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*War and the Media in Border Minstrelsy:
The Ballad of Chevy Chase (book chapter)*

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War and the Media in Border Minstrelsy: The Ballad of Chevy Chase

The ballad of Chevy Chase is a very old ballad, probably dating back to the fifteenth century and referring to events that transpired in the middle of that century or even back to the fourteenth century. Appreciated by writers and singers from feudal times to the age of Enlightenment, this ballad also crossed the line from oral culture to manuscript and printed text and back again—moving back and forth between broadside and song, sometimes part of a living tradition and sometimes an antiquarian's souvenir. That it has a long manuscript and print tradition is evident from the number of tangible versions of it on paper, both reported and extant, dating from the sixteenth century onwards. But it was undoubtedly sung as well (and not all broadsides *did* enter the oral tradition) for many broadsides of other songs both in single sheets and garlands have the instruction "To the tune of Chevy Chase." Moreover, several tunes were associated with this ballad, further indicating that it was sung.¹

The ballad of "Chevy Chase" or "The Hunting of the Cheviot" as the ballad scholar F.J. Child called it, comes from the border region between Norman-Saxon England and Celtic-Gaelic Scotland, a contested territory between the two countries defined roughly by a rectangle with "corners at Newcastle, Penrith, Dumfries, and Edinburgh."² The site of many pitched battles, livestock raids, and ambushes, this border region was defined by violent encounters among clansmen who, according to an official of 1583, "will be Scottishe when they will and Englishe at their pleasure."³ Their allegiances tended to be to clans rather than to any nation.

But no matter how they identified themselves, people throughout the region shared a common culture; they played fiddles and pipes and sang about men "eminent for their

prowess and bravery in the border wars”—as Thomas Bewick tells us in his memoir of growing up in eighteenth-century Newcastle.

The winter evenings were often spent in listning (sic) to the traditionary tales and songs....These songs and *laments* were commemorative of many worthies, but the most particular ones that I now remember were those respecting the Earl of Derwent-Water, who was beheaded in the year 1715, and who was looked upon, as having been a victim to the cruelty of the reigning family.⁴

Although Englishmen, these borderers were moved by the tale of a Scots laird executed by the king of England for his unswerving fidelity to the Stuarts in the uprising of 1715. Loyal to certain families first and to their nation second, the borderers operated according to a system that David Buchan has called a “clannit” society⁵: an amalgam of feudal loyalties derived from the land they lived on together with the clan loyalties derived from family membership. This way of life, with its heroism and obligations, has been recorded and celebrated in a surviving body of ballads collected by Sir Walter Scott in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803-1805). As Scott explained it,

The patriarchal right of dominion of a Chieftain of a clan over those of the same name, and who were presumed to be of the same family with himself—a right of dominion the most ancient in the world—was acknowledged in both countries, while the authority exercised by the Lowland Scottish nobles and barons depended upon the feudal principle of superior and vassal, or upon that of landlord and tenant.⁶

But in Scott's lifetime the older feudal arrangements recorded in the border ballads—both the Highland “clannit” system and the Lowland vasselage system—were being supplanted by more modern contractual relations due to a number of factors: the internecine feuds in the borderlands, the Act of Union between Scotland and England (1707), the failure of the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. The “clearances” in Scotland in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, analogous to the “enclosures” that occurred a bit earlier in England, converted multitudes of small holdings to vast sheep walks and displaced tens of thousands of people—because, as Scott put it, “the Laird has more need for money than for men.” That is, the economic possibilities of capitalism and international trade made sheep herding more lucrative than tenant farming and, in a post-feudal world, more appealing to those who owned the land. Scott, that urbane modern man, watched the last remnants of feudalism play out in his time and recognized what he was seeing. His ballad collecting was part of his determination “to preserve these stories and the memory of times and manners which, though existing as it were yesterday, have so strangely vanished from our eyes.”⁷

Popular ballads are narratives in verse—sung stories—a medieval poetic genre with distinctive metrics and a distinctive style, which is both immediate and impersonal. The term “popular ballad” is F. J. Child's term, meant to distinguish ballads carried (at least partly) in the oral tradition from those more ephemeral and often topical broadside ballads that existed effectively in print. The traditional performance style for such popular ballads is deadpan, without dramatization; singers are understood to be the vehicle for the ballad whose power and interest must carry the occasion. It is believed that ballads evolved long ago in pre-literate communities of people (with shared interests, tastes, and beliefs), to accompany various kinds of work as well as dances and holidays and convivial gatherings. They

functioned as entertainment in these communities and as expressive outlets, but also as historical record, news and commentaries. Ballads were the newspapers, radio, magazines, books and television of their day. Along with the Bible and local histories, they formed the reading matter of the poor during the eighteenth century.⁸

Our knowledge of many ballads such as this one, of course, can only be dated from where we can pick up the paper trail—whether print or manuscript—no matter how far back particular ballads might go in the oral tradition. Ballads were published on single sheets of paper called broadsides, often decorated with crude woodcuts, and sung by itinerant minstrels or sold cheaply in city streets or village squares by hawkers and ballad mongers. The Stationer's Register—a court agency that licensed all printed matter in England—records three thousand ballads licensed between 1557 and 1709 but there were “at least three to five times that number . . . issued without license or specific entry” in the register.⁹ Although the form of the popular ballad is medieval, the Elizabethan period was the heyday of these printed broadsides. The border ballads, of which “Chevy Chase” is such a venerable example, are thus an expression of life on a frontier not only in medieval times but also in feudal-Elizabethan times.

The ballad of “Chevy Chase” is about a battle fought in the borderlands between the forces of Northumberland's Earl Percy and Scotland's Earl Douglas. In the song, Earl Percy is the instigator, hunting in Scottish territory, the woods of Chevy Chase. According to a Scottish historian, there *was* a battle between a Percy and a Douglas in 1435 or so, with great slaughter on both sides, as a result of a raid led by Lord Percy with 4,000 men.¹⁰ In this Scottish historical record, the Scots, led by William Douglas, Earl of Angus, were considered victorious despite their losses.

But historical memory is fallible and often confuses and conflates events. In the U.S. today, for instance, even at the distance of eight years and the disavowal by the Bush administration publicists of any connection between Iraq and the terrorists who blew up the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11/01, there are plenty of Americans who believe that we invaded Iraq because Saddam Hussein was somehow behind the events of 9/11. In a similar act of re-imagining the events of the ballad of “Chevy Chase,” the battle of 1435 recorded by the Scottish historian is conflated with a much earlier battle between a different Percy and Douglas, the battle of Otterburn, as is suggested in verse sixty-five of the oldest version of the ballad: “This was the hontynge off the Cheviat, / that tear begane this spurn; / Old men that knowen the grownde well ynoughe / call it *the* battell of Otterburn.”¹¹ According to the French historian Froissart, the story of the battle of Otterburn (which is about thirty-two miles from Newcastle), is as follows. In 1388, during the reign of Richard II, the Scots invaded Northumberland and, under the leadership of several prominent noblemen, “advanced to the gates of Newcastle; where, in a skirmish, they took the ‘penon’ or ‘colours’ [i.e. flag] belonging to Henry Lord Percy, surnamed Hotspur, son to the Earl of Northumberland. In their retreat home they also attacked the castle of Otterbourn....” The daring Scots were then surprised in their camp by Lord Percy, at which point, rallying under the leadership of James, the Earl of Douglas, they fought a pitched battle with the English in which Douglas was slain and Percy was taken prisoner.¹²

Sir Walter Scott includes a ballad called “The Battle of Otterbourne” in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803) in which the brave Scots rout the English. The ballad was obtained in a fragmentary form from David Herd’s *Collections of Scottish Songs and Ballads* (1776) and was filled out by James Hogg from the recitation of “a crazy old man, and a

woman deranged in her mind residing in Ettrick Forest”—not to mention Hogg’s own inventive imagination.¹³ Scott states that his “Otterbourne” is essentially different from the version that Percy published in the *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765) insofar as his “Otterbourne” is obviously of Scottish composition. Percy’s English version of “Otterbourne” comes from manuscripts in the Cottonian and Harleian collections, preserved in the British Library.

“The Hunting of the Cheviot,” #162 in F. J. Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98), is obviously a related ballad. As Child writes in his headnote:

The differences in the story of the two ballads, though not trivial, are still not so material as to forbid us to hold that both may be founded upon the same occurrence, the Hunting of the Cheviot being of course the later version, and following in part its own tradition, though repeating some portions of the older ballad. According to this older ballad [i.e. the ballad of Otterburn], Douglas invades Northumberland in an act of public war; according to the later, Percy takes the initiative, by hunting in the Scottish hills without the leave and in open defiance of Douglas, lieutenant of the Marches.¹⁴

The earliest version of “The Hunting of the Cheviot” tells the story from the English point of view, claiming that the Scottish force suffered the heaviest losses and that the English were victorious. The names of the dead on both sides, listed in the last verses, remind one of the catalogue of Greek heroes sung out in the second book of *The Iliad*. This earliest text of “Chevy Chase” comes from the manuscript of Richard Sheale, a minstrel from Tamworth in the later sixteenth century, “whose business was to sing and talk, or to chant ballads and tell stories.”¹⁵ Sheale’s version of “Chevy Chase,” from the 1550s, predates its appearance

among a large parcel of ballads entered in the Stationer's Registers in 1624.¹⁶ Because these ballads have come down to us in an oral tradition, preserved by the singing of traveling minstrels and ordinary people without reading or writing, our first glimpse of them from the printed record may come long after they have been known and sung. Indeed, it seems likely that the ballad of "Chevy Chase" was being sung in England before Columbus discovered America!

But the first mention of "Chevy Chase" in the print record appears in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (1549), where it is referred to as one of several songs "of natural music of the antiquitie" sung by shepherds.¹⁷ So by the middle of the sixteenth century, when Richard Sheale sang it with its sixty-eight verses, this ballad was already an old and well-known song. Sir Philip Sidney, born four or five years after this, confides in his *Apologie for Poetrie*, 1595:

I never heard the olde song of Percie and Douglas, that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet: and yet is it sung but by some blinde crouder [harper], with no rougher voyce, than rude stile; which beeing so evill apparelled in the dust and cobwebbes of that uncivill age, what would it worke, trymmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar!¹⁸

Francis James Child, who was a great philologist among other things, observes that many of the linguistic details of Sheale's version look considerably older than the Elizabethan era in which Sheale lived. According to Child, the grammatical form of the plurals of nouns, for instance, and the reference to a king—"God save the king"—rather than a queen in the last verse, suggest a text considerably older than the sixteenth century. To a critic familiar with the historical sweep of English poetry, some of the lines have a distinctly Elizabethan cast:

“This battell begane in Chyviat / an owar befor the none / And when even-songe bell was rang, / the battell was nat half done.” But other lines seem older to the sensitive ear, archaic words that render the meaning ambiguous. “This was the hontynge off the Cheviat, / that tear begane this spurn; / Old men that knowen the grownde well yenoughe / call it *the* battell of Otterburn.” The words “tear” and “spurn” themselves are very old; the OED dates them back as far as 1000. Child cites a colleague specializing in medieval etymology in his headnote: “That tear begane his spurn ‘is said to be a proverb, meaning that tear, or pull, brought about this kick’—but adds that this claim needs to be confirmed.¹⁹ Or “tear” might simply be the heard contraction of “that e’re (ever)” in which case the meaning of the line is “That ever began this spurn.”

Because of inevitable alterations that occur with oral transmission over the centuries, one cannot place much stock in the historical accuracy of either of these ballads; they have been slanted by nationalistic and propagandistic purposes to glorify the English in the ballad of “Chevy Chase” and to glorify the Scots in the ballad of “Otterburn.” Nonetheless, one luminous historical detail is perfectly preserved in the reference to the battle of Humbledown (Homildon), a battle that did, in fact, take place fourteen years after Otterburn, also in the reign of Henry IV. In the ballad of “Chevy Chase,” the English king pledges to revenge himself upon the Scots for Earl Percy’s death, which he does triumphantly at Humbledown. Neither the revenge nor the triumph are historically accurate; both have been added to glorify the English. But the historical sequence of the two battles has been preserved by word of mouth from the fourteenth century onwards.

There are a number of literary references to “Chevy Chase” as it was carried through time both orally and in print. We know that it was a popular ballad in the middle of the

seventeenth century, because Isaak Walton refers to it in *The Compleat Angler* (1653) as one of the songs sung by the daughter of a dairy woman, along with “Johnny Armstrong” and “Come, Shepherds, Deck Your Herds.” That it was still being sung fifty years later is attested to by Joseph Addison, an eighteenth-century man of letters who wrote that “The old Song of *Chevy-Chase* is the favorite Ballad of the common People of *England*.” Addison, one of the inventors of the periodical, apparently collected broadsides as a hobby—those single sheet printings of ballads with ornamental woodcuts along the top, that country folk hung upon their walls much as our students hang posters on their walls to decorate their rooms. He wrote a lengthy analysis of “Chevy Chase,” in two numbers of *The Spectator* (May 21 and May 25, 1711), a publication intended to improve the taste and polish the sensibilities of his early eighteenth-century audience. To sanction and justify his interest in broadsides, and his literary analysis of the beauties of this ballad in particular, he reported that “*Ben Johnson* (sic) used to say he had rather have been the Author of it [i.e. “Chevy Chase”] than of all his Works.”²⁰ He defended popular taste, saying “an ordinary Song or Ballad that is the Delight of the common People, cannot fail to please all such Readers as are not unqualified for the Entertainment by their Affectation or Ignorance.”²¹ The popularity of such songs as “Chevy Chase” created the cultural context for Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (as discussed by Noelle Chao in this volume)—ordinary ballads sung by ordinary people in London (rather than Italian aristocrats) in a new form (the ballad opera) that valorized the ordinary. People sang ballads, heard ballads, and knew ballads; putting these familiar tunes on the stage in a theatrical event brought the theater into the streets and the streets into the theater.

But Joseph Addison, being a literary gentleman, did not leave “Chevy Chase” there, in the hearts and mouths of common people. Rather he placed the ballad in the epic tradition,

stating that “the Sentiments in that Ballad are extreamly Natural and Poetical, and full of the majestick Simplicity which we admire in the greatest of ancient Poets . . . there are several Parts in it where not only the Thought but the Language is majestick, and the Numbers sonorous.”²² He remarks in particular on the beauty of the line describing Percy’s action as he dies right after Douglas is struck by an arrow: “And leaving life Earl Percy took the dead man by the hand,” and observes that it reminds him of Aeneas’ behavior towards Lausus, whom he slays in coming to the aid of his own aged father in *The Aeneid*.²³

Addison’s praise, and his observation that contemporary balladry had something in common with the oral tradition of Homer, put him ahead of his time. Not until the Scottish scholar Thomas Blackwell’s *Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) did another literary thinker articulate in print the view that Homer’s epic drew on popular oral traditions of his time and was therefore comparable, in some way, to other popular oral traditions closer to home. By the time Thomas Percy rescued the seventeenth-century manuscript of songs and ballads from the maid who was lighting fires with it and transformed it into *The Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765), ballad poetry had come to interest intellectuals of the day very much, albeit as a literary phenomenon rather than as a living tradition.²⁴ The exception was Samuel Johnson, who was never much interested in the oral traditions that were being recovered in his day with such excitement. He scoffed at the authenticity of James Macpherson’s discovery of epic works in Gaelic²⁵; and despite his support of Percy’s project to publish the manuscript that was the basis of the *Reliques*, he sneered at oral poetry. “Chevy Chase pleased the vulgar,” he said, “but did not satisfy the learned; it did not fill a mind capable of thinking strongly.”²⁶

But then Johnson was not musical; and it was the melodies as much as the poetry and the alchemy of the words and music in combination that kept these ballads in circulation. Bertrand Bronson notes three different very popular tunes to which “Chevy Chase” was sung: “Flying Fame,” “Peascod Time,” and “O Ponder Well.”²⁷ Each tune had its own aesthetic appeal and rhetorical power. Indeed, many other ballads were sung to these tunes. The tune of a ballad is what keeps “the ballad syntax simple and straightforward”; tunes also control “what the ear takes in as a musical unit” and therefore what the mind apprehends.²⁸ To read the words of a ballad rather than hearing them sung is to miss the experience of the ballad; for the total effect is a result not only of the tune but the rhythm and pace of the melody to which it is sung.

Thomas Bewick, the engraver, to take a different eighteenth-century example, had a fine ear: “what ever tunes I heard at fairs or hoppings etc, I could next morning whistle them correctly, and not only the tune, but the manner of the various performers.”²⁹ As a boy, he loved hearing the “wild notes” of old tunes played on the Northumberland pipes when he went with his father to collect money for coals; and as a young man he enthused about the fine singing of one of his peers, a carver and gilder, who “could in a natural tone go to the highest and lowest pitch, with his pauses, his shakes or quavers—all in time.”³⁰ He knew several of the Duke of Northumberland’s pipers and especially praised one John Peacock, an “inimitable performer... on the Northumberland or small pipes, and with his old tunes, his lilt, his pauses and his variations I was always excessively pleased.” Bewick feared that “these old tunes and this ancient instrument, might from neglect or discouragement get out of use” and urged Peacock to take on students to preserve the old music. He suspected that the “Northumberland family were beginning to feel indifferent or to overlook and slight these

their ancient minstrels, who had for ages past been much esteemed by their forefathers and kept in attendance upon them.”³¹

Bewick from the Newcastle side of the border, like Scott from the Edinburgh side, felt that action was necessary to preserve the old oral musical traditions that were coming to be distained in the age of print. Since the late seventeenth century, when the educated classes began to read books and periodicals, literacy had been dividing communities. Elite forms of music and entertainment had been drifting away from popular music and narrative, which still tended to be transmitted orally. Increasingly associated with marginal social groups such as ballad mongers, hucksters at fairs, strolling players, and old women, these popular oral forms were coming to bear the stigma of vulgarity, illiteracy, and superstition.³² Samuel Johnson’s dismissal of “Chevy Chase” when compared to Ben Jonson’s admiration of it a century and a half before—and even Addison’s enthusiasm fifty years before—is telling.

Fortunately, in addition to gentlemen like Scott and educated yeomen like Bewick who loved the old songs, a generation of antiquarians grew up in the eighteenth century determined to preserve the old broadsides and manuscripts. Richards Sheale’s MS. version of “Chevy Chase” was first collected and printed by the indefatigable Thomas Herne in 1719 although copies of the later broadside versions, such as Addison was familiar with, can be found in the Pepys, Bagford, and Roxburghe collections of ballads. Samuel Johnson satirizes the type in *Rambler* #177 in a character who “turned all his thoughts upon old ballads, for he considered them as the genuine records of national taste” and was proud of his “first edition” of “The Children of the Wood.”³³

The appeal of “Chevy Chase”—the “favorite Ballad of the common People of *England*”—lies in part in the story of a mighty battle and of great heroism, bold defiance,

courage, and loyalty to an idealized monarch. “An Elegy on the Unknown Author of the ancient Ballad of Chevy Chase,” published in *The Caledonian Magazine; or Aberdeen Repository* in 1787, refers to the unknown bard’s martial spirit: “Such flames thy numbers still inspire, / Our village youth oft ask thy name, / And thy story too enquire.” And now, he continues, brave men from both England and Scotland such as those “in thy forceful lay,” fight side by side against “Gallia” or France.³⁴ War was a popular framing narrative for eighteenth-century ballads—as Dianne Dugaw’s discussion of cross-dressing sailors and soldiers reminds us. But this ballad has another dimension beyond the excitement of adventure. “Chevy Chase” is also about the tragic absurdity of war. Reading or hearing the ballad, one is struck by the enormous waste of life on both sides and by the triviality of the cause. This built-in ambivalence must have been part of the psychological interest of the ballad, mixed in with the martial displays and the weeping widows. A sense of how unnecessary it all was, spurred on by the willful and destructive “honor” of the leaders and by the tragic refusal of the English to abide by a single hand-to-hand combat, tempers the war lust. Our mixture of feelings as the story unfolds—horror, regret, admiration—make it more believable.

Indeed, one of the most striking things about the war propaganda of that distant time—as opposed to the war propaganda of our own day—is the admiration these fighting men feel for one another. The figures on both sides are heroic in Medieval and Renaissance contests. They are all worthy opponents—presumably so that the battle and the victory will mean something. Our media, on the contrary, tends rather to de-humanize the enemy, to make them into intractable villains who pose a threat to civilization so that our victories can be seen not as the triumph of individual valor or nobility but the triumph of a way of life, of

“freedom.” The gesture that the U.S. commander-in-chief made in being jetted down to an aircraft carrier in San Diego Bay in 2003 for a flamboyant photo announcing a “victory” that had little to do with the devastation of the war zone halfway around the world, is a far cry from Percy’s simple, human gesture of taking his enemy by the hand. This earlier propaganda recognized that the enemy lies just across the border.

If the ballad of “Otterburn” was constructed and sung from the Scots point of view, so the Anglophilia of the ballad of “Chevy Chase” is evident in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. In the third verse we are told that Percy’s mighty army of 1500 “bowmen bold” were “All chosen men of might.” They were a superior force, hand-picked for their prowess, with bows and arrows that could inflict injury from a distance, while the Scots still fought with spears. Indeed, it was an arrow that killed brave Earl Douglas, the Scots leader. We are given the inspiring and patriotic words of a “gallant” squire, an English landowner, Witherington, who says “While I have power to wield my sword/ Ile fight with hart and hand” (v. 26). But we hear no such speech from anyone in the Scottish force even though their leader, Earl Douglas, as I have said, is represented as brave and honorable. The worst thing for Douglas about his death is that “Lord Percy sees my fall” (v. 41).

But we are standing with the English: the Scottish spears are marching in “*our* sight” (v. 13). “*Our* English archers bent their bowes / Their harts were good and trew” (v. 27) And when the king of Scotland learns that he has lost Earl Douglas, he laments that he has lost his best man, whereas when King Henry learns of Percy’s death he says “I trust I have within my realme / five hundred as good as hee” (v. 64). Nevertheless, King Henry vows to revenge Percy’s death, which he does afterwards “well perform” at Humbledown, where “In one day fifty knights were slayne / with lords of great renowne” (v. 66).

Like all traditional ballads, this one plunks you down in *medias res*, in the middle of the action, without establishing time or context. One day Lord Percy of Northumberland vows to hunt in Chevy Chase and the action ramifies from that beginning. The immediacy of ballad narration is brilliantly typified by the lines: “Loe, yonder doth Erle Douglas come / hys men in armour bright” (v. 13) as if we are standing with the English army and we suddenly catch sight of this imposing enemy, Earl Douglas, with the sun glinting on the armor of his troops. That he is on a “milk-white steede” is a convention that both signals his nobility and confers a fairytale aura on the whole event; it assures us that we are being told a story. The formulaic “milk-white steede” is also part of the secret of remembering such a long song; descriptive epithets such as this are part of the singer’s equipment, known from countless other songs, rung in to burnish the dramatic moment and to fill out the line.

Alliteration is another *aide memoire* in this oral tradition and almost every line has repeated sounds that please the ear and help the memory. “The first flight of their arrowes sent / Full fourscore Scots they slew” (v. 27). Or “deepe and deedly blow” or “leaving life” or “Was with an arrow slaine.” These are just a few of the alliterations in the lines that are plentifully sprinkled throughout the ballad. Sir Walter Scott wrote in his “Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry” that the “passion for alliteration, which formed a rule of the Saxon poetry, was also retained in the Scottish poems of a more elevated character.”³⁵

The nonchalance of the opening of the ballad—Lord Percy deciding to take his pleasure hunting in a Scottish wood—is disingenuous, belied by his bringing 1500 archers with him on his hunting vacation. Nor were the English to be deterred from the battle they were provoking by the proposition of single hand-to-hand combat, although as the ballad says only fifty-three of the English archers went home after the battle was over. “The rest in

Chevy Chase were slaine, under the greenwoode tree” (v. 58). And of the 2,000 spearmen of Scotland “scarce fifty-five did flye” (v. 57), suggesting in that word “flye” that the fifty-five Scottish survivors were cowards rather than victors. Again, the ballad glorifies the English in their relatively fewer losses and their later revenge at Humbledown.

But this way of telling the losses on both sides—reporting that only 108 men all told out of 3,500 escaped the carnage rather than announcing that 1,447 English and 1,945 Scots had been killed—gives a truer sense of the devastation because we seem to learn of it from an eyewitness account from the battlefield rather than a bureaucratic report. To be told who was left standing after the battle was over—only 108 survivors—focuses us on ongoing life rather than the slaughter we have just heard about. This is one reason why this ballad horrifies us and brings home the senselessness of war as much as it appeals to patriotic feelings. Although all the men are brave and true, finally the cause feels too slight, too insufficient for all that killing, all those widows bewailing all those husbands and so few left standing when it is all over.

The last stanza carries this feeling even further. It seems to come from a different place, in a different voice, than the rest of the ballad. Its more direct and personal appeal is a departure from the impersonal tone of the storyteller, a *cri de coeur* slipped into the conventional ending: “God save our king and bless this land / With plentye, joy and peace; / And grant henceforth that foule debate / ‘Twixt noblemen may cease.” The people who sang this song would have been of the class that suffered from the quarrels of noblemen. And despite the requisite patriotic gloss that stirred the listeners and emptied their pockets, these last lines complain, however mildly, that war is caused by prideful leaders, that it is a hardship on people, forced on them by the “foule” debates of nobles that have nothing to do

with their lives. “Foule,” which sounds archaic, was a powerful word in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. When used literally it meant offensive to the senses as in rotten or putrifying, gross and rank, disgustingly dirty, filthy, or infected and diseased. Describing weather, it meant violent storms; describing a person’s appearance, revoltingly ugly. Used metaphorically, “foule” meant morally or spiritually polluted, abominable, detestable. “Foule” debates mean debates that are corrupt, diseased, stinking, filthy—anything but noble, and certainly the opposite of honorable. These words reduce the inflated nationalism of the foregoing glorious battle to “foule debates,” to garbage, to lowly, stinking, loathesome contention. These last lines are thus a curse and a meditative prayer, from the ground, after the battle that has been carried forward 600 years in the poetic tradition of ordinary people—a hope that the wars foisted on them by their superiors might one day come to an end.

Appendix: "The Ballad of Chevy Chase"
Version B from F. J. Child (3.311-314)

1. God prosper Long our noble king,
Our lives and safetyes all;
A woefull hunting once there did
In Chevy Chase befall.
2. To drive the deer with hound and horne,
Erle Percy took his way,
The child may rue that is unborne
The hunting of that day.
3. The stout Erle of Northumberland
A vow to God did make,
His pleasure in the Scottish woods
Three summer days to take;
4. The cheefest harts in Chevy Chase
To kill and bear away.
These tidings to Erle Douglas came,
In Scotland where he lay,
5. Who sent Erle Percy present word
He would prevent his sport.
The English Erle not fearing that,
Did to the woods resort,
6. With fifteen hundred bowmen bold;
All chosen men of might,
Who knew full well in time of neede
To ayme their shafts aright.
7. The gallant greyhounds swiftly ran
To chase the fallow deere:
On Monday they began to hunt
Ere daylight did appear;
8. And long before high noon they had
An hundred fat buckes slaine;
Then having dined the drovyers went
To rouse the deer again.
9. The bowmen mustered on the hill,
Well able to endure;

Their backsides all, with special care,
That day were guarded sure.

10. The hounds ran swiftly through the woods,
The nimble deere to take,
That with their cryes the hills and dales
An eccho shrill did make.

11. Lord Percy to the quarry went,
To view the slaughtered deer;
Quoth he, Erle Douglas promised
This day to meet me heere;

12. But if I thought he would not come,
Noe longer would I stay.
With that a brave young gentleman
Thus to the Erle did say:-

13. Loe, yonder doth Erle Douglas come,
His men in armour bright;
Full twenty hundred Scottish speres
All marching in our sight;

14. All men of pleasant Tivydale,
Fast by the river Tweede:
O cease your sports, Erle Percy said,
And take your bowes with speede.

15. And now with me, my countrymen,
Your courage forth advance;
For there was never champion yett
In Scotland or in France,

16. That ever did on horseback come,
But if my hap it were,
I durst encounter man for man,
With him to break a spere.

17. Erle Douglas on his milk-white steede,
Most like a baron bold,
Rode foremost of his company,
Whose armour shone like gold.

18. Show me, sayd he, whose men you be,
That hunt so boldly heere,
That without my consent doe chase

And kill my fallow deere.

19. The first man that did answer make
Was noble Percy he;
Who sayd, We list not to declare,
Nor show whose men we be.
20. Yet we will spend our deerest blood,
Thy cheefest harts to slay.
The Douglas swore a solempne oathe,
And thus in rage did say,
21. Ere thus I will outbraved be,
One of us two shall dye:
I know thee well an erle thou art;
Lord Percy, soe am I.
22. But trust me, Percy, pittye it were
And great offence to kill
Any of these our guiltless men,
For they have done no ill.
23. Let thou and I the battell trye,
And set our men aside.
Accurst be he, Erle Percy sayd,
By whom this is denyed.
24. Then stept a gallant squier forth,
Witherington was his name,
Who said, I wold not have it told
To Henry our king for shame,
25. That ere my captaine fought on foot
And I stood looking on.
You be two erles, sayd Witherington,
And I a squier alone:
26. Ile doe the best that doe I may,
While I have power to stand:
While I have power to wield my sword,
Ile fight with hart and hand.
27. Our English archers bent their bowes
Their harts were good and trew;
At the first flight of arrowes sent,
Full fourscore Scots they slew.

28. Yet bides Erle Douglas on the bent,
As cheeftain stout and good,
As valiant captain, all unmoved,
The shock he firmly stood.
29. His host he parted had in three,
As leader ware and tryd,
And soon his spearmen on his foes
Bare down on every side.
30. To drive the deere with hound and horne,
Douglas bade on the bent:
Two captaines moved with mickle might
Their speares to shivers went.
31. Throughout the English archery
They dealt full many a wound;
But still our valiant Englishmen
All firmly kept their ground:
32. And throwing straight their bowes away,
They grasped their swords so bright:
And now sharp blows, a heavy shower,
On shields and helmets light.
33. They closed full fast on every side,
No slackness there was found;
And many a gallant gentleman
Lay gasping on the ground.
34. O Christ! it was a griefe to see,
And likewise for to heare,
The cries of men lying in their gore,
And scattered here and there.
35. At last these two stout erles did meet,
Like captaines of great might;
Like lyons wood, they layd on lode
And made a cruell fight:
36. They fought until they both did sweat,
With swords of tempered steele;
Until the blood, like drops of rain,
They trickling down did feele.

37. Yield thee, Lord Percy, Douglas sayd;
In faith I will thee bringe,
Where thou shalt high advanced be
By James our Scottish king:

38. Thy ransome I will freely give,
And this report of thee:
Thou art the most courageous knight
That ever I did see.

39. Noe, Douglas, quoth Erle Percy then,
Thy proffer I do scorne;
I will not yield to any Scott,
That ever yet was borne.

40. With that there came an arrow keene,
Out of an English bow,
Which struck Erle Douglas to the heart,
A deepe and deadly blow:

41. Who never spake more words than these,
Fight on, my merry men all;
For why, my life is at an end;
Lord Percy sees my fall.

42. Then leaving liffe, Erle Percy tooke
The dead man by the hand;
And said, Erle Douglas, for thy life
Wold I have lost my land.

43. O Christ, my very hart doth bleed
With sorrow for thy sake;
For sure a more redoubted knight
Mischance cold never take.

44. A knight among the Scotts there was
Who saw Erle Douglas dye,
Who streight in wrath did vow revenge
Upon the Lord Percy.

45. Sir Hugh Montgomery was he called,
Who, with a spear most bright,
Well mounted on a gallant steed,
Ran fiercely through the fight;

46. And past the English archers all,

Without all dread and feare;
And through Earl Percy's body then
He thrust his hatefull speare;

47. With such a vehement force and might
He did his body gore,
The staff ran through the other side
A large cloth-yard or more.

48. So thus did both these nobles dye,
Whose courage none could staine:
An English archer then perceived
The noble erle was slaine;

49. He had a bow bent in his hand,
Made of a trusty tree;
An arrow of a cloth-yard long
Up to the head drew he:

50. Against Sir Hugh Montgomery,
So right the shaft he sett,
The grey goose-wing that was thereon,
In his hart's blood was wett.

51. This fight did last from break of day
Till setting of the sun;
For when they rang the evening-bell
The battle scarce was done.

52. With stoute Erle Percy there was slaine
Sir John of Egerton,
Sir Robert Ratcliff, and Sir John,
Sir James that bold barron:

53. And with Sir George and stoute Sir James
Both knights of good account,
Good Sir Ralph Raby there was slaine,
Whose prowese did surmount.

54. For Witherington my hart is woe,
That ever he slain should be;
For when his legs were hewn in two
He knelt and fought on his knee.

55. And with Erle Douglas there was slaine
Sir Hugh Montgomery,

Sir Charles Murray, that from the field
One foot wold never flee.

56. Sir Charles Murray, of Ratcliff too,
His sister's sonne was he;
Sir David Lamb, so well esteem'd,
Yet saved cold not be,

57. And the Lord Maxwell in like case
Did with Erle Douglas dye:
Of twenty hundred Scottish speres
Scarce fifty-five did flye.

58. Of fifteen hundred Englishmen,
Went home but fifty-three;
The rest were slaine in Chevy Chase,
Under the greene woode tree.

59. Next day did many widowes come,
Their husbands to bewayle;
They washed their wounds in brinish teares,
But all wold not prevayle.

60. Theyr bodyes, bathed in purple gore,
They bore with them away;
They kist them dead a thousand times,
Ere they were cladd in clay.

61. The newes was brought to Eddenborrow,
Where Scotland's king did raigne,
That brave Erle Douglas suddenlye
Was with an arrow slaine.

62. O heavy newes, King James did say,
Scotland may witness be,
I have not any captain more
Of such account as he.

63. Like tydings to King Henry came,
Within as short a space,
That Percy of Northumberland
Was slaine in Chevy Chase:

64. Now God be with him, said the king,
Sith it will noe better be;
I trust I have within my realme,

Five hundred as good as he.

65. Yet shall not Scotts nor Scotland say,
But I will vengeance take;
Ile be revenged on them all
For brave Erle Percy's sake.

66. This vow full well the king performed
After at Humbledowne;
In one day fifty knights were slaine,
With lords of great renowne;

67. And of the rest of small account,
Did many thousands dye:
Thus ended the hunting of Chevy Chase
Made by the Erle Percy.

68. God save our king, and bless this land
With plentye, joy, and peace;
And grant henceforth that foule debate
'Twixt noblemen may cease.

Notes

¹ Simpson, *British Broadside Ballad*, pp. 96-101, 103-106. Simpson reports that “Chevy Chase is named as the tune for some three dozen ballads before 1700” (p. 96) and conjectures that the melody previously known as “Flying Fame” was gradually renamed “Chevy Chase.” He also notes that “O Ponder Well” was a tune associated with “Chevy Chase” (p. 104).

² Reed, *Border Ballad*, p. 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bewick, *My Life*, ed. and intro. by Bain., p. 32. The ballad to which he refers, “Lord Derwentwater,” Child 208, is still being transmitted orally today. Danny Spooner, the great Australian folksinger, sings a version that he learned by ear from Mrs. McColl, a friend of his mother’s, in London during WWII. He reminds me that there is also another ballad called “Dewentwater's Farewell” which appears in a number of collections and begins

Fare thee well thou Dilston Hall

Fareweel ma' ancient seat, etc.

It tells of James Ratcliffe, Earl of Derwentwater, who goes to London knowing full well that he will be executed for participating in the 1715 Jacobite rebellion.

⁵ Buchan, *Ballad and the Folk*, Chap. 5, pp. 35-50.

⁶ *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 1.56-57.

⁷ Letter to Robert Surtees, December 17, 1806, quoted from *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 1.67.

⁸ Bewick, *My Life*, p. 46. This is what Bewick says of the cottagers were reading in the later eighteenth century in Newcastle. Beginning readers of all classes often used ballads as primers.

⁹ Simpson, *British Broadside Ballad*, p. xi n.6.

¹⁰ For this citation see Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 3.305.

¹¹ I quote this from Child's "A" text, Richard Sheale's version (with 68 verses), preserved in MS. Ashmole 48, and printed in Child, *Popular Ballads*, 3.307-10. The broadside version known to Addison and which I discuss below, is reproduced at the end of this article. A variant can also be found in electronic form in the EMC Early Modern Archive at the University of California at Santa Barbara <<http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/>>.

¹² This account is given by Percy in *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, Book I, in the headnote to "The Battle of Otterbourne."

¹³ *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, with notes and introduction by Sir Walter Scott, ed. Henderson, 1. 284.

¹⁴ Child, *Popular Ballads*, 3.304.

¹⁵ Child, *Popular Ballads*, 3.303.

¹⁶ Child, *Popular Ballads*, 3.305n.

¹⁷ This historical information about the ballad comes from Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 3.303-15.

¹⁸ Quoted as an epigraph to the section on "The Ancient Ballad of Chevy Chase" by Percy in *Reliques*, Book I.

¹⁹ Walter William Skeat was a professor of Anglo Saxon at Christ's Church, Cambridge and a contemporary of Child's.

²⁰ *The Spectator* #70, Monday, May 21, 1711.

²¹ Ibid. The text of the broadside he was working with is quoted in full at the end of this article.

²² *The Spectator* #74, Friday, May 25, 1711.

²³ *The Spectator* # 70.

²⁴ For the story of Percy's project, see Groom, *Making of Percy's Reliques*.

²⁵ Although Macpherson imposed on the credulity of the public with the publication of *Fingal* and *Temora* in 1765, he did collect Gaelic poetry from oral sources in his day and so the tradition he published as "Ossian," was not entirely a fabrication. See the Introduction by Stafford to *Poems of Ossian*, ed. Gaskill.

²⁶ Quoted by William Windham, 1784 in Ketton-Cremer, *Early Life and Diaries of William Windham*, p. 264.

²⁷ Bronson, *Singing Tradition of Child's Popular Ballads*, pp. 305-07.

²⁸ Ibid., p. xxvii.

²⁹ Bewick, *My Life*, p. 67

³⁰ Ibid., p.80, 115.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 115-16.

³² Woolf, "The 'Common Voice,'" pp. 26-52, esp. p. 47.

³³ The date of the *Rambler* essay is November 26, 1751.

³⁴ The poem, signed W. Hamilton Reid, was in *The Caledonian Magazine; or Aberdeen Repository* (Edinburgh, 1787), 1.643.

³⁵ Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. Henderson, 1.20.