

The Broadside Ballad

By Steve Gardham

It is an incontrovertible fact that almost all of what we nowadays call folk songs existed at some point in their evolution on cheaply printed thin sheets of paper we generally refer to as broadsides. In fact many of our folk songs first saw the light of day on some sort of street literature. Even many of the highly esteemed Child Ballads, most of which can be traced back to before the seventeenth century, owe their existence to having been printed on broadsides.

From the sixteenth century until the early decades of the twentieth century the printing of popular songs of the day flourished alongside sensational news items in verse and old popular ballads, but the peak periods seem to have been the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. Large numbers of the more popular sheets were produced and many collections of these have survived and been preserved in museums and university libraries all over the country.

Apart from the collections in the British Library the two largest collections, as one might expect, at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, are accessible to the public; the Madden Collection at Cambridge is available on microfilm (a copy in the VWML), and the various collections brought together in the Bodleian Library all available on the Internet (Insert link) with original images, all fully indexed.

The interaction of these printed versions of ballads with their oral equivalents can make a fascinating study. For many of them it is a case of passing backwards and forwards between print and the oral tradition over several centuries.

On first inspection it is often thought that the variation found between different versions of ballads was solely due to the processes of evolution in the oral tradition, but in fact much of this variation can be put down to deliberate rewriting of ballads by the printers' hacks who were paid to supply the cheap presses with new and popular material. Some were altered to suit new localities, to describe contemporary events, or indeed simply reduced in length just to suit current fashion. In some cases it was simply a matter of it being easier to rewrite an older ballad than having to go to the lengths of producing something completely fresh.

In many cases the printers just reproduced what other printers were printing. Once a ballad was printed in one locality it was quickly taken up by others all over the country, particularly in the nineteenth century.

Printers published whatever would sell most copies and indeed took ballads straight off the streets onto their printing presses, therefore unwittingly they were among our first folk song collectors. Using close study of markedly different versions of the same song we can identify songs which were obviously circulating in the oral tradition, say in any given period, some of which did not survive to be collected from the oral tradition in the late nineteenth century. In fact throughout the history of printed ballads there are many good ballads in the popular style that did not survive to be harvested by the folk song collectors, and revival singers searching for material would be amply rewarded by investigating these resources more closely.