

The Center for Folklore Studies presents

# Rethinking the Ballad

A Conversation with Richard Firth Green & Friends



**Friday, February 28, 2014**

**8:30am - 5:00pm**

**Ohio Union, Barbie Tootle Room**

Co-sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Folklore Student Association, The Lawrence and Isabel Barnett Center for Integrated Arts and Enterprise, and the School of Music

In this day-long conversation, Richard Firth Green, guests, and students take the pulse of ballad scholarship. They consider changes in the understanding of Anglophone balladry as old songs are revived, remediated, and repurposed for new audiences, giving us new perspectives on texts and tunes. Coming from folklore, literary studies, medieval studies, and musicology, they also explore disciplinary and generational shifts of engagement with a much-studied but still elusive genre.



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## Schedule of Events

### **8:30 - 9:00 Registration, Caffeine, Carbohydrates**

### **9:00 - 10:00 Landscapes of Violence**

**Andrew Richmond** (Department of English, OSU), Rivers of Blood at the Banks You Know: Vision Literature Motifs and Rhetorical Constructions of Localized Landscapes in *Thomas the Rhymer*

**Sarah Harlan-Haughey** (Department of English, University of Maine), Women on the Brink: Water and Death in Maine/Maritimes Balladry

### **10:00 - 10:15 Break**

### **10:15 - 11:15 Gender and Concealment**

**Christofer Johnson** (Department of English, OSU), 'She Dressed Herself in Man's Array': Gender, Sexuality, and Agency in the Cross-Dressing Ballads

**Kate Burling** (University of Capetown/Project Narrative), Conrad's Secret Agent: the Role of 'The Butcher Boy' Ballad in the Telling of Winnie Verloc

### **11:15 - 11:30 Break**

### **11:30 - 12:30 Delving**

**Richard Firth Green** (Department of English, OSU), 'I saw a dead man won the field': the Genesis of The Battle of Otterburn

**Sally Schutz** (Department of English, Texas A&M), Ballad Hysteria: A Response to Fatalistic Ballad Scholarship

### **12:30-1:30 Lunch**

### **1:30 - 2:30 Enlivening**

**Jennifer Wollock** (Department of English, Texas A&M), On Reading and Singing 'Tam Lin'

**Graeme Boone** (School of Music, OSU), Jerry Garcia, Robert Hunter, and the Harry Smith Ballad Collection

### **2:30 - 2:45 Break**

### **2:45 - 3:45 Keynote Address**

**Todd Harvey** (Curator of the Alan Lomax Collection of the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress) "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship": Reimagining Ballad Scholarship at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

### **3:45 - 4:45 Wrap-up Discussion**

Graeme Boone, Richard Green, and Dorothy Noyes

## Presentation Abstracts

**Boone, Graeme.** (School of Music, OSU), **Jerry Garcia, Robert Hunter, and the Harry Smith Ballad Collection.** The modern history of the ballad is marked by complex entanglements with popular culture and music. The Grateful Dead and their principal singer, Jerry Garcia, present a signal example of these entanglements in the 1960s and also of the ongoing relevance of the ballad to contemporary musical expression since that time.

**Burling, Kate.** (University of Capetown/Project Narrative), **Conrad's Secret Agent: the role of 'The Butcher Boy' ballad in the telling of Winnie Verloc.** Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) has long been seen as an intensely 'political novel', the second of three major works critiquing the grand narratives of Capitalism, Anarchism and Communism. Like *Nostromo* before it (1904), and *Under Western Eyes* which followed (1911), *The Secret Agent* tracks international incursions into the political, social and economic life of a modern city and its government: ordinary people caught up in events are merely instruments and casualties of the greater scheme of things.

But these readings fly in the face of Conrad's repeated claims that *The Secret Agent* is essentially "the story of Winnie Verloc" - the unattractive, uninspiring wife of a double agent, whose domestic experience of disappointment, betrayal and tragedy leads her to suicide. My paper will argue that Conrad's commitment to the singularity and particularity of Winnie's story relies on a deliberately subliminal invocation of the popular, 'Butcher Boy' song, which had been circulating in Britain as a broadside ballad from the mid-nineteenth century. In form, content and convention, the telling of Winnie's life and death recalls the characters, language and themes of the ballad via a network of references embedded in the text. Rather than affirming the impossibility of individual agency in the novel's bleak world, Conrad's stealthy inter-medial agent transforms Winnie into a self-determined heroine, possessed of poignantly latent lyricism and powerfully Romantic appeal.

**Green, Richard Firth.** (Department of English, OSU), **'I saw a dead man won the field': the Genesis of The Battle of Otterburn.** The Battle of Otterburn, fought in 1388 between the Scots and the English, resulted in a decisive Scottish victory, but this paper will argue the earliest surviving versions of a ballad commemorating the battle (from around 1500), not only deliberately falsify its outcome but misrepresent its essential features, and that, furthermore, a handful of generally maligned and neglected later ballad versions (collected in Scotland around 1800), far from having been hopelessly corrupted by four-hundred years of oral transmission, actually preserve the central episode of the original ballad (its emotional core) with some precision.

**Harlan-Haughey, Sarah.** (Department of English, University of Maine), **Women on the Brink: Water and Death in Maine/Maritimes Balladry.** Maine is a watery state and it's no surprise that British ballads that survived there often focus on bodies of water—lakes, seas, marshes, and rivers—as settings for ballad action. In fact, watery settings, already present in the British ballads, are often amplified to great emotional affect in the versions collected in Maine. This paper explores the ways in which ballad singers in Maine and the Maritimes think with water, especially about modalities of death. We will follow the trajectory of some watery British ballads that became popular in Maine, (especially "The lake of Cold Finn," "The Lexington Miller," "Banks of Old Bardine," and "The Fair Maid on

the Shore,” among others) and then think about their influence on ballads arguably composed (but certainly popular) in Maine and the Maritimes—in particular “Lost Jimmy Whelan” and “The Jam on Gerry’s Rock.” With water in the ballads comes several special modes of thinking about love and death; while the imagery of water is inherited from another place, the tradition is enhanced, amplified, and rewritten by ballad makers in Maine and nearby. Ultimately, the unique environment of the region becomes a collaborator in the ever-evolving art of the ballad.

**Harvey, Todd.** (Curator of the Alan Lomax Collection of the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress), **Captain Wedderburn’s Courtship”: Reimagining Ballad Scholarship at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.** The American Folklife Center archive holds significant collections of song, making it a valuable resource for ballad scholarship. Ethnographic field recordings comprise the majority of early 20<sup>th</sup> century holdings in the archive. These recordings make possible exploration of ballads in their cultural context to an extent that text-only sources do not. A gulf exists, however, between knowledge that holdings exist and access to these materials in a manner increasingly expected by contemporary scholars. A central matter in archival discourse today, ‘meeting the needs of users’ depends on numerous factors including the Center’s willingness to embrace ideas from outside disciplines and disparate user groups. Field recordings will be heard and their cultural context will be examined.

**Johnson, Christofer.** (Department of English, OSU), **‘She Dressed Herself in Man’s Array’: Gender, Sexuality, and Agency in the Cross-Dressing Ballads.** I will explore the issues of gender and sexuality as presented “Sovay, or The Female Highwayman” [Laws N21], “The Soldier Maid” [Roud 226], and “The Famous Flower of Serving-men” [Child 106], paying special attention to the question of feminine power in a masculine-dominated world and the relatively fluid nature of gender and attraction in the cross-dressing ballads. I will examine the ways in which women in the cross-dressing ballads are able to navigate traditionally masculine spheres with little or no consequences, and the element of sexual confusion that the cross-dressing woman introduces into patriarchal society.

**Richmond, Andrew.** (Department of English, OSU), **Rivers of Blood at the Banks You Know: Vision Literature Motifs and Rhetorical Constructions of Localized Landscapes in *Thomas the Rhymer*.** In the ballad of *Thomas the Rhymer* (Child 37), the fairy realm is presented as a world alongside all others – beneath the hills of Scotland, yet down a different path than those that lead to either Heaven or Hell. Speaking of a similar geographical arrangement in the closely-related, fourteenth-century romance *Thomas of Ercelesdoun*, Ad Putter describes this “bizarre ‘mapping’ of the otherworld” as one that embodies “the connections between the constructs of the fairy world and the religious otherworld, ... in a cosmos where the fairy world is geographically intermediate between our world and the afterlife” (240). In addition to general agreement among academics as to the existence of geographical links to the realms of medieval Christian afterlife, yet unremarked upon in contemporary critical discourses, are some of the specific details that *Thomas the Rhymer* shares with other texts from the visionary tradition. Moreover, the description of Thomas’s journey to the fairy realm, while concordant with the general template for such journeys described by H. R. Patch in his comprehensive study of such motifs (3), nevertheless contains a peculiar mix of particulars that, surprisingly, echoes literary and folk traditions describing the biblical exodus of Moses and the Jews through the Red Sea.

The current aim, therefore, is to explain how specific details of Thomas' journey to fairy land, such as the opening scene, the red-blood river, the forty-day journey, and the appearance of the orchard may reflect the influence of both exegetical folk traditions and a specific scene from one Middle English translation of *St. Patrick's Purgatory*. This discussion will also lead us to consider how these specific details sustain an alternative, local account of Thomas' death. Together, these observations suggest that already existing folk motifs regarding prophets and visits to the otherworld were combined with the narrative of a prominent local figure's death, and the nature of the area's geography, to craft a fairy-world foundation for the legitimacy of the "prophecies" associated with his name. Finally, we will consider how the readily identifiable details of local landscape that begin the ballad help to reinforce the credibility of its story, and to make its fantastical, escapist narrative appealing to a regional audience by virtue of its implied availability.

**Schutz, Sally.** (Department of English, Texas A&M), **Ballad Hysteria: A Response to Fatalistic Ballad Scholarship.** There is a fatalistic strain in ballad scholarship. The concern over the death of the ballad and balladry itself forms a ballad hysteria that anyone doing scholarly research on the topic will encounter. In some part, the death knell tolled over the ballad stems from a belief that the oral tradition necessary to ballad composition has disappeared. These early scholars hold that the translation of ballads into physical text dismantles the oral atmosphere necessary for the ballad to adapt and change. There is also an unfortunate disregard among these academics for the merit and importance of the emerging American ballads that later prove the continuing life of balladry as a whole. Such scholars simply do not foresee the rise of an audio/visual culture that is currently evolving at an astounding rate, and enabling the ballad, particularly the American ballad, to thrive. By tracing the American murder ballad Stackolee through its various incarnations over the century since the actual murder took place, the successful adaptation of traditional balladry to new media is clearly illustrated.

**Wollock, Jennifer.** (Department of English, Texas A&M), **On Reading and Singing 'Tam Lin'.** As a popular, traditional English ballad, "Tam Lin" (Roud 35, Child 39) has been long admired for its plot, "among the best of all English-language ballad stories" (A. L. Lloyd, liner notes to the album Annie Briggs, 1971). The name Tam Lin first appears in 1549, and the earliest extant text (incomplete) was printed by David Herd in *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* (1769). The ballad itself has been collected among the Scottish travelling people, and is now in the repertory of a number of distinguished contemporary bands and folk singers on both sides of the Atlantic. Its narrative affinities connect it to medieval chivalric romance as well as folk belief and ancient mythology.

This paper looks at "Tam Lin" from two vantage points — that of the academic reader with a background in the study of the medieval chivalric romance tradition, and that of a present-day folk singer confronting the problem of performance for contemporary audiences. As an artifact "Tam Lin" offers the symposium a chance to consider a still living multimedia work of art — text and music — rooted in some of the oldest material we have, a clear witness to the ongoing power of the ballad form and of this work in particular.



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