

# Ballads

By Lyn Wolz

## A song that tells a story.

Many cultures in the United States have a heritage of narrative songs, but when scholars and singers in English-speaking countries use the term “ballads,” they are usually referring to a specific body of narrative songs that originated in the British Isles. These ballads were commonly sung from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and were passed down from generation to generation through oral transmission, evolving over time into many different versions. The British ballads have survived, sometimes for centuries, because the stories they tell deal with universal themes and the melodies that accompany them give them additional emotional appeal.

There are two types of narrative songs that make up the canon of English-language ballads—the “classic” ballads and the broadside ballads. The body of classic British ballads consists mainly of songs written and sung since the 1500’s at the earliest, many of them originating in the 1700’s and early 1800’s. These classic ballads are often called “Child ballads” because they were collected by Harvard’s Prof. Francis James Child in the 1880s from manuscript sources. This collection was published as a five-volume work titled *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* in which Child grouped all of the texts together into what he considered the three hundred and five basic narrative songs of the British tradition. For each ballad he included as many variants and versions as he could find. His notes on each song reflect his extensive research into related songs and tales within the British tradition and in other cultures, particularly those of northern Europe. Child’s work was immensely influential in scholarly circles and is still enshrined in ballad scholarship by the common use of the term “Child ballads” to refer to songs that can be traced to one of his three hundred and five ballads. Also, his numbering system is still the standard way to refer to songs. When a song is given a number like this—“Riddles Wisely Expounded” (Child #1)—that means it is a version of the first song in Child’s collection.

The other type of British ballad is called a broadside. Broadside ballads are songs that were printed on single sheets of paper and sold by street vendors; these were popular from the 1600’s through the 1900’s. The authors of broadsides often wrote about current events and famous people and frequently used the melody of a well-known song. Broadside ballads were very popular and circulated widely for centuries, enriching the repertoires of singers while being honed through oral transmission.

When the classic ballads and the broadsides traveled with emigrants from England, Scotland, and Ireland to America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, they were adapted to their new surroundings and local variants developed. As the British Isles became more industrial and its people more widely educated, some of the ballads lasted longer in the oral tradition in the colonies than they did in their homeland, flourishing especially in isolated and close-knit communities. The ballad tradition also continued to grow in its new surroundings because local or “native” ballads were written about events and conditions in the New World. These local ballads were shared among performers and developed their own variants, thus becoming part of the oral tradition.

Classic ballads and broadsides were also called popular ballads by the early scholars because they were sung for entertainment. In fact, in many ways modern soap operas and tabloids with their sensational stories of infidelity, jealousy, and murder are the descendants of the British ballads. For centuries there was a process of cross-fertilization between the print and oral ballad traditions and as the interplay of print and oral traditions continued, many versions of ballads developed. Each version had variations in the plot and setting, and often contained different details such as names and locations, but the kernel of the story remained recognizable.

The style of the older, classic ballads tended to be minimalist, the plot conveyed through vignettes showing different points of the action; this technique has been called “leaping and lingering.” A series of events was described from the third person point of view, but the story was told as if it were a movie with short scenes concentrating on the most important or moving moments in the action. In this way, the details in a song were pared down while the memorable images and essential parts of the action remained. In contrast, the later broadside ballads often gave extensive details and were told in a chronological style with all scenes given equal emphasis, more like a newspaper article than a movie. The classic ballads also tended to use stock phrases. Audiences would have been familiar with the epithets, similes, and metaphors that were used for description, creating a kind of shorthand to communicate vivid images with few words. Steeds tended to be “milk-white” or “coal-black,” girls usually had “ruby cheeks” and “cherry lips,” in the old churchyard the red rose twined ‘round the briar. This language constituted a shared set of cultural and stylistic expectations that functioned well over a long period of time.

The music of the ballads added another dimension to the stories—the expressive quality of the music communicated emotions that were not addressed directly through the often spare plot line of the older ballads where details had fallen away through the process of oral transmission. A good story put to music could touch the hearts of a singer and an audience. Music could be used to rouse people to battle for justice and honor or it could soothe or cajole children, it could move listeners to feel more deeply the pity or love expressed in the song or it could help people to laugh at the human condition and themselves. Though early scholars of the ballads often ignored the musical aspects of ballads in order to study the songs as historical and literary documents, performers know that the music is very important and often determines what the reaction of an audience will be. In reading a ballad, it is sometimes difficult to figure out why anyone would find it interesting enough to listen to, while hearing a performance of the same ballad would allow the listener to recognize immediately the emotional power of the story.

The musical structures of ballads enhance the listener’s experience of the ballads as well. Both the melody itself and the structure of the song can act as a memory aid for the singer. Repeated phrases, called refrains, also encourage listeners to pay closer attention and to sing along. Refrains often consist of either nonsense syllables or groups of plant names like “Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.” Two other structural devices can be used to encourage group participation—incremental repetition and cumulation. Songs that use incremental repetition have one basic stanza that is repeated with a different person, action, or item plugged in for each repetition. An example of a song that uses incremental repetition is “The Maid Freed From the Gallows” (Child #95), often called in America “The Hangman.” Every verse is the same stanza with only one change, in this case the character—father, mother, brother, sister, lover. A cumulative song is one that repeats all previous verses each time a new verse is sung. Well-known examples, such as the traditional “Green Grow the Rushes-O” and revival folk singer Oscar Brand’s song “When I First Came to This Land,” are very popular with performers and audiences alike because they are fun to sing as a group. Variations of these techniques are familiar to storytellers, who will probably find that ballads will easily fit into their repertoires.

Ballads are often adapted to local conditions, either consciously or unconsciously. The details change to reflect the knowledge and beliefs of the people in each cultural and geographic area. The process of oral transmission also helps to create new versions of songs through lapses in memory, mishearing, or misunderstanding. Sometimes singers will also make deliberate changes so that a song becomes more acceptable to the members of his or her local community. The process of localization makes it easier for singers and listeners to identify with the characters in the song and also makes it easier for the singer to remember the details of the story. The localization process usually changes only the details of a ballad while the “core” of the song remains recognizable.

Over the centuries, traveling and community-based performers, whether they were called bards, minstrels, or ballad-mongers, perfected the art of balladry as a form of popular entertainment. All newsworthy events were sung about, from accidents and natural disasters to battles and murders. Ballad plots encompassed most facets of the human condition from tragedy to comedy, though the majority concerned the universal

themes of love, jealousy, loss, and family or community conflicts. Ballads also kept alive stories from the fringes of society—stories of battles from the losers' point of view, stories of ghosts and fairies and other supernatural beings, stories of pirates, poachers, and outlaws, real and legendary. Some of the classic ballads even have plots and characters that are very similar to those in fairy tales.

A few of the oldest ballads are adaptations of legends about Biblical times, such as “St. Stephen and Herod” (Child #22) in which a roasted cock stands up in the dish and crows to convince Herod of the truth of the birth of Jesus the savior. Some ballads enchant listeners with tales of the supernatural. Several ballads within this group involve shape shifting performed by fairies, magicians, witches, and other supernatural creatures. In the ballad “Tam Lin” (Child #39), the main character's sweetheart Janet saves him from the queen of the Fairies by holding on to him despite his being changed into a snake and a lion, among other things. In the ballad called “The Two Magicians” (Child #44) a male magician pursues a female magician through multiple shape-shifts, each time besting her by changing himself into a shape that can trump hers. “The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry” (Child #113) is the story of a woman who unknowingly marries a silkie or selchie, a supernatural being who walks in the shape of a man when he's on the land but turns into a seal when he's in the ocean. The main character in “Allison Gross” (Child #35) is a witch who turns a young man into a dragon because he spurns her advances. As in the tradition of fairy tales and fableaux, the fantastic can be very entertaining.

Some of the ballads involve divine retribution for sins. That's the lesson in “James Harris (The Daemon Lover)” (Child #243), often called “The House Carpenter,” in which the ghost of a former lover tempts a woman to leave her husband and child; she sets sail with him in a ship that soon sinks, a lesson for all women who might think of straying. The main character in “The Cruel Mother” (Child #20) also pays the price for her sin, the sin of infanticide—she is “sentenced” to seven years as a fish, a bird, and a bell, but hopes for a reprieve from seven years in Hell.

Many ballads deal with folk beliefs. In the story of “The Two Sisters” (Child #10), one sister murders the other because she is jealous that a suitor did not choose her. The murdered sister's body is found by a minstrel who makes her bones and hair into a harp that sings out the name of the murderer when taken into the family's house. The guilty sister is then either hung or boiled in lead, depending on the version. “The Unquiet Grave” (Child #78) is based on the belief that too much mourning can make the dead restless—a dead man's ghost asks his sweetheart to stop grieving so he can rest. The belief that giving pious and correct answers to riddles posed by the Devil in disguise to save one's soul appears in “The False Knight on the Road” (Child #3). The old European belief that Jews murdered Christ and continued to sacrifice Christian children to take their blood for Passover rites is the central motif of “Sir Hugh, or, The Jew's Daughter” (Child #155). Another folk belief, the common prejudice against gypsies, appears in “The Gypsy Laddie” (Child #200). In this ballad, a woman is lured off by gypsies and leaves her house and lands, her husband and baby behind. In some versions she goes back when her husband comes after her, but in others she doesn't. In the versions where she doesn't return to her previous life, half the time she regrets her decision and the rest of the time she revels in her new freedom.

Some ballads are based on legends and might have initially been written and performed by minstrels. These include the many ballads about Robin Hood (Child #117-154) that were seldom collected from oral tradition but sometimes printed as broadsides. Other ballads that were written in a literary style and were seldom recorded from singers include “Kind Orfeo” (Child #19) based on the medieval romance of Orpheus and Eurydice and “The Hunting of the Cheviot” (Child #162).

Among the least often sung ballads were those with themes most people do not choose to acknowledge in public, at least in polite society. “Sheath and Knife” (Child #16) and “Lizie Wan” (Child #51) deal with incest and murder. “Lady Maisry” (Child #65) tells of a Scottish family burning their own daughter because she's pregnant with an Englishman's child. “The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter” (Child #110) is one of the ballads based on different individual and societal responses to a woman who's been raped, and “Clerk Saunders” (Child #69) represents a whole group of ballads in which a family murders a daughter's unacceptable suitor.

The ballad canon also contains substantial numbers of comic ballads that poke fun at individuals, classes of people, and the human condition in general. "Get Up and Bar the Door" (Child #275), for example, takes a couple's spat to laughable extremes when neither will lose a bet by closing the house door first, even after thieves come in and steal all of their valuables. In "The Farmer's Cursed Wife" (Child #278), the Devil tries to take a tough old woman down to Hell, with the blessings of her husband, but has to send her back when she beats up all the little devils. Some of the humorous ballads are analogous to tall tales, songs where hyperbole makes for great fun, like the "The Derby Ram" with its outrageous claims about the huge size of the ram. Humorous songs, too, become localized as shown by a song which is called "Johnny Be Fair" when sung to an Irish melody, "Mixed Up Family" when played in the Ozark style, and "Shame and Scandal" when it sounds like a Jamaican calypso song. The melody, style, and rhyme scheme differ from version to version, but the basic plot and punch line are the same in every version.

In common with many earlier broadside ballads, later composed narrative songs were often concerned with current events, notorious people, and occupational concerns, though these ballads were more likely than the classic ballads to include an explicit moral lesson. In addition to these subjects and themes, common topics for broadsides and modern ballads include songs about women warriors, such as "When I Was a Fair Maid" about a woman who disguises herself as a man in order to become a sailor. A body of songs about accidents and natural disasters has expanded with society's growing technological sophistication to include first sinking ships, then train wrecks, and most recently truck accidents on mountain highways. In years past, songs about mining, sailors, and lumberjacks, all dangerous group occupations, were common within their occupational groups and their communities, but were seldom sung by outsiders. There were many broadside ballads about people on the fringes of society, such as pirates, highwaymen and other outlaws, and about the public executions of criminals. Many major events and movements, such as the Civil War and the Gold Rush, spawned their own historical ballads. Some of these ballads were sung nationwide while others were sung only in certain geographic regions or among certain groups of people.

Many cultures in the United States have their own ballad repertoire. Some cultures, such as the African American, have adapted British ballads into their own versions in their own style. They have also composed and handed down their own story songs about situations unique to their ethnic group. There are also cultures that borrow very little from the Anglo-American tradition but have many ballads unique to their ethnic group and regional location. The Hispanic culture on the Texas-Mexico border, for example, has adapted very few Anglo traditions, but has developed its own ballad form, called a corrido, many of which are sung about an outlaw named Gregorio Cortez. For storytellers who want to use ballads to enrich their repertoires through diversity, ballads from non-British cultures can also prove to be an excellent source of performance pieces.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, many people are familiar with the term "ballad" only from its use in popular music and jazz where it refers to a love song or lament sung to a slow mournful tempo, or its use in literature to mean a poem that tells a story like "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by Oscar Wilde. In more recent years, the descendants of broadside ballads have included popular songs like "Ode to Billy Joe," "Harper Valley PTA," and "Big Bad John." Such modern composed ballads are often performed by country music singers who are familiar with the Anglo-American tradition that includes ballad singing. Theme songs for popular television series are another modern permutation of the broadside ballad tradition. Songs such as "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" from the 1960s television show "The Beverly Hillbillies" or the eponymous "Ballad of Gilligan's Island" provided background information so that new viewers would have an understanding of the show's premise before seeing it.

Authors and artists have adapted ballads for many purposes for centuries, most notably for books and plays. One early example of this was the "ballad operas" of John Gay and others that were very popular in the 1600's. In the recent past, the most common manifestation of this process has been the adoption of ballad plots, settings, and characters for adult novels, such as the Sharon McCrumb mystery series set in the Appalachians. Musicals have also been written using folk ballad plots or settings or using ballads to

provide local color. Ballads have also been used extensively as the subject for illustrated children's books, among them "Tam Lin," "Polly Vaughan," and "John Henry."

British and American ballads, whether classic, broadside, or modern, constitute an important resource for storytellers. The themes and plots of the songs are universal and the songs themselves can be adapted to many types of storytelling audiences. The ballads that circulated orally from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can provide storytellers with tales that have unusual plots and interesting characters. Ballads can help people to understand what it was like to live in previous eras and in other countries, broadening their perspective. Ballads obviously serve multiple functions—to teach life lessons, to impart cultural information and expectations, to express emotion, and to entertain. Storytellers who want to study ballads or learn them for performance will find that there are many formats of recordings that are easily available. Field recordings made of traditional singers in their own cultural settings are preferable if authenticity is important, whereas recordings of revivalist singers, which are often more easily available, can serve admirably for most purposes. Recordings are often available in libraries or on the Internet for free. Indexes that make it possible to find a specific performer or song are also available for free on the Internet and are listed in the resource section below.

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See Also: Broadside

## Resources for Further Study

### Websites

#### 1. Folk Song and Broadside Indexes

These databases list songs wherever they appear—in books, on recordings, etc. They do NOT include words to, or recordings of, the songs themselves. You might be able to order copies of specific songs through Interlibrary Loan, though libraries and archives sometimes charge for copies.

**Broadside Ballad Index** (<http://www.csufresno.edu/folklore/Olson>) W. Bruce Olson, ed. (deceased)  
Index to published and unpublished collections of songs from 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century broadsides.  
All have tunes available in ABC format. Searchable by keyword using the "Find" command.

**Broadside Index** (<http://library.efdss.org/cqi-bin/home.cgi>; also available on CD-ROM) Steve Roud, ed.  
More than 120,000 entries for songs appearing on broadsides and in chapbooks and songsters.  
Sort and browse by song title, printer, etc. Search by keyword using database software.

**Folk Music: An Index to Recorded Resources** <http://www.ibiblio.org/folkindex> Jane Keefer, ed.  
Songs and tunes appearing on almost 3,000 commercially-available recordings. Browse by performer or song title. Search by keywords within titles.

**Folk Song Index** (<http://library.efdss.org/cqi-bin/home.cgi>; also available on CD-ROM) Steve Roud, ed.  
More than 110,000 entries for song versions and performances appearing in both published and unpublished sources—books, journal articles, recordings, and manuscripts. Includes only traditional songs performed by traditional singers. All songs in English, most of British and American origin.  
Sort and browse by song title, singer, collector, place. Search by keyword using database software.  
Search by the "Roud number" given to each record—it functions like a Child or Laws number to connect all versions of a particular song. Email Steve Roud at [roud@supanet.com](mailto:roud@supanet.com) for more info.

**The Flanders Ballad Collection** Helen Hartness Flanders, collector. (Middlebury College Library)

"Ballads" submitted version, later edited and published in *Storytelling: An Encyclopedia of Mythology and Folklore*, ed. by Josepha Sherman. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), Volume 1, pp. 51-53.

([www.middlebury.edu/academics/lis/about/library\\_info/special\\_collections/collections/flanders](http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/lis/about/library_info/special_collections/collections/flanders))  
Songs and dance tunes collected by Flanders and others in New England between 1930 and 1966. Approximately 5,000 items can be searched by song or tune title, performer, or keyword

**Traditional Ballad Index** (<http://www.csufresno.edu/folklore/BalladIndexTOC.html>)

Robert Waltz, ed.; David Engle, asst. ed.; Paul Stamler et al., contributors  
Index to songs in commercially-available recordings and books. Search by keyword or title. Most entries include a brief description, a bibliography, and historical background. Alternate titles are also given and most songs have a list of keywords to help in searching.

## 2. Electronic Databases Containing Song Lyrics

These databases include full song lyrics. Some also include tune notation, formats for listening to the tune played by the computer (ABC, MIDI, AIFF), or actual recordings of performances.

**Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads** Mike Heaney, ed. (Oxford University)  
(<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads>)

Images of over 30,000 broadsides printed mainly in the British Isles in the 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Can be searched by keyword or subject of image. Has MIDI files for those songs with notation.

**Digital Tradition** (<http://www.mudcat.org>) Dick Greenhaus, ed.

More than 9,000 songs are contained in the DT database which resides on this website. Full lyrics are provided for all songs, and more than half have playable tunes in MIDI or ABC format. Includes a mixture of traditional and non-copyrighted modern songs from all eras and countries. Browse by title or search by keyword. There is also a forum you can search for discussions of song topics.

**The Max Hunter Folk Song Collection** (<http://maxhunter.missouristate.edu>)

Max Hunter, collector. Michael F. Murray, ed. (Missouri State University)  
Lyrics and field recordings of almost 1600 songs collected in Missouri and Arkansas by Ozark native Max Hunter between 1956 and 1976. Hunter's field recordings for every song are available in RealAudio. The tunes are also available in MIDI and AIFF formats. Browse by song title or singer. Search by keyword within song lyrics.

[Online source descriptions and URLs updated 3/07]

## Printed Research Tools

### Bibliographies, Discographies, and Indexes

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