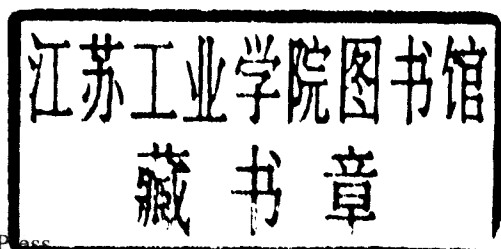


The Ballad and Oral Literature

Edited by
Joseph Harris



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Preface

Six of the papers gathered here originated as lectures at a symposium on the Child ballads held at Harvard University in November 1988; these chapters, by Flemming G. Andersen, Hugh Shields, David Buchan, Emily Lyle, Vésteinn Ólason, and Natscha Würzbach, have, however, been considerably reworked for printed presentation here. Two other contributions to the symposium resisted article format and had to be omitted: the excellent lectures by Otto Holzapfel of the Deutsches Volksliedarchiv in Freiburg ("The Concept of European Folk Ballads Today") and Stefaan Top of Leuven ("The Broadside Singers' Tradition in Belgium, 1750–1950"). In compensation I was able to solicit ballad articles from Sigrid Rieuwerts, who had spent 1987–88 at Harvard working especially in the unpublished materials of Houghton Library, and from William B. McCarthy, a paper originally presented at the centennial meeting of the American Folklore Society in Cambridge just after the Child symposium. For the ninth article on ballads I am particularly grateful to Bengt R. Jonsson of Stockholm for contributing despite difficult conditions and being unable to attend the conference. The latter half of the book comprises six articles on oral literature other than the ballad, or more generally on aspects of orality and literacy, solicited from colleagues,

permanent or temporary, here at Harvard. Karl Reichl, normally Professor of English at Bonn, was a Visiting Professor in the departments of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature in the spring semester of 1989 and held invited lectures on Turkic oral epic in November 1988 thanks to a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Dwight Reynolds, now Assistant Professor of Arabic Language and Literature in Amherst College, was a Junior Fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows, 1986–1990.

At the beginning of the enterprise concluded in this volume I profited from consultations with Anne Dhu Shapiro (then of Harvard, now of Boston College), whose study of tune families of traditional folksong, including most Child ballads, is forthcoming from Pennsylvania State University Press. Others who contributed, one way or another to this volume, were Hugh Amory, Lorna Bolkey, Susan Deskis, Linda Morley, Jennifer Snodgrass, and, not least, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences with various grants. Trying to shape the volume, and to edit with a modicum of consistency such a variety of contributors and topics, has been, as the saying goes, an education. The goal has been to make specialist work accessible across disciplinary lines; but abbreviations which remain unexplained (MED, EETS, STC, and so on) are standards which seemed to need no gloss. *ESPB* is, of course, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Francis James Child, 10 pts. in 5 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co.; London: Henry Stevens Son and Stiles, 1882–1898).

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JOSEPH HARRIS

Introduction

This volume had its origin in a conference in memory of Francis James Child (1825–1896) on the occasion of the centenary of the founding in Cambridge of the American Folklore Society. Child, whose influence on the national institutions of scholarship was immense, was not, in this particular cause, the most active among the original group of scholars, which included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and W. W. Newell, but they honored him as first president of the new learned society.¹ Child graduated from Harvard in 1846—the year the word “folklore” was coined—and immediately joined the teaching staff; when he died at the age of seventy-one he had taught on the faculty for fifty years. His service to the University and to scholarship is acknowledged by a dark bronze bas-relief roundel on rough-hewn oak showing Child’s youthful profile; presented September 27, 1898, it hangs on the east wall of the

1. See Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, “On the Founding of the American Folklore Society and the *Journal of American Folklore*,” in William M. Clements, ed., *100 Years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History* (Washington, D.C.: American Folklore Society, 1988), pp. 8–10; Lee J. Vance, “Folk-Lore Study in America,” *The Popular Science Monthly* 43 (1893): 586–598, esp. 595.

Faculty Room of University Hall, the very room where the organizational meeting of the AFS had taken place on January 4, 1888.² Among the many imposing professorial portraits there, including George Lyman Kittredge in his white suit "like an egret in a flock of cowbirds,"³ the inconspicuous medallion of Child is easily overlooked, despite its position directly behind the traditional seat of the President of the University when he presides at meetings of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Child's greatest scholarly accomplishment was, of course, his edition of English and Scottish ballads; but he was also a founder and first president of the American Dialect Society, Harvard's first professor of English, and according to Gerald Graff, the first American academic to use the "outside offer" to better his position.⁴ Despite his status as founding father or culture hero, it is remarkable how little Child is invoked outside of ballad study and how little known within the Harvard of today, even among the generations of students who study in the Child Memorial Library.⁵ He receives three brief mentions, for example, in a recent history of American folklore studies and about the same attention in Graff's "institutional history" of literary studies; printed accounts of his life

2. The sculptor was Lilia Usher (1859–1955) and the presentation committee was headed by Francis Boott (Harvard class of 1831), according to helpful information from Louise Ambler, Harvard Portrait Collection. A copy of the medallion hangs in the Child Memorial Library.

3. B. J. Whiting, "Introduction," in George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry*, 55th anniversary ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. vii–xxxvi; quotation, p. xx.

4. See Louise Pound, "The American Dialect Society: A Historical Sketch," *Publications of the American Dialect Society* 17 (1952): 3–28. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 40–41. See also Robin Varnum, "Harvard's Francis James Child: The Years of the Rose," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 36 (1988): 291–319, esp. 295.

5. On the founding and financing of the Child Memorial Library see Charles H. Grandgent, "The Modern Languages, 1869–1929," in Samuel Eliot Morison, ed., *The Development of Harvard University since the Inauguration of President Eliot, 1869–1929* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 67, n. 1.

and teaching remained limited and hagiographically toned—until the recent Marxist critique by Dave Harker.⁶ Child's "noble modesty" (in a phrase from Kittredge's radiant appreciation of his "master") and the vast and indecipherable state of Child's *Nachlass* may be to blame for the fact that no full biography has yet been completed.⁷

A gesture toward redressing the balance seemed overdue. Part of Harvard's institutional contribution, then, to the centennial of the AFS, which convened in Cambridge in October 1988, was the symposium "Mr Child of Harvard and his Ballads," held on October 24–25, and this resulting volume of Harvard English Studies. (The quaint title of the symposium was supposed to evoke the times and the Pickwickian figure of "Stubby" Child, perhaps as in the famous photo in his rose garden, or seated on the porch of his house on Kirkland Street.) Another part was an exhibition in the rotunda of Widener Library mounted by Hugh Amory of the Houghton Library and Linda Morley, Associate of the Committee on Degrees in Folklore and Mythology. This collaboration between

6. Simon J. Bronner, *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); compare the slightly fuller treatment in Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988). To the biographical sources listed in the *Dictionary of American Biography* could be added Frank Preston Stearns, *Cambridge Sketches* (Philadelphia and London: Lippincott, 1905); *The Scholar Friends: Letters of Francis James Child and James Russell Lowell*, ed. M. A. DeWolfe Howe and G. W. Cottrell, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952); and Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985).

7. George Lyman Kittredge, "Professor Child," *Atlantic Monthly* 78 (1896): 737–742; rpt. with additions as "Francis James Child" in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Francis James Child, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882; issued with part X [1898] with directions for binding into vol. 1), pp. xxiii–xxxi. Child's papers were arranged by Kittredge in thirty-odd folio volumes, to be found in the Houghton Library at Harvard. Linda Morley is at work on a biography of Child based on all sources.

a scholar of Child and the ballad and a connoisseur of Harvard collections and the book trade was remarkably fruitful, and the international guests and conferees who attended the opening reception found an intriguing mixture of personal and professional aspects of Child on display, including such previously unknown materials as the account books of Child's publisher, Little, Brown, documenting Child's exasperating changes in press. To cap the occasion, Amory surprised everyone with the compilation of Child's complete bibliography in presentation copies for participants in the conference.

For the symposium eight lecturers were invited from among the European ballad scholars whose work would have interested Child himself, and a considerable number of American ballad scholars were also able to participate. The organizer thought the limitation to European speakers was appropriate since Child himself had set a high value on European, especially Scandinavian, ballads and ballad scholarship and had even dreamed of a similar invitation to the famous Danish ballad scholar Svend Grundtvig (1824–1883).⁸ A surprising minor theme of the Child-Grundtvig correspondence is money, announced in Grundtvig's first letter (February 17, 1872), where the Danish professor, "with only a small salary," says he cannot afford not to require payment for his services as what we would call a "consultant." Child replied generously (March 26, 1872), and among his ideas for bettering Grundtvig's condition was an invitation to speak at "an institution in Boston called the Lowell Lectures," where the payment for five or six lectures would be "not less than 1500 dollars." Grundtvig welcomed the suggestion, offering the title "Old Northern Language and Literature" though he feared that his English would not be adequate to "the very cream of American literary Society" (June 2, 1872). To "the Eddas" and "the Sagas" of the

8. Sigurd Bernard Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930). See also Erik Dal, "Francis James Child and Denmark after the Death of Svend Grundtvig 1883," *Norveg: Folkelivsgransking* 21 (1978; festschrift for Olav Bø): 183–196.

original conception, Child wished to add "the Ballads"; the real purpose, however, would be not the public lectures but discussions between the two scholars: "You would be with me and we could discuss many things which we could not go into in letters. The advantage for me would be incalculable" (August 25, 1872). In this last letter, however, one already senses the obstacles: "With regard to the Lowell lectures, I have strong hopes that that pleasant little scheme of mine will be realized. Mr. Lowell was very glad of the suggestion. He said that he would look over his list of lecturers already engaged, and if he found that he had not already asked too many, would write to you. He is an old man, of very few words, and very much averse to writing. So I know that he will not write to *me*, and I shall hear of his action only through you . . ."

The failure of the "scheme" is reported in a letter of July 1, 1873: "Of Mr. Lowell and my cherished project of having you come over to us I have nothing new to say. He is an odd man, and one whom I do not wish to approach again. Indeed I perfectly understood that you would very much object to my doing more than suggest that if such a course of lectures were *wanted*, you might be willing to give them. I fear now that he will invite you at some time not convenient to you."⁹ No invitation, convenient or otherwise, was forthcoming, and Child turned his hopes for a personal meeting with Grundtvig—something that never came about—to a vacation encounter in Switzerland. But it is amusing to note that both gentlemen thought hints more than sufficient for what in our time would be an application to a foundation.¹⁰ In 1988 some of Grundtvig's heirs could at last be invited, with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the University. Their lectures form the core of this volume, which, however follows recent developments in scholarship to situate the ballad in contexts not anticipated by Child, especially in the context of "oral literature."

* * *

9. John Amory Lowell (1798–1881), first Trustee of the Lowell Institute.

10. Grundtvig cautions against pushing "the question as a personal one" (June 2, 1872).

For Child, ballads were popular or folk literature; his guiding spirits were Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Child passed on their assumptions—"romantic assumptions" as they are apt to be called now—to his students, especially George Lyman Kittredge (1860–1941), Francis Barton Gummere (1855–1919), and Fred Norris Robinson (1871–1966).¹¹ Child was concerned mainly with the authenticity and age of his ballads and with the cross-cultural comparisons of content necessary to begin to establish a history of each text; he does not seem to have anticipated, except very sporadically, more modern concerns with the mechanisms of change or with orality and literacy. In their place he operated with the assumptions of his day about social evolution and especially with the German distinction between *Kunstpoesie* and *Volksdichtung*—"a distinct and very important species of poetry . . . anterior to the appearance of the poetry of art."¹² David Bynum has shown very well how, under

11. Since Child had barely begun the theoretical introduction to his edition at the time of his death, our printed sources for his ideas about ballads in general are limited to his brief article "Ballad Poetry," in *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopædia*, ed. Frederic A. P. Barnard et al. (New York: A. J. Johnson & Son, 1877), vol. 1, pp. 365–368; letters (reprinted chiefly in Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men*, and in *Letters on Scottish Ballads from Professor Francis J. Child to W[illiam] W[alker] Aberdeen* (Aberdeen: Bon-Accord Press, 1930); and the headnotes to individual ballads; as well as the ideas of his students, especially Kittredge and Gummere. See Walter Morris Hart, "Professor Child and the Ballad," *PMLA* 21 (1906): 755–807; rpt. in later printings of *ESPB*; James Reppert, "F. J. Child and the Ballad," in Larry Benson, ed., *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, Harvard English Studies 5 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 197–212 (based on Reppert's Harvard dissertation of 1953). The interpretations of Child's ideas by Kittredge, Gummere, Hart, Gerould, and even Louise Pound come in for criticism in Thelma James, "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads of Francis J. Child," *Journal of American Folklore* 46 (1933): 51–68; rpt. in Mac Edward Leach and Tristram P. Coffin, eds., *The Critics and the Ballad: Readings* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), pp. 12–19.

12. Child, "Ballad Poetry," p. 365; cited also by Hart, Bynum, and others. For a brilliant contemporary analysis of Child's conception of the popular and the people, see Michael J. Bell, "'No Borders to the Ballad Maker's Art': Francis James Child and the Politics of the People," *Western Folklore* 47 (1988): 285–307.

his chosen successor Kittredge, Child's legacy was "enlarged" to a greater range of folklore that assumed far-reaching educational implications: "The study of oral literature had begun at Harvard as the personal preoccupation of one man, and as such it was one of the oldest *foci* of intellectual effort in the modern University. But after 1890 it became also a major generator of new technical disciplines not only for Harvard but also for higher learning in the nation as a whole."¹³ After Kittredge scholarly interest in the ballad and folklore declined in its original home, the English Department, but Hyder Edward Rollins (1889–1958), who goes unmentioned in Bynum's sketch, had influential views on the ballad and played a major role in editing broadsides.¹⁴ (In general one can defer to Bynum's picture of the Harvard connections of literary folkloristics in the late- and post-Kittredge era.) Meanwhile, the new focus on specifically oral literature had already begun with Milman Parry and the "Homeric question" and soon spread back to the English Department.¹⁵

The term "oral literature" was already being used by Kittredge in his 1896 obituary of Child; the passage was prominently incorporated into the biographical sketch prefixed to the

13. "Child's Legacy Enlarged: Oral Literary Studies at Harvard Since 1856," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 22 (1974): 237–267; quotation, pp. 247–248; rpt. in Publications of the Milman Parry Collection, Documentation and Planning Series 2.

14. Carl Lindahl, "The Folklorist and Literature: Child and Others," in Clements, *100 Years*, pp. 52–54, makes the likely suggestion that the cause of the decline was the growth of esthetic approaches in place of source study in literature. Herschel Baker, *Hyder Edward Rollins: A Bibliography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 35–41, lists Rollins's Ph.D. students; according to my count at least eight (including Samuel Bayard) wrote on ballads of one kind or another.

15. Alongside Bartlett Jere Whiting (b. 1904; ret. 1975), who continued the direct line from Kittredge, flourished Francis Peabody Magoun (1895–1979), who first integrated the theories of Parry and Albert Bates Lord into early English (see Bynum, pp. 18–21). In more recent decades Charles Dunn (Celtic and English) and Morton Bloomfield may be mentioned; see their *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge, England and Wolfboro, N.H.: Brewer, 1989).

ballad edition beginning in 1898: "Mere learning will not guide an editor through [the perplexities of ballad tradition]. What is needed is, in addition, a complete understanding of the 'popular' genius, a sympathetic recognition of the traits that characterize oral literature wherever and in whatever degree they exist . . . In reality a kind of instinct, [this faculty] had been so cultivated [in Child] by long and loving study of the traditional literature of all nations that it had become wonderfully swift in its operations and almost infallible" (p. xxx). Here the object of study, traditional literature, was still "popular," though the concept is distanced with quotation marks, but Kittredge speaks prophetically of specific traits that characterize oral literature and implies their cross-cultural comparability. Perhaps Kittredge even anticipates other recent topics, such as "oral residues," by opening the possibility of degrees of orality ("in whatever degree they exist").

A few years later in his famous essay introductory to the one-volume edition of Child's ballads, Kittredge was even more prophetic.¹⁶ Rereading this brilliant piece one finds mistaken certitude—the 305 ballad types "comprise the whole extant mass of this material"—and views confidently asserted in diametrical opposition to the present consensus, such as: "Ballad-making, so far as the English-speaking nations are concerned, is a lost art; and the same may be said of ballad-singing." Or this on the age of the ballad: "There is ample evidence for the antiquity of popular ballads in England. Nobody doubts that the Angles and Saxons had them in abundance when they invaded Britain . . . from the dawn of English history . . . The substance of many Anglo-Saxon ballads may be preserved in *Béowulf*." The impression of downright error is heightened by Kittredge's emphatic style though he often smuggles qualifications to his apodictic statements into the treatment of individual items covered by the generalizations. But revisiting Kittredge one can also find traces of a prescient

16. *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), pp. xi–xxx.

literary theorist, one who anticipates several developments of modern times. His ballad poet “improvises orally with his audience before him”; in a direct anticipation of Gerould’s concept of “communal recreation,” Kittredge comments on variation: “Taken collectively, these processes of oral tradition amount to a second act of composition, of an inextricably complicated character, in which many persons share . . . [a kind of] collective composition.” Anticipating the dogma of the active audience, Kittredge’s ballad audience “even if they kept silent . . . would still have a share in [the singer’s] poetic act,” at times would even “participate in the process.” Perhaps even anticipating structuralism and its aftermath: “a ballad has no author . . . We do not feel sure that he ever existed [although we have to] infer his existence”; “a tale . . . *telling itself*, without the instrumentality of the speaker . . . There are *texts*, but there is no *text*.” Some of these thoughts are as old as Grimm; but Kittredge also anticipates the idea of a poetics related to the living conditions of the literature, that is, an oral poetics. Even Kittredge’s refusal to trivialize that “dark oracle” of Grimm, “das Volk dichtet,” is likely to sound different in the current situation of the humanities than it did in the positivist decades, though I cannot see that Kittredge’s appreciation foreshadows modern concepts of supra-individual or collective representations—oracles perhaps equally dark.¹⁷

In the midst of all this a shrewd analysis of the role of writing (p. xii) could be a page out of Ong or Goody, and Kittredge uses “oral literature” in a thoroughly contemporary way several times in the essay, including this more self-conscious instance: “To this oral literature, as the French call it, education is no friend.” I have not searched for nineteenth-century French uses of *littérature orale* or for earlier English occurrences; the point is simply to establish a respectable age for a

17. The classic overview is D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship since 1898* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1959). See also Clyde Kenneth Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge: Teacher and Scholar* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1962), pp. 104–105 and p. 198, n. 17.

phrase and concept tellingly criticized by Walter Ong—criticism ironic in coming from one of the most prolific scholars of orality and literacy, a nexus of interests rapidly assuming the status of an “over-field.”

In a section entitled “Did you say ‘oral literature’?” Ong objects to the oxymoron he finds in the expression.¹⁸ Of course *literature* is derived from *littera*, so that etymologically literature is something written, and Ong comments that “concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever.” Strictly speaking, I suppose, concepts don’t have etymologies, only words do, but Ong’s real objection is that the word-shaped concept of literature is saturated with chirographic-typographic modes of understanding:

We (those who read texts such as this) are for the most part so resolutely literate that we seldom feel comfortable with a situation in which verbalization is so little thing-like as it is in oral tradition. As a result—though at a slightly reduced frequency now—scholarship in the past has generated such monstrous concepts as ‘oral literature.’ This strictly preposterous term remains in circulation today even among scholars now more and more acutely aware how embarrassingly it reveals our inability to represent to our own minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all. The title of the great Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University monumentalizes the state of awareness of an earlier generation of scholars rather than that of its recent curators.

As a caveat against “the restless imperialism of writing culture” and a reminder of our difficulty in conceptualizing orality and its (rough) equivalent of literature, Ong’s warning is well taken.¹⁹

The essential problem he avoids, however, is what *is* literature? Surely not just anything in *litterae*. Though we sometimes do use the word very broadly (the present curator of the Parry Collection instances the “literature” about a given

18. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 10–15.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12. For a different approach, see Robert Kellogg, “Oral Literature,” *New Literary History* 5 (1973): 55–66.