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PLACE-NAMES IN TRADITIONAL BALLADS*

"When is a ballad not a ballad?" Bertrand Bronson asks at the outset of his monumental four-volume edition of The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads,[1] and he answers his own question quite categorically, "When it has no tune." For someone who had spent a lifetime of scholarship on the interdependence of ballad texts and tunes, this was the only answer to give, and his insistence that one must pay at least as much attention to the tunes as to the texts of the traditional ballads in order to do them justice and understand them fully as a genre, has been one of the most salutory [sic] contribution to ballad research in the last few decades.

If in this paper we revert to an older and seemingly less adequate approach to this kind of non-material folklore, it is not because we want to ignore willfully the high standards set by the new breed of ballad scholars, but because the central topic of this paper, the use of place-names in ballads, appears to us to be almost exclusively a textual matter and therefore little dependent on the musical aspects of the genre. We can consequently neglect the melodies without in any way impairing the value of this little study. It follows that what we wish to discuss briefly in this paper is, more correctly, the use of place-names in ballad texts, or even more pre-

* Reprinted with slight revision from Folklore 84 (1973) 299-312; by kind permission of the Editor.

cisely, in the texts of traditional ballads, i.e. those transcribed from oral tradition. Our main body of source material will be the 305 ballads contained in the Child canon,[2] or rather in the much extended Bronson edition of that canon.[3]

To the best of our knowledge, an examination of our subject has been attempted only once before, when W. Edson Richmond scrutinized "Ballad Place Names" in a paper first read before the Middle English section of the Modern Language Association in 1945 and published one year later in Vol. 59 of the Journal of American Folklore.[4] The present paper is not intended to be a duplication of Richmond's study, however justified such an undertaking might be 28 years later, especially in view of both the considerable amount of new published material now available and the wide popular interest in this genre as a live form of oral folk narrative. Bronson's work, moreover , has broadened the base for any kind of study of the traditional ballad significantly by providing us with numerous variants of each song, many from this side of the Atlantic, and several competent regional collections have added greatly to the known ballad corpus, both within and without the Child canon. Thus, for instance, a check on the 35 ballads which according to Richmond do not contain any place-names, reveals that in 6 of them, variants recorded and published since 1945 do indeed refer to places by name, so that at 29, the number of traditional English and Scottish ballads without any toponymic reference whatsoever is even smaller than the already negligible proportion pointed out 28 years ago--but enough of this kind of hindsighted

updating of Richmond's very fine article.

It is, on the other hand, necessary for us to recall that Richmond was mainly interested in the role certain groups of ballad place-names might play in the elucidation of "the nature of ballad transmission and ballad variation," and that in connection with this pursuit he came to various important conclusions which may be summarized like this:[5] Place-names appear in traditional ballads for three reasons:

(1) because historical events necessitate the recording of particular names;

(2) because the ballad singer either consciously or unconsciously wishes to lend credibility to his tales by locating the events in (a) known places, or in (b) fictive or faraway places beyond the reach of curious scoffers;

(3) because the ballad singer substitutes either an actual or a pseudo place-name for (a) a place-name which he fails to recognize, or for (b) a seemingly meaningless word or phrase.

All three reasons can be documented several times over without any difficulty, and indubitably are the cause for the appearance of many a place-name in our ballads. Indeed, one might go even further and concede that one or another of them probably supplies one ostensive explanation for the appearance of all ballad place-names. The questions which need to be asked at this point are, whether they constitute a complete set of reasons, and whether they may not, in certain instances anyhow, be responsible together with other reasons for the curiously frequent direct reference to place-names in traditional

ballads. Refining our inquiry somewhat more, we may pose a related set of questions: Do place-names perhaps operate on more than one level in ballad structure and presentation? And if they do, what is their total function?

Quite clearly the answer—if there is one—cannot lie in a detailed account, however convincing, of the employment of a specific ballad and its variants, although a ballad historian concerned with the origin, transmission, and diffusion of a particular ballad may validly choose this approach for his own purposes, as Wayland D. Hand did so well in his article "Wo sind 'die Strassen von Laredo'?"[6] The solution of our problem will also not come from a reiteration or paraphrasing of Richmond's stated set of reasons, since these seek an explanation solely in the performer's desire for historicity and credibility and his folk-etymological instinct, sometimes coupled with incompetence, to make meaningful what has no recognizable meaning. It is as if the reputation of our singer of tales were at stake—as historian, as storyteller, and as linguist-cum-geographer—and as if the successful use of place-names were to be a reassuring signal that this reputation had indeed not been lost. Although this interpretation of Richmond's triad of reasons is probably both unfair and exaggerated, it does point up the necessity for going beyond the preoccupation with the performer's role, as seen by himself and by his audience.

There is, for example, the whole area of the place-name (and name in general) as an artistic device, as a compositioned element,

since there is no reason to presume that folk poetry, transmitted orally, behaves very differently in this respect from literary art poetry. It might be objected that the use of names may have developed in this direction, once the primary function of the inclusion of names, as outlined by Richmond, had been exhausted because of a considerable lapse of time between the original event celebrated in the ballad and the actual performance or less direct involvement of the audience in that event, or some such reason; that is, once the ballad had become an entity of its own no longer dependent on the initial stimulus, names might have become less denotative in their function and more connotative, more like the nouns (or nominalized adjectives) from which they derived, a process which would make them both interchangeable with other names and with appellatives. Obviously, such an objection would have validity in the case of ballads which retell the story of historical events, battles, disasters, and other local happenings of a dramatic character, but even here it would not be easy to distinguish between the primary and secondary use of place-names in the artistic reshaping of the narrative by a ballad singer. In other instances, the conscious employment of place-names as stylistic devices in oral composition must have been present even in the archetype.

The first line of "Barbara Allan" (Child 84) is a case in point. Of the nearly 200 variants printed by Bronson[7], almost one quarter (48) begin with a line like "In [ABC] where I was born." Of these, 17 make reference to Scarlet Town ("In Scarlet Town where

I was born," etc.), 10 name Scotland ("In Scotland I was born and bred"), there are 6 references to London, 4 to Reading, 2 each to the fictitious Story Town and Starling(s) Town, and one to Oxford. The other five do not use names but descriptive appellatives: "It was once I lived in a scornful town", "Dark and gloomy there was a (is the) town", "In yonder town where I was born", and, somewhat different, "It was upon a high, high hill". We are not going to speculate on the original form or location of the place-name (the question "Wo ist Scarlet Town?" will not be asked), although one can see some interesting connection between Scotland, Scarlet, Starling (for Stirling?), Story, scornful, and even Reading; but what is interesting in this context of interchangeability is the fact that Scarlet Town, "which is not to be found on any map",[8] wins out over the rest, a result quite in keeping with what David Buchan has called the "stylized limbo" of the ballad world.[9] The ubiquitous and non-existent Scarlet Town has become a distancing device providing "Barbara Allan" with a setting which removes it "from the everyday work of the plough and the byre."[10] In this artistic process, the supposedly denotative place-name has become almost identical with the connotative "scornful town", by losing its isolating onomastic function. We may confidently add at this point that the non-fictitious Scotland, London, Reading, and Oxford are potentially just as much lacking in denotation in this context as Scarlet, Story, and Starling(s) Town, for they have become part of the stylized landscape in which "court, castle and greenwood

also have rarely any precise, geographically identifiable location."[11] The frequent references to the North Country or the West Country in other ballads have a similar effect.

In the realm of ballad morphology, the place-name may be regarded as a structural device. Most often its repeated appearance as the final rhyming word in the last line of a stanzaic unit dominates the formal sound patterning and clearly distinguishes one stanza from another. In "The Braes o Yarrow" (Child 214)[12] the river-name Yarrow regularly ends each four-line stanza, usually as the last word in a phrase like "the dowy banks" or "the dowy houms o Yarrow," producing in line two such rhymes, assonances, and near rhymes as marrow, Sarah, before, O, sorrow, and Yarrow itself. In "Rare Willie Drowned in Yarrow" (Child 215), the name Yarrow, too, closes every stanza but the first. In the ballad "John of Hazelgreen" (Child 293) the place-name Hasilgreen dominates the sound structure by concluding every eight-line stanza, as well as appearing several times in other positions; a similarly dominating effect is achieved by the place-name Auchanachie, which also functions as a surname regularly in the first few stanzas and sporadically later in "Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie" (Child 239).

It is not surprising that place-names bereft of their denotive function and without real geographical significance can, as structural elements, enter that most formulaic of all formulaic ballad language, the refrain. As "sinnlos gewordener Lautkomplex (sound structure which has lost all meaning),[13] a name unselfconsciously

takes the place of the nonsense syllable in this common ballad feature which in addition to its formal structural function has an important role in the singer-audience relationship in an actual performance, without in any way advancing the story. One of the best known and most frequently recorded ballads, "The Twa Sisters" (Child 10), provides convenient documentation for this statement. The numerous variants of this ballad are found to fall into three main categories, with regard to their refrains:

I. Nonsense or near-nonsense vocables (Bronson No. 26):

There was an old man in the North Country,
Low down derry down dee,
There was an old man in the North Country,
Valid we ought to be,
There was an old man in the North Country,
He had daughters, one, two, three,
I'll be true to my love if my love will be true to me.

II. The fictitious place-name (Bronson No. 7):

There were twa sisters sat in a bow'r,
Binnorie, O Binnorie;
There came a knight to be their wooer,
By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

III. The real but stylized place-name (Bronson No. 79):

There were twa sisters in ae bow'r
Edinbrough, Edinbrough;
There were twa sisters in ae bow'r
Stirling for ay;
There were two sisters in ae bow'r
There came a knight to be their wooer,
Bonny Saint Johnston stands upon Tay.

Although category III is the smallest of these and seemingly confined to Scotland, the use of the Scottish place-names Edinburgh, Stirling, and St. Johnston (i.e. Perth), in this tripartite refrain cannot

be viewed as having any localizing significance, as regards the ballad narrative. These names serve here without any lexical burden and are meaningless both lexically and onomastically, providing the audience with familiar but near-nonsense sound sequences in their non-narrative participation in the ballad performance.

One of the best known and also least understood stylistic and structural characteristics of the ballad is "incremental repetition," and place-names have their expected share in its verbal realization. A particularly instructive example is "The Lads of Wamphray" (Child 184), an early Seventeenth-Century ballad concerning a clan feud. Its eight stanzas read like this:

1. Twixt the Girthhead and Langwood-end
   Lived the Galiard and Galiard's men.

2. It is the lads of Lethenha
   The greatest rogues among them a'.

3. It is the lads of Leverhay
   That drove the Crichton's gier away.

4. It is the lads of the Kirkhill,
   The gay Galiard and Will o Kirkhill,

5. But and the lads o Stefenbiggin,
   They broke the house in at the riggin.

6. The lads o Fingland and Hellbackhill,
   They were neer for good, but aye for ill.

7. Twixt the Staywood Bass and Langside Hill,
   They stelld the broked cow and branded bull.

8. It is the lads o the Girthhead,
   The diel's in them for pride and greed.

Quite apart from a couple of alliterative patterns, especially one involving Langwood-end, Lethenha, and Leverhay, the repeated

phrase "It is the lads of (place-name)" as the first half of a two-line stanza foregrounds [sic] the structural relationship, both isolating individual stanzas and linking them, thus revealing the formal texture of this portion of the ballad. Obviously these are real names, authentically localizing the ballad story, but they are simultaneously important markers of the stanzaic structure of this ballad.

Another instance of place-names as prominent verbal indicators of an abstract non-verbal structure is the "Adue, Dumfriese,...", "Adue, Lochmaben," "Adue, Fair Eskdale..." repetitions in the central section of "Lord Maxwell's Last Goodnight" (Child 195), the farewell of a murderer before his execution to the places, people, and natural beauty (including even the robin in the orchard) he has known and loved so well and is now to leave behind. Each word group opens a new stanza and punctuates toponymically the next of memories.

One of the basic binary patterns[14] in the verbal, formal, and conceptual relationship between a pair of stanzas leans heavily on place-name support in stanzas 9 and 10 of the bride-stealing ballad "Bonny Baby Livingston" (Child 222). The verbal parallelism, including its onomastic ingredients, represents the kidnapper's proposal and the girl's rejection, each contained in a four-line stanza:

9. "We'll stay a while at Auchingour,
And get sweet milk and cheese,

And syne we'll gang to Glenlion.
  And live there at our ease."

10. "I winna stay at Auchingour,
  Nor eat sweet milk and cheese,
Nor go with thee to Glenlion
  For there I'll neer find ease."

These place-names represent the kidnapper's territory which the girl is not eager to enter.

Although, in comparison with the folktale, the ballad has normally fewer episodes, several ballads are multi-episodic, and in a number of these place-names are episode-forming, i.e. they create and emphasize units of the narrative structure. Suffice it to state here that place-names appear to be playing that role in, amongst others, the "Battle of Otterburn" (Child 161) and "Hobie Noble" (189); detailed proof must be sought in the ballads themselves.

While the foregoing examples of place-names as artistic, stylistic, structural devices in the composition of traditional ballads are eminently worthy of our attention, there is, above all, one further subtle and important stylistic feature worth considering, one which I should like to call "the place-name as metaphor." This notion suggested itself forcefully to me (as did, in fact, the subject of this paper) at a recent performance on our campus, by Margaret MacArthur, the Vermont-based folksinger, of the ballad "Annan Water," one of those closely adjacent to the Child canon but only admitted to it as an appendix to "Rare Willie Drowned in Yarrow" (Child 215), because, as Leach tells us, Child was "skeptical about it as a folk ballad of very long standing."[15] Mrs. MacArthur's

version, which she learned from a record, singing it to an exquisite little tune by Nic Jones, is in the same tradition as Sir Walter Scott's rendering "from tradition" in his Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border II, 138 (1802), and reprinted by Leach.[16]

Annan Water

O Annan Water's wondrous deep
And my love Annie's wondrous bonnie,
I'm loath that she should wet her feet,
Because I love her best of any.
Go saddle to me the bonnie grey mare,
Go saddle her quick and make her ready,
For I must cross that river wide
And all to see my bonnie lady.

Chorus: And woe betide you, Annan Water,
At night you are a gloomy river,
And over you I'll build a bridge
That you never more true love may sever.

And he has ridden oer field and fell,
Oer moor and moss and many a mire;
His spurs of steel were sore to bide,
And from the mare's feet flew the fire.
The mare flew on oer moor and moss
Until she gained the Annan Water;
She couldn't have ridden a furlong more,
Had a thorn and whips been laid upon her.

Oh boatman come, put off your boat,
Put off your boat for golden money,
For I must cross that river wide
Or never more I'll see my Annie.
The sides are steep, the water deep,
From bank to braes the water's pourin,
Your bonnie grey mare, she sweats with fear,
She hears the water kelpie roarin.*

And he has tried to swim that stream,
And he swam on both strong and steady,
But the river was broad and strength did fail,
And he never saw his bonnie lady.

* Substituted from the Appendix to Child 216, by Mrs. MacArthur, to replace Nic Jones' 'She stands to hear the water roarin.'

Oh woe betide thee willow wand,
And woe betide thee, bush of briar,
For it broke into my true love's hand,
When strength did fail and limbs did tire.

The main difference, apart from the usual verbal variation, between Scott's arrangement and Mrs. MacArthur's beautiful modern version is that the latter employs the all-important stanza 14 as a recurring refrain, rather than as a concluding, climaxing, accusing, challenging final statement in the ballad as a whole. Naturally, this regular repetition not only gives it a haunting effect but also the status of being central to the whole song, both as comment and as resolution, It contains the third mention —the others occur in stanzas 1 and 7—of the river-name which also provides the title for the ballad itself, Annan Water.[17] This is the name of a Scottish river which rises near Hartfell Mountain on the Peeblesshire border, and after flowing south for 49 miles through Dumfriesshire and having received the tributary waters of Evan, Moffat, Kinnel, Dryfe, and Milk, enters the Solway Firth, 1 3/4 miles below the town of Annan, which was named after the water-course. Like all other rivers draining into the Solway Firth, especially from the northern Scottish side, it is well known for its quick tides, resulting every year in several deaths of persons caught by them unawares.

The name "Annan Water" is therefore very appropriately connected with the drowning of a strong man overpowered by the strong tidal undertow. This is just the kind of river where this sort of tragedy would happen, and the repeated mention of this stream-name would

indicate an appropriate localization of the story told in this ballad, although the same Gatehope-Slack would have an even more pinpointing effect locally. The audience's credence would not be strained by this location, and the tragic events related may in fact refer to a particular drowning which at least the early audiences (of the Eighteenth Century?) would still remember.

When, during Mrs. MacArthur's performance, I looked around the room, I realized that of the approximately fifty people present (including the singer), my wife and I were probably the only ones who would know the geographical location of the river and be aware of the dangers in the tidal portion of its lower reaches. It was clear, therefore, that, whatever the initial occasion stimulating the question of the original ballad may have been, this performance of "Annan Water" on an American university campus in 1973 was not the balladistic recounting of a particular drowning, but the presentation, in narrative song, of the death of the lover trying to reach his beloved from whom he is separated; and just as the fast-flowing river becomes the symbol for the separating obstacle, so Annan Water as the name of that river takes on the role of metaphor in this context, heightened in the world of ballad folk-belief by the roaring of the water-kelpy, putting sweat-producing fear into the "bonny grey mare", the animal, while the threatening noises of the supernatural inhabitant of the river remain unnoticed by its undiscerning rider, ready to face the very real dangers of the natural elements. Consequently the horse survives whereas the man drowns, and Annan Water

turns out to be not only a metaphor for the painful physical separation of two loving human beings but also of the human tragedy which befalls when one of the two attempts to reduce that separation in the face of adversity.[18] Annan Water is the unbridged river which keeps two lovers apart, when togetherness is what they need most of all for their physical salvation; and so it is that the young American audience of 1973 sings over and over again, with both understanding and personal emotional involvement, that powerful refrain:

> "And wae betide ye, Annan Water,
> This night that ye are a drumlie river!
> For over thee I'll build a bridge,
> That ye never more true love may sever."

Indubitably, it is possible to appreciate the ballad on both the "straight" and the metaphorical level, or on either of them separately, but the fact that a ballad like this can survive three or four centuries or more, while continuing to appeal to a singer and an audience, must be due to the metaphorical qualities of its symbols and not to its perception as a "historical" narrative.

There simply is not time for us in the context of this paper to explore this issue much further, however fascinating the implications and repercussions of the idea of "name as metaphor" seem to be. We can only briefly all de to two other types of metaphor, although there are undoubtedly many more which only a detailed investigation of the corpus of traditional ballads will reveal.

Deep and lasting conflict, or battle, is treated in the ballads "Flodden Field" (Child 168), "The Battle of Harlaw" (Child 163), etc.

In the former, commemorating the Battle of Flodden on September 9, 1513, stanza 8 is the only place in which Flodden Field is mentioned:

> At Flodden Field the Scots came in,
> Which made our English men faine;
> At Branstone Greene this battaile was seene,
> There was King Jamie slaine.

As the military events are described from the English (that is, the victorious) point of view, the tragic consequences of the battle are hardly depicted adequately. For that reason the traditional ballad does not have the intensive sadness of the popular "The Flowers of the Forest" or Sir Walter Scott's "The Last Stand at Flodden" (in Marmion),[19] but the name Flodden will nevertheless stand for centuries of strife between the English and the Scots, and the vanquishing of the latter on "Flodden's fatal field," and elsewhere. As a parallel, the name Harlaw, while originally the scene of battle on July 24, 1411, conjures up the basic internal Scottish conflict between Highlands and Lowlands, between Gaelic speakers and English speakers, a conflict which, like the external one, has never been resolved in the hearts of the people to this day.

The break-in of the otherworldly into this world is metaphorized by Huntlie bank and Eildon tree in "Thomas Rhymer" (Child 37) and by Carterhaugh in "Tam Lin" (Child 39). Especially in Carterhaugh the seamlessness of the numinous and the mundane is exposed:

> 6. "'Why pu's thou the rose, Janet,
> And why breaks thou the wand?
> Or why comes thou to Carterhaugh
> Withoutten my command?'
> 7. Carterhaugh, it is my ain,
> My daddie gave it to me;
> I'll come and gang by Carterhaugh,

And ask nae leave at thee."

Is Tam, the fairie, trespassing on human property, or has Janet, the human, entered fairyland without permission? They are both there in their own right, and Carterhaugh is the place where therefore two worlds meet; it is also the onomastic metaphor for the clash and ultimate reconciliation of the seemingly unreconcilable.

In our view, then, place-names, in addition to their qualities of historicity, localization, and authenticity, lend to traditional ballads their lexical meaninglessness and connotative potential as stylistic devices in the texturing of both form and contents, i.e. in both the stanzaic and the narrative structure, in the process or oral composition and performance. On one level, when onomastically almost empty—there are, of course, always traces of onomastic meaning left in names known to the audience—they may serve as effective metaphors for such universal human concepts as separation, conflict, superstitious belief, and so forth while, on the other, maintaining their onomastic integrity as real names.

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NOTES

1.
Vol. I (1959), p. IX.

2.
Francis James Child, English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 5 volumes, Boston, 1882-98.

3.
Bertrand Harris Bronson, The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads, 4 volumes, Princeton, N.J., 1959-72.

4.
W. Edson Richmond, "Ballad Place Names," Journal of American Folklore 59 (1946), 263-267.

5.
See Richmond, p. 263.

6.
Festschrift für Will-Erich Peuckert, Berlin, 1955, pp. 144-161.

7.
Traditional Tunes, pp. 321-391.

8.
Bertrand Harris Bronson, The Ballad as Song, Berkeley, 1969, p. 237.

9.
David Buchan, The Ballad and the Folk, London, 1972, p. 76.

10.
Ibid.

11.
Ibid., p. 77.

12.
Quotations are usually from versions printed in Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (editors), English and Scottish Popular Ballads (Cambridge, Mass., 1904), or Mac Edward Leach, The Ballad Book (New York, 1955), and sometimes from Child's and Bronson's canons. Since this paper is not centrally concerned with the transmission of ballads, it has been deemed unnecessary to reprint more detailed information about the actual source of each ballad.

13.
Dietrich Gerhardt, "Über die Stellung der Namen im Lexikalischen System,"

Beitrage zur Namenforschung I (1948-49), p. 11.

14.
See Buchan, pp.87 ff.

15.
The Ballad Book, p. 695.

16.
Ibid., pp. 695-697. The recording is Trailer LER 2014 'Ballads and Songs'. In his sleeve note, Nic Jones indicates that he has altered and simplified the ballad considerably, using as his tune an adaptation of 'The brisk young lively lad', as found in The Folk Song Journal.

17.
The fact that the original name of the ballad river may have been Allan Water is important for the transmission of this ballad, but in no way impinges on our argument. In fact, the name does not matter.

18.
Hydronymic metaphors for tragic drowning night also be Yarrow and Gamorie: "Rare Willie Drowned in Yarrow, or, The Water o Gamorie" (Child 215), and Clyde: "The Mother's Malison, or, Clyde's Water" (Child 216), but although they may equal Annan Water in dramatic intensity, they do not come close to its emotional lyricism.

19.
For convenient texts see G. F. Maine, A Book of Scotland (London 1950), pp. 97-100.