alter its details, both its individuality and its "balladness" are the gift of its original creator.

Since all art begins with an artist, let us begin there too. Joseph William Scott was born in Lower Woodstock, New Brunswick, "on the banks of the Saint John," in 1867.

Temperamentally unsuited to farming, he left home as a young man for the lumberwoods of Maine, arriving just as the burgeoning pulp and paper industry was creating a boom in the woods that would equal anything ever seen when lumber was king. He settled in Rumford Falls, a raw paper-mill town and woods depot that had been carved out of the wilderness only a few years before he arrived, and he worked up and down the Androscoggin River, where he became known as a crack woodsman and river-driver and a great guy, a man among men—and among women. In 1894 he was jilted by a beautiful girl, and it marked him. Except for a few side excursions, he kept to the woods until that notoriously roaring life caught up with him, and he died in the Augusta State Hospital of alcoholism and syphilis in 1918. It was neither a happy life nor on the surface a very distinguished one, but around the turn of the century Scott made up about a dozen ballads that became part of the standard repertoire of traditional singers throughout the entire northeast. Even at midcentury I was able to collect more than two-hundred versions of them, and one of the best known was "Benjamin Deane."

The record shows that in May of 1898, one Benjamin Deane, proprietor of a small boarding house frequented by transient lumbermen, shot and killed his wife in Berlin, New Hampshire. The record also shows that the Androscoggin River log drive was passing through Berlin at that time, which means that Scott was almost certainly around town then. Besides, he knew Deane, probably having stayed at his boarding house. At any rate, as I say, he made a ballad about him, and not only do I have the original twenty-five-stanza printed broadside he sold around town and in the lumbercamps, I was able to collect over thirty traditional versions of it from all over Maine, New Hampshire, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, and the following, sung for me by Billy Bell of Brewer, Maine, is a perfectly representative one (I have omitted the tune, since, for the present paper, music is no part of the argument):

1.

Good people all both great and small, read these lines penned by me;
These lines were written by a man deprived of liberty,
Who is serving out a sentence for a deed that I have done,
And it's here I fear I will remain 'til my race on earth is run.

2.

My name is Benjamin Deane and my age is forty-one;
I was born in New Brunswick in the city of Saint John,
Nearby the Bay of Fundy where the seagulls loudly call
As they rock with pride on the silvery tide as the billows rise and fall.

3.

My parents reared me honestly, brought me up in the fear of God,
But long have they been slumbering beneath their native sod;
Side by side they slumber in a quiet cemetery,
Where the willows bow before the breeze from off the deep blue sea.

4.

Farewell unto my happy home, I ne'er shall see it more;
No more I'll watch the billows break upon its rock-bound shore.

No more I'll watch those ships go by with sails as white as snow.
Bound for some port far o'er the sea before the winds that blow.

5.

When I arrived in Berlin Falls some twenty years ago,
The town was then about one-half as large as it is now;
And laboring men of every nationality were there,
For work was plenty, wages good, each man could get a share.

6.

The businessmen of Berlin then were making money fast;
I thought that I too would invest before the boom had passed.
A building leased on Mason Street and into business went;
I kept a fruit and candy shop, likewise a restaurant.

7.

My business proved successful for I was beloved by all;
I gained the favor of the great, the rich, the poor, the small.
To my surprise, before a year had fully rolled around,
In glittering gold I did possess more than a thousand pound.

8.

The coming year I wed with one, the fairest of the fair.
Her eyes were of the heavenly blue and light brown was her hair;
Her cheeks were like the dawn of morn, her form graceful and fair,
Her smile as bright as morning light, her step as light as air.

9.

She was born of good parents and they reared her tenderly;
'Twas little did they ever think she would be slain by me.
The night I gained her promise and her hand to me she gave
It would have been better far for her if she lay in her grave.

10.

I own I loved my fair young bride, which proved a prudent wife;
'Tis little did I think that I one day would take her life.
But as the years rolled swiftly by upon the wings of time
I found the paths of pleasure had led to the fields of crime.

11.

I soon began a wild career caused by the thirst for gold;
My property on Mason Street for a goodly sum I sold.
I bought a building on Main Street, which cost a handsome sum;
I ran a free-and-easy house and went to selling rum.

12.

My fair young wife would often beg me my steps to retrace;
She told me that the path I trod led to death and disgrace.
Had I but heeded her warning I wouldn't be here now,
And she might still be living with no brand upon her brow.

13.

I soon began to associate with men of low degree,
And my business kept me constantly in their base company.
I quickly went from bad to worse, did many a deed of crime
That never will be brought to light in future years of time.

14.

My fair young wife then fled with one whose name I will not write,
Whose character was blacker than the darkest hour of night.
To persuade her to return to me it was my whole intent,
So to the house where she then dwelt my steps I quickly bent.

15.

I cautiously approached the house and opened the hall door;
I found the way to my wife's room upon an upper floor.
The sight that fell upon my gaze is stamped upon my mind,
For on the bosom of a man my fair wife's head reclined.

16.

The very fiends of hell it seemed my being did possess;
I drew a loaded pistol and I aimed it at her breast.
And when she saw the weapon 'twas loudly she did cry,
"For God's sake, do not shoot me, Ben, for I'm not fit to die!"

17.

The bullet pierced her snowy breast; in a moment she was dead.
"For God's sake, you have shot me!" were the last words that she said.
The trigger of that weapon either moved too fast or slow,
Or else another would have passed with her to weal or woe.

18.

The last time that I saw my wife she lay upon the floor,
Her long and light brown wavy hair was stained with crimson gore.
The sun shone through the window on her cold and lifeless face
As the officers led me away from that polluted place.

19.

I have two daughters living—they're orphans in a way—
And should you chance to meet them, treat them kindly I pray.
Don't charge them with their father's sin, for on them there will rest
A crimson stain long after I am mouldering back to dust.

[20]⁷

[Come all young men, a warning take from this sad tale of mine:
Don't sacrifice your honor for the gold or silver fine.
Let truth and honor be your guide, and by them you will climb
Success the ladder to the top, and not be stung by crime.]

As I pointed out above, a ballad is a fusion of fact and tradition. The first question to be answered, then, is "What are the facts?" Not so much "what really happened" (which is irrelevant to the creative process)) but what would he, Joe Scott, have known about the

incident at the time. Those are the raw materials he had to work with. I thought I had answered that question when I came across a rather complete and contemporary account of the murder in the *Berlin Reporter*. At first glance, it looked to me like all Scott had to do was supply the rhymes, but a closer look showed many differences, and those differences lined up rather nicely with the gossip I was still able to hear sixty or more years later. The newspaper has the murder take place in a first-floor sitting room in the presence of two witnesses; the ballad moves it to Mrs. Deane's second-floor bedroom. The newspaper account has one of the witnesses, Jack Garland, wresting the gun from Deane and holding him down until the police arrive; the ballad casts him as Mrs. Deane's lover and claims he was lucky to escape with his life. The article's tone is condemnatory, showing Deane as a murderer pure and simple, having premeditated the crime; the ballad's tone is one of sorrow for a good man's downfall, a man who—for all his "life of crime"—went to bring his wife home but, blinded by rage at what he saw, shot her to death. All of this, as I say, goes along with the gossip: "He'd of killed Garland, but he gripped the gun too tight. . . . That Garland was a wild one, you know. . . . Nobody put all the blame on Ben. . . ." And so on.

My further investigations revealed other differences between the ballad and the documentary record. Right from the beginning Deane was in trouble with the law and just about one jump ahead of the sheriff. He was also a sick man, increasingly crippled with arthritis, and his troubles with his wife had a long, long history. All of this forms no part of the newspaper story, but all of it would have been, and was, common knowledge among those who knew Ben.

The indications are pretty clear, then, that Scott was working with what I'll call "barroom" or "hell-I-was-right-there" authority, with just a touch of the printed record, and he was very selective about what he used and what he left out. That selectivity was controlled by the artistic tradition in which he had decided to work: that of the murder ballad. Therefore, let's take a brief look at that tradition.

In the first place, simply deciding to make a ballad about a murder would have been a traditional act in itself. Malcolm Laws lists thirty-seven such ballads in his *Native American Balladry*, plus twenty-seven more that he felt were of doubtful currency in tradition, and I am sure that any ballad scholar can think of several others that aren't in Laws' canon at all.⁸ As I say, a murder was prime material for the ballad-maker, and the form in which such ballads were cast was much the same everywhere. "The Wexford Lass" is a typical and widespread example, and here it is as sung for me by Dellas MacDonald of Glenwood, N.B., back in 1961:⁹

1.

As I was born in Sheffield, brought up to the high degree;
My parents reared me tenderly, they had no child but me.
Til I fell in love with a Waxford lass, with a dark and rolling eye;
I promised for to marry her, the truth I'll not deny.

2.

As I went to her father's house 'bout eight o'clock that night,
But little did this fair one think I owed to her a spite;

I asked her for to take a walk to view those meadows gay,
And perhaps that we might have a chance to appoint our wedding day.

3.
We walked along together 'til we came to rising ground;
I pulled a stake out of the fence, with this I knocked her down.
She fell down to her bended knee, for mercy she did cry,
"Do not murder me Jimmy for I ain't prepared to die."

4.
But I grabbed her by those yellow locks, I drug her on the ground;
I threw her into the river that flows through Waxford town:
"Lie there, lie there, my pretty fair maid, to me you'll never be tied;
You shall not enjoy my life or ever be my bride."

5.
Returning to my father's house 'bout twelve o'clock that night,
My father rose to let me in while striking up a light,
Crying, "Son, dear son, what have you done? What stains your hands and clothes?"
The answer that I made him was, "A bleeding from the nose."

6.
At first I asked for a candle to light my way to bed,
Likewise I asked for a handkerchief to tie around my head.
Oh the twisting and the whirling, no comfort could I find;
The gates of Hell wide open before my eyes did shine.

7.
About ten days later this Waxford lass was found
A-floating down the river that flows through Waxford town;
Her sister swore my life away without a word or doubt;
They took me up on suspicion for having this fair one out.

8.
So come all you true and lovers a warning take by me,
And do not murder your own true love, no matter whom she be.
For if you do you're sure to rue until the day you die,
For it's high upon the scaffold where you'll end your days and die.

The similarities with "Benjamin Deane" are clear: Both ballads use the same double-stanza form. Both use the first-person confessional mode. Both tell where the hero was born and how he was reared tenderly. Both foreshadow the murder with "little did she think" asides. Both heroines beg for life, claiming they're not prepared to die. And both ballads end by pointing the moral that others should not do as they have done.

But right there the similarity ends. Not only is the tone of the two quite different—"Benjamin Deane" being far more sympathetic to its hero—but the emphasis and sequence of events is just about reversed. "The Wexford Lass" gets right to the murder then involves itself in the aftermath and consequences; "Benjamin Deane," after telling of Ben's origins, goes through his whole life, stage by stage: birth, childhood, coming to Berlin, opening a candy store, success, blessed marriage, the thirst for gold, the "free and

easy house," the wife's departure, and then—and only then—the murder. "The Wexford Lass" is a lurid tabloid item; in comparison, "Benjamin Deane" is a novel or perhaps a confessional autobiography, and no other murder ballad I know of is anything like it.

The only ballad even remotely like it is the well-known "The *Flying Cloud*,"¹⁰ a pirate saga following its hero from birth and tender upbringing through apprenticeship to a cooper, to running away to sea on a merchantman, to hiring on the *Flying Cloud*, first for a slaving voyage and then for a long and successful career of piracy, and ultimately to capture and impending death on the gallows, and since that ballad was well-known in the lumbercamps I am convinced it was Scott's model for "Benjamin Deane." But whether it was or not, it is worth pausing a moment to recognize—given the basic conservativeness of the tradition he was working in—the daring artistic innovation Joe Scott's ballad represents.

Even beyond its relationship to other murder ballads, "Benjamin Deane" shares both a prosody and a diction with other ballads in what we call the broadside tradition. Its double stanza, for instance, is by far the most common stanza form in that tradition, as standard for it as the shorter common-meter stanza is for the so-called Child ballad. As for diction, it shares as much as a third to a half its language—ranging from short phrases to whole lines, couplets and even entire stanzas—with other ballads. To the student of oral poetry, such formulaic language is the lifeblood of the metier, comparable to the Child ballad's "commonplaces" and the epic singer's "formulae" and "themes."

Go back to my alembic analogy, where I spoke of the artist fusing experience with tradition, and we have seen Joe Scott doing just that. I also said that in this transmutation the artist adds "something of his own." Call it individuality, call it style, it is what allows us to recognize a painting as by van Gogh, say, or a poem as by Dylan Thomas. We do not as a rule look for it in ballads because in this metier poets did their best work by not insisting on it. But occasionally it shows itself, and it certainly does in Scott's florid style. Take, for example, the second stanza. What is covered in one formulaic line in "The Wexford Lass"—"My parents reared me tenderly, they had no child but me"—Scott elaborates into a full stanza (#3) replete with willows and a breeze off the deep blue sea, and the Wexford lass's "dark and rolling eye" compares similarly to Ben's full four-line description of his wife in stanza 8.

Let me add here that this is not my personal judgment only. The community in which Scott's songs circulated also recognized it. More than once I was told "Joe loved to put in about the flowers and brooks and things," for instance, and even people who didn't know of Scott's authorship often claimed "Benjamin Deane" was a hard one to sing, meaning it was rather long.

All very well, yet that community's tolerance for inventiveness had its limits. As written and circulated on broadside, "Benjamin Deane" was twenty-five stanzas long; no traditional version of it is more than nineteen, and the average is more like seventeen, yet it is still thought of as a long song. What almost always gets dropped is a series of stanzas detailing Ben's financial and legal problems—stuff like this:

All I possessed in real estate to my wife it was made
Over in legal writing, when kind fortune's smile did fade.

"HOW GOT THE APPLES IN?"

But her regard and love for me did gradually grow cold
When she found my heart and soul were bound with glittering gold.

Or, worse yet, the following:

Then under forty thousand dollar bonds I soon was placed
To respect the laws of man that I had long disgraced.
And then to add unto my many troubles that had come
Were four indictments that appeared for selling beer and rum.

Scott devoted almost a quarter of his ballad to such material, but hardly any of it appears in the traditional versions. Of course, he is hardly the only author to have his work improved by sensitive editing. As T.S. Eliot had Ezra Pound and Thomas Wolfe Maxwell Perkins, so he had a whole succession of singers who knew what they liked and what they didn't, what would go and what would not. In addition to this one rather radical excision, all kinds of variations took place at the word and phrase level, the sorts of things that one expects to find as a ballad passes along in oral tradition. In both cases we speak of "communal re-creation," but having said that I have to add that in the two or three generations I have been able to trace the ballad through, I find no evidence that that process works any true transmutation. Even after the rather radical pruning mentioned above, "Benjamin Deane" remains essentially what Joe Scott made it. The gift of whatness is given by its creator. I do not quite have the *chutzpah* to claim that *all* ballads must have been created in this way, that is by gifted individuals steeped in their chosen tradition, given the bankruptcy of "communal composition" and knowing no satisfactory example of "communal re-creation" having made a ballad out of a non-ballad, I find it not attractive, especially since I don't have simply to theorize about it. I've seen it happen.

Earlier on, I spoke of the Parry/Lord theory as "the most exciting narrative-poetic discovery of the twentieth century," and I don't mean to dismiss such a monumental work quite as cavalierly as I may appear to have done. Certainly much of what I have said about Joe Scott's creative process matches well with what oral epic poets like Avdo Medvedović are reported to have done, bringing together traditional elements in poetic form, save that Joe worked at his ballads over time rather than composing them in performance. But if his ballad had been created, it was a text to be passed on memorially by the community in which it is found.

But here I find myself on the verge of two usual mistakes: (1) Communities do nothing; it is individuals within communities that do everything. (2) "passed on memorially" is not as simple as it sounds. In my book *Lawrence Durrell* I said that "a song tradition is not carried on by a group but by individuals within that group who for one reason or another take a special interest in songs."¹¹ Some, not surprisingly, form that educated and critical audience that is largely responsible for the health of the arts in every culture. Others, the active performers, vary tremendously in the creative responsibility they feel for the material in their keeping. Some make every effort to preserve it exactly as it came to them; others are willing to make minor repairs and do restoration work; while still others combine versions, switch tunes, add or omit stanzas as they see fit, and (like Joe Scott) even create new ballads out of old. Since

memorization can in no way account for the variety of texts we find for any well-known ballad; it takes the combined creativities of what Eleanor Long called the perseverators, the confabulators, the rationalizers, and the integrators to come close to doing that.¹²

One final point. We tend to look at tradition as a kind of mortmain, the dead hand of the past, resistant to change, yet Joe Scott's ballads, for all their innovative qualities, were accepted and preserved. In fact they became an important *part* of the tradition out of which they grew. I remember asking one New Brunswick farmer if he knew any of the old songs. He wasn't quite sure what I meant, and I started to explain. "You mean songs like *Howard Carey* and *Benjamin Deane* and *The Plain Golden Band*?" he asked. All three were by Joe Scott, though he didn't know that. Had not an almost complete revolution in economics and technology made that song tradition moribund, it might have become possible to show how Scott altered it by offering new models, much as William Carlos Williams and Charles Ives altered *their* traditions. But the demise of the all-winter lumbercamp and the burgeoning of mass communications made that possibility moot.

And that's apples enough for one day.

Notes

1. Almost all the material of this chapter is covered in my book, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1878), and the interested reader is referred there for more detail.

2. See particularly his *The Beginnings of Poetry* (New York, 1901), *Old English Ballads* (Boston, 1897), and *The Popular Ballad* (Boston, 1907).

3. Gummere, *Old English Ballads*, p. xxxvii.

4. (New York, 1932), p. 165

5. The entire communalist/re-creationist controversy is extremely well covered in D.K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1959), pp. 3-122.

6. See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964). For two applications of this theory to British ballads, see David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London, 1983; reprinted Edinburgh 1997) and William Bernard McCarthy, *The Ballad Matrix* (Bloomington, 1990).

7. I have added this stanza from another version. It is an extremely common one.

8. G. Malcolm Laws, Jr. *Native American Balladry* Revised Edition (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964), pp. 190-210.

9. For other easily available examples, see Laws, *American Balladry from British Broad-sides* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1957), p. 267 (P-35). See also pp. 104-122.

10. For easily available versions of this ballad, see Laws, *ABBB*, pp. 154-55 (K-28).

11. (Orono, Me., 1971), p. 251.

12. "Ballad Singers, Ballad Makers, and Ballad Etiology," *Western Folklore* 32 (1973), 225-36. Included in Dianne Dugaw, *The Anglo-American Ballad* (New York, 1995), pp. 234-48.