

Father Christmas and the Deck of Cards: Further Adventures in Cheap Print, ed. by David Atkinson and Steve Roud (London: The Ballad Partners, 2024), ISBN 978-1-0686406-0-5, pp. x+239.

This new collection from the Ballad Partners' stable opens with Alex Lyons' work on literary depictions of Father Christmas, showing that it was seventeenth century political upheavals that transformed the character from a one-dimensional figure into a 'wily dissident' (p. 10). Three linked pieces then follow. Martin Graebe traces the origins of the famous 'Deck of Cards' recitation (in which a soldier uses a pack of cards for a prayer book) back to the 1630s. A UK hit for Wink Martindale in the late twentieth century, Graebe highlights the tale's circulation through the US, Australia and Ireland. The next chapter picks up this theme, investigating a wide range of Czech versions of the same story, which first began to circulate in the nineteenth century. A cover version by Ing. M. Černý and the Rangers became a huge hit in Communist Czechoslovakia of the 1960s, despite its religious themes, and was both taken up both as a 'tramping song' used in outdoor pursuits and satirised mercilessly over the following years. Chapter 4 then summarises the state of research into Czech broadside ballads, showing that although they are commonly assumed to be mainly news ballads, in fact most are religious songs.

Several chapters on English broadside ballads then follow. David Atkinson's excellent survey of eighteenth-century 'old ballads' demonstrates just how far was the divergence between the Child canon and the corpus of songs printed by eighteenth-century ballad sellers. The term tended to imply not just the age of the song, but also its printing on a half-sheet and narrative rather than lyrical, satirical or political content. Thomas Pettitt identifies two sub-genres of murdered sweetheart ballads, the 'journalistic', in which retribution comes from a judicial source, and the 'tragical romance', in which the murderer's comeuppance is revealed by supernatural forces. He claims that all the earliest murdered sweetheart ballads are in the 'journalistic' mode, however, the text of the ballad one of these missing and only the woodcuts remain. I also felt that this chapter could have been strengthened with more reference to scholarship, not least Alexandra Walsham's *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) and Una McIlvenna's *Singing the News of Death* (Oxford: OUP, 2022). Andrew C. Rouse traces a sequence of late seventeenth-century English ballads which, intriguingly, use a fictional Polish persona to attack Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury. Fascinating as this chapter is, I am not certain that it elucidates why Shaftesbury would be figured as the king of Poland in particular and why the lampoon survived across several years. Nonetheless, it provides a useful account of the songs' context.

The final four chapters relate to nineteenth-century Irish balladry. Siobhán McElduff argues that the classical references employed by both male and female narrators in Irish ballads indicated that the song was not set in 'everyday Ireland' (p. 157). Their widespread use also demonstrates that such allusions were understood by a wide audience. John Mouldon clears up some confusion about the life and output of John Sheil of Drogheda, while Catherine Ann Cullen does the same for comic singer/songwriter James Kearney, noting an interesting reference to song sheets being sold in Dublin music saloons and pubs where singing was known to take place. Finally, Martin Nail catalogues the printing and performance history of five different songs, all entitled 'No Irish Need Apply'.

Careful curation by the editors transforms eleven individual essays into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, these essays repeatedly demonstrate the value of painstaking archival work, with references that have previously been overlooked enriching many of the accounts. The true value of the collection, however, lies in its breadth, not only in terms of period but also wide geographical coverage – something to be praised, given the dominance of the English broadside ballad over scholarship thus far. Although this has begun to change in recent years, this collection is another step in the right direction, allowing us to understand more about English songs through their international context.

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