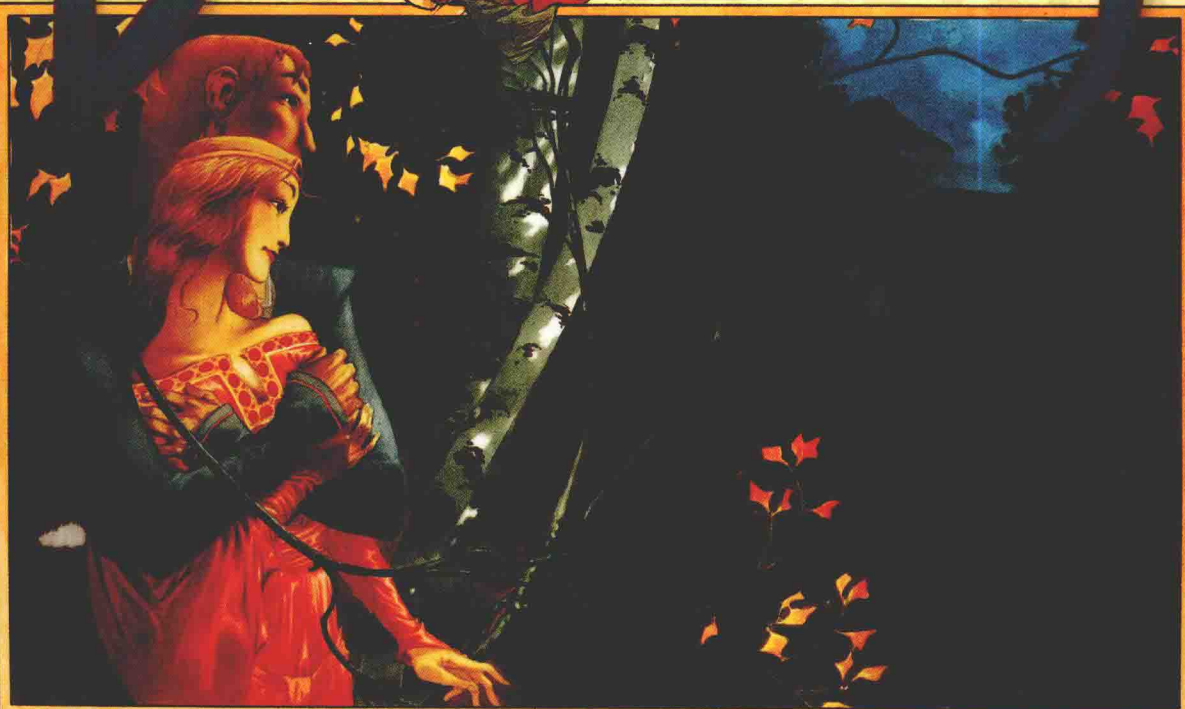


THE BOOK OF BALLADS



CHARLES VESS

WITH

NEIL GAIMAN • CHARLES DE LINT
JANE YOLEN • JEFF SMITH
EMMA BULL • SHARYN MCCRUMB
AND OTHERS

INTRODUCTION BY TERRI WINDLING

"A CLOTH OF RARE DELIGHT." —James Gurney, author of *Dinotopia*

THE BOOK OF BALLADS



BY
CHARLES VESS



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in these stories are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

THE BOOK OF BALLADS

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Edited by Teresa Nielsen Hayden

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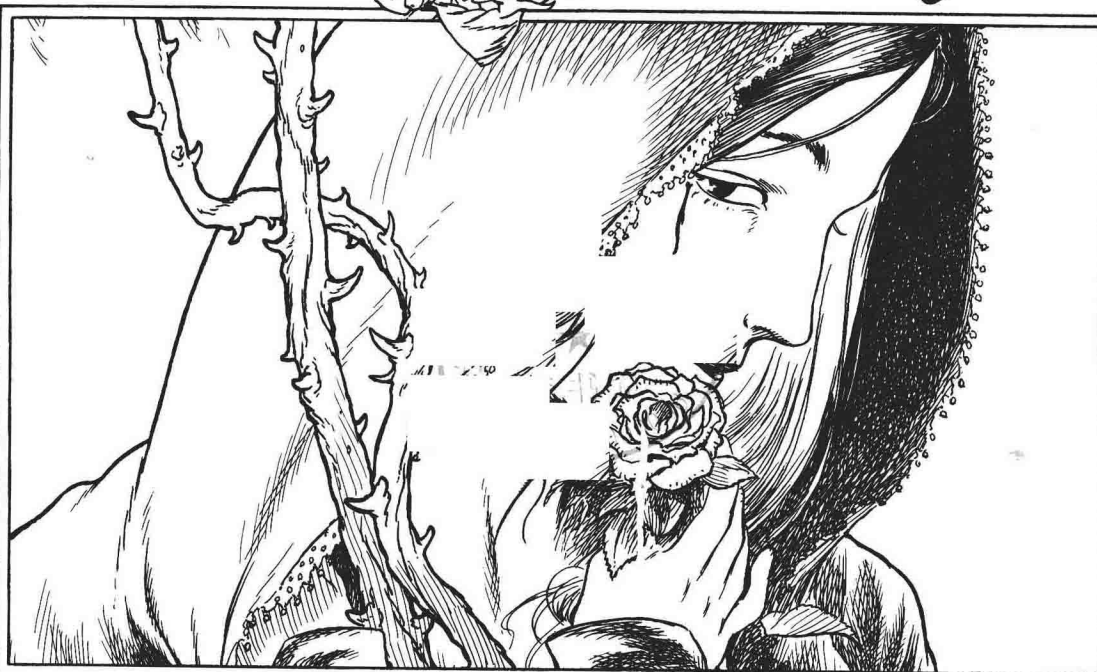
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DEDICATION

TO

Jacqui McShee, Sandy Denny, and Maddy Prior,
whose singing first brought these old songs
to vivid life for me

AND TO

all those other singers and musicians
that carry on the folk tradition,
I affectionately dedicate this volume.

CHARLES VESS
Abingdon, Virginia
April 2004



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INTRODUCTION

by Terri Windling

A tale from Scotland's Isle of Skye relates how music first came to those lands. A poor youth found a strange instrument, a triangular harp, floating in the waves. He fished it out, set it upright, and the wind began to play the strings—an eerie, lovely sound the likes of which had never been heard. The boy could not duplicate the sound, although he tried for many long days. So obsessed did he become that his widowed mother ran to a wizard (a “dubh-sgoilear”) to beg him to give her son the skill to play the instrument—or else to quell his desire for it. The dubh-sgoilear offered her this choice: he would take away the boy's desire in exchange for the widow's body, or he'd give him the gift of music in exchange for her mortal soul. She chose the latter and returned home where she found her son plucking beautiful, heavenly music from the strings of the harp. But the boy was horrified to learn the price his mother had paid for his skill. From that moment on, he began to play music so sad that even the birds and fish wept. And that, concludes the tale, is why music is capable of wringing our hearts. Perhaps it's also why so many ancient Scottish songs are sorrowful ones, telling tales of treachery, tragedy, love betrayed, and fortunes lost.

From Ireland comes a story explaining the three types of music found in the repertoire of a traditional musician: songs of merriment, songs of sorrow, and songs of supernatural enchantment. Boand was the wife of the Dagda Mor—a deity of the Tuatha De Danann, the faery race of Ireland. As Boand gave birth to the Dagda's three sons, the Dagda's harper played along to ease the woman's labor. The harp groaned with the intensity of the pain as the woman's first child emerged, and so she named her eldest son Goltraí, the crying music. The music made a merry sound as

Boand's second son was born, and so she named the child Gentrai, the laughing music. At last the final infant emerged to music that was soft and sweet. She called the child Suantri, the sleeping music—which was also the music of dreams and enchantment. These same three strains of music occur in the Anglo-Scots ballad of “King Orfeo,” who saves his wife from the faeries by playing three fiddle tunes before their king: the notes of joy, the notes of pain, and the magical faery reel.

In this collection, you'll find all three kinds of stories (of merriment, sorrow, and the supernatural), for each is based on the traditional ballads of England, Scotland, and Ireland, or on the ballads that immigrants from those lands transplanted to America.

What is a ballad? The great folklorist Francis James Child defined what he called the “popular ballad” as a form of ancient folk poetry, composed anonymously within the oral tradition, bearing the clear stamp of the preliterate peoples of the British Isles. Ballads, which are stories in narrative verse, are related to folktales, romances, and sagas, with which they sometimes share themes, plots, and characters (such as Robin Hood). No one knows how old the oldest are. It's believed that they are ancient indeed—and yet we have few historical records of them older than the sixteenth century. Little is known for certain about how the oldest ballads would have been performed—but most likely they were recited, chanted, or sung without instrumentation. Right up to the twentieth century, ballads were traditionally sung a cappella, although today it is common to hear them accompanied by harp, guitar, fiddle, and other instruments.

Why do we have so few historical records? Because until relatively recently, they weren't considered important enough to write down. With the rise of literacy, the songs and poems of Britain's great oral tradition began to fall out of favor—and ballads that had once been popular among all classes of society were now deemed primitive, pagan, the province of unlettered country folk. Because of this, few attempts were made to preserve ballads prior to the seventeenth century, and thus many were lost or were passed down through the years in fragmentary form. In the eighteenth century, ballad collection was still haphazard and sporadic, and the fruits of such labor were little regarded in academic circles. Universities did not yet consider folklore a respectable area of study, so manuscript collections remained in private hands, easily lost and forgotten.

In 1765, Bishop Thomas Percy came across one manuscript full of fine old ballads being used to light a kitchen fire. He saved them from the flames and published them in his book, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Percy's book was a great

success. It was much admired by such English Romantic writers as Coleridge, Southey, Shelley, and Keats, as well as German Romantics like Goethe, Tieck, and Novalis, and sparked much literary interest in the songs and legends of bygone days. Another fan of Percy's book was the novelist Sir Walter Scott, who collected the ballads of his native Scotland in the early nineteenth century. Scott sat at the center of a circle of poets and antiquarians who were devotees (and romanticizers) of the ancient history of the British Isles. This group did much to popularize the old songs and tales of Scotland, England, and Ireland—but still no British university would sponsor a proper academic collection of the country's ballads.

That job fell to an American scholar, Francis James Child of Harvard University, who was urged to take on the subject by his frustrated British colleagues. Child hesitated, somewhat daunted by the immensity of the job at hand, and then he plunged in, devoting the rest of his life to the study of ballads. Beginning in the 1870s, Child set out to track down every extant version of every genuine popular ballad in the English and Scottish traditions. He limited himself to England and Scotland because the ballads of these countries overlapped, whereas Irish ballads were a separate tradition, requiring a depth of knowledge of Ireland's language and history he didn't possess. His goal was to publish the collected ballads with notes tracing their histories, relating them to songs and tales to be found in folklore the world over. The result of this remarkable labor was *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published in five volumes between 1882 and 1898. It's a work that's still widely used today, revered by scholars and musicians alike.

The life of the man behind these famous books is as interesting as the ballads he loved. Born the son of a sailmaker, Child grew up on the docks of Boston harbor—until his aptitude for learning brought him to the attention of a distinguished Cambridge scholar. The boy was encouraged to transfer from his working-class school to Boston's Latin School, after which he was sponsored at Harvard, where he graduated at the top of his class. Except for two years of study abroad, Child spent the rest of his life at Harvard, rising to become the first chairman of the newly created department of English. He built his substantial reputation on groundbreaking studies of Chaucer and Spenser, but he also had an abiding love for philology, ancient poetry, folklore, and fairy tales. The latter interests had been whetted during the two years Child spent in Germany, where he'd been exposed to the work of the folklore enthusiasts of the Heidelberg Circle of scholars, which included folk song collectors Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, and the remarkable Brothers Grimm. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, noted Child's friend and colleague G. L. Kittredge, "may even, in a very real sense, be regarded as the fruit of these

years in Germany. Throughout his life he kept pictures of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm on the mantel over his study fireplace.”

Child was a textual scholar rather than a field collector, and he put his massive ballad compilation together by seeking out every manuscript copy of ballad material he could lay his hands on, with the help of a small army of fellow scholars searching out songs and fragments of songs throughout the British Isles. Another reason he depended on manuscripts rather than the memories of folk musicians was that the British popular ballad, in his view, was no longer a living tradition. The ballads he sought were the ancient ones—not the “broadside ballads” that dominated the nineteenth-century folk musician’s repertoire. Broadsheet ballads were authored song lyrics designed to fit traditional tunes, cheaply printed and sold for pennies on street corners from the sixteenth century onward. These were contemporary compositions, rather than ancient poetry from the oral tradition—though sometimes broadside ballads mimicked the language of much older songs, and determining which was which was a problem Professor Child was both intrigued and vexed by. To the dismay of this meticulous scholar, in the absence of clear historical records he was often forced to depend on textual clues and his own best judgment. Fortunately, that judgment was finely honed by his fluency in archaic languages, and his extraordinary knowledge of folklore traditions the world over. He chose, he explained in a letter to a friend, to err on the side of inclusiveness. Where he had lingering doubts about the authenticity of a song variant, he was apt to include it anyway, along with notes outlining his reservations.

His task was greatly complicated by the fact that the ballads of Britain had been so badly recorded and preserved compared with those of other countries such as Denmark. “The ballads should have been collected as early as 1600,” he noted sadly; “then there would have been such a nice crop; the aftermath is very weedy.” Another complication was that ballads written down and published from the eighteenth century onward had been edited, censored, or “improved” by folklore enthusiasts who were literary men, romantics, rather than rigorous academics. The prime example of this was Percy’s famous *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Child and other folklorists suspected that Percy had altered the text of ballads to suit the literary tastes of his day—particularly as Percy would not allow an examination of the ballad manuscript in his possession. Working with British scholar F. J. Furnivall, Child was instrumental in persuading Percy’s descendants to finally release this manuscript, which did indeed confirm that Percy had edited and “improved” the original ballads.

Sifting through the mountain of material he collected, sniffing out alterations

and forgeries, Child amassed a group of 305 songs with their roots in the oral tradition, along with variants of each song, sometimes in dozens of alternate versions. The final volume of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* was completed the year of Child's death, but he died before writing the book's introduction, which would have explained his method of selection and given us an overview of his work. Yet even without this, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* was hailed by critics on both sides of the Atlantic and became a cornerstone of modern folklore scholarship. In addition, Child was instrumental in establishing the American Folklore Society, serving as its first president from 1888 to 1889. But sadly, Child did not live to see that movement flower in subsequent years, and he died doubting his work had relevance to a modern age. "If he'd lived just a little longer," says Mark F. Heiman of Loomis House, which published a handsome new edition of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, "he would have seen the golden age of the ballad collector and folklorist. He would have seen how important his life's work really was."¹

Child's work went on to inspire a whole new generation of folklorists, men and women who weren't quite so convinced that the oral tradition was irretrievably dead and gone. One of them was Cecil Sharp, who began collecting English folk songs and dance tunes in the early years of the twentieth century. Sharp was a trained musician, and unlike Child he was also interested in preserving the music of the ballad tradition, rather than viewing ballads primarily as poetry. He noted that the Child ballads were rarely part of the repertoire of the elderly singers he listened to in the countryside; they'd been replaced by broadside ballads and other more recent songs. Sharp wondered if the older ballads might have survived among the British and Scottish settlers in America, particularly among the descendants of settlers in isolated mountain regions, where "pennysheets" of modern ballads would not have been available.

Between 1914 and 1918, Sharp made two extensive trips through the Appalachian Mountains, collecting over a thousand songs with the aid of his secretary, Maud Karpeles. Sharp and Karpeles discovered that many of the Child ballads were indeed still known and performed in Appalachia, although sometimes the titles and lyrics had changed somewhat in this new setting. Sharp published these ballads in his now-classic *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, which in turn inspired new folklore studies and new collection efforts throughout the United States.

Despite the keen interest of folklorists, ballads remained a specialized interest

1. Quoted in "Child's Garden of Verses," by Scott Alarik, *Sing Out!*, Vol. 46, #4.

for much of the twentieth century, until the huge folk music revival of the 1960s and '70s. In those years, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and other singers recorded ballads from the Child collections, and a Celtic music revival exploded across the British Isles, Brittany, and America. Folk-rock bands like Pentangle, Fairport Convention, and Steeleye Span updated the ballads for a new generation, while singers like Martin Carthy, Frankie Armstrong, and June Tabor created an audience for traditional music played in more traditional ways. Thirty years later, the revival is still going strong, and Child ballads are still being sung by performers like Niamh Parsons, Kate Rusby, Loreena McKennitt, and many others. (See the Discography Notes at the back of this book for specific recommendations.)

In the 1970s, while musicians were rediscovering and reinventing the genre of folk music, writers were rediscovering and reinventing the genre of fantasy fiction. The audience for both of these things overlapped. It's not hard to understand why. Fantasy writers often work with themes that hark back to the oral tradition—to folktales, myths, and sagas steeped in the lore of our folk heritage. A number of writers who came to the fantasy genre in the 1970s and '80s were also folk musicians or singers (such as Ellen Kushner, Charles de Lint, Emma Bull, and Jane Yolen) and music permeated their books. Charles de Lint's *The Little Country*, for example, is set among folk musicians in Cornwall. Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* concerns folk-rock musicians in '80s-era Minneapolis. Jane Yolen wove original ballads into *Sister Light*, *Sister Dark* and its sequels. Ellen Kushner retold a classic ballad in her novel *Thomas the Rhymers*, and created an anthology of magical stories about music, *The Horns of Elfland*. A number of other fiction writers also turned to ballads for inspiration, fleshing out the bare bones of song narratives to turn them into stories and novels. One need only dip at random into the pages of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* to discover why this material would appeal to writers of magical fiction. There you'll find stories not told in *Ballads*, like "Kemp Owyne," in which a young woman is turned into a loathsome dragon. Knight after knight comes to slay the beast. The dragon kills them all in turn, with tears of regret on her scaly cheeks. It is only when a knight puts down his sword and kisses her horrible face that the spell is broken and the dragon turns back into a beautiful maiden.

In "The Elfin Knight," a girl hears faery music and longs for a supernatural lover. The elf knight appears at her request, but gives her one look and tells her she's too young. The song becomes a riddling song (similar to "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme")—though this is a riddling match that is charged with distinctly sexual overtones.

In "Reynardine," a mysterious man seduces a woman as she walks among the