THE BALLAD

by Alan Bold. Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen, 1979.

A new, short, general book on ballads comes in an unlikely series from an unlikely author. "The Critical Idiom" series, in which *The Ballad* appears, has so far been occupied with gallant, yet turgid, efforts to define elusive abstractions such as allegory and metaphor. Alan Bold is known in Britain as a minor poet and energetic anthologist, editing *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* and *Making Love: The Picador Book of Erotic Verse.* The connection between Bold's various activities is his concern that poetry be accessible, for the many, not an elite. He states this grand and important thought in a long paragraph which also serves to illustrate limitations of his book, imprecision and an ungraceful style: "The ballads. . . were not conceived in splendid artistic isolation to gratify the inspirational genius of a lonely creator. They were made to be used, to be handed on. They have the strength of a solid workmanship about them. . . . The local ballad-singer was not a full-time poet but an integral part of the community. . . . The ballads were the proud possession of people who were obsessed by survival and wanted their entertainment to survive with them" (p. 64).

The first three of Bold's five chapters are good, assuming his publishers imposed the brevity. In these he deals in turn with origins, style and content, briskly dismissing problems of definition. He points out, for example, that because we have had Child's texts to hand in print for almost one hundred years, we find it difficult to imagine when they "were simply and fondly remembered by those who enjoyed singing them" (p. 2). He characterizes well such literary qualities as "the use of irony" ("The Bonny Earl of Murray"), "the slow construction of tension" ("The Lass of Roch Royal"), "the poetic use of the ominous dream" ("The Battle of Otterburn") and "the brooding imagery" ("The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry") on p. 33. He has not found space to describe how the same ballad story is often found in half-a-dozen European languages, which he could have linked with sustained attention to one typical ballad, such as "Edward," "Sir Aldingar," "Barbara Allen," "The Twa Sisters" or "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," to name five which have been the subject of book-length studies.

The reader who wishes to go further, however, is helpfully guided by a six-page annotated bibliography. The big omission here is the collection by John Holloway and Joan Black, *Later English Broadside Ballads* (London, 1975), which, particularly with companion volumes reputedly to follow, has to be the Child for 18th century broadsides.

The fourth chapter, about broadside ballads, is less good. Bold includes too few quotations (especially with no cross-reference to Holloway or to *The Common Muse*) and it is crammed with more names, addresses and dates of broadside publishers than we need. Besides, Bold sometimes seems to believe that he ought to admire broadsides because they were popular, and cannot bring himself to do so.

In Chapter 5, a breathless catch-all, Ned Kelly jostles Rudyard Kipling and "John Henry" just precedes John Keats. Even then, bothy ballads go unmentioned; they may not be ballads, but the term is commonly used.

Bold is a reader of ballads, not a listener or a musician. Though he tells us, in his cheerful shorthand way, that "Child and Bronson are the Gilbert and Sullivan of balladry" (p. 95), he refers only once to hearing ballads: that records of Ewan MacColl and Jeannie Robertson convey "something of the original quality of the ballads" (p. 24). He does not list any records, not even "The Long Harvest" or the Child Ballads from Topic's "Folk Songs of Britain" series.

Bold is also more of a reader than a scholar, and I doubt whether he has delved far among articles in journals. He over-simplifies the problems of the historical basis of "Mary Hamilton" (pp. 60-61) and I argue with "Collectors have tried to add to the Child canon—with items like 'Still Growing,' 'Corpus Christi,' 'Bruton Town'—but only one piece has been accepted everywhere as a genuine popular ballad: 'The Bitter Withy' " (pp. 1-2). Gerould in *The Ballad of Tradition* (1932, pp. 32-35) persuades me that a few more qualify for the canon, and there are other candidates such as "Far Fannil Town." Since fault-finding is easier than absolute anarchy, I record only in passing that he means Ben Jonson, not Johnson, on p. 69 and that A.E. Houseman's career as a professor of classics was mainly at Cambridge, not at London University (p. 90). Bold writes that "invariably when a ballad has been collected from tradition the source is female" (p. 40), then gives contradictory evidence on p. 56.

Bold's *The Ballad* makes no pretence to originality and is a straightforward introduction—straightforward, at least, for readers who can cope with "proleptically" (p. 28) and "noncupative" (p. 32). His book does not replace Matthew Hodgart's standard text, *The Ballads* (1950). Where Bold does add to Hodgart, it is a fresh sensibility on his section on style, and a touch of the faith of an A.L. Lloyd that the ballads matter because they are a people's art of high quality.

Malcolm Page