

“Johnie of Breadislee”

Sir Walter Scott included “Johnie of Breadislee” from the first edition of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, where it appears in the first volume.

The ballad tells the tale of a poacher, who is confronted by foresters and takes a desperate last stand against them. Scott makes it quite clear in his introduction to this ballad that his version is a combination of various copies, noting that the “stanzas of the greatest merit have been selected from each copy” (MSB (1802) I: 59)

History

While there is no specific event associated to this ballad, poaching has been a criminal offence for centuries. For centuries, too, it has fallen into two categories: the lone poacher and the gang of poachers. While gangs are viewed as being a modern phenomenon, there were noted gangs operating in England in the 17th century, who were not just hunting to feed themselves, but on what was then a near-industrial scale.

In England, in the 12th and 13th centuries, there were laws imposed regarding hunting within royal forests - and Inglewood Forest in the North of England was one of these. These laws were imposed by Norman rule. By Tudor and Stuart times in England, the laws were less stringently applied. However, wardens, foresters and gamekeepers have waged a centuries-long battle against the future.

There is no clear way to date the actions presented in the ballad, apart from the fact that no firearms are being used. What we are presented with is a romantic view of a poacher. Scott, in associating the ballad with the Borders, notes that the main character “appears to have been an Outlaw and deer stealer – probably one of the Broken Men residing upon the Border” (MSB (1802) I: 59).

Notes |

Verse 1 |

“the gude graie dogs”

These are Johnie’s hunting dogs, although we cannot assert that they are greyhounds. However, for centuries “long dogs”, that is sight hounds such as greyhounds, deerhounds, whippets and various cross-breeds, have been used to bring down prey from rabbits to deer.

Verses 2-3 |

Johnie’s mother begs him not to go hunting, but Johnie goes nonetheless. In the ballad tradition, if a mother forbids a son or daughter not to do something, but they defy the mother’s wishes, then there will be a tragic outcome.

In referring to “gude wheat bread” and “blude-red wine”, there is a suggestion that there is no want of food in Johnie’s home.

Verse 4 |

“Durrisdeer”

Durisdeer is a small village in Dumfries and Galloway, lying in Nithsdale.

“dun deer”

In this context, dun refers to the brown colour of the deer. When used in terms of describing the colour of an animal, dun is a dull brown colour, except in the case of horses.

Verse 5 |

“Johnie’s buskt up his gude bend bow”

To busk means to make ready or to put in order, so here Johnie is preparing his bow. By referring to a “bend” or bent bow, the narrative makes clear that Johnie is not using a cross-bow.

Verse 6 |

Ling is another words for “heather”.

Verse 7 |

There is a high degree of action in this verse, with Johnie shooting his bow, the deer, wounded, leaping away and the dogs bringing her down.

“His hounds they laid her pride”

In butchery terms, the “pride” is the spleen, but it can also refer to the entrails of the deer.

Verse 8 |

Following on from verse 7, with the deer killed by the dogs, Johnie then butchers it.

“Johnie has bryttled the deer sae weel”

Scott states that “bryttled” means “cut up venison. However, given that the next lines discusses the removal of the liver and the lungs, this may be akin to the “gralloch” of a deer, which refers to the diembowelling of a dead deer.

Verse 10 |

“And by there cam a silly auld carle,
An Ill death mote he die!”

The use of a character of an old man (a “carle”) is used in the ballad tradition as one way of conveying information to another character or characters. “An ill death mote he die!” is a variant of the more common “An ill death may he die!”, which is used to indicate a character who obstructs or opposes the hero or heroine. Personalised asides such as these, while fairly common in the reiver ballads, are much less common in the ballad tradition in general, where the narrative of a tale is usually presented in an impersonal manner. “An ill death may he die!” is the line most frequently used on the rare occasions when an aside is included.

Verses 11-12 |

Here, the character of the old man fulfills his functions, providing information that the foresters otherwise could not know.

“scroggs”

The Dictionary of the Scots Tongue / Dictionar o the Scots Leid defines scroggs as “(An area of) brushwood or scrub, thickets of bushes and small trees.

Verse 13 |

In the ballad tradition, beautiful clothing indicates a beautiful or handsome character. The clothing described in this verse is of good quality.

“holland fine”

Holland was a linen fabric, which was made in Holland

“Lincome twine”

This may refer to Lincoln cloth.

There were two colours of cloth most associated with Lincoln: green and red. However, production of a green dye in Lincoln was presented as an ancient craft in book 25 of Michael Drayton’s poem *Poly-Olbion*, first published in 1612.

(<http://archive.org/stream/completeworksmioodraygoog#page/n170/mode/2up>)

Graine or greyne is the word used to describe the material used to dye cloth, so Lincoln greyne is would be any cloth dyed in Lincoln.

Verses 15 -16 |

Part of a forester’s duty was to protect a forest’s game from unlawful hunting. In this respect, then, the foresters are within their rights to apprehend Johnie, whom, by inference, they know.

“His sister’s son was he”

This may infer that the sixth forester is nephew to the head-forester, or less probably, that he is Johnie’s nephew.

Verse 17 |

There is a ballad leap at this point in the ballad. In verse 16, the seven foresters have resolved to kill Johnie. In verse 17, they are attacking him.

Verse 18-19 |

These verses are one of the most famous “last stands” in the ballad tradition, and are perhaps only matched by the bravery of the hero in “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow”. Johnie, although mortally wounded, kills six of his attackers and seriously wounds the seventh.

Verse 20 - 21|

The use of a bird is another method within the ballad tradition of imparting important information.

Verse 22 |

Here, Johnie’s corpse is carried from the forest. The implication is that the wood mentioned is used as some sort of bier.

Verse 23 |

The character of the mother refers back to her plea at the outset of the ballad, to remind the listener that she asked Johnie not to go hunting.

Verse 25 |

This verse contains an example of how a ballad may not present the entire narrative, but imply some aspects of the ending: although the hanging of the old man is not presented in the ballad, the implication is that it will be carried out.

Verse 26 |

This is a version of one of the most famous verses in the ballad tradition. The broken bow of the first line is an indicator of Johnie’s death in the third.