

<sup>2</sup> The men now owning and/or making up the crews of the boats acquired under the scheme came almost exclusively from the following occupations:—

- (a) Merchant navy and whaling fleet.
- (b) Harris tweed weavers.
- (c) Deckhands aboard East Coast fishing boats.

It would be difficult to give any accurate figures for the proportion of men who came from each of the above sources as many of them formerly combined two and sometimes three of these occupations.

#### REFERENCES

- Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Fishing Industry (Fleck Committee), 1961, H.M.S.O., Cmnd. 1266.  
Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Crofting Conditions (Taylor Commission), 1954, H.M.S.O., Cmnd. 9091.  
Review of Highland Policy (Secretary for Scotland's report on Highland Policy), 1959, H.M.S.O., Cmnd. 785.  
Fisheries of Scotland: Report for 1961, September 1962, H.M.S.O., Cmnd. 1674.  
The Crofters' Commission: Annual Report for 1962, April 1963, H.M.S.O.

JOHN L. BLAKE

NOVEMBER 1963

#### D. BOOK REVIEWS

*The traditional tunes of the Child ballads* with their texts, according to the extant records of Great Britain and America. By Bertrand Harris Bronson. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press. Vol. II. £10.

The second volume of Professor Bronson's work covers the tunes to nos. 54-113 of Child's collection, and includes a preface in which the author deals further with certain matters raised in the introductory essay to Vol. I. The latter was not reviewed in this journal, and it will be necessary to refer to it several times.

In his chosen field, Bronson has undertaken something that is comparable in intention to that of any literary editor who seeks to add illumination to the past by the increased light provided by the latest knowledge and method. Inevitably, this process of critical re-appraisal means the exposing of errors of judgment by earlier scholars, due to their lack of access to material only subsequently available; but this fact

does not diminish the value or importance of their contribution to knowledge of their subject. For example, nobody questions the competence or integrity of David Laing merely because John Small and W. M. Mackenzie were able in later generations to correct him on many matters connected with his edition of Dunbar's poems published in 1834.

These are pertinent reflections when one comes to examine the scholarly relationship between Professor Bronson and Child, of whose famous collection the present work is an extension, though not a completion. Bronson's first volume opens with an introductory essay which immediately makes the charge that ballad-scholarship has in the past been basically deficient, in its concentration upon the literary aspect of balladry and its ignoring of its music.

This implicit criticism of his basic text leads the author into a discussion of other shortcomings in Child's collection, particularly in the matter of system; Child's difficulties are regarded sympathetically, and in fact, after ventilating the matter Bronson finds himself forced, for practical reasons, to follow Child's ordering of his material as a basis for his own work. Had he attempted to improve on Child's labours in this respect before embarking on his main task, it is unlikely that one lifetime would have sufficed, and we should never have seen these volumes in print at all.

As it is, the mind is staggered by the formidable size of Bronson's undertaking, and by the mere contemplation of some of the problems he has had to face. One senses from the introductory remarks to the first volume (some of which are re-stated, in answer to critics, in the second) that Professor Bronson recognised two main directions in which a theoretical perfection could never be achieved in this work, and in which he has been forced by practical considerations to compromise.

The first of these, referred to above, is concerned with the shortcomings of Child's own collection, primarily in the matter of system and order. The second lies in the sheer bulk of material that has been added to the available store since Child's day, at an accelerating rate, and to-day far from showing signs of exhaustion. Faced with this physical fact, Bronson finds himself forced to adopt a tapering-off method of presentation, whereby he has endeavoured in the first place to "make the record virtually complete to the end of Child's century". Next, for the first quarter of the present century he has tried, under increasing difficulty, and with diminishing

success, to continue the process; third, for the second quarter-century, he has tried to take in all the *published* records; but thereafter he has felt himself handicapped by the ethical problems posed by any suggestion of making use of the work of other scholars whose writings have "not been in print long enough to have exhausted their first wave of purchasers". (It is surely one of the advantages to be set against obstacles to freedom of thought in Communist countries that scholars there do not have to consider this particular barrier to unfettered public utterance.) Further, he has had to face the sheer impossibility of keeping track of all new material, particularly of the vast amount of commercial phonographically-recorded music of local or regional interest and now available "only by lucky encounter".

By way of justification of this chronologically-diminishing completeness of his record, Bronson reasonably draws attention to the considerable and ever-increasing archives of recorded folk-song which "offer ample room for further research", sugaring this pill by underlining the indisputable fact that sound-records are very much more reliable than printed transcripts, and leaving future researchers to make their own arrangements for exploring the superabundant archives.

Within this framework the scholarship which Bronson brings to bear on his subject is fully worthy of comparison with Child's own, and his meticulous attention to detail in his editorial method goes far beyond anything that Child was able to accomplish at a time when the scientific aspects of modern editing were practically unknown. The system of symbols used for classification purposes is not difficult to grasp, granted as prerequisite sufficient technical knowledge on the reader's part to make serious study worth while; though one is grateful for the supplementary clarification of the symbols relating to the modes and scales which the author gives in his introduction to Vol. II.

It would be absurd to expect a short review to enter into critical discussion of the detail of a work so gigantic in its scope. Bronson himself indicates that one of his main functions has been to provide the material for the start of many followers' research, and it may be assumed that in due course there will emerge points in plenty for debate and criticism.

Some idea of the possibilities may be gained from a mention of a few of the most spectacular of Professor Bronson's achievements, such as the printing here of 199 versions of "Barbara

Allan" (plus an indication of the published whereabouts of 29 more): the 158 versions of "Lord Thomas and fair Eleanor" known to the author, and mostly given in the text: the eleven ballads for which from 30 to 80 tunes are printed, with chapter and verse for many others published elsewhere. At the other end of the scale, Bronson is scrupulous, in the case of "Willie and Lady Maisrie", in not printing the single tune whose connection with the ballad is slender and very dubious, even though it means his giving no music at all in this instance. It seems to me that an author of even a little less integrity would have printed the tune, however hedged about with warnings, for the sake of filling up a blank space in his scheme, and that this is a certain indication of reliability and scholarly honesty in the whole.

In a very important passage in his introduction, Professor Bronson draws attention to the worrying implications of the scramble for "copyright" in these public treasures, and to the tendency to deliberate mutilation in the endeavour to establish such copyright. He issues a warning that applications to reproduce or perform copyright versions are to be made to the holders, and not to him or his publishers.

This part of the introduction should perhaps be taken very seriously by the sophisticated and other modern singers of folk-song, who are certain to find in the work a well-nigh inexhaustible source of supply. However much some of the results of their quarrying may be deplored, we see here a secondary, and on the whole valuable, use for a work that must surely remain standard for generations.

CEDRIC THORPE DAVIE

*Agricultural Sir John, The Life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster 1754-1835.* By Rosalind Mitchison. London: Geoffrey Bles. 1962. ix+291 pp. 14 plates, 35s.

Of all the leading personalities of the Scottish Renaissance, few have languished so long in obscurity as Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, editor of the Old Statistical Account and father of the first Board of Agriculture. Burns, Scott, Hume and Smith, like Watt, Telford and the Adam brothers on a different level, left memorials so spectacular that posterity was bound to be curious about their history. Sir John simply bullied other

people into writing the main works associated with his name; although generations of scholars and general readers have enjoyed the fruits of his coercion, and though all of us may lie under an even deeper debt to him than we presently acknowledge, Mrs. Mitchison is the first to have paid him the compliment of a biography since his own son performed the act of filial piety immediately after his death. We should all be grateful for the scholarly (and entertaining) manner in which she has executed her task: she produces striking proof that academic history need not be dull to be good.

The book is a comprehensive biography on a chronological pattern. The first two chapters deal with the Sinclair family and the Ulbster estate in Caithness before Sir John was born in 1754. The next five deal mainly with his early career in politics before he became a well-known national figure in the 1790's. Mrs. Mitchison shows a deft hand in unravelling the intricacies of the St. Albans Club and Sir John's part in toppling the ministry of Lord North, and reaches the top of her form in chapter eight—a study of eighteenth-century electioneering in the Caithness contest of 1789 which ensured for her hero a firm place at Westminster in the age of Pitt and Dundas.

The remaining eleven chapters portray Sir John after his arrival at maturity—that is to say, from the point when he discovered that his heart was not in political life for its own sake, but in the work of “condensing useful knowledge into a moderate compass”, and in “the introduction of a spirit of industry and improvement” into his country. Asking a multitude of questions that he regarded as useful and important, badgering all he could for the answers with no regard to the inconvenience he caused the questioned, tirelessly offering advice and exhortation on a multitude of agricultural and monetary problems, Sir John was the arch bore and busybody of his age. His complete lack of tact or humour often made him ridiculous—as when he advised Sir Walter Scott to marry the Dowager Duchess of Roxburgh only four months after the unfortunate novelist had lost his first wife, or when his pet hypochondriac remedies for indigestion were proffered to Canning and the Prince Regent. Yet such was his sincerity, his driving energy and his restless enthusiasm that no contemporary could fairly deny him a certain respect and stature.

Mrs. Mitchison deals thoroughly with the main targets of his enthusiasm—the British Wool Society, the Board of



Agriculture, the Statistical Account, the bullion controversy and his private attempts at "improvement" in Caithness. In one way or another all these ventures were something less than a success. The Wool Society, which aimed primarily at improving the breeds of Highland sheep, became moribund as soon as Sir John's personal attention was transferred to a wider field, and in its four years of existence (1790 to 1794) its concrete achievements were slight. The Board of Agriculture lasted longer: born in 1793 as Pitt's payment for Sir John's timely intervention in the liquidity crisis of that year (a service for which he could easily have claimed a peerage) and killed in 1821 when Lord Liverpool quarrelled with Sir John about free trade, it was very much a "personal" affair, with the President (Sir John in its most active years) and the Secretary (initially Arthur Young) running it like a comfortable gentlemen's club rather than a bureaucratic Government office. Its best achievement was in carrying out the incomplete double series of Agricultural Reports, of which the Scottish volumes were the most satisfactory: in almost everything else, and especially in its repeated but futile attempts to get a General Enclosure Act through Parliament before the end of the Napoleonic Wars, it was haunted by the ineffectiveness of mere powers of persuasion against prejudice and vested interest.

The Statistical Account—Sir John's third major venture of the 1790's—appears on the face of it to have been a more complete success. Certainly it achieved the limited aims of a parish-by-parish survey of his native country. Even this, however, was only a ghost of his original conception of an investigation to cover the whole British Isles, consisting not only of these parish surveys and the Agricultural Reports, but also of a digest in the form of a General Report, topped by a summary Analysis of the whole—the imaginative "Statistical Pyramid" which was actually achieved only for Scotland, and then only in very imperfect form.

As a political economist, Sinclair came to fruition in the following decade, arguing the case for inconvertible paper against Huskisson, Ricardo and the bullionists in a more sensible and cogent manner—as Mrs. Mitchison points out—than historians have usually given him credit for. He won the short term victory, only to lose in the long run when resumption of cash payments was permitted in 1821, and all his later fulminations in alliance with Attwood were unable to obtain a reversal of what was to become monetary orthodoxy for a

hundred years. Finally, as the model improver in his own country, he poured capital into his estates as an example to the neighbours, and so redesigned and rebuilt Thurso that the modern town remains a living memorial to his energy and vision—characteristically he bit off more than he could chew and went bankrupt in 1811, thus teaching the neighbours an additional lesson that he had not intended. Indeed, his whole career reads as a catalogue of endeavour overthrown, and Mrs. Mitchison pulls no punches in pointing out how far its basic pathos was due as much to Sir John's personal shortcomings, particularly to his intellectual confusion and diffuseness of aim, as to any of the outside blows of fate.

Was Sir John Sinclair, despite all this, truly a great man? The reviewer may perhaps be forgiven for raising a question which the author may not have thought it her business to answer quite in this form: certainly there is no direct assessment of his historical importance in this otherwise excellent book. For Scotland, at least, the answer must be that he was. Here Sir John was the outstanding propagandist of planned rural "improvement" in an age when agrarian progress depended to an enormous extent on infecting society both with the enthusiasm for change and the knowledge of how to set about it: nothing did more to carry these germs into every corner of North Britain than the Statistical Account and the Agricultural Reports, and the sheer pleasure that we get from reading them to-day should not blind us to the very practical and important functions they had when modern Scotland first took shape.

Was Sir John more than a purely Scottish figure? To this the answer is more uncertain, since he failed to make the immediate impact on Britain as a whole that he made on Scotland. Yet because he was not only "Agricultural Sir John" but also "Statistical Sir John", it is not unreasonable to bracket him with the more original minds of such great contemporaries as Smith or Scott. He was not the first to see the importance of collecting and publishing exact facts about the economy and society, any more than Smith was the first to consider "political economy" or Scott the first to write a "romantic" novel. Yet he was certainly the first to plan and execute a comprehensive factual survey of any nation, and the example, if not as joyfully followed by contemporaries as he had hoped, was not lost on posterity. This "collecting of useful information" has become the modern science of Government to such an extent that twentieth century Britain would be

unthinkable without it, though of course, this has not happened only or even mainly because of Sir John (the complexities and horrors of nineteenth-century life would have made it inevitable even if the Statistical Account had never been written) and modern economists and sociologists, both in the questions they ask and in the tools they have for obtaining and analysing the answers, are vastly different from and superior to him. But both he and they meet in recognition of the fundamental importance of describing the human economic and social condition as accurately as possible before attempting to prescribe the necessary alterations. It was here Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster was a pioneer, and for this he surely deserves a more prominent niche on Olympus than we would guess from the story of his career alone.

T. C. SMOUT

---

*A Shetland Riddle*

In 1960 this journal published "A collection of Riddles from Shetland" by the late Dr. Calum I. Maclean and Mr. Stewart F. Sanderson (Vol. 4:150-86). Below we are printing a variant of the riddle listed as No. 91 in this collection. It was submitted by Mr. John Hay of Hayfield, Delgatie Castle, Turriff, Aberdeenshire:

Come a guddick, come a guddick  
Come a rot tot tot  
Da peerie peerie maan i' da red red cot  
Wi' da staff i' his haand n' da stane i' his trot  
Come a guddick, come a guddick  
Come a rot tot tot

*Answer* — a cherry.

EDITOR