»An Amateur« and his Translations of the Danish Ballads – Identity and Significance[1]

By Larry Syndergaard

It is an interesting task to determine the *first book* of English translations of the Danish *folkeviser* – not a group of translated ballads comprising examples in a book, not an article containing ballad translations among other things, but a proper book, one which cares enough about the *folkeviser* to devote itself wholly to them. One would think backward past Henry Meyers' *Danish Ballads and Folk Songs* (1962) and Alexander Gray's *Four-and-Forty* (1954) and *Historical Ballads of Denmark* (1958), past Smith-Dampier's widely distributed *A Book of Danish Ballads* (1939) and her earlier books, and past Robert Buchanan's *Ballad Stories of the Affections* (1866) to R. C. A. Prior's monumental, three-volume *Ancient Danish Ballads* of 1860. One might then think far back to Robert Jamieson's pioneering nineteen translations in *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* (1814) – but as one segment of a larger work, this would not really qualify.

And in fact one would have overshot the mark, for in 1856 appeared in England, under the pseudonym »An Amateur,« the slim volume *Old Danish Ballads: Translated from Grimm's Collection* – the first book of English translations of the Danish ballads. (»Grimm's Collection« here means Wilhelm Grimm's *Altdänische Heldenlieder, Balladen und Märchen* of 1811, a very important collection of German translations from Peder Syv, *Et Hundrede udvalde Danske viser ... forøgede med det andet Hundrede Viser,* 1695). An Amateur presents 38 ballads together with the occasional note on parallels in other languages and with a brief introduction acknowledging earlier translation work and establishing a respectful but restrained attitude toward the material. (An Amateur considers that he has translated 37 ballads, but his number 22 »Marsk Stig's Daughters« translates a combination of *DgF* 146 Mark Stigs Døttre and *DgF* 39 Nøkkens Svig.)

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Though this is indeed the first book of English translations of the *folkeviser*, it has remained obscure and its pseudonymous translator unidentified. Other translators, such as William and Mary Howitt, who have contributed less, are far better known. Even so, many may be satisfied to let An Amateur rest in his obscurity, since we do have other, later, and better translators who do not detour through German in bringing the Danish ballads into English.

However, it does count for something that An Amateur is first, and his work is also significant in a larger context. Translation activity can be seen as a kind of discourse between two cultures. It is a more or less cumulative discourse, with many workers contributing, and as such it needs to be seen as much more than simply a disconnected series of individual literary acts. An Amateur is especially interesting and significant in this context. And he is the first translator clearly to understand and present his own work within such a context. This dimension is the focus of the second part of my study, after the identification of An Amateur; I do not take up the nature of his literary transformations from German to English. We will see that An Amateur is important in the mid-century revival of Danish ballad translation in England and that his work marks a departure from some prevalent and disturbing misuses of the Danish ballad material in earlier 19th century English culture. Some much better-known translators could in fact have learned certain things from him.

But more immediately we may emphasize the significance of An Amateur by noting the influence of his work upon that of a successor, R. C. Alexander Prior, who is arguably the most important – which is not to say the best – of all translators of the *folkeviser* into English. His *Ancient Danish Ballads* (1860) translates far more ballads than does any other source, and to this day English-speakers have access to numbers of the *folkeviser* only in Prior's translations. His work and judgment are taken seriously by Grundtvig, and indeed he is a pioneer in choosing to translate from the then-new *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* – a pioneer with relatively few followers to this day, surprisingly enough. In using *DgF* as a source Prior is of course not influenced by An Amateur, who does his work before Volume I of *DgF* appears and who states that he translates from the German because he cannot obtain the ballads in the original in England. But Prior does seem to have been influenced by An Amateur's views on the relative unimportance of the refrain, a connection first noted by the astute Erik Dal (*Samlet og*

Spredt 21); on understanding the ballads as records of medieval life and manners; on the importance of romance-language parallels and possible sources; and by his research on earlier translations.

Thus, by identifying An Amateur and examining his *Old Danish Ballads* of 1856 we may better understand the work of Prior and his more important *Ancient Danish Ballads* of 1860. And in examining this relationship we may better understand the larger translation discourse between Denmark and the English-speaking world.

Who, then, is An Amateur? The guides to anonymous and pseudonymous literature in Britain and Scandinavia give no help. Nor do the national catalogues; in fact the *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books* does not even list the book. All other bibliographic sources and inquiries to colleagues on two continents have yielded no results.

Thus a different strategy is indicated: an examination of the affinities of An Amateur's book. As noted above, Prior's *Ancient Danish Ballads* is significantly influenced by An Amateur – beginning with the title, obviously, but in its introduction as well. For example, An Amateur writes:

> Of that chivalrous deference to the ladies, which romance-writers ascribe to the medieval period, there is in these cotemporary [sic] writers scarcely a trace. Far from it, we find women of the highest rank exposed to cruelties and indignities, such as in civilized society are seldom witnessed in the very lowest classes... (iii).

Prior echoes: »Those who composed the ballads were not well acquainted with matters of chivalry. We certainly do not find in them the remotest trace of the southern devotion of knights to their ladies...« (xxxvi). But when one moves from comparing introductions to comparing translation texts one has the unpleasant surprise of discovering that whole sections and stanzas in *Ancient Danish Ballads* are lifted bodily from *Old Danish Ballads*. There is no other word for it; our unknown Amateur has been plagiarized by Prior.

Or are there other possibilities? One hypothesis might let us rescue Prior's reputation: could *he* be An Amateur and thus be using his own work? If we establish this to be the case it will certainly be without Prior's help, for throughout the three volumes of *Ancient Danish Ballads* he resolutely avoids mentioning An Amateur and *Old Danish Bal-*

lads. And Prior is otherwise responsible and thorough, freely crediting a wide variety of sources, translations, and scholarly commentaries. To demonstrate the hypothesis that An Amateur is Prior would require hard evidence as well as some explanation for Prior's silence on the matter.

There is in fact such evidence, partly in one of the few extant copies of *Old Danish Ballads* and partly in one of the few sources on Prior's life.

In the University of California at Los Angeles Library is one of perhaps three copies of *Old Danish Ballads* extant in North America, and this has every sign of being the very book in which various notes and revisions pointing toward Prior's *Ancient Danish Ballads* were begun. Here added in ink are certain notations of source and parallel texts, the information which becomes such a useful feature of Prior. The annotator has made a kind of concordance covering Grimm, Oehlenschläger's *Gamle Danske Folkeviser*, and Abrahamson, Nyerup, and Rahbek's *Udvalgte danske Viser*. Here also, usually in pencil, are scattered trial revisions in the translations – either attempts to adapt the translation to the Danish sources used for *Ancient Danish Ballads* or attempts to make the translation sound better. (An example appears in the Appendix.) Scattered misprints are also corrected. In short, the annotator seems to have had a sense of full ownership of the content.

Obviously it would help in identifying Prior as An Amateur if we could also establish his ownership of the UCLA copy of *Old Danish Ballads*. Here we encounter a puzzle. For the copy is indeed inscribed, but with the name Richard Chandler Alexander. We almost seem to have lost ground: we are still unsure about the identity of An Amateur, and now we seem to discover that Prior had an unacknowledged collaborator, Richard Chandler Alexander, on his *Ancient Danish Ballads*. But finally we see what cannot be coincidence: Prior's name on the title page of *Ancient Danish Ballads* is *R. C. Alexander* Prior. All is made clear by Edward Walford's *The County Families of the United Kingdom:*

> PRIOR, Richard Chandler Alexander, Esq., M. D., of Halse House, Somerset. Eldest son of the late Richard Hayward Alexander, Esq. ... Assumed the name of Prior under the will of his maternal uncle, Edward Prior, Esq.

There has been a change of name: Prior and R. C. Alexander are the same person, and that person is almost certainly An Amateur.

The identification is not absolute, of course. One could account for the evidence in other ways, but those ways make Prior into a man of such questionable ethics and of such disregard for legal risk as to be willing to plagiarize blatantly and repeatedly. This is not consistent with his role as Magistrate for Somersetshire (»Obituary«), nor with what one might call his responsible scholarly »voice« in *Ancient Danish Ballads*.

Somewhat paradoxically, the qualities just named would also lead us to expect Prior in *Ancient Danish Ballads* to acknowledge his own earlier work, the more so in that he meticulously cites other earlier translators, clearly building upon citations used in *Old Danish Ballads*, including other translations from German intermediaries. But he nowhere does so. He may simply be so dissatisfied with his earlier translations themselves that he does not want to acknowledge them. As one sees in the Appendix, his translation in *Old Danish Ballads* is not invariably close to the German, and he is openly frustrated by the inadequacy of his own work (182). But I am most inclined to see the silence as the product of a general unease and dissatisfaction with his earlier practice of translating from translations, and from a source he now knows to be unreliable. For Prior has now read, digested, and for the most part accepted the implications of Grundtvig's new and eye-opening editing principles in *DgF*, especially respect for received tradition and for textual accuracy.

What else do we know about this gentleman, so freshly freed from his pseudonym? Besides being a translator of the *folkeviser* he is a physician, an Oxford graduate, an antiquarian, an etymologist, a student of natural history, and a member of the Linnaean Society (»Obituary«). The range of his intellectual curiosity is reflected in some of his other publications: in 1872 he produces the curious but learned monograph *Notes on Croquet: And Some Ancient Bat and Ball Games Related to It*, and he has an 1879 monograph *On the Popular Names of the British Plants*. He is an important contributor to Murray's monumental *New English Dictionary* (»Obituary«). He is obviously a committed student of the romance languages as well as the germanic. And he is capable of very hard work; between *Old Danish Ballads* in 1856 and *Ancient Danish Ballads* in 1860 he prepared 193 translations for the latter (using, as we have seen, some of his earlier work), and he obviously

read extensively in both Scandinavian and romance-language parallels, in other translations, and in contemporary scholarly discussions. Grundtvig, in later volumes of *DgF*, respects Prior's work and learning, especially regarding the romance-language parallels and traditions. At least one scholar has suggested that Prior is Danish-born (Roos 98). But to the extent that I and kind colleagues have been able to investigate, there is no real evidence of this, attractive though the idea of such a Danish connection may be (Dal, Letter; Jacobsen).

Now that we have established his identity, let us examine the significance of Amateur/Prior's work in *Old Danish Ballads* within the larger transcultural context mentioned above.

Some of the significance is admittedly negative. Amateur/Prior (as I shall hitherto call him) takes English-speakers on a circuitous German route to the Danish ballads, and the practice of translating translations has self-evident shortcomings. On the other hand, he does no more than continue a »German connection« already established for such translations in England, and unlike some predecessors such as M. G. »Monk« Lewis, Amateur/Prior is completely open about his practice. The least defensible feature of *Old Danish Ballads* is its exclusion of the refrains, because this damages the integrity of the ballads. (This must be the result of Oehlenschläger's influence, not Grimm's.)

But in other respects we may see a very positive significance in Amateur/Prior's work. First, while it is not quite the first work of the mid-century revival of English translation of the Danish ballads, it is nevertheless a trial run for the work which dominates that revival, Prior's *Ancient Danish Ballads*. (Other participants include William and Mary Howitt [1852], Whitley Stokes [1852, 1855], Robert Buchanan [1866].) And some of the best innovations in Prior's major work are incipient in the trial run. For example, it broadens the canon. In the first wave of translation, 1796-1830, England was preoccupied with the *kæmpeviser* or heroic ballads, the *ridderviser* or ballads of chivalry, and the *tryllleviser* or nature-mythic ballads – especially the revenant ballads. Amateur/Prior continues these emphases but is the first to expand the canon to include the *historiske viser* or historical ballads (*DgF* 126 Kong Valdemar og hans Søster, 127 Kong Valdemar og hans Søsterdatter, 128 Liden Kirsten og Dronning Sofie, 129 Stolt Signild og Dronning Sofie, and 146 Marsk Stigs Døttre). He does not include the *legendeviser* or Christian-legendary ballads (though he will four years later), because his source, Grimm, virtually excludes them.

England here, in the mid-century revival, gets its first real *book* whose central purpose is to translate this particular genre of Danish traditional literature. Texts, introduction, and notes combine to say, both implicitly and explicitly, that this literature is significant in its own right. If we see what the English-speaking world understood to be the importance of the *folkeviser* on the basis of the work of most earlier translators, we find that Amateur/Prior's emphasis marks a very significant, and positive, departure. And much of the significance lies in the earlier baggage he declines to pick up.

What *Old Danish Ballads* presents for the first time is freedom from the prevailing projection of a complex agenda onto the translated Danish ballads – a program which is *racial* and can become *racist.* The agenda tends to celebrate conquest and the subjugation of peoples, and it has a number of associated features to be noted below. The racial dimension manifests a larger cultural phenomenon of the 19th century in England and America, the rise of racial germanism or teutonism under the code-word Anglo-Saxon. This lengthy and unhappy development is identified and defined by Reginald Horsman in *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1981) (though he has nothing to say about ballad translations). He traces an evolution from an attempt to construct an »Anglo-Saxon« institutional past for England according to later political and religious needs, to a racist view of the germanic past and present of England and other nations, a view that helps rationalize some of the worst, genocidal aspects of English colonialism, and indeed of American expansionism (1-75). Obviously it foreshadows the great culmination of destructive germanism under Hitler. Hugh MacDougall treats the same unhappy phenomenon in more detail in *Racial Myth in English History* (1982), and Raymond Betts helps us see it in relation to the English and European colonialism which has so changed the face and cultures of the world (xiv-xvi, 11-13, 18, 150-183).

Within this context let us look more closely at what England wanted from Denmark and her ballads, if we are to judge by the commentary of Amateur/Prior's predecessors. (And »wanted« is defensible here, in that much of the work appears in magazines, a reader-responsive medium.) Their emphases and their conscious aims vary widely. But certain features appear so consistently, whether or not they dominate the discussion, that they are in fact paradigmatic.

First of these is an emphasis on the kinship of the English-Scottish ballads with the Danish, and thus also with the larger Scandinavian

balladry and with a perceived or projected balladry of germanic culture (Jamieson, *Illustrations* 245-6). Vital here is an assumption that the Danish ballads include categories largely lost in Britain, thus indirectly connecting the English and Scottish ballads backwards to a vaguely ancient teutonic traditional literature (»On the State« 396n.).

This ballad linkage is seen to exemplify a larger linkage of English culture with a vaguely-defined, common-germanic people and culture, both ancestral and, to a degree, contemporary (Jamieson, *Popular Ballads and Songs* 1: 208, 2: 87-8). The term »Anglo-Saxon« tends to stand for the English people from the fifth century on, and the word »gothic« is almost paradigmatic for the common-germanic »race«, though »teutonic« and »germanic« appear. The nature of this race may be perceived in terms of the activities and traits of »the Norseman«: expansion, vigor, »savagery«, heroic paganism in an earlier age, and, especially, conquest (»On the Songs« 412; Borrow 306-7).

One also notes a paradigmatic excitement here. There is a fundamental assumption of – and thus I would argue a need for – a *superiority* in this gothic »race«. »The Teutonic, Germanic, or Gothic nations, have long been the leading people of the world« (»On the Songs« [II] 42). This seems to appear even when the »savagery« of the forebears is deprecated in the same article ([III] 412-3). To some the superiority is demonstrated by success in the subjugation of other peoples, past and present (Bowring and Borrow 57-8). Less commonly the superiority is found as well in the »teutons'« perceived favorable treatment of women (»On the Songs« [I] 144) or in an intellectual and political progressiveness:

> To the Gothic stock ... almost all the nobler properties of Northern Europe must be referred, while it will be seen that the founders of the greatest and most enlightened of modern nations – the nations which have raised their civil policy on the wide foundations of knowledge and freedom – emanate from the same distinguished source. (Bowring and Borrow 49).

The superiority is consistently racial.

In his discussion of folklore as being in some cases a projection of what is unconscious, Alan Dundes (33-61) provides us a means of interpretation, a way to understand the *uses* these British translators and their audience have wished – or better, needed – to make of the Danish

ballads in all this. At a time of expanding empire and the wholesale, sometimes iron-fisted subjugation or extermination of peoples and races (Betts 217-8), I suggest that Englishmen were, at a largely unconscious level, of deeply divided mind about what was happening. And I suggest that they needed to project their current, *real* national savagery onto their own past, and thus shift their responsibility for that savagery to an inherited racial make-up or destiny. Similar needs might arise out of the social Darwinism creeping into the culture. Certainly other kinds of literature arising in England throughout the century reflect a complex escapism involving a kind of teutonism (Shippey) and a need to project what is ugly within the culture onto people and things outside the culture – a reflection of a pervasive preoccupation with colonialism at a deep level (Brantlinger).

Also paradigmatic is the determination of the translators to see the Danish ballads as reflections of »manners«, of past conditions of society (»On the State« 93). Thus the ballads are simplistically put to the service of history, and indeed Jamieson compares his work in *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* to that of Saxo (236-7). There is a kind of condescension to the past in this, and also to the ballads, i.e., by not taking them for the pieces of traditional literature they are.

A barbarous or »wild« past is also projected onto the Danish ballads, establishing a dichotomy with the »cultivated« and tame present (Jamieson, *Illustrations* 243). The descriptor »rude« is universal. These ballads are seen as especially appropriate for the role because they are felt to be older – in one case, felt to go virtually all the way back to the steppes of Asia! Again one cannot help but see projection of one's own »uncultivated« – and unassimilated – »savagery« onto the past, or perhaps to see an urge to escape from the still-powerful demands of the age of cultivation and reason into a projected past filled with »primitive« feelings. And certainly this preoccupation with »wildness« must be connected with the (especially German) romanticism which helps drive racially-connected 19th century phenomena ranging from colonialism to the new »science« of philology and the teutonism which in part depends on it (Betts 17, 243; Horsman 5, 34-41; MacDougall 119-24).

The Danish ballads moreover are felt to provide a connection to a pre-Christian stage of culture. Views vary, from seeing the *folkeviser* as preserving a kind of demoted ancient mythology in their »superstitions« to seeing them as preserving actual belief in the old pantheon long after the age of conversion (»On the Songs« [III] 413). The trans-

lators and commentators are strikingly preoccupied with making contact with – or better, creating – a past extremely different from the conventional Christian culture they inhabit and espouse.

One final cluster of tendencies is significant even if not paradigmatic. Some of the translators present their work in a context of decided anti-Catholicism and anti-medievalism. The *folkeviser* are seen as a connection to a more valid stage of culture before the dark Popish night with its Mediterranean dominance (Bowring and Borrow 52, 55). According to Horsman, such anti-Catholicism is an important stimulus to the racial Anglo-Saxonism he traces (9-12, 68-9).

The error, both moral and factual, in most elements of the paradigm above is clear enough, above all in the chilling germanic chest-thumping. (And the paradigm remains in disturbingly full force in some participants in the midcentury revival of Danish ballad translation, such as the Howitts and the anonymous author of »Ballads and Traditions of Northern Europe«.) Amateur/Prior's predecessors were deeply interested in the *folkeviser* – not, largely, for their intrinsic qualities but rather as a means to invoke the past, and sometimes the present, they needed. We know from his citations that Amateur/Prior knew most of this work. What does he do with the paradigm he inherited?

He largely responds with eloquent silence or correctives. The one questionable element he endorses is the »evidence of manners of the past« view of the ballads. But he makes clear in his notes that he also values the ballads in their own right, as a special literature which may show »great truth and dramatic power« (182). He points out that women are notably ill-used in many of the *folkeviser* and thus counters the wishful idea of a teutonic equality of treatment (iii). Most important, Amateur/Prior cites romance-language parallels and possible sources, a trait he will develop at great length in *Ancient Danish Ballads*, and thus begins to counter the germanic blinders worn by his predecessors (159). He eschews the gothic fantasies and projections discussed above. The English-speaking reader could approach *Old Danish Ballads* with far greater freedom from ill-conceived and exploitative context than was possible for any earlier translation source, and some contemporary ones.

This work is also the first to understand, at least implicitly, that translation of such material is a cumulative, larger activity to which any individual makes only a component contribution. Amateur/Prior is very much conscious of earlier translation activity; in his introduction he

methodically lists all translations he can find and implicitly invites the reader to see the whole as an expanding corpus. He seems to choose his ballads – as does none of his predecessors – partly in view of whether they have been translated before (ii-iii).

The attitude he projects stands in welcome contrast to what I see as a lack of respect both for the originals and for the translation process on the part of some earlier translators in the magazines. He is clear as to source, while elsewhere there is a tendency toward haziness about this, especially on the possible use of Grimm or other German translations in addition to or in place of Danish sources (»On the State« 397-8). (The actual sum knowledge of Danish among the translators active between 1796 and 1864 is certainly somewhat less than the knowledge they claim or imply.) This evasiveness distorts the whole process, de-emphasizing the original tradition and implicitly giving the translator and his work undue pre-eminence and authority. In addition, while Amateur/Prior may briefly evaluate another translator's work, he shows none of the common signs of being threatened by it: bickering, or jockeying to arrogate a position of authority (»On the State« 396-7n.). Nor does he project a false and condescending casualness, e.g., »We take the first that we lay hands upon« to translate (Bowring and Borrow 59).

In fact An Amateur may, paradoxically, be the first *professional* translator of the *folkeviser.* Not in terms of his scholarly preparation, nor in terms of his translations themselves, which don't seem especially good. But he is »professional« in the modern sense of concentrating on the material itself while maintaining a productive distance from it. And he is »professional«, finally, in his lacking ideological axes to grind – especially the racial one prefiguring what must be the ugliest moral and political development of our century.

Appendix: The progress of a stanza from DgF 20 Hagbard og Signe

Vedel, *Tragica*
Syv, *Et Hundrede Udvalde Danske Viser ... forøgede med det andet Hundrede...*

Satte de Haffbur kongens Søn,
  Vdi den Borgestue:
Hannem gaar til baade Mand oc Møer
  Oc mest hans egen Iomfrue.

Grimm, *Altdänische Heldenlieder, Balladen und Märchen* (1811)

Sie setzten Hafbur, den Königs Sohn, in die Burgstube hin:
Da gingen Männer und Jung-frauen zumeist sine Liebste zu ihm.

An Amateur, *Old Danish Ballads, Translated from Grimm's Collection* (1856)

With iron then they fetter him,
  And guard in donjon keep:
To see him crowd the Ladies all,
  And all that see him weep.

Longhand revisions in *Old Danish Ballads*

They seized and laid that highborn prince
  Within the prison wall,
And men and maidens round him wept
  His true love most of all.

Prior, *Ancient Danish Ballads* (1860)

They dragg'd him then, the royal prince,
  Within the prison wall,
And men and maidens crowded round,
  His trulove most of all.

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Der er ydet bidrag til trykning af denne afhandling fra Svend Grundtvigs og Axel Olriks Legat.