Books


by Sandra Brown Eminov.

Inspired by current trends in structuralism and functionalism, David Buchan has employed an eclectic approach in this excellent contribution to ballad scholarship. The ballad tradition of one region in Northeast Scotland, as exemplified by its most outstanding practitioners in each of three periods, is viewed in its social-historic context (here, the influence of Linda Degh's seminal work, Folktales and Society, is reflected). This tradition is then described structurally, using the approach of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord (The Singer of Tales) as a basis.

Mr. Buchan distinguishes three periods which correspond to stages in the development of the Northeastern ballad tradition. These periods are based primarily on the extent of literacy and printed material in the region, but historical, social, and technological developments also are taken into account. The ballad tradition of the Northeast is thus divided into oral, transitional, and modern periods.

As for the structure of the old (oral period) ballads, Mr. Buchan discerns three major levels: stanzaic; character; narrative. While the character and narrative structures may be schematized fairly easily, the stanzaic structure is potentially quite complicated. The old Northeast ballads were characterized by balances, antitheses, appositions, and parallelisms; structures, says Buchan, "intrinsic to the oral mind" (p. 88). These structural units permeate the ballads in such frequent patterns as plan and act, command and execution, question and answer. This 'binary' principle operates to build up individual stanzas and pairs of stanzas.

Buchan also emphasizes the tendency of oral literature to group its material in threes. This 'trinary' force may occur as three-fold repetition within a stanza, a triad of stanzas, or in a triad of balancing stanzas. The trinary principle is found to be an important method through which the oral artist dramatically expands the bare essentials of his/her ballad-story.

Along with the balances and triads, a third major aspect of ballad construction is the 'frame': "In its simplest forms a frame consists of a balancing pair of stanzas which flank a single stanza or a balance or a triad. The complete unit, a framed balance or triad, is what normally constitutes a ballad scene" (p. 95). The frame, then, shapes the ballad into manageable units. It holds the ballad material together like "a pair of aural bookends" (p. 96). Essential narrative ingredients are contained in these frames, while intervening stanzas flesh out the story but are not necessary to the furthering of the plot. Combining Mr. Buchan's concept of frame with a phrase coined by Gummere, then, we might say that it is from frame to frame that the ballad-story "leaps and lingers."
The stanzaic patterns described above may occur in much more complicated forms, while character and narrative structures are developed concurrently during the course of an oral re-creation of the ballad-story. The oral mind, which can simultaneously generate ballad structure on three levels, must possess a mode of spatial apprehension, says Buchan, quite foreign to the literate mind, which orders ideas in linear and sequential patterns. A major thesis of The Ballad and the Folk is that an almost-unbridgeable gap exists between these two ways of thinking: the literate mind, imprisoned by ways of thinking and terminology which are rooted in the written word, has difficulty in grasping the essential processes of the oral mind. As students of oral balladry, we must attempt to bridge this gap, for it is to the spatial apprehension of the non-literate mind that we owe the construction and aesthetic quality of the 'old' ballads.

Buchan investigates the oral mode of composition through the corpus of Mrs. Brown of Falkland. In the light of The Singer of Tales, he surmises that the ballad-maker originally learned his/her art in much the same way as the Yugoslavian epic singer, utilizing the technique of oral re-creative composition before an audience only after a period of apprenticeship. This oral re-creation was a disciplined, well-structured technique for instantaneous composition.

In subsequent chapters, Buchan hypothesizes a transitional period during which the oral technique was breaking down. An analysis of the ballads of James Nicol reveals that, although they are still "loosely re-creative" (p. 243), they lack the traditional structural patternings; the framing device has atrophied. This, says Buchan, is evidence that the folk "lost their sense of the ballad as a spatially related entity and began to see it as sequentially related" (p. 230).

In the modern period, seen through the ballads of Bell Robertson, the transition to rote memorization has been completed. The literate ballad-singer learns ballad-texts, but lacks the technique of oral composition. In the Northeast, the folk turn their creative energies in other directions.

Mr. Buchan's main concern in this work is the context, composition, and structure of the old ballads. His arguments, often sophistications of earlier theses, are most convincing when based on the concrete evidence of historical or textual record. Occasionally, as when he argues that the rhythms of the oral composition method "originated in an elementary psychological need to control the story material" (p. 142), the reader might long for supporting evidence. Apart from infrequent leaps into superficial psychologizing, however, Buchan's book is thoughtfully analytical. For ballad buffs, I should mention that the author makes brief forays into several controversies: the trustworthiness of Peter Buchan's ballad texts; whether the folk originally distinguished a 'ballad aristocracy'; more evidence that the couplet ballad antedated the quatrain. However, it is Buchan's attempt to understand oral composition in relation to the structure and aesthetics of the old ballads that makes this book a major contribution to recent ballad scholarship.