

Tom Pickard, *The Ballad of Jamie Allan*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2007. 101pp. \$14.95

Incorrigible, untoward, and intractable, eighteenth-century English-Scottish Borders musician Jamie Allan was the ubiquitous trickster. He stands in popular lore as an archetype of the bandit: as old as Reynard the Fox and as contemporary as *Raising Arizona's* H.I. McDunnough. Tom Pickard's 2007 volume *The Ballad of Jamie Allan* began as the libretto to a chamber opera commemorating the Northumberland vagabond by British composer John Harle. Epigraphs from, among others, Michel Foucault and Eric Hobsbawn, a lengthy afterword, and a selected bibliography alert us to the ambition of this undertaking. Pickard's sources include depositions, or "informations," of associates and accusers found in the criminal records of the National Archives; Allan's own criminal and military records, the latter transcribed within the Book of Deserters; numerous chapbooks and pamphlets disseminated throughout the border regions of Northumberland; and a small number of biographies, including one, nearly 700 pages in length, entitled *Life of James Allan, the celebrated Northumbrian piper; containing his surprising adventures and wonderful achievements in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, India, Tartary, Russia, Egypt, and various other Countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa*. This is folk balladry as scholarly adventure.

Reverentially attuned to revenants heard, Pickard opens with the favonian invocation "The Charm":

you who make music
and music makes
whose fingers fly
make of air a song
your breath be steady
and the tune be long

As a poet, Pickard has made much of making—within common song, one is made, or comes to be, precisely in and through its distribution of belonging. He is also attuned to the unmaking of that making, to moments when labor, degraded and dispossessed, tenders an enfeebled sense of belonging and common cause. Consider the following lines from *The Order of Chance* (1971):

producers of heat
 confused in the cold

moon full above the dole

 sleep children of chilled night

whose fathers were black men

sleep bairns, shiver now
ya fathers' gold is stolen

strong fathers of a harsh past
despondent now
slag faces rot against the dole

your hands held hammers
& demanded much
the moment passed
bairns curled cad in the womb
("The Devil's Destroying Angel Exploded or Coal Hewers in an Uproar")

To these bairns (Scottish for "child"), a barren dispensation: not the inheritance of songs shared by the fire, but the burden of curses muttered over the coals. Pickard makes the most of this meager, tolling, and toilsome "dole." Richly accumulative, whether as a variant of deal (a part or division of a whole) or dale (a portion of a common or undivided field), dole also sounds out sorrow and grief, that some lot's fated to the dole, whether that dole be a baleful portion of ore and/or charity sparingly applied. A face as black as lungs, this is Pickard's History imaged, the dark dream to a Snow White sing-along: "We dig up diamonds / By the score / A thousand rubies / Sometimes more / We don't know what we dig them for / We dig dig digga dig dig."

We may trace the once-proud lineage of these despondent, coal-dusted fathers back into the century of Jamie Allan: The faces blackened in resistance were those of the Waltham Blacks, who defiantly launched a campaign against the intensifying enclosure of common lands. In reprisal, the 1723 Black Act measure criminalized any sojourn, without benefit of clergy, into wooded regions while in disguise or blackened face. Explicitly targeting those "wicked and evil-disposed Persons going armed in Disguise, and doing Injuries and Violences to the Persons and Properties of his Majesty's Subjects" (*The Statutes at Large*, 1763), the Black Act evolved into perhaps the most notorious and draconian piece of legislation in eighteenth-century England, doling out death out of all proportion to the least of property crimes. Thus, we first meet our hero—gypsy piper, beloved raconteur, affable scofflaw, occasional horse thief and deserter—broken down by law:

Jamie Allan is seventy-seven years old and dying.
The wind smells of the Wear, sprays rain on the wall
and growls

with an insistent

As Pickard remonstrates, "It is not accumulation. 'Tis not accumulation. 'Tis not accumulation." whereas those of his generation, remain with ground, remain with ground, remain with ground, resides the antiphonal lands, their being with master of the North copy of *The Ballad of Swither*" Pickard's v pleasure in the felicitous the Northumbrian of sound—*skran*, *shraic*—charm and *ja* uncreate, not right. Arrested before such

The military and *Newcastle Courant* the at the expense of the of our man, "five feet straight limb'd, and *Courant*, 4th October of pleonastic legacies and rule upon the prosaic accounts, of for the particulars. record, which propo

...his Grace [the] ushered into the highly expressive by all ranks, as v At the Durham aged 77, for stea Gateshead, was f

Pickard follows this Army," a burlesque fucking legs," one o

with an insistent swither.

(“Durham Lockup, 13th November 1810”)

As Pickard remonstrates in his afterword, “His crimes were for survival not accumulation. The after-effects of those crimes died with the criminal, whereas those of his contemporary betters, those who enclosed common ground, remain with us and shape the landscape.” In rivers and winds, then, resides the antiphony: the opposition of sound and ear to the sculpting of lands, their being whittled and worn away. In giving chase to this vanished master of the Northumbrian pipes, I have found it necessary to notate my copy of *The Ballad* so that I might attune my ear to the “growls” and “insistent swither” Pickard’s vernacular vocates and localizes. (I cannot help but take pleasure in the felicitous coincidence of “ballad” and the standard range of the Northumbrian pipes, D to b.) These rough hewn, ancient outcroppings of sound—*skran*, *skint*, *flaffs*, and *gaff*, *yem*, *yasel*, *Yetholmers*, *cloughs*, and *craic*—charm and *flech* (beguile, entice). Strange, eldritch cairns, seeming uncreate, not rightly observed, demanding much from a moment passed. Arrested before such forms, the diligent reader must take up pursuit anew.

The military and criminal records, along with various notices from the *Newcastle Courant* that alternate with Pickard’s lyrical flights, amass particulars at the expense of the singular. With vacuous acuity, they take the measure of our man, “five feet, eight *and one quarter inches high* [emphasis mine], straight limb’d, and well made, a round large Head, flat Face [...]” (“*Newcastle Courant*, 4th October 1760”). Enscornced within the redundant proprieties of pleonastic legalese, these prosaic “informations” seem to image enclosure and rule upon the page, their typeset blocked and orthogonal. By design, such prosaic accounts, of authenticated date and provenance, eschew the singular for the particulars. We have moved from the popular balladry to the public record, which properly speaking belongs least of all to the people:

...his Grace [the Duke of Northumberland] was, on the above occasion, ushered into the county with every demonstration of joy and welcome, highly expressive of the popularity in which the noble Duke is justly held by all ranks, as well in respect of his public as his private character.[...] At the Durham Assizes, James Allan, of North Shields, the famous piper, aged 77, for stealing a horse out of the stables of Matthew Robinson, of Gateshead, was found guilty, DEATH.

(“*Newcastle Courant*, 6th August 1803”)

Pickard follows this brilliantly with the trickster misadventures of “Join the Army,” a burlesque song recounting in the voice of Allan, a man of “fast fucking legs,” one of his many flights from service:

When I hid in the hills around Rothbury town
 the people just gave them a right run around.
 Have you seen him? they axed. Could you say he's about?
 He's slippy as eels and flash as a trout.
 We've looked on the fells and down in the dales
 and all that we catch is a sight of his tail.
 The people replied have you tried owa there?
 He's sleek as a fox and runs like a hare.
 There's no one can see him when he comes around,
 the dogs go all quiet and cats go to ground.

(“Join the Army”)

Armed only with a refrain, hastened on by galloping couplets, and perhaps a tune lifted here or there, the folk-ballad plays host to such “slippy” histories, accommodating between their banks a depth unplumbed by official chronologies. Their additive logic is one of elasticity and expanse. Admitting neither theft nor license, their interiors contain multitudes incommensurate to the span of a single life. With every iteration, the ballad both sheds and assumes identities with purposes mercurial and furtive. Yet, Pickard ultimately resists the elusion, the wrong righted, the narrow escape. Our poet, much the same of 1985’s *Custom & Exile* who “knew that property was theft” (“Dawn Raid on an Orchard”), measures with keen and sober eye the juridical power brought to bear in defense of property.

Without some ballast, *The Ballad* would be nothing more the fascinating, roaring yarn of a charming rogue who, after a life spent taking the piss, meets with an unfortunate end. Informed from the first the story will not happily conclude, the reader is nonetheless left hopelessly unprepared for the desperation and emotional devastation which haunt *The Ballad*’s closing verses. When we first meet Allan’s beloved, Annie Bennett, she tracks and traces the incarcerated Allan with a mournful refrain heard in a dream: “The sound of deep waters sang in my sleep / so I followed the stream to search for a thief. / I followed a dark stream that ran underground; / by the sound of deep waters my lover was found” (“Annie Bennett, Her Information”). Annie (an undated “information”) is an alluvion poured deep within the refrain “by the sound of deep waters my lover was found.” She asks of Allan’s jailor, “And what can we swallow, his babby and me, / if he rots, a ripe fruit on an orchard tree?”—only to be answered with that jailor’s delight in cruelty. She re-emerges, finally, at volume’s end. The river now having run its course, she takes her leave:

Goodbye to the
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 Goodbye to the
 goodbye to the n

The river is black
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 Leave me now an
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The brutal, sparing
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 I must die in Du
 but will not be f

the wind sings Ja

Goodbye to the river, goodbye to the fell,
goodbye to the days too loving to tell.
Goodbye to the drink, goodbye to the craic,
goodbye to the nights with you on my back.

The river is black with peat from the fell,
curlews are calling with nothing to tell.
Leave me now and let me sleep,
your thieving words are all I'll keep—
and like the fox you shall grieve.

(“The River Is Dark”)

The brutal, sparing economy of these lines compels the reader to reconcile the celebrated trickster of guile and cunning with the tiresome scoundrel. Erotic assignations, however tender and loving, remain untellable. How is a family to find purchase in soil so precarious, this latter term used in its original sense: “of a right, tenancy, etc.: held or enjoyed by the favor of and at the pleasure of another person; vulnerable to the will or decision of others”? From such stuff is *ressentiment* made. *The Ballad* ends back in the same small cell where it began, the same notes of defeat marking a life held in too little esteem:

I was horse thief to his majesty
deserter to the king
I played my pipes for a countess
and made her poor heart sing
I was horse thief to his majesty
for dukes and earls I piped
but I'm lying in a cell
and dying in my shite

they said no jail could hold me
at the age of forty-four
when jailors' wives and daughters
opened up the doors
but now that I am old and frail
and cannot pick the lock
I must die in Durham jail
but will not be forgot

the wind sings Jamie Allan, oh

(“The Ballad of Jamie Allan”)

The repetition and refrain of balladry ever permits a genetic repetition that, in the remembering and recitation, ushers in a fugitive difference. Like waters and drafts seeping through stone, the ballad abhors capture. The “oh” opens up the hunt anew, enlisting, welcoming, the pursuants in the party of the pursued. And off they go, as in “Hey Up and Away,” which makes a *détournement* of “Matthew Robinson, His Information.” His horse stolen by Jaime,

Matthew crossed the border,
he took the quiet roads
looking for a tinker—
a man of no abode.
Then creeping down Thief Sike
and owa Liddel Watta
he heard the sound of pipes
that whittled into laughter.

(“Hey Up and Away”)

The syntax here harbors an ambiguity, two readings that ultimately dissolve into one and the same. For whether it be the sound of pipes or of Matthew creeping down and “owa” that “whittled,” the line imparts a secret lessened not by the telling. (“Whittle,” in addition to bearing its common meaning, can also be variant of “whiddle,” which means “to divulge a secret.”) Turned informer, Matthew is in turn deformed and set upon and swallowed by a Rabelaisian laughter. In such moments we begin to reckon with the devious singularity of the ballad’s multiple incarnations, and Pickard’s adroit turning of history to timeless account. *The Ballad of Jamie Allan* possesses that recalcitrance of which Derrida spoke in *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan*: “The date must conceal within itself some stigma of singularity if it is to last longer than that which it commemorates—and this lasting is the poem.”

J. Bassett