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Appalachian ballads grew with each singer



ROB NEUFELD
VISITING OUR PAST

Any collection of the greatest stories ever told must include the British ballads, brought to the mountains and altered with subtle additions.

Ballads — along with old-time music and the songs of African-American and Cherokee bands — fill David Weintraub's new film, "A Great American Tapestry: The Many Strands of Mountain Music," premiering next week (see box at the bottom of this story).

The film also features many noteworthy speakers and performers.

Pick a song

If I were to pick one ballad to represent the storytelling, it might be "Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor," for which there are many variants.

It's dramatic. Thomas, keeper of the king's deer, follows his mother's advice and weds the "brown girl" rather than fair Eleanor, whom he loves, because the brown girl has house and land.

It's hard to ignore the color distinction in the song. Probably, as with Shakespeare, "brown" means "brown-haired."

A Mediterranean population had mixed with a Scandinavian one for centuries, and the Nordic look survived as an ideal.

Brunettes got a lot of love, nevertheless, which led to marriage being the classic subject for exposing divisions between clans and classes of people.

By the way, a version of the ballad sung by Mrs. J.E. Spence of Siler City (lowland Chatham County) omits the word "brown."

The source of this note, and of others in this column, is the "Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore" (see NC Jukebox at ncjukebox.trinity.duke.edu/exhibits/).

Getting back to the song, Thomas goes to Eleanor.

"What news, what news, Lord Thomas," Eleanor says, as he arrives at her place. "What news have you brought unto me?"

"I have come to bid you to my wedding," he says, "And that's bad news for thee."

That's the set-up. Eleanor has to decide if she wants to make a threesome at Thomas' wedding.

In Madison County in 1913, singers added a moment-of-decision stanza to the story, enlarging upon the earliest collected version, which Dr. Brown had collected in Virginia in 1899.

"Come father, come mother riddle my riddle," Edith B. Smith of White Rock recited, "And riddle it all as one/ Whether I must go to Lord Thomas's wedding/ Or tarry along at home."

The posing of life's risks as riddles is an Appalachian cultural feature. The class issues that Eleanor's riddle raises were dealt with in different ways in different regions.

In Durham County, an "elderly seamstress" sang about Eleanor being "the king's high dame."

But in Boone, I.G. Greer, in 1915, sent Brown lyrics that gave Eleanor's mom wise response to her daughter's class-jumping notion.

"Daughter, O daughter, I've riddled



GEORGE PICKOW/COURTESY OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY
Jean Ritchie plays dulcimer around a cottage hearth, an image used in David Weintraub's new film, "A Great American Tapestry: The Many Strands of Mountain Music."

your riddle/ I've riddled it all as one/ The best advice I can give to you/ Is to tarry this day at home."

Many of the changes to the ballad that developed in these mountains had to do with adding realistic dramatic effect.

Miss Louise Rand Bascom of Highlands submitted a version that began to show what Eleanor was thinking.

"It's I would go to Lord Thomas's wedding," Eleanor declares to her mom, "If my coffin was in at my door."

So this is teenage love, and Eleanor knows it's the only thing that matters. But how did Thomas and Eleanor first get together? We don't know. Different people can make different assumptions.

The earliest version calls Thomas "bold" and Eleanor "clever." This teenage story has a lot of possibilities! And I trust Miss Bascom's scrutiny. She corrected the misuse of "jingle" for the bell-ringing Thomas did at Eleanor's door. Women "jingle," she said. Men "jangle."

To the wedding

Mrs. Brown, singing in Beech Mountain, put a little pre-wedding ceremony into the ballad.

"He called up his merry merry men/ By one, by two, and by three/ She called up her merry merry men/ By one, by two, and by three."

Does Mrs. Brown know that she's setting up a "West Side Story" scenario with this plot addition?

Jumping to the action, the earliest version has Eleanor getting all dressed up and saying to Thomas, when introduced to his fiancée, "Is this your bride? Is this your bride?/ She looks so very brown."

The cutting remark reveals a hurt — you could have married the fair girl, Eleanor says.

Is Eleanor's race-comparison an excuse for her rejection, by which all women ditched for practical reasons would identify with Eleanor? Or does she have an attitude about the mixing up of social hierarchies?

A version from the 1850s, received from Zionville collector Thomas Smith in 1914, gives the brown girl a feisty retort: "Where did you get your well water/ That washed your skin so white."

That's a sharp one, because only a peasant such as Eleanor would be going to a well. And speaking of sharp, the next thing you know, in most versions, is that the brown girl is sticking a knife into Eleanor's heart.

Singers love adding details to this section. Miss Fannie Grogan of Silverstone (Watauga County) sang, "The brown girl she had a little pen knife/ With blades both keen and sharp."

This addition — the usage of "blades" instead of "blade" — applied some necessary knife-knowledge. Pocket-knives come with one or two blades. One two-bladed type is the stiletto, the correct instrument for piercing a heart, which raises the question, "Did the brown girl come prepared, or is she the type of person who always carries a stiletto?"

Grogan also adds three stabbing syllables to the murder action. The earliest version reports, "Betwixt the long ribs and the short/ She pierced fair Eleanor's heart." Grogan concludes, "She pierced fair Eleanor right in the heart."

I.G. Greer, who had previously added to the drama with Eleanor's mom's advice, does a little dramatic trick with the murder.

He leaves out the knife part. We never see it. Instead, we see Thomas noticing Eleanor's paleness, and her saying she feels blood running down her.

The earliest version ends with Lord Thomas cutting off the brown girl's head and killing himself with his sword to his chest.

Miss Edith Fish of Madison County, who had submitted the part about Eleanor's "riddle," also gave Thomas a little speech before he died: "Go dig my grave both wide and deep/ And paint my coffin black/ And bury fair Ellender in my arms/ And the brown girl at my back."

Miss Fish liked giving characters speeches, so there's that individual artist aspect. Her additions tied the old ballad to Appalachian culture: the haunting legacies of violent actions and the significance of grave placements, for instance.

Story songs

"People were poor materialistically but, boy, they had a wealth of information, recipes, old sayings — I mean, some of the funniest stories you ever heard. They sang a lot of stories," seventh-generation Madison County balladeer, Sheila Kay Adams says in Weintraub's film.

Ballad-singer Bobbie McMillan, a N.C. Folk Heritage Award recipient, describes how the tradition got passed along. "When we learned the ballads, we learned it, what you'd call 'knee-to-knee.' You sat across from the singer, and that singer was your total concentration."

Though often performed in home settings, the songs also traveled to sites where traditions mixed. Or else, other traditions came to the home site through common work. The fusion produced an Appalachian heritage that Weintraub celebrates for its diversity.

Bo Taylor, executive director of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, relates how the Cherokee circle dance around a council fire was replicated in Appalachian dances in barns. Early settlers picked up on Cherokee agriculture, hunting, medicine and even song-singing, which found a common form in African-American chants.

"Because everybody sings in unison, there's a call-and-response. In the African tradition, they have a call-and-response," Taylor says. "It's the same thing... When you get those shells going (with Cherokee women's leg rattles) and the music's going, it becomes magical."

"There's been this opportunity for musical interchange for hundreds of years," Brett Riggs, Sequoyah Distinguished Professor at Western Carolina University, says about the Cherokee and settlers. "They shared songs, they shared dances, they picked up innovations from other places, (and) introduced them. After the arrival of Europeans and Africans, there were just more people in the mix for a people who were already very musical."

African-Americans, frequently the fiddlers at black and white dances, developed dance calling, inserting stories as well as dance directions into their performances.

"I love a peach pie and I love a tater puddin'/ And I love that gal they call Sally Goodin" went an old dance song that could be played on a fife in battles. It's also a great love story, this one not ending in murder.

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