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Stormy Crossings: Scots-Scandinavian Balladic Synergies

Donna Heddle*

Abstract - This article will attempt to quantify the Scandinavian influence on the Scottish corpus by looking at the historical and literary context for Scots-Scandinavian synergies in ballads and popular verse, noting the complexities of attributing any chronology and of classifying the direction and flow of such synergies. It will concentrate on specific stylistic and contextual features shared by the two traditions and then consider these in relation to two specific ballads, “Sir Patrick Spens” (Child 58) and “Sir Aldingar” (Child 59). The historical trading routes between Scotland and Scandinavia are well established. This article will argue that they traded cultural goods at the same time.

Introduction

Ballads and popular verse are generally supposed to form part of the oral tradition—and indeed they do. They may, however, be more complex and socio-historically interesting than this simple perception might conclude. The focus of this article is the evaluation of the cultural and historical influence of Scandinavia on the Scottish ballad corpus through the isolation and analysis of content and stylistic synergies between the two.

What is a ballad?

In order to analyze balladic synergies¹, we must define what we mean by a ballad. This is easier said than done, and many over the years have tried to address this contentious issue. E.J. Cowan (2000:1) quotes Power’s organic and inclusive definition:

The ballad may be described as a popular and primitive short-story—religious, historic, romantic, tragic, gnomic, fairy, or even humorous—told simply, succinctly, and dramatically—partly in the form of elliptic and repetitive dialogue, and with complete suppression of the narrator’s personality—in rhymed, often original verse, generally in short-line quatrains or in octosyllabic or anapaestic couplets.

Whereas MacEdward Leach is more specific and didactic:

A ballad is story. Of the four elements common to all narrative—action, character, setting, and theme—the ballad emphasizes the first. Setting is casual, theme is often implied, characters are usually types and even when more individual are undeveloped, but action carries the interest. The action is usually highly dramatic, often startling and all the more impressive because it is unrelieved. The

ballad practices [sic] rigid economy in relating the action; incidents antecedent to the climax are often omitted, as are explanatory and motivating details. The action is usually of a plot sort and the plot often reduced to the moment of climax; that is, of the unstable situation and the resolution which constitutes plot, the ballad often concentrates on the resolution leaving the listener to supply details and antecedent material. (Leach and Fried 1975:60)

Clearly there have always been changing and shifting perceptions, but the shift to synchronic ethnography, which advocates research and evaluation with an orientation in a timeless contemporaneity, has allowed the ballad genre, previously studied in isolation as a literary form, to be used to illustrate socio-historical paradigms and to give cultural context. Perhaps Thomas Pettitt’s analysis best meets the case:

The ballad, like Tam Lin in the arms of his sweetheart, is hard to grasp and harder still to hang on to: while few doubt the objective existence of the phenomenon, the ballad is notoriously difficult to discern among its surroundings, and given to striking variation in the course of time and in response to varying geographical and social contexts (Andersen et al. 1982:1)

Ballads have no fixed text—they are stories sung in a particular style and manner—and when a collector hears a ballad and writes it down, its nature is at once changed and a boundary placed upon it. A ballad may have been sung countless times, in innumerable forms according to the individual singer, before the collector froze it in time it by writing it down, and therefore its previous history is in the nature of things elusive and impossible to trace precisely. It

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is difficult or impossible to find a single definition that will cover all cases, so it is no wonder historical sources and contexts are so difficult to pin down in respect of specific ballads.

Charles Duffin (2000:20) likens the ballad to a vanishing snapshot of a specific oral tradition and notes that the ballad is a powerful cultural product, which may be the best way of classifying the form. The essence of the ballad is the performance, an evanescent narration, just as it is for sagas, but what remains in the written context alone is still a cultural and socio-historic product through which the culturally significant past is viewed. The culturally important fact is that somebody wrote it down, and the written version becomes part of the evolving literary culture.

Scots-Scandinavian Synergies

The route to the British Isles from Scandinavia in general and Norway in particular was relatively short, and its importance as a trade route was well established by the High Middle Ages. In 1263, King Hakon IV Hakonarson required merely two nights for the crossing from Herdlever, West Norway, to Shetland, before the Battle of Largs:

King Haco having got a gentle breeze, was two nights at sea, when he reached that Harbour of Shetland called Breydeyar-sound, with a great part of his navy, as Sturlas sings.
(Johnstone 2006:10)

The trading links between Scotland and Scandinavia are also well established. The distance from Bergen, the main trading port of West Norway, to mainland Scotland is less than the distance from Bergen to Oslo and it is much shorter than the route from Bergen to Northern Germany and the Netherlands. The Norwegians have been a seafaring nation with a strong demand for the international exchange of goods from their earliest incarnation. From the twelfth century onwards, the burgh of Aberdeen was an important commercial center that traded with the continent rather than the rest of Britain. The provisions regarding merchants' losses that appear in the 1266 Treaty of Perth² signed by Scotland and Norway would indicate a thriving trade between Aberdeen, then the major port north of Berwick, and at least one part of Scandinavia. Trade and emigration between the countries helped produce the steady political interaction that gave rise to a few royal marriages, and, in post medieval times, the large number of Northeast mercenaries in the Scandinavian armies would undoubtedly have stimulated the exchange of materials between the two traditions. Obviously

such trading and intercultural contacts allied to geographical proximity would have an appreciable effect, and it can be conjectured that Scottish and Scandinavian ballads flowed easily back and forth across the North Sea.

Francis Child, when compiling his famous *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* collection, published between 1892 and 1898, noted that out of the 305 Scottish ballads given to him, 91 were unique to Aberdeenshire. As David Buchan (1997:7) has comprehensively shown, the Northeast tradition is extensive, containing almost two thirds of all the Scottish ballad stories in circulation, many of which are Northeast oikotypes³ or regional variations. They can be grouped into two distinct varieties: one based on local history and the other on the supernatural. The Northeast tradition shows both the local context we expect of ballads and folktales, and a wider context expressed through the supernatural corpus that shares many connections with the Scandinavian corpus, which has quite a high proportion of such ballads. Any study of the corpus of Northeast ballads shows a distinct content and stylistic focus that bears out the hypothesis that there were indeed Scots-Scandinavian synergies allied to trading routes through Aberdeen in particular. At the same time, we cannot discount other routes of transmission from France and England, which go some way to explaining the large amount of variants of certain ballads such as "Lady Isobel and the Elf Knight" as David Buchan (1970:63) notes in his enlightening article on this ballad. We may even have to look further afield for Lady Isobel—the Hungarian scholar Lajos Vargyas (1967:129–165) has suggested that the origins of the song are much earlier and are based in Asia, having then been taken into Europe by the Magyars.

The Scandinavian poetic tradition has its origins in the Skaldic and Eddic verse of the Viking Age, ca. 800–1100 AD. It flourished during the medieval period, producing a plethora of ballads, occasional poetry, and the improvised four-line stanza forms known as *stev*, which, along with folktales, comprise a fundamental part of Scandinavian folk literature just as they do in the Scottish tradition. Moltke Moe and Knut Liestol were instrumental in collecting and reconstructing the Norwegian ballads in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas the collection process in Scotland began rather earlier in the Northeast in the eighteenth century with the key publication of David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* (1769), followed by the publications of Percy and Jamieson⁴.

Both balladic traditions have a well-annotated and researched corpus. In the case of the Scottish tradition, it forms part of Francis Child's seminal

English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1892–1898) and Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders* (1802–1803), and the Norwegian ballads form part of the equally seminal *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, which was started in 1853 by Svend Grundtvig and was continued in the twentieth century by new generations of folklorists, and comprised 12 volumes in 1976. The corpus was further defined by the Norwegian publication *Types of Scandinavian Medieval Ballads* (TSB) of 1978. There are many readily identifiable synergies between Scottish and Norwegian ballads in respect of recurrent motives and of shared balladic types—the problem lies in quantifying the nature and qualifying the chronology of these correspondences.

Knut Liestol (1946:5) unequivocally states that “With the ordinary cultural presumptions before us, and judging from the testimony we do, in fact, possess, one would accordingly be able to state with certainty that the ballad was already known in the England and Scotland of the 13th century, a period when the Nordic ballad, all circumstances considered, first flourished”, thus drawing an explicit connection between the two traditions without actually attributing seniority. The general consensus, however, is that the English-language ballad genre started to develop around 1450. A much more cautious approach should therefore be taken which recognizes the uncertainties about the Scottish/Scandinavian connections and the problems over dating, but also the intriguing parallels between the two.

As Liestol and others note, many ballads are known equally well on both sides of the North Sea, for example, “Svein Normann og Gulbjørg”—also known as “Kvinnemorderen” and “Rullemann and Hilleborg” (TSB D 411)—maps closely to “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight” (Child 4), “Maria Magdalena” (TSB B 16) has strong similarities to “The Maid and the Palmer” (Child 21) and, perhaps more overtly, “Dei to søstre” (TSB A 38) mirrors “The Two Sisters” (Child 10). There are some ballads whose progress across the sea we can postulate more accurately. Child provides us with an exemplar of such a ballad in “Clerk Colvill” (Child 42), which was collected in the North of Scotland in a form very close to that of the Faroese version of the Norwegian original “Olav Liljekrans”. This relationship should not surprise us—as long as the realm of Norway extended as far as to Scotland, it was natural that ballads should travel across the trade routes from Norway through Faroes, Orkney and Shetland to Scotland, as well as through Aberdeen and Berwick. The long and intense academic relationship between Child and Grundtvig and Child's stay in Germany may well have contributed to a Scandinavian/German bias to Child's ballad origin theory, as Nicolaisen (1991:100, 101)

notes. More research is required into the nature and the method of the diffusion to establish whether it is a matter of linguistic as well as historical and cultural contact. In the search for the key linguistic congruences, certain components may be identified, and we may navigate this sea of shifting perceptions and historical contexts by means of the mappable rocks of content and stylistics.

We can start by looking at the overt use of the name Norway in Scottish ballads. Scotland and Norway occupy the place of the recognizable and mutual other as each is a recognized destination for both trading and diplomatic links. Significantly, Norway is one of only three foreign countries mentioned in the Scottish ballads collected by Child (the others being England and Italy, so the perception of Norway and its connection to Scotland is clearly extant. The use of the terms “Norrova” or “Norroya” for the definable other occurs in a number of Scottish ballads, notably in stanza 1 of “The Elfin Knight” (Child 2, variants A and B):

MY plaid awa, my plaid awa,
And ore the hill and far awa,
And far awa to Norrova,

Scotland occurs in a reciprocal context in the Scandinavian ballads, notably in “Ridder Stig og skottekongens datter/ Sir Stig and the King of Scots' daughter” (TSB A 38/ D161–164) in which Sir Stig sails to Scotland and stays there for some time. One day he sees the king's daughter on her way to church and falls in love with her. Finally the lovers sail home to Norway together. Scotland in this instance is the definable other, and both Scotland and Norway are connected by the sea as facilitator in the narrative of the ballad just as they were by the trade routes which have transmitted the form.

A peculiarity of the Nordic ballads, particularly the Icelandic variants, is the *burdenstem* or *burdenline*, an introductory lyrical stanza that provides the refrain (or burden) for the following stanzas. While the Scottish four-lined stanza usually does not have a burden, the two-lined stanza with a divided burden follows the Scandinavian template and is very much a feature of the Scottish and northern English ballad tradition. The most northerly instance in the Scottish tradition is the Shetland ballad of “King Orfeo” (Child 19)—although we should note that the subject matter of this ballad is not Scandinavian⁵. It occurs particularly in supernatural ballads like “The Elfin Knight” or as here in one of the oldest of the Scottish classic ballads “Binnorie” (Child 10C), a variant of “The Two Sisters” noted above, which has considerable currency in the Nordic countries, with variants in Danish, Swedish, Faeroese, and Icelandic to be found:

THERE were twa sisters sat in a bour;
Refrain: Binnorie, O Binnorie!
There cam a knight to be their wooer,
Refrain: By the bonnie milldams o' Binnorie.

He courted the eldest with glove and ring,
Refrain: Binnorie, O Binnorie!
But he lo'ed the youngest aboon a' thing.
Refrain: By the bonnie milldams o' Binnorie.

The eldest she was vexèd sair,
Refrain: Binnorie, O Binnorie!
And sair envied her sister fair.
Refrain: By the bonnie milldams o' Binnorie.

We have to be aware that cultural tides ebb and flow, and it is therefore difficult to identify the points of origin of balladic features, although we can identify synergies. The eminent folklorist Moltke Moe maintained, for example, that “in the North, even the epic-lyrical ballad for dancing was created from alien elements. French and English; via England, the North received the four-line stanza, the key ballad component known as the *stev*” (Liestol 1946:10).

Stanza forms and alliterative forms like “fager og fin” corresponding to “fair and fine”, “baka og bryggje” corresponding to “bake and brew”, and a complementary line or filler like the Norwegian “han stod ikkje langt ifra” corresponding to “he stood a little foreby” have been comprehensively discussed by Knut Liestol (1946:10), but are less exclusive in their usage, being found in the English ballad tradition.

Let us narrow the scope of our enquiry in search of any solid ground in the shifting sands of the balladic tradition, and its connection to the history and culture of Scotland and Scandinavia in the study of two specific ballads and their variants. “Sir Patrick Spens” and “Sir Aldingar” sit consecutively in Child’s opus; both have a knightly protagonist, a royal heroine, and a quasi-historical background, but in reality they are at opposite ends of the Scottish-Scandinavian synergy spectrum. “Sir Patrick Spens” is the better known to the general public of the two and possesses a rare currency and longevity in the Scottish corpus despite its vague historical context, whereas “Sir Aldingar” has the more readily identifiable historical provenance and far greater currency in its variant forms in the European context.

The case of Sir Patrick Spens (Child 58A to R)

Historical context. “Sir Patrick Spens” was first recorded by Percy in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* of 1765, although he notes that his version was “given from two MS. copies, transmitted from Scotland” (Percy 1910:113). Child lists no fewer than 18 variants as Child 58A to R. At least two variants are unique to the Northeast tradition. “Sir Patrick Spens” has a sea voyage to Norway as its

subject matter, which might prove significant if it actually reflects the diplomatic links that existed with Norway. Child (2003:19) himself could only speculate as follows:

No such name as Patrick Spens is historically connected with any of these occurrences but Spence is a common name in Orkney today. Spens has even been said not to be an early Scottish name. Aytoun, however, points to a notable exploit by one Spens as early as 1336, and Mr Macmath has shown me that the name occurred in five charters of David II, between 1329 and 1370. We might allege that Spens, though called Sir Patrick in later days, was in reality only a skeely skipper, and that historians do not trouble themselves much about skippers.....For one, I do not feel compelled to regard the ballad as historical.

There have been strenuous efforts made to establish the historical facts underpinning the ballad, not least by Sir Walter Scott, with his great passion for historicity as a backdrop for fiction, and his vigorous linking of historical events and folklore in his own ballad collection, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Scott considered that the historical events described in “Sir Patrick Spens” could have two likely sources: the journey to Norway of Margaret, daughter of Alexander III of Scots, for her wedding with Erik of Norway in 1281 or the death of their six year old daughter “the Maid of Norway” on her way to Orkney in 1290 to assume the Scottish crown (Scott 1838:45, 46).

Margaret of Scotland was taken to Norway in August of 1281, accompanied by a large retinue of knights and gentlemen. The return voyage was tumultuous and many were indeed drowned, as Sir Patrick Spens is in Child 58 variants G, H, and I; so this part of the story at least gives us our shipwreck. The young Queen Margaret died in childbirth in 1283, leaving a newly born daughter. In 1286, Alexander III was killed by falling from his horse over the cliff at Kinghorn, and his crown passed to his Norwegian granddaughter. A betrothal was advanced between the young Margaret, known as the “Maid of Norway”, and the heir of Edward I of England. In 1290, a modest deputation was sent to bring the young queen to her kingdom, but she died *en route* before reaching Scotland. Neither of these scenarios exactly meets the case for the events of the ballad. It is worthy of note that in “Sir Patrick Spens” the King’s daughter is not mentioned at all in the account of the fatal homeward voyage. Was she drowned with Sir Patrick and the crew? If the ballad does refer to the wedding of Margaret and Erik, then of course she would not be on board.

The actual historical truth may not be the key issue here, and certainly no such historical figure as Sir Patrick Spens (or Spence as Child 58A and G name him) is extant at the time of the likely historical events of the ballad. In fact, variant 58D gives Sir Andrew Wood (d. 1515) as the name of the skipper of the doomed vessel, and variant 58Q names Earl Patrick Graham (d. 1413). The Scots-Norwegian synergy would be reinforced by finding the real Sir Patrick Spens, if he existed at all, in the liminal space of Orkney, land belonging to both Norway and Scotland at one point or another. James Maidment purported to discover Spens' grave in Papa Westray, Orkney, stating that:

It is true that the name of Sir Patrick Spens is not mentioned in history; but I am able to state that tradition has preserved it. In the little island of Papa Stronsay, one of the Orca-dian group, lying over against Norway, there is a large grave or tumulus, which has been known to the inhabitants, from time immemorial, as "The grave of Sir Patrick Spens". (Maidment 1898:31)

Maidment continues:

On this fact, the late Professor Ayton remarks "The Scottish ballads were not early current in Orkney, a Scandinavian country; so it is very unlikely that the poem could have originated the name. The people know nothing beyond the traditional appellation of the spot, and they have no legend to tell." (Maidment 1898:32)

The evidence for an Orcadian Sir Patrick Spens is, however, hardly conclusive, and the perception of a Nordic connection for "Sir Patrick Spens" may have a closer affiliation with a slightly more contemporaneous figure, as the historical context does not tie the narrative down to any specific time frame.

Historical investigation reveals that the name Spens has historical resonance in Scandinavia, if not in Scotland, but with Sweden, not Norway, and dates from the likely time of transmission of the ballad rather than from any thirteenth-century events. The trading and emigration links with Scandinavia were at their height between 1600 and 1800, as commercial expansion in Scotland reached its zenith, but it was during the seventeenth century that immigration from Scotland to Sweden reached its apogee (Hort et al. 1962:5–6).

The first reason for this flood of immigration was the many wars in which Sweden engaged in the first sixty years of the century. There was a great demand for officers and enlisted men, and the majority of Scots came to Sweden in this capacity. The

second reason was the great commercial expansion in Scotland at that time which resulted in an influx of Scottish merchants keen to exploit the natural resources of this new great power. As Steve Murdoch (2005:247–248) notes, commerce was not the only trade:

Kith and kin networks, joint-stock companies, and even numerous locations and institutions in Scotland became enriched through the co-operation of the native and embedded communities at home and abroad, linked as they were through a series of dynamic networks. This resulted in a subtle transfer of capital, goods, and cultural commodities back into Scotland.

The intangible aspects of this flourishing social and cultural transfer may lead us to the real Sir Patrick Spens. Historical investigation does indeed provide us with a candidate. Axel Oxenstierna was Chancellor of Sweden from 1611–1654, encompassing the reign of Gustavus Adolphus, the regency period of 1632–1644, and the reign of Christina. The second volume of the thirteenth series of his *Works and Correspondance* deals with letters from Sir James Spens and Jan Rutgers, who were important members of his diplomatic network, and is thus a primary historical source.⁶ Spens' significance is reinforced by the place Murdoch (2006), Hort et al. (1962), and others give him in the political landscape of the period.

Sir James Spens of Wormiston was a key military and political figure in Sweden in the first two decades of the seventeenth century. He was born in 1571 in Fife. His father died while Spens was still a child, and his mother remarried a member of the powerful Anstruther family. Spens became Provost of Crail, a fishing burgh in Fife, in 1594. The merchant life was not for him, however—in 1598, he and his stepfather plotted to occupy and colonize Lewis, the largest island of the Hebrides archipelago. The plan failed, and Spens was imprisoned as a hostage. He is first mentioned in Swedish history in 1606 as the recipient of a letter from Charles IX concerning the enlistment of Scottish soldiers into the Swedish army. Charles sought 60 horsemen and 1600 foot soldiers. The situation must have been desperate, as Spens was then offered the command of all the British troops in Sweden, concomitant on his arrival with 500 horsemen and 1000 soldiers in the spring of 1609. His appointment was confirmed in 1610 and his rise from then on was meteoric. He became Swedish Legate in Britain in 1611 and was appointed Swedish Ambassador in December 1613. He was a close confidante of the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus and actually signed an oath of allegiance to him in October

1612 (Murdoch 2005:256), but was also deployed by James VI and I, who appointed him British Ambassador to Sweden in 1619 and 1620. Spens was made a baronet in 1622—a new title created by James—and was appointed Court Counsellor and Swedish Legate in Britain in 1626. His political influence was great, and he played a key role in the two decades of negotiations to bring about an alliance between the Protestant powers of Sweden, Denmark, Britain, and the Netherlands against the Holy Roman Empire and their Catholic allies. He died in 1632 shortly after learning of the King's death at Lutzen (according to tradition, from the shock he felt at the news) and was buried in Riddarholmskyrkan, the burial place of the Kings of Sweden.

Spens was extremely well known, he was from Fife, and he was attached to Sweden, not Scotland. In the evanescent tradition of the ballad, the perceptions of a vaguely historical Scandinavian linkage may have been reinforced by this well-known contemporaneous historical figure from Fife who was involved in diplomatic missions to Scandinavia, and he may well have given his name to the "skeely skipper" Sir Patrick Spens. In an interesting historical footnote, a descendant of the Spens family, Sir Patrick Spens (1885–1973), was created 1st Lord Spens of Blairsanquhar, Fife, in 1959.⁷

Stylistic synergies. Can this ballad provide a microcosm for analysis of the stylistic complexities of the genre? Child Variants A–J of "Sir Patrick Spens" begin in a manner remarkably reminiscent of the introduction to several Norwegian ballads, most notably "Åsmund Frægdegjæva" (Åsmund the famous and skillful and full of honor) as they combine similar content and similar metrics, exploiting the use of the *stev* (Table 1).

The ballad of 'Åsmund Frægdegjæva', TSB E145, with no less than 89 variants, belongs to the fairy tale group of ballads. This ballad group originally emerged from the Norwegian-Faroese tradition, which has strong linguistic and cultural connections to the Norn of the Northern isles. It is therefore likely to have passed through the Norway-

Faroe Islands-Orkney-Scotland trading route.

"Åsmund" is a much older ballad than "Sir Patrick Spens", coming as it does from material contained in the *fornaldursögur norðurlanda*,⁸ a body of literature described by Vesteinn Ólason (1994:101) as "the Matter of the North", so it is likely that the flow of influence was from Norway to Scotland in this instance. The *fornaldursögur* influence and its connection to Scottish ballads is noted by Velle Espeland (2004:4):

While parallels to other groups can be found all over Europe, ballads of this type are found only in Scandinavia with the single exception of a Scots ballad. (cf. "Kemp Owain", Child No. 34: Professor Child notes, however, that "Kemp Owain" has taken its subject from an Icelandic saga).

Stylistically, ballads in general have much in common with the Icelandic sagas—they have a spare, objective, action-based style noted by E.J. Cowan (2000:2) amongst others. It would be tempting to seek for the origins of the ballad in saga literature; however, the origins of the ballad form may have a common ground with the medieval European romances, as some ballads share the same stories. However, if the connection in content and stylistics between "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Åsmund Frægdegjæva" is recognized, a case can be made in respect of these ballads which shows a clear path of transmission from Norway to Scotland in this particular instance and reinforces the chronological context. We can conjecture that the direct Nordic influence is most likely to be on texts with a wide range of variants, indicating longevity.

In true saga style, both ballads show the singling out of an outstanding man by a shadowy figure with possibly suspect motivation for the task of bringing a King's daughter home. However, there is a marked difference between the two ballads. The king who sits in Dunfermline town is the King of Scots, and he sends Sir Patrick Spens to bring home another king's daughter, whereas the Irish king in the Norwegian ballad wants the skipper to

Table 1. Comparison of 4-lined stanzas, or stevs, from the ballads "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Åsmund Frægdegjæva".

"Sir Patrick Spens" (Child 58A)

The King sits in Dunfermline town,
Drinking the blood-red wine;
"O where shall I get a skeely skipper
To sail this ship of mine?"

Then up and spake an eldern knight,
Sat at the King's right knee:
"Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That ever sailed the sea."

"Åsmund Frægdegjæva" (TSB E145)

De var Irlands konge boll! It was Ireland's bold king
han tala til sine menn: /he spoke to his men
«Kven vil nord i Trollebotn! Who will go north to the land of the trolls
og hente mi dotter heim? »/and bring my daughter home?

Til so svara han ræhaest! Then the highest advisor [to the king] answered thus
han steig for kongen fram: / he stepped up to the king
*«Åsmund er både stor og sterk, / Åsmund is both big and strong
han er so frægd ein mann.»* / he is so famous a man

“hente mi dotter heim/bring my daughter home”. The story ends rather better for Åsmund than for Sir Patrick, however, as he brings his princess home in triumph.

Some of the variants of “Sir Patrick Spens”, particularly those collected in the Northeast (Child G–I), specifically note his predilection for Norway. In several variants, it is the overstay in Norway which in fact precipitates his doom.

The ending is significant—good Sir Patrick Spens, the ordinary skipper with no discernable political agenda, lies at the bottom of the sea with the Scots lords at his feet:

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
It’s fiftie fadom deip,
And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
Wi the Scots lords at his feit. (Child 58A)

The structure of recognizable historical localities such as Dunfermline and Norway and what looked like convincing historical fact leads in the end to the liminality of the sea bed, where “guid Sir Patrick” lies between two countries, belonging to no definite time or place.

The case of “Sir Aldingar” (Child 59A and B)

Historical context. “Sir Aldingar” on the other hand can be traced to its origin by textual analysis. According to Entwistle’s *European Balladry*, it is the oldest extant English ballad, dated to the middle years of the twelfth century, and it has a recognizable and identifiable historic origin. The heroine Gunhilda (sometimes Elinor) is said to have been the daughter of Canute the Great and Emma. She married King Henry of Germany, the son and heir of Conrad II, the Holy Roman Emperor in 1036. A century later, William of Malmesbury related this tale as authentic history of her life, although there is no actual historical evidence for it. (Entwistle 1939:66–67, 195, 233–234). It has two British versions: Child 59A is the English version of 1650 collected in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, in which Percy gives it the same origin as William of Malmesbury (Percy 1761 [1910]:310), whereas Child 59B is the Scottish version, which dates from 1803, and was published in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Child gives a comprehensive introduction to this particular ballad, in which he notes more than forty variants of “Sir Aldingar” and divides them into three groupings or families, placing the English and Scottish versions into the first grouping, which he calls Scandinavian (Child 2003:33–43), and which contains variants from Denmark, the Faeroe Islands, Norway, Iceland, and France.⁹

The narrative concerns a duplicitous knight or steward, a trusted courtier, who is described as a

large man and who makes advances to his queen, is rebuffed, and accuses her of adultery with a clergyman (or, in the case of the British versions, a leper). The lover as circumstantial evidence is presented only in the British versions. The king allows the queen’s virtue to be proven through trial by combat, or by fire in the case of the Icelandic and Faroese variants. In the Scandinavian variants, the queen’s champion is an undersized hero; in the Scottish variant the champion is the normal-sized and skillful knight Sir Hugh le Blond; but in the Icelandic version, there is no champion. The queen is exonerated, and the accuser is punished for his crime, sometimes by losing his legs.

Stylistic synergies. There is nothing specifically identifiable as Scandinavian in the actual structure of “Sir Aldingar” itself, and Paul Christopherson (1952:142–147) argues persuasively that the ballad originated in Flanders or Germany, came to England, and was disseminated from there to Scotland and Norway, whence it travelled across Scandinavia and to Iceland and the Faeroe Islands. However, we may be able to isolate evidence for a different transmission route, in which the story originated in England, as part of the Gunhild grouping from 1060–1150, but was reimported from Scandinavia in ballad form through Scotland very soon after 1150.

If the *dramatis personae* of the Scandinavian, English, and Scottish variants are analyzed, it can be seen that Scandinavian tradition has kept the names of the four principal characters, while the English and Scottish variant name only the villainous protagonist—the English variant as “Sir Aldingar” and the Scottish variant as “Rodingham”. This difference would argue a degradation of the transmission of the Scandinavian original in the later English and Scottish variants. If the microscope is turned upon the actual names found in the English and Scottish variants, we can see that the names Sir Aldingar and Rodingham resonate with the Scandinavian names found in the other variants, which list the protagonist as Ravnliil, Ravnhild, Rognvaldr, Rundkrud, Hagesgaard, Roysningur, Raffuengard, Ronenaar, Røngård, Roddyngar, and Rodegan as Donald Taylor (1952:142) has noted. The Scottish nomenclature is therefore much closer to the Scandinavian original than the English one. The theory that the ballad came from Scandinavia in the first instance is reinforced by the existence of the early Scandinavian ballad “Ravengard og Memering” (DgF 13), of which there are versions from Denmark, Iceland, and the Faeroe Islands, as well as a Norwegian prose redaction, which closely parallels “Sir Aldingar”, and there is resonance with the names: Ravengard/Rodingham/(Si)r Aldingar. The narrative of the ballad is clearly far more prevalent and of longer stand-

ing throughout the Scandinavian corpus than it is in the Scottish/English tradition, which would also argue point of origin and an early provenance. This analysis would suggest that “Sir Patrick Spens” and “Sir Aldingar” show clear evidence of Scandinavian influence—albeit in entirely different contexts.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to evaluate the influence of Scandinavian ballads on the Scottish canon from a range of perspectives—historical, stylistic, and philosophical—while also analyzing the nature of the shared content and the use of Scandinavian references, with particular reference to “Sir Patrick Spens” and “Sir Aldingar”.

The eminent folklorist Hamish Henderson noted that “The historical ballads are often a guide to what History is not” (Cowan 2000:1). Ballads take the reader to a liminal space between fact and fiction, in which a timeless world is created with no factual accuracy, no past or future. They are thus in many ways the polar opposite of a historical document, but this does not pre-empt them being social ones with recognizable if fluctuating synergies.

“Sir Patrick Spens” has what appears to be a historical factual framework, which is ultimately an evanescence reflecting perceived Nordic links that were strengthened by commercial and cultural exchanges over many hundreds of years, not just with the “Norway” of the ballad but with all of Scandinavia. These perceived Nordic links were actually reinforced by the shared subject matter and stylistic evidence. “Sir Aldingar” has a Germanic source tale and far more currency across Europe, but still has recognizable and debatable Scandinavian features, more clearly noted in the Scots version than the English, which indicates a transmission route from the Scandinavian corpus.

Content, geographical spread of variants, and stylistic evidence point to cultural interchange facilitated by the trading routes between Scandinavia, Orkney, Shetland, and Aberdeen, although it cannot be said that these were the only influences on the Scottish balladic tradition. Historical evidence proves less successful except in identifying perceptions of shared history in ballads like “Sir Patrick Spens”. The issue of authorship also raises more questions than can be readily resolved here. In the final analysis, perhaps the only fixed point in a turbulent literary sea is the clear natural, philosophical, and cultural synergy between the ballad traditions, which reflects the close historical and cultural associations of the Scottish and Scandinavian people themselves.

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- and Songs from Tradition, Manuscripts and Scarce Editions with Translations of Similar Pieces from the Ancient Danish Language and was a collection of 149 traditional ballads and songs with two of his own original pieces. Jamieson’s work preserved much oral tradition which might otherwise have been lost. He was highly regarded by Scott for his work on Scots and Scandinavian ballads and was one of the co-editors, together with Henry Weber and Scott, of *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* (1814).

⁵The burdenstem in “King Orfeo” is, in fact, Scandinavian, with, for example a tune noted down from John Stickle, Baltasound, Unst, by Patrick Shuldham-Shaw in 1947 containing the Danish/Norn refrain “Skowan eril gray” (see Lyle 2007:65).

⁶See Jönsson 2007.

⁷He is listed as “The 1st Baron Spens (Sir [William] Patrick Spens, PC, K.B.E), of Blairsanquhar, co. Fife.” on p. 2506 of *Burke’s Peerage and Baronetage* (106th Edition) (Mosley 1999).

⁸*Fornaldursögur norðurlanda* has the literal meaning of “ancient sagas of the northern lands”, which is often interpreted as “mythical-heroic” or “legendary” sagas. Unlike many of the standard saga genre designations found in the medieval corpus to which they refer—*Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, etc.—the term *fornaldarsögur* is relatively modern. It was first used by Carl Christian Rafn as the title of his three-volume edition, which was published in Copenhagen in 1829–1830.

⁹Donald Taylor (1952:142) notes that the Gunhild story “is represented in English by the romance ‘The Erl of Tolous’, in Spain and Provence by the Ramon de Barcelona stories, and also in France, Germany, Denmark, and Italy, and ranges in date from 1300 to 1641”.

Endnotes

¹The term synergy comes from the Greek word *synergia* συνεργία meaning “working together”.

²Hakon IV Hakonarson lost the Battle of Largs in 1263. The Treaty was concluded between the nobles of his son King Magnus VI of Norway (1238–1280) and King Alexander III of Scotland (1241–1286), signed in Perth on 2 July 1266, and signified to all intents and purposes the end of Norwegian influence in Scotland, although Norway’s sovereignty over Orkney and Shetland was confirmed. Scotland gained the Hebrides and the Isle of Man, compensating Norway with a sum of 4000 marks, together with an annual fee of 100 marks payable in perpetuity. The treaty was renewed and ratified in Inverness on 29 October 1312.

³Oikotype is a technical term used specifically within the historic-geographic method pioneered in Scandinavia and first used by Carl Von Sydow (1878–1952) to refer to the development of regional variation in oral narratives and song due to the influence of local sociohistoric and cultural contexts.

⁴Bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811) published *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (sometimes known as *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* or simply *Percy’s Reliques*) in 1765. It was the first great ballad collection, and many Scottish ballads are first recorded in his work. Robert Jamieson (ca. 1780–24 September 1844) was a Scottish antiquary born in the Northeast of Scotland. His key text, finally published in 1806, was entitled *Popular Ballads*