# POPULAR BALLADS

Ballads are anonymous narrative songs that have been preserved by oral transmission. Although any stage of a given culture may produce ballads, they are most characteristic of primitive societies such as that of the American frontier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or that of the English-Scottish border region in the later Middle Ages. These northern English songs, even divorced from the tunes to which they were once sung, are narrative poems of great literary interest.

The origins of the popular (or folk) ballad are much disputed. The theory that they were first composed by communal effort, taking shape as the songs with which primitive people accompanied ritual dances, no longer seems plausible. On the other hand, the forms in which the ballads have come down to us show that they have been subjected to a continuing process of revision, both conscious and unconscious, by those through whose lips and memories they passed. Though the English ballads were probably composed during the five-hundred-year period from 1200 to 1700, few of them were printed before the eighteenth century and some not until the nineteenth. Bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811) was among the first to take a literary interest in ballads, stimulated by his chance discovery of a seventeenth-century manuscript in which a number of them had been copied down among a great welter of Middle English verse. Percy's publication of this material in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* inspired others, notably Sir Walter Scott, to go to the living source of the ballads and to set them down on paper at the dictation of the border people among whom the old songs were still being sung. These collectors often found that one ballad was remembered differently by different people: for instance, when one speaks of *Sir Patrick Spens* one is actually speaking of a number of poems that tell the same story in slightly or widely different words. If a single original form by a single author lies behind this diversity, it is too far back in the mists of time to be recovered.

A work that is the product of a consciously artistic mind will not ordinarily be improved by the revision that most ballads have been subjected to, but some of the ballads are probably better in their revised form than they were in their original form. The distinctive quality that popular ballads share is spareness: they are apt to deal only with the culminating incident or climax of a plot, to describe that event with intense compression, to put the burden of narration on allusive monologue or dialogue, and to avoid editorial comment. This concentration upon the bare essential is precisely the quality that the fallible human memory is likely not only to preserve but also to enhance, for the effort of remembering causes a sloughing-off of what is not strictly relevant. Some of the best of the ballads may have thus been refined in their transmission through people's minds, gaining rather than losing artistic stature.

The fact that ballads were originally songs is important to their development. The simplicity of the tunes to which they were sung not only influenced the distinctive verse form—normally a quatrain with four stresses per line—but also encouraged a corresponding simplicity in the narrative itself, and made individualizing flourishes impossible. Furthermore, the choral practice of using refrains and other kinds of repetitions probably lent the ballad one of its most impressive qualities, for while the actual narratives are tightly compressed, ballads rarely develop in an unbroken line. The reader—originally, the hearer—is constantly made to pause by a repeated phrase, or even by nonsense syllables, which provide suspense in a very primitive and effective form. The progress to a foreknown, foredoomed conclusion is paradoxically made to seem more inevitable, more urgent, by such relaxations of narrative tension. The use of repetition and refrain also imparts to the ballads something of the quality of incantation, of ritual, of liturgy—all of which are, of course, themselves closely allied with music.

Most of the best ballads have as their subject a tragic incident, often a murder or accidental death, generally involving supernatural elements. These motifs are a part of the common legacy of European folklore, and many of the English ballads have counterparts in other languages.

Some ballads go back to actual historical incidents. A late song, the *Bonny Earl of Murray,* laments the political murder of a popular sixteenth-century Scots noble. The presumably much older ballad *Sir Patrick Spens* may be based on a historical incident of the end of the thirteenth century. Yet both of these achieve that mood of sadness that is characteristic of the best of the tragic stories derived from ancient folklore. The quasi-historical Robin Hood ballads, which form a large class by themselves, are less impressive. Most of them seem to have been composed relatively late and hence not to have gone through many stages of oral transmission; they lack the better ballads' intensity, often exhibiting an expansive development that is not free from chattiness. They are probably the work of minstrels who exploited the old folklore figure of Robin Hood by making him a symbol of that rebellion against authority that their own hearers perhaps longed for but did not dare to undertake. In the ballads Robin Hood is placed in a kind of never-never land of English history, where he can strike down tyrants with impunity, but often with far too much gloating: the attractive folklore figure of a natural, freedom-loving man has been burdened with too many political and social implications.

The great collection of English ballads is that of F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* first published in 1882. The numbers under which Child lists the various versions of each of the ballads printed here are given in footnotes to the individual titles. The versions chosen for this anthology are those which the editor considers the most effective as poetry Spelling has been modernized; the majority of the northernisms in the originals have been retained.

## Hind Horn[1]

In Scotland there was a baby born,
   *Lil lal*
And his name it was called young Hind Horn,
   *With a fal lal.*

He sent a letter to our king
That he was in love with his daughter Jean.

The king an angry man was he:
He sent young Hind Horn to the sea.[2]

He's gi'en to her a silver wand,
With seven living lavrocks° sitting thereon. *larks*

She's gi'en to him a diamond ring,
With seven bright diamonds set therein.

"When this ring grows pale and wan,
You may know by it my love is gan."° *gone*

---

[1] Child, No. 17. "Hind" means "youth."

[2] This stanza of background is introduced from a variant version of the ballad.

One day as he looked his ring upon,
He saw the diamonds pale and wan.

He left the sea and came to land,
And the first that he met was an auld° beggar man. *old*

"What news, what news?" said young Hind Horn.
"No news, no news," said the auld beggar man.

"No news," said the beggar, "no news at a',
But there is a wedding in the king's ha'.

"But there is a wedding in the king's ha'
That has halden° these forty days and twa."° *been held / two*

"Will ye lend me your begging coat?
And I'll lend you my scarlet cloak.

"Will you lend me your beggar's rung?° *staff*
And I'll gi' you my steed to ride upon.

"Will you lend me your wig o' hair
To cover mine, because it is fair?"

The auld beggar man was bound for the mill,
But young Hind Horn for the king's hall.

The auld beggar man was bound for to ride,
But young Hind Horn was bound for the bride.

When he came to the king's gate,
He sought a drink for Hind Horn's sake.

The bride came down with a glass of wine,
When he drank out the glass and dropped in the ring.

"O got ye this by sea or land,
Or got ye it off a dead man's hand?"

"I got not it by sea, I got it by land,
And I got it, madam, out of your own hand."

"O I'll cast off my gowns of brown,
And beg wi' you frae° town to town. *from*

"O I'll cast off my gowns of red,
And I'll beg wi' you to win my bread."

"Ye needna' cast off your gowns of brown,
For I'll make you lady o' many a town.

"Ye needna' cast off your gowns of red:
It's only a sham, the begging o' my bread."

The bridegroom he had wedded the bride,
But young Hind Horn he took her to bed.

## Judas[1]

It was upon a shere[2] Thursday that our Lord aras;° *arose*
Ful milde were the wordes he spak to Judas:
"Judas, thou moste to Jersalem,[3] oure mete for to bigge;° *buy*
Thritty platen[4] of silver thou bere upo thy rigge;° *back*
Thou comest fer° i the brode street, fer i the brode street, *far*
Some of thy kinnesmen ther thou mayst ymeete."
Ymette° with his suster, that swikele° womman: *he met / deceitful*
"Judas, thou were worthy men stende° thee with stoon, *stoned*
Judas, thou were worthy men stende thee with stoon
For the false prophete that thou bilevest upon."
"Be stille, leve° suster, thyn herte thee tobreke![5] *dear*
Wiste my Lord Crist,[6] ful wel he wolde be wreke."° *avenged*
"Judas, go thou on the rok, heigh upon the stoon;
Lay thyn heved° i my barm,° sleep thou thee anoon." *head / lap*
Soone so[7] Judas of sleepe was awake,
Thritty platen of silver from him weren ytake.
He drow himself by the top that al it lavede ablood;[8]
The Jewes of Jersalem awenden° he were wood.° *thought / insane*
Forth him cam[9] the riche Jew that highte° Pilatus: *was named*
"Woltou selle thy Lord that highte Jesus?"
"I nil° selle my Lord for nones kinnes aughte,[1] *will not*
But° it be for the thritty platen that he me bitaughte."[2] *unless*
"Woltou selle thy Lord Crist for enes kinnes[3] golde?"
"Nay, but it be for the platen that he habben° wolde." *have*
In him cam oure Lord goon[4] as his postles setten at mete:
"How sitte ye, postles, and why nile ye ete?
How sitte ye, postles, and why nile ye ete?
Ich am ybought and ysold today for oure mete."
Up stood him Judas: "Lord, am I that frek?° *man*
I nas never o the stede ther me thee evel spek."[5]
Up him stood Peter and spak with al his mighte:
"Though Pilatus him come with ten hundred knightes,
Though Pilatus him come with ten hundred knightes,
Yet ich wolde, Lord, for thy love fighte."
"Stille thou be, Peter, wel I thee yknowe:
Thou wolt forsake me thrien° er the cok him crowe." *thrice*

---

[1] Child, No. 23.
[2] I.e., Holy.
[3] Thou must go to Jerusalem.
[4] Thirty pieces.
[5] May thy heart break within thee.
[6] If my Lord Christ knew.
[7] As soon as.
[8] He tore his hair so that it all ran with blood.
[9] "Him cam" merely means "came."
[1] For no kind of possession.
[2] That he entrusted to me.
[3] Any kind of.
[4] Walking; "postles": apostles
[5] I was never in the place where men spoke evil of thee.

# Edward[1]

“Why does your brand sae drap wi’ bluid,[2]
Edward, Edward?
Why does your brand sae drap wi’ bluid,
And why sae sad gang° ye, O?” *go*
“O I ha’e killed my hawk sae guid,
Mither, mither,
O I ha’e killed my hawk sae guid,
And I had nae mair° but he, O.” *more*

“Your hawkes bluid was never sae reid,° *red*
Edward, Edward.
Your hawkes bluid was never sae reid,
My dear son I tell thee, O.”
“O I ha’e killed my reid-roan° steed, *chestnut*
Mither, mither,
O I ha’e killed my reid-roan° steed,
That erst° was sae fair and free, O.” *before*

“Your steed was auld° and ye ha’e gat mair, *old*
Edward, Edward.
Your steed was auld and ye ha’e gat mair:
Som other dule° ye dree,° O.” *grief / suffer*
“O I ha’e killed my fader dear,
Mither, mither,
“O I ha’e killed my fader dear,
Alas and wae° is me, O!” *woe*

“And whatten° penance wul ye dree for that, *what sort of*
Edward, Edward?
And whatten penance wul ye dree for that,
My dear son, now tell me, O?”
“I’ll set my feet in yonder boat,
Mither, Mither,
I’ll set my feet in yonder boat,
And I’ll fare over the sea, O.”

“And what wul ye do wi’ your towers and your ha’,
Edward, Edward,?
And what wul ye do wi’ your towers and your ha’,
That were sae fair to see, O?”
“I’ll let thame stand til they down fa’,
Mither, mither,
I’ll let thame stand til they down fa’,
For here never mair maun° I be, O.” *must*

“And what wul ye leave to your bairns° and your wife, *children*
Edward, Edward,
And what wul ye leave to your bairns and your wife,

---

[1] Child, no. 13.

[2] I.e., why does your sword so drip with blood?

When ye gang over the sea, O?"
"The warldes room[3] late° them beg thrae° life, *let / through*
Mither, mither,
The warldes room late them beg thrae life,
For thame never mair wul I see, O."

"And what wul ye leave to your ain° mither dear, *own*
Edward, Edward?
And what wul ye leave to your ain mither dear,
My dear son, now tell me, O?"
"The curse of hell frae° me sal° ye bear, *from / shall*
Mither, mither,
The curse of hell frae me sal ye bear,
Sic° counseils ye gave to me, O." *such*

## Robin Hood and the Three Squires[1]

There are twelve months in all the year,
As I hear many men say,
But the merriest month in all the year
Is the merry month of May.

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
*With a link-a-down and a-day,*
And there he met a silly° old woman, *poor, innocent*
Was weeping on the way.

"What news? what news, thou silly old woman?
What news hast thou for me?"
Said she, "There's three squires in Nottingham town,
Today is condemned to dee."° *die*

"O have they parishes burnt?" he said,
"Or have they ministers slain?
Or have they robbed any virgin,
Or with other men's wives have lain?"

"They have no parishes burnt, good sir,
Nor yet have ministers slain,
Nor have they robbed any virgin,
Nor with other men's wives have lain."

"O what have they done?" said bold Robin Hood,
"I pray thee tell to me."
"It's for slaying of the king's fallow° deer, *brown-red*
Bearing their longbows with thee."

"Dost thou not mind,° old woman," he said, *remember*
"Since thou made me sup and dine?

---

[3] The world's space.

[1] Child, no. 140.

By the truth of my body," quoth bold Robin Hood,
"You could not tell it in better time."

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
*With a link-a-down and a-day,*
And there he met with a silly old palmer,[2]
Was walking along the highway.

"What news? what news, thou silly old man?
What news, I do thee pray?"
Said he, "Three squires in Nottingham town
Are condemned to die this day."

"Come change thine apparel with me, old man,
Come change thine apparel for mine.
Here is forty shillings in good silver,
Go drink it in beer or wine."

"O thine apparel is good," he said,
"And mine is ragged and torn.
Wherever you go, wherever you ride,
Laugh ne'er an old man to scorn."

"Come change thine apparel with me, old churl,
Come change thine apparel with mine:
Here are twenty pieces of good broad gold,
Go feast thy brethren with wine."

Then he put on the old man's hat,
It stood full high on the crown:
"The first bold bargain that I come at,
It shall make thee come down."

Then he put on the old man's cloak,
Was patched black, blue, and red:
He thought it no shame all the day long
To wear the bags of bread.

Then he put on the old man's breeks,° *underbreeches*
Was patched from ballup[3] to side:
"By the truth of my body," bold Robin can° say, *did*
"This man loved little pride."

Then he put on the old man's hose,° *tights*
Were patched from knee to wrist:
"By the truth of my body," said bold Robin Hood,
"I'd laugh if I had any list."° *desire*

Then he put on the old man's shoes,
Were patched both beneath and aboon:° *above*

---

[2] A poor old palmer: a palmer was one who had made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

[3] I.e., center.

Then Robin Hood swore a solemn oath,
"It's good habit° that makes a man." *clothing*

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,
*With a link-a-down and a-down,*
And there he met with the proud sheriff,
Was walking along the town.

"O Christ you save, O sheriff," he said,
"O Christ you save and see:
And what will you give to a silly old man
Today will your hangman be?"

"Some suits, some suits," the sheriff he said,
"Some suits I'll give to thee;
Some suits, some suits, and pence thirteen,
Today's a hangman's fee."

Then Robin he turns him round about,
And jumps from stock° to stone: *stump*
"By the truth of my body," the sheriff he said,
"That's well jumped, thou nimble old man."

"I was ne'er a hangman in all my life,
Nor yet intends to trade.
But cursed be he," said bold Robin,
"That first a hangman was made.

"I've a bag for meal, and a bag for malt,
And a bag for barley and corn,
A bag for bread, and a bag for beef,
And a bag for my little small horn.

"I have a horn in my pocket:
I got it from Robin Hood;
And still when I set it to my mouth,
For thee it blows little good."

"O wind° thy horn, thou proud fellow: *blow*
Of thee I have no doubt;° *fear*
I wish that thou give such a blast
Till both thy eyes fall out."

The first loud blast that he did blow,
He blew both loud and shrill,
A hundred and fifty of Robin Hood's men
Came riding over the hill.

The next loud blast that he did give,
He blew both loud and amain,
And quickly sixty of Robin Hood's men
Came shining[4] over the plain.

---

[4] I.e., making a brave show.

“O who are those,” the sheriff he said,
  “Come tripping over the lea?”° *meadow*
“They’re my attendants,” brave Robin did say,
  “They’ll pay a visit to thee.”

They took the gallows from the slack,° *hollow*
  They set it in the glen;
They hanged the proud sheriff on that,
  Released their own three men.