

Fighting Dragons (Or Witches): Western North Carolina Mountain Tradition-Bearers of Seventeenth-Century British Broadside Ballads

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Several names heard in Western North Carolina are synonymous with ballad, song, and storytelling: The Ward, Hicks, Presnell, Rhymer, Norton, Guy, and Harmon families have shared what has been passed down to them in the oral tradition. Traditional, cultural transmissions practiced in the seventeenth century, and many that pre-date written documentation, ballads about love, murder, and witchcraft, are alive and well in Appalachia. One particular ballad dating back to the seventeenth century about interaction with a witch, "Jobal Hunter" (*Child* 18), is performed and has been recorded by Rick Ward, tradition-bearer of Beech Mountain ballad-singing.

Appalachian mountain people have been stereotyped as humble.¹ The character trait is found in Biblical scripture, with warnings of dire consequences if lacking: "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (KJV Matthew 23:12); "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself" (KJV Philippians 2:3); and, "Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'...humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (KJV James 4:6,10). Rick Ward and his family are a deeply spiritual group, raised up in the King James Version of the Bible. But, two members of the family, Rick's "Grandma Bradie," and his great-aunt "Granny Guy," practiced folk medicine, and were once labeled "witches." Granny Guy was a mid-wife, and according to Rick, "She was the one who birthed Mama and a lot of them up on Beech Mountain."² Grandma Bradie was a single mother for a while, took care of her family, played the guitar and sang, and "had some strange powers." Rick Ward reports that Bradie removed warts using a potato. She cut a potato into pieces, making sure to include on "eye" of the potato on the piece she would use. She then heated a pin over a candle, pricked the wart until she brought blood, and then rubbed the potato over the wart. The potato was then wrapped in a piece of white cloth, and buried. As the potato plant grew, the wart went away. Ward reports: "I saw her take seventy-two off a man. She took twelve off of me."³

Bradie also told fortunes using cards, and could tell the future by "reading" wax. This entailed dropping hot wax into a glass of water and looking at the shapes the wax took on. In her own understanding of what the varying shapes meant, she could predict the person's fortune. Jean Ward, Rick's mother and Bradie's daughter, says that her mother told fortunes until "the church made her stop; her church believed it was a sin."⁴ This determination was probably derived from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter eighteen, book ten: "There shall not

¹ See Deborah Vansau McCauley's work, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

² R. Ward, on the subjects of superstition and religion, personal interview.

³ Ibid.

⁴ J. Ward, personal interview.

be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch" (*The Holy Bible*). Bradie obeyed, in spite of the fact that neither she nor her family members found any contradiction of belief systems, folk belief and Christian. Bradie held on to her beliefs, beliefs that Jean would come to hold as well. Jean is a devout member of the Baptist Church, and is fully aware of the inconsistencies of believing in folk beliefs and wisdom and scriptural teachings at the same time, but she accepts this as the part of her carrying on the beliefs of her mother. Religion, folk wisdom, folk belief, folk practices, Christianity, and witchcraft are and were sometimes compatible.

Historian Michael D. Bailey sheds light on this compatibility in his essay, "The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature." Rituals and healing practices of individuals, and the church, predated an assignation of demonic association with those practices. Evolving from an ancient system of beliefs, the blend of folk belief and wisdom with Biblical instruction is a worldview in which spirituality is extremely strong and personal, not a vision of a spiritual world far away.

Folk beliefs and sacred beliefs helped define the identities of immigrants into the Appalachian region from the British Isles, and elsewhere. Escaping religious persecution in many cases, immigrant peoples brought with them belief systems and moral codes defined by their ancestors before them. However, even though early immigrants had rejected aspects of a European past,⁵ there were aspects of past religion that were maintained. Bailey explains the intellectual and psychological rationale:

Most laypeople surely understood at least the basic nature of demonic menace as the church depicted it. They did not; however, seem to connect familiar practices with this menace, or they viewed possible involvement with demons far less seriously than did clerics. Common discourse about interactions with supernatural or occult forces typically reflected care and hesitancy about engaging with such power, but also some casualness, evidenced by claims that most laypeople did not well or fully understand the specific nature of the operations involved or the powers invoked....Prayers and approved blessings drew on divine power, while magic spells relied on demons.⁶

Historian Alexandra Walsham sees the paradox of multiple and often opposing belief systems that came about after the religious upheavals of the Middle Ages, as "ingenious adjustments." Walsham writes:

The use of the Bible as a tool of divination or for medicinal cure and the miracles allegedly worked by incombustible portraits of Martin Luther may superficially smack of the Catholic cult of relics and sacramental and bespeak a reluctance to embrace an ideology that fiercely

⁵Michael D. Bailey, "The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature," *The American Historical Review* 111 (April 2006): 383-404. Bailey's work draws heavily from the works of scholars of European history, Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), and Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago, 2002).

⁶ Bailey, 391 and 394.

repudiated the localization of the holy, but they too attest to the ingenious adjustments and compromises that accompanied and eased this moment of rupture.⁷

Witchcraft is the subject matter of many ballads of the seventeenth century. As Associate Professor of Music History and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina, Sarah F. Williams writes, "Although learned scholars, lawmakers, and clergy wrote volumes about early modern English witchcraft, it was the artifacts of popular culture, like the broadside ballad, that actually disseminated its stereotypes, attributes, and, most especially, its acoustic qualities."⁸ Further, Williams states that "early modern English witches were categorized and represented not only by their social status or gender but also by their musical habits."⁹ Since women of the seventeenth century were expected to be modest, quiet, and in control of their emotions, singing and dancing could find one labeled a witch. Within the broadside ballad:

[we find women] represented [as] witches [who] . . . broke the established social rules of conduct and speech outlined for women in the seventeenth century, often engaging in excessive, disordered, discordant, and noisy behaviors. . . . The represented sounds of witches in street literature [were seen] as a kind of aural disorder, one that directly contradicts the social standards for orderly speech acts, social conduct, and learned musical discourse.¹⁰

Discordant music, music performed by incapable musicians, or any music composed without an eye towards God was seen by early moderns to be capable of bringing about disaster to individuals and society. "Music was an efficacious, yet dangerous, art. To misuse it to seduce an unwilling soul, as a witch might do, was a real concern."¹¹ Williams finds parallels between textual choices in the "witch" broadsides and the melodies assigned to them. The tunes themselves came to be indicative of the demonic, such as occurred with a tune from the oral canon of the sixteenth century, "Fortune My Foe."¹² That tune was later assigned to the broadside "Witchcraft Discovered and Punished," published in 1681. The tune of "Fortune My Foe" continued to be assigned to ballads about murders and executions, as well as other tragedies, such as a fire begun by a lightning strike which burned the city of Munster in Ireland in May of 1621 (Lamentable Burning). Another broadside ballad to be sung to the tune of "Fortune My Foe" was "Titus Andronicus Complaint." This work is the story of a man who fights against the Goths as a Roman soldier for ten years, returns home, and presents the king with his prisoners, one of which is "The Queen of Gothes," and another is a Moor. They are both evil.

⁷ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 205.

⁸ Sarah F. Williams, "'A Swearing and Blaspheming Wretch': Representations of Witchcraft and Excess in Early Modern English Broadside Balladry and Popular Song," *The Journal of Musicological Research* 30 (Issue 4, 2011): 310.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 310-11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹² *Ibid.*, for other names by which the tune, "Fortune My Foe," was known. Williams found the origination of the usage of the tune of "Fortune My Foe" used in a broadside to have occurred in a publication from 1565, "Of One Complaining of the Mutability of Fortune."

The king marries the queen, who sleeps with the Moor behind his back. In revenge for her initial capture, she eventually has the soldier's remaining sons imprisoned, and her sons rape his daughter, cut out her tongue and cut off her hands so she can neither speak nor write of who has done the deed. The daughter, Lavinia, overcomes, however, and writes their names in sand with her bloody stumps. The queen then tells the soldier she will free his sons if he gives her his own right hand, which he does. Later, the queen sends him his hand, along with the heads of his sons. The soldier's vengeance is in the capture, torture and mutilation of the queen's sons, grinding them into flour, and making a pie of them, which she eats. Titus then kills the emperor, his daughter, and himself. The ballad ends with the punishment of the Moore:

Then this revenge against the Moore was found
[Alive] they set him halfe into the ground,
Whereas he stood until such time he starv'd,
And so God send all muderers may be serv'd. (*Titus*)

Thus, we may conclude, the aural memories of musical tunes, such as those associated with "Fortunes Foe," recognizably contributed to feelings of horror and death, and evil intents of revenge and witchcraft.

Ballads and stories about witches made their way into western North Carolina in the 18th century with immigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. One finds a story about witches in a Jack tale entitled, "Jack and the Witches." Richard Chase, as a collector of folk tales for the Works Progress Administration after the Depression, writes:

["Jack and the Witches" was] recorded from R. M. Ward, Nancy Ward, Nora Hicks, and Kel Harmon, of Beech Mountain in western Carolina, Sally Middleton and Rosella Boggs of eastern Kentucky, and Mrs. Hattie Kiser of southwestern Virginia, [and] this witches' Sabbath tale seems to be fairly widely known in the Southern Mountains. Usually the boy is not named. R. M. Ward had forgotten what must have once been a most interesting part of this story: Where the Devil evidently used some sort of ritual to "take in new members." Mr. Ward said that Council Harmon, his grandfather;... "had a lot of words right there. I can't recollect any of it anymore."¹³

This passage is indicative of how certain aspects of stories are lost, and therefore, not always transmitted. In Appalachia we find many stories of love, albeit with subtle alterations. Here, recall we are unable to genuinely determine a strictly orally transmitted ballad from a broadside ballad—collections of broadsides are not complete, and many found are partial renderings. Although scholars have provided what is considered to be criteria for identification, such as lyrical components which assist memorization, and more lovely melodies, as well as a polished refinement¹⁴ that evolves through oral transmission of ancient, oral ballads, knowing for certain which ballads were also printed as broadsides is impossible. There does, however, seem to be agreement that a ballad is a product of cultural-editing. Eleanor R. Long-Wilgus reminds us:

¹³ Richard Chase, *The Jack Tales* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 64.

¹⁴ See Livingston, page 860.

As any true ballad-lover knows, no two performances of a ballad, even from the same singer, will be identical unless: (a) they have been memorized from a single source, in print or sound recordings; (b) there has been no exposure to any other version of the song; and/or (c) the version in question has been polished through repeated performances in professional or quasi-professional settings.¹⁵

Any printed broadsides, *with the exception of love songs and romantic fictions*,¹⁶ were politically controlled.¹⁷ As the use of ballads and broadsides evolved, so did the cultural impact, particularly in the evolution of the assumed characteristics, identification, and treatment of witches. That impact not only influenced the common folk, but also the well-educated. The use of the broadside in Britain varied, as the ballad was performed, read, and sometimes pasted on walls, but all of these uses were aspects of culturally provided education. Affordable, broadsides were popular among the literate population, and they were oftentimes printed versions of older, oral ballads.

As we know, the efforts of Francis J. Child resulted in a collection that includes what he delineated as traditional ballads, broadsides, and folk songs. The specific criteria by which he determined what to include or exclude in his work are debated, but Child's belief that ballad transmission which occurred orally through the illiterate, less-educated people, maintained a purer version of the original has been well-documented. Child's conclusions may be valid, but according to Carol Rose Livingston, "prior to the sixteenth century, the printed broadsheet *and* [my emphasis] the minstrel ballad had separately been very largely the possessions of the ruling classes."¹⁸ Sigrid Rieuwerts supports this dual-ownership of broadsides and ballads, and found it remained so into the early eighteenth century. Rieuwerts gives examples from Allan Ramsay's collections of songs, *Tea-table Miscellany*, printed in four volumes between 1723-1736:

[They were] intended for women, regardless of their social standing. Without making any textual changes, the songs that were previously sold as half-pennies and broadsheets in the streets of Edinburgh, were now compiled and sold as a book to which women of higher society subscribed.¹⁹

Mary Ellen Brown also saw the class differentiation breakdown revealed in Ramsay's publication practices. [He], "to please all audiences, published the same materials in deluxe editions and as single sheets and garlands; it may be that there were class distinctions in the packaging, if not in the materials."²⁰

Paula McDowell shares additional information about the publication of broadsides in Britain, and indicated them to be "among the largest classes of printed materials. Some three

¹⁵ Eleanor R. Long-Wilgus, *Naomi Wise: Creation, Re-creation, and Continuity in an American Ballad Tradition* (Chapel Hill: Chapel Hill Press, 2003), 21.

¹⁶ I have emphasized this phrase.

¹⁷ Carole Rose Livingston, *British Broadside Ballads of the Sixteenth Century: A Catalogue of the Extant Sheets and an Essay* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 855.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 853.

¹⁹ Sigrid Rieuwerts, "Women as the Chief Preservers of Traditional Ballad Poetry," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 47 (2002): 153.

²⁰ Mary Ellen Brown, *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 125.

thousand distinct ballads were printed between 1150 and 1600."²¹ Mary Ellen Brown writes, "There was a collective understanding, an a priori—if indeterminate—sense of ballads, especially with regard to their societal context. That is, ballads apparently arose and thrived in particular environments—among a homogeneous people prior to the development of 'book culture'."²²

The haunting antiquity extolled in the modern day by performers such as Rick Ward continues to taunt scholars trying to explain what cannot be fully explained. The Ward family moved into the area now known as Watauga County in the middle of the eighteenth century. Ward's family can be traced to British sea Captain Seth Ward, who lived in Henrico County, Virginia in 1613, and traveled back and forth to London; his son, Richard being born there. We can presume, by association, that Seth Ward would have been exposed to the broadside ballad at the very least. Whether or not Seth was literate has not been definitively determined. Did Seth stuff a broadsheet into a travel bag and carry it to America with him? Did the ballads that Rick Ward performs make their way to Rick via Seth's crossings? Sixteen generations of Wards have lived between that first Richard Ward and Rick, moving through Virginia into the Cumberland Gap, and finally into North Carolina where, it is believed, the Wards were the first settlers into Watauga County, owning a land grant in the area now known as Valle Crucis.

Keeping the Tradition: Traditional Music from Beech Mountain, NC (2010) is Rick Ward's latest recorded compilation of traditional ballads and songs.²³ Seventeen performances are on the disc, and "Jobal Hunter," also identified as Child 18, are included. Variants of this ballad are many, but the older renditions as performed in Appalachia may be found in Cecil Sharp's *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, published in 1917.²⁴ Some versions include a witch, and some do not. The Jobal Hunter is sometimes identified as *jovial*. He was also known as Sir Lionell, Sir Ryalass, Sir Eglamore, and Center, among others. He fought boars, witches, dragons, and, in the case of Sir Eglamore, asked that God preserve the King and Queen. Ward's Jobal Hunter does not. Ward's version includes the witch:

Abe and Bailey had three sons;
The youngest was called Center.
He's gone to the Green's woods hunting
Just like a jobal hunter.

As he walked up the green briar ridge,
Blow your horn, Center.
There he met a gay lady,
Just like a jobal hunter.

She says, "There is a wild boar in these woods;
Blow your horn, Center,

²¹Paula McDowell, "The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of Ballad-Making: Broadside Ballads in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse," *The Eighteenth Century* 47 (2006): 151.

²² Brown, 232.

²³ Rick Ward, *Keeping the Tradition: Traditional Music from Beech Mountain, NC* (Sugar Grove, NC: Rick Ward Music, 2010), track 12.

²⁴ Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1917), 28.

For he has killed my lord and forty men,
As you are the jobal hunter.

He says, 'Oh how am I to know?'
Blow your horn, Center.
Blow your horn north, east, west, and south,
As you are the jobal hunter.

He blowed his horn north, east, west, and south,
Blow your horn, Center.
The wild boar heard him unto his den,
Just like a jobal hunter.

And as they crossed the White Oak Mountain,
Blow your horn, Center,
On their way they went again,
Just like a jobal hunter.

As he slayed the wild boar,
Blow your horn, Center,
The oak and ash they did bend,
As he was a jobal hunter.

And as they passed by the wild boar's den,
Blow your horn, Center,
There laid the bones of a thousand men
As he was a jovial hunter

They met the old witch wife on a bridge,
Blow your horn, Center,
"Begone, you rogue; you've killed my pig,
As you are the jobal hunter.

She says, "These three things I crave of yourn,
Blow your horn, Center,
Your 'hawk, your hound, and your Gaily-Dee,
As you are the jobal hunter."

He says, "These three things you cannot have of mine."
Blow your horn, Center.
"Is my 'hawk, my hound, my Gaily-Dee,"
Just like a jobal hunter.

He split the old witch wife through the chin,
Blow your horn, Center.
And on their way they went again,
As you are the jobal hunter.

The version in Sharp's collection includes Sir Lionel, and the boar is hunted. The title of Child 18, as the storyline, and as is typical of ballads, varies, and includes "Jovial Hunter," "Sir Lionel," "Sir Lionell," "Isaac-a-Bell and Hugh the Graeme," "The Jovial Hunter of Bromsgrove," "The Old Man and his Three Sons," "Bold Sir Rylas," "Bangum and the Boar," "The Wild Boar," "Sir

Egrabel," "Sir Rackabello," and "Sir Eglamore." One of the versions titled "Sir Lionell" is included in *The Percy Folio of Old English Ballads and Romances*.²⁵ The version in Percy begins: "Sir Egrabell had sonnes three, Sir Lyonell was one of these." The refrain is, "Blow thy horne, good hunter, As I am a gentle hunter." This Sir Lyonell meets a lady, but she asks him to kill a giant rather than a boar, and the version ends after sending her and a child safely away on a horse. Although there are many other variations in the versions found in the Child collection, I include here only those variations found in the first lines and the refrains in order to inform overall understanding of this aspect of the ballad genre. There is much scholarly work available about the subject of variation within ballads should more detail be desired.

Textual Variations within Child 18:

Child 18A, titled "Sir Lionel," begins as follows:

Sir Egrabell had sonnes three," and the refrain is: "Blow thy horne, good hunter Sir Lyonell was one of these."

Child 18B, also titled "Sir Lionel," begins:

"A knight had two sons o sma fame," and the refrain is: "Hey nien nanny Isaac-a-Bell and Hugh the Graeme."

Child 18C, again titled, "Sir Lionel," begins:

"Sir Robert Bolton had three sons," and the refrain is: "Wind well thy horn, good hunter And one of them was called Sir Ryalas. For he was a jovial hunter."

Child 18D, "Sir Lionel," begins:

"As I went up one brook, one brook," and the refrain is: "Well wind the horn, good hunter."

Child 18E, "Sir Lionel, begins:

"There was an old man and sons he had three," and the refrain is: "Wind well, Lion, good hunter."

Child 18F, "Sir Lionel," begins:

"Sir Rackabello had three sons," and the refrain is: "Wind well your horn, brave hunter, Sir Ryalash was one of these, And he was a jovial hunter."

"Sir Eglamore," also included as Child 18, depicts the hero slaying a dragon rather than a pig. There is no mention of a woman or a witch, and our hero ends his day of battle in a pub: "For he was so hot with tugging with the Dragon that nothing would quench him but a whole Flaggon." And, in typical broadside fashion during the Tudor realm, that version reveals an underlying political agenda: "Now God preserve our King and Queen...".²⁶ Notably, Ward's

²⁵ Thomas Percy, Frederick James, and John Furnivall, Eds. *The Percy Folio of Old English Ballads and Romances*, Vol. 1 (London: De la More Press, 1905), 37.

²⁶ I see inconsistency between the date of publication attributed to this broadside version, 1672, and the British realm at this time. Although we cannot assume the king and queen mentioned are William and Mary, who came into rule in 1689, James II ruled independently in 1672.

version, nor many of those found in Child, so obviously extol politics.²⁷ The subtleties and more obvious subject matter of his version are pre-Tudor, early Tudor at the most.

The ebb and flow of a ballad through oral and textual sources creates a stubborn cultural conundrum for scholars. Has Rick Ward preserved the oldest version found in the United States of a story about a hunter, son, or hero killing boars, dragons, or witches? I believe he has.

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²⁷ To hear twelve different performances of the ballad, refer to "Francis Child," *Live Journal*, web, <http://francis-child.livejournal.com/5199.html> (accessed 15 November 2011).

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