Francis James Child: Some Thoughts While Shaving

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What can I possibly say that can add to the huge body of commentary on this man, the hochgecelebrated Francis James Child? Not much, I’m afraid. He has all but been canonized by some, demonized by others. He singlehandedly saved the ballad from oblivion; he is the source of our major ballad-study problems. He had an instinct that told him what was a ballad, what was not; he had no theoretical underpinning for his choices. His great collection is the beginning of all our wisdom; his great collection rides us like the Old Man of the Mountains, weighing us down, holding us back, stifling us. Have it how you will, or have it in between somewhere, it is still true that even his most outspoken critics stand hat in hand before they launch their respectful attacks. The man and his work are twin colossi in the field of ballad study.

I have no intention of either attacking or defending him in this brief presentation, but I thought it might be interesting to show him as I have seen him while I was in the process writing a small book on the Scottish ballad (or ballads), "The Bonny Earl of Murray," which he included in his collection as number 181. In order to show you this properly, though, I have to make three excursions, one to Mexico, another to the coast of Labrador, and a third to my own beloved stamping ground of Maine and the Canadian Maritimes.

In a 1992 article, "Folklore as Commemorative Discourse," John McDowell claimed that the performance of Mexican corridos often involved "a conversational prologue and epilogue allowing performers and audience members to indulge in commentary about the songs," and, calling the commentary informative, the song commemorative discourse, he felt that much could be learned from studying "the peculiar bond linking these contrastive discourse styles." That is to say that a singer would often give some sort of discursive introduction to a corrido, explaining something about it, before he began singing, and, afterwards (and sometimes even during the singing) members of the audience would comment further upon it. What McDowell suggests is that we look on all three—prologue, song, after-comments—not as separate entities but as parts of a performed whole. Oddly enough, I was reminded of MacEdward Leach’s experience in Labrador, which I quote from his Introduction to Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast (1965). He was describing a typical evening visit:

There is talk, the unending talk about the fish, the weather, the out-of-the-run events of the day. Pipes are going. An hour or so slips by. Someone calls out, “Uncle Peter, how about giving us a song?” Uncle Peter smiles, “What’ll it be?” And then he answers his own question, “I’ll sing ‘Jimmie Whelan’; that one is a good song. Many a time my father sang that one. Some of you’ll mind him singing ‘Jimmie Whelan.’ He learned me that song when I was just about as big as the lad there.”

After the song is over, says Leach, “there is no applause or extravagant praise. Rather there are quiet remarks here and there, ‘That’s sure a good song,’ or ‘A song like that, it’s got more truth than a preacher’s sermon.’” Further along, Leach remarks that when a local song is sung, “the listeners immediately identify with the song and live in it. When it is
over, then every omitted detail must be brought forth and reminisced," leading him to suggest "that song may be just a stimulus, prompting memory and leading the listeners to re-live the event."3

I have seen it work out that way in Maine and the Maritimes. A song was frequently embedded in commentary about where it had been learned, who used to sing it, what this-or-that phrase meant, where the action had taken place, what "really" happened, etc., but I should add the rather obvious observation that this informative discourse would thicken in proportion both to the song’s topicality and to the presence of an outsider in the audience, especially one—a junketing folklorist, say—who is obviously interested in what’s going on.

Although both McDowell and Leach were describing what went on in oral performance (and so was I), I began to see a parallel to what I was finding with "The Bonny Earl of Murray," which, apparently, had nothing but a printed tradition in Great Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.4 It first appeared, words and melody, in the second edition of William Thomson’s book of Scots songs, Orpheus Caledonius, published in London in 1733, just in time to catch the wave of enthusiasm for "Scotch songs" which was breaking over the English capital at the time. Shortly afterward it appeared in words-only form in the fourth volume of Allan Ramsay’s immensely successful The Tea Table Miscellany, but the next step was an interesting and extremely important one: it appeared in Thomas Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry in 1765, where we find not only the words (the same set found in Thomson and Ramsay) but an extensive and quite informative headnote giving the historical background of the ballad, mostly taken from William Robertson’s recently published History of Scotland. Then in the second edition of 1767 "The Bonny Earl" was followed by "Young Waters," whose headnote is as much about "The Bonny Earl" as it is about "Young Waters." We today tend to view the Reliques as a reference work or sourcebook, forgetting that Percy wrote it to be read—and God knows it was read, being arguably one of the most important literary works of the late eighteenth century, even one of the cornerstones (can there be more than one cornerstone?) of the whole Romantic Movement. It was a work of literature in which ancient poetry was carefully polished and set in the context of learned prose explication. Print was its performance medium, and if that performance isn’t an almost seamless combine of informative and commemorative discourse then I’m Lady Wardlaw. That format was to prevail in collections by men like Scott, Finlay, Gilchrist, Cunningham, Motherwell, Chambers and Aytoun all through the first half of the nineteenth century. Which brings us at last (would you believe it?) to Francis James Child.

Between 1857 and 1859, Child, then in his early thirties and a Professor at Harvard, brought out an eight-volume collection in this same "Percy and others" format entitled English and Scottish Ballads that could have been the collection to end all collections of this type, combining as it did readable and authoritative introductions with accurate texts.5 However, since it was written as a contribution to a huge set of over sixty volumes entitled British Poets that was probably aimed at the burgeoning public library market, it was necessarily pitched to an audience of readers, not fellow scholars. And young Child,
having already published a monumental edition of Spenser, was already very much a scholar with a scholar's decided instincts.

He had compiled his collection, as he said in his Preface, "from the numerous collections of Ballads printed since the beginning of the last century," but almost immediately he was dissatisfied with it, as he made clear in a letter to the Swedish ballad scholar Svend Grundtvig:

Ever since I attempted an edition of the English and Scotch ballads, I have had the intention of making some day a different and less hasty work. I had at the time neither leisure nor materials, and as you, better than anybody, could perceive, but a very insufficient knowledge of the subject. The collection was made as a sort of job—forming part of one of those senseless huge collections of British Poets.

What chiefly bothered him was that he had been forced to work from other people's collections, not from the original sources, the manuscripts on which these collectors drew, and he spent the rest of his life both gathering and studying those manuscripts and finally publishing the results of that study in his magnum opus, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1882-98), a work that was as far beyond his earlier work as the work of Thomas Percy was beyond that of Allan Ramsay.

There is no need here to give a full review of Child's tremendous influence on ballad study, but if people like Thomson and Ramsay can be said to have given ballads a wide distribution amongst a reading and literary public and Percy to have given them true literary respectability, Child can be said to have assured them a place in the Groves of Academe. No self-respecting college literature text would ever be without a selection of ballads (usually annexed to the medieval section, unfortunately), and ballads even entered the literary canon, becoming standard anthology stuff. Arthur Quiller-Couch included more than a dozen ballads in his Oxford Book of English Verse (1900), for instance, and that was probably due in no small part to the tremendous influence of Francis James Child and his work.

But perhaps most important, at least for most of us present, through that same man's influence ballads came to be accepted as a legitimate arena for scholarly research and publication. Child died in 1896 and never saw his great work completed, nor, perhaps, could he have even imagined the rich harvest his planting was to result in as his student and collaborator George Lyman Kittredge carried his work on. Child felt that the ballad was a "closed account" like the medieval romance and for all practical purposes his collection contained what there was to be contained. Kittredge's students and colleagues were to show that here in the New World ballads were still very much alive and still being sung, breaking them forever from the literary mold going back to Percy that I have been discussing. That format—the commemorative discourse supplied by the "folk," the informative by the scholar in his study—is no longer enough. We have learned to want the folk's informative context as well.

We may have gone beyond Child, but in no way have we left him behind. For all of us in ballad study, whether we think of him as the Old Man of the Mountain or the Man from Sinai's slope, he is our "only begetter" and we, his scholarly and intellectual get, are here today to pay him tribute.
Notes

3. Leach, 10.


7. Hustvedt, 246. Grundtvig was in the process of compiling his great collection of Danish ballads, and he had already published a set of translations of British ballads. See his *Engelske og Skotske Folkeviser* (Copenhagen: Wahlske Boghandlings, 1842-46).

The Contributions of Francis James Child to Folklore and Literary Studies

Barre Toelken

My comments will be necessarily brief because I have not made a fair study of Child and his work from a folklore perspective; as a medievalist, I first used Child's great collection the way any literary scholar might employ an archival resource: as a compendium of reliably gathered and rigorously edited materials for study and interpretation. In the 1960s, as I worked on a doctoral dissertation on poetic aspects of balladry, I began to realize that the style of texts found mainly in printed form was quite different from that of ballads that had been shaped by a substantially oral existence. As I tried to account for this variance, I found myself drawn farther and farther from Child's printed materials and closer to the live texts being collected by fieldworkers. We all used Child's numbering system, to be sure, but those of us who were developing interests in semiotics, metaphor, structure, and the like found that texts from oral tradition offered us richer material. Indeed, many ballad scholars of my generation complained that Child had been needlessly antiquarian—that he preferred older printed versions in archaic language to fresher oral performances in modern vernacular. It seemed to many that he eschewed field collected texts, especially from contemporary singers in the United States, and thus depended too heavily on the idea that older versions somehow presented a more genuine articulation of what the original ballad might have been like. Now, as any close reader of Child's notes knows, these concerns are not entirely groundless; but they are not borne out in any extreme way, either. In any case, I think it is pointless to complain that Child was not using our up-to-date folkloristic methods and perspectives; he was pretty much in the mainstream of those concerned scholars who began forming the American Folklore Society in the 1880s: they believed that folklore—at least of the orally transmitted sort—was dying out, and they were all trained in the study of printed texts. So we could say that Child's