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HALF-PENNY BALLADS AND THE SOUNDSCAPE OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ELECTIONEERING[1]

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Ballad sheets, or broadsides, were one of the most accessible forms of print in early-modern England. They were cheap and easily transported by street hawkers and chapmen (itinerant salesmen). Moreover, they were tapping into a far older oral tradition, and were therefore a customary means of communication. This liminal quality is most evident in political ballads, as their topical news content exposes what Adam Fox describes as 'the promiscuous exchange between the oral, scribal, and printed realms'.[2] The singing of such songs was a perennial feature of popular politics, and ballad sellers made a regular appearance amidst the commotion of the hustings in eighteenth-century elections.[3] Yet, electoral ballads have not attracted the same level of attention as the equally political Jacobite balladry that harked back to bygone days. It is no longer fair to say that they are deemed to be 'of little interest to the serious political historian', but even in the case of eighteenth-century Paris, where state censorship gave songs a particularly important role in spreading the news, historians have tended to overlook the significance of singing as a means of reporting current affairs.[4]

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[1] I am grateful to Christopher Brooks, Adrian Green, David Craig and the anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions.

[2] Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*, Oxford 2000, p.40.

[3] John Brewer refers to the case of Admiral Byng in 1757 when anti-government songs were performed by one hundred demonstrators as they paraded through the streets of Westminster, and also notes that the popularity of Wilkite and anti-Bute ballads led to government attempts to keep ballad singers off the streets of London in 1769: John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Cambridge 1976, p.155; see also Hogarth's depiction of 'The Polling', part of his *Humours of the Election*, which satirised the Oxford election of 1754, and where a ballad singer is seen hawking her wares.

[4] Frank O'Gorman, 'Coventry Electoral Broadsides, 1780', *Yale University Library Gazette*, No. 67, 1993, p.161; Hannah Barker and David Vincent, *Language, Print and Electoral Politics, 1790-1832: Newcastle-under-Lyme Broadsides*, Woodbridge 2001; see also 'Singing the News in 18th-Century Paris: An Interview with Robert Darnton', Randall Stephens, *The Historical Society Boston University*, 2011.

This oversight is in part because oral commentary often goes unrecorded, and even in their printed form political ballads might be deemed too ephemeral to merit preservation. As the eighteenth-century ballad collector Joseph Ritson noted, they were 'not only too temporary, but too partial to gain much applause when their subjects are forgotten, and their satire has lost its force'.[5] If, however, circumstances were considered by contemporaries to be momentous, then topical ballads are more likely to have left a lasting record, as was the case during the 1774 parliamentary election when several 'poetical pieces' were included in *A complete collection of all the papers which have appeared from the different parties in the present contest for members for the county of Northumberland*; the editor's aim being 'to preserve many valuable fugitive Pieces, which, in the Hurry and Confusion of the Contest, would otherwise perish with the Day, and be consigned to an unmerited oblivion.'[6] This election was also hotly contested in the borough constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne, and the political ballads printed in the town give voice to the electioneering cacophony of 1774. In doing so, this 'street literature' evokes an urban soundscape where print and oral culture converged.

A growing interest in what tends to be described as the seventeenth-century heyday of the broadside ballad has resulted in an increasing recognition of both the diversity within this genre and the prevalence of singing in early-modern society. Placing the election ballads of 1774 within the social terrain in which they were produced provides the opportunity to question the extent to which this auditory culture was eroded by the march of progress during the eighteenth century. It also makes it possible to

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http://histsociety.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/singing-news-in-18th-century-paris.html; and Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

[5] Cited in Paula McDowell, 'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*: Broadside Ballads in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse', *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol.47 No.2, 2006, p.172.

[6] *A complete collection of all the papers which have appeared from the different parties in the present contest for members for the county of Northumberland,* Newcastle 1774.

discern an aspect of popular politics that often goes unheard, and when considered alongside the changing cultural connotations of balladry, the radical undertones of this tumult are brought to the fore. It is not, however, the political content of the ballads or the specific details of the electoral contest that is of interest here. Nor is it the 'familiar tunes' to which the ballads were sung; although these added an additional layer to the political messages that they conveyed.[7] Instead, attention is focused upon the evidence that the lyrics provide in terms of the performance and reception of the songs. These aspects of balladry are nevertheless of relevance in a political context, as an awareness of the manner in which the issues of the day were aired in song is essential to our understanding of the printed political discourse whether it appeared in the pages of a newspaper, a pamphlet, or as a ballad. The woodcut images that were once an integral part of the broadside also have their own story to tell.[8] But such imagery was not a prominent feature of the electoral song sheets of 1774, and it is suffice to say that there was no clear correlation between the inclusion of an image and either the format or the political leanings of the song. The appearance of the ballads in more general terms deserves further attention, but is not directly relevant in this context, given that the intention is to explore the oral realm in which the printed songs were experienced, and to reveal both the cultural resonance and the political tone of the electoral discord that could be heard on the banks of the Tyne.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE BALLADS

[7] The growing recognition of this aspect of balladry can be seen in the inclusion of a CD in Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England*, Cambridge 2010; also The English Broadside Ballad Archive, hosted by University of California at Santa Barbara, which not only provides facsimiles and transcripts of early-modern ballads, but has also produced recordings where the tune can be identified, http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu

[8] The new image-matching tool available on The Bodleian Library's Broadside Ballads Online makes it possible to track the use of woodcuts at the click of a mouse, http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk

Newcastle has been described as one of the 'most dynamic' of the 'old centres' in eighteenth-century England.[9] The population doubled over the century from around fourteen to twenty-eight thousand, and in addition to being at the heart of the region's coal trade, the town had a flourishing commercial sector.[10] Newcastle also had a vibrant cultural life. The annual fair attracted visitors from a wide geographic area, a fact celebrated in the ballad *Newcastle Fair*.[11] The more genteel or 'polite' attractions included theatres and assembly rooms, and the town was home to a host of clubs and societies. It was also one of the most important printing centres outside London, and although eighteenth-century print culture is often associated with a rational shift away from custom and tradition, ballad sheets were still a lucrative part of the print trade in 1774.[12]

In his memoirs, the renowned Newcastle engraver Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) painted a vivid if romanticised picture of an oral world in which singing was ubiquitous, and where printed ballads were as pervasive as the songs themselves. Bewick completed a six year apprenticeship in Newcastle in October 1774 just as voting in the election was about to begin. As an old man looking back nostalgically to his childhood, spent just outside of the town in rural Northumberland, he recalled how '[t]he winter evenings were often spent in listening to the traditionary tales and songs', and how the past was 'kept in

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[9] Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies c.1580-1800*, Oxford 2000, p.417.
[10] For population figures see Joyce Ellis, 'Regional and County Centres 1700-1840', *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, 3 Vols, ed. Peter Clark, Cambridge 2000, Vol.2, p.679; Joyce Ellis, 'The "Black Indies": The Economic Development of Newcastle, c.1700-1840', *Newcastle upon Tyne: a Modern History*, ed. Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster, Chichester 2001, p.1; see also William Whitehead, *The First Newcastle Directory*, Newcastle 1778 [reprinted 1889].
[11] *Newcastle Fair*, Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads [hereafter cited as Bodleian]: Harding B 25(1329).
[12] Helen Berry, 'Creating Polite Space: The Organisation and Social Function of the Newcastle Assembly Rooms', *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830*, ed. Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregory, Aldershot 2004, pp.120-140; John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, London 1997, pp.504, 507; Barbara Crosbie, 'Provincial Purveyors of Culture: the Print Trade in Newcastle upon Tyne, c.1700-1800', *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, ed. Barbara Crosbie and Adrian Green, forthcoming.

remembrance by the songs and tunes of old times'.[13] He suggested that woodcut prints could be seen 'in every cottage and farm house throughout the country', and that these 'were sold at a very low price, were commonly illustrative of some memorable exploits, ... often with songs added to them of a moral, a patriotic, or a rural tendency, which served to enliven the circle in which they were admired'.[14] Bewick also referred to Newcastle's first permanent printer, John White, who had produced the town's longest-running newspaper, the *Newcastle Courant*, from 1711 until his death in 1769. White had, according to Bewick, 'rendered himself famous for his numerous publications of histories and old ballads' and it was suggested '[w]ith the singing of the latter, the streets of Newcastle were long greatly enlivened ... on market days, visitors, as well as the town's people, were often highly gratified with it.' To which Bewick added '[w]hat a cheerful, lively time this appeared to me and many others!'[15]

Not everyone took such a positive view of the ballads produced by White. Newcastle historian John Brand noted in his *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777) that in the offices of the *Newcastle Courant* 'there is preserved an *hereditary* Collection of Ballads ... the greatest Part of which is worse than Trash ... the style of them so *puerile* and *simple*, that I cannot think it would be worth the Pains to invade the Hawkers' Province, by exhibiting any Specimens of them.' Brand claimed that such songs were by 1777 only sung to infants in Sandgate, the area around Newcastle quayside, which he described as 'the Billingsgate of the north'.[16] His disapproval was reiterated when referring to an ancient custom of holding a mock battle between the winter and the

[13] Thomas Bewick and Jane Bewick, *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick*, Newcastle 1862, pp.12, 84.
[14] Ibid, pp.245-6.
[15] Ibid, p.60.
[16] John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1777, pp.184-5.

summer, in which the inevitable victor (in the form of a budding branch and/or May flowers) was carried through the streets accompanied by song. Brand complained: 'I have more than once been disturbed early on May Morning at Newcastle, by the *Noise* of a Song, which a Woman sung about the Streets, who had several Garlands, in her Hand, and which ... she sold to any who were superstitious enough to buy them.'[17] These acerbic comments need to be read as part of a wider debate about balladry. While Brand emphasised the uncivilised nature of such songs, there were antiquarians who collected them, at least some of whom were busily striving to separate the rustic from the vulgar.[18] Such debates were not without precedent, but this was not a question of subconsciously, or uncritically, continuing a process started by previous generations. Instead, old arguments were being employed in a new context.

This change in attitudes was clearly seen in the marketing of ballads. They had initially been printed as broadsides (a single sheet of paper) but were increasingly sold as half sheets and even small slips of paper, or several ballads were printed on one sheet and sold as a miscellany or garland, all of which had kept their price low. However, during the second half of the eighteenth century publishing expensive edited collections of ballads was becoming a profitable commercial enterprise. All too often contrived distinctions were made between the supposedly more authentic songs included in these collections and those deemed to be crude corruptions, and as such generally associated

[17] Ibid, p.262.
[18] This was part of a wider cultural turn. Markers of locality were being redefined and, as Adrian Green suggests, a polite lack of interest in the vulgar was replaced by a fashionable interest in the rustic: Adrian Green, 'Confining the Vernacular: the Seventeenth-Century Origins of a Mode of Study', *Vernacular Architecture*, Vol.38, 2007, pp.1-7. For a detailed discussion of the attitudes of antiquarian collectors see Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: the Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, London 2004.

with the lower orders.[19] As a consequence, far from being rejected in favour of more 'rational' pastimes, at least some ballads were gaining a fashionable respectability. This was not limited to ballads in their printed form; in 1785 the *Newcastle Courant* carried a report about a meeting of the Cumberland Society held in Fleet Street, which was described as a gathering of one hundred and fifty of the county's more prestigious London residents, and where the entertainments included songs performed in Cumberland dialect.[20] Yet the fashionable interest in balladry was selective, and the electoral ballads were amongst those that lacked the necessary durability to claim a place in the printed collections.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE BALLADS

Turning to the political contest of 1774, it is fair to say that the events in Newcastle were not typical of eighteenth-century elections. Firstly, the pre-reform political landscape was a complex patchwork of constituencies. The right to vote in county elections was premised upon a property qualification, but each of the boroughs had a distinct electoral system. In Newcastle, which was a 'freeman borough', all those entitled to membership of an incorporated trade had the right to vote for the town's two MPs, and Joyce Ellis has estimated that freeman status enfranchised as many as fifty per cent of the adult male householders.[21] In specific terms this meant that 2,245 freemen cast their votes in 1774, but it is important to recognise that almost half of the electorate were non-residents, the majority of whom lived in the surrounding counties.[22] Nevertheless, the voters in

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[19] Sweet, *Antiquaries*, pp.340-41; McDowell, 'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*', pp.151-178.
[20] *Newcastle Courant*, 23 April 1785.
[21] J.M. Ellis, 'A Dynamic Society: Social Relations in Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1660-1790', *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600-1800*, ed. Peter Clark, London 1984, p.201.
[22] Thomas R. Knox, 'Bowes and Liberty: The Newcastle By-Election of 1777', *Durham University Journal*, Vol.77, 1984-5, p.159.

Newcastle were more numerous and more socially diverse than most. Conversely, as the guilds lost their tight economic grip on the town, the nature of the franchise had increasingly excluded some relatively wealthy members of the community. It should also be noted that the pre-reform electorate were rarely given the opportunity to vote, but were simply presented with a *fait accompli* after some backroom manoeuvring by the political elite, and Newcastle was no exception. A longstanding truce between Whigs and Tories had seen each nominate one candidate to stand unopposed, and 1774 was the first contested election in the town for a generation.[23]

The contest came in the wake of a politically charged local dispute over the freemen's right to use of the town moor, which had become interwoven with a growing national campaign for electoral reform. The election was also played out against the backdrop of deteriorating relations with the American colonies. News of events in Massachusetts had reached the Newcastle press in January 1774 some six weeks after tea had been dumped in Boston harbour. Political tensions were, therefore, already running high when on 25 June it was announced in the *Newcastle Chronicle* that some of the freemen had resolved to withhold their support from candidates that refused to back their demands for political reform. The following week readers were told that two reformers were to stand in opposition to the candidates selected by the civic authorities. While this was a defiant stance, the political nature of the reform movement in Newcastle remains a contested subject. This is not the place to evaluate these debates, but it should noted that

[23] For details of the contest in Newcastle see Thomas R. Knox, 'Wilkism and the Newcastle election of 1774', *Durham University Journal*, No.72, 1979, pp.23-37; Barbara Crosbie, 'The Rising Generations: A Northern Perspective on Age Relations and the Contours of Cultural Change, England c.1740-1785' Durham University Ph.D. thesis, 2011; Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, Cambridge 1995; H. T. Dickinson, *Radical Politics in the North-East of England in the Later Eighteenth Century*, Durham 1979; Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*; James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism*, Cambridge 1990.

the reformers were a potentially broad church ranging from provincially-minded objectors to perceived abuses of power through to ideologically motivated radicals, and in keeping with eighteenth-century convention the reform candidates were drawn from the ruling elite. They were roundly beaten when the poll eventually took place in early October but the outcome was far from predictable, and the reformers would go on to win a seat in 1780.

During the summer of 1774 the contest dominated the local sections of Newcastle's three newspapers, and it was in this context that the electoral ballads were produced. These songs demonstrate a wide range of styles and opinions. Some were humorous, but not always light-hearted, while others offered more serious coverage of political issues. Although they were presented in poetical form, there was no clear distinction between the ballads and other types of printed political comment. They not only covered the same key issues as were raised in the press but also made numerous references to the local newspapers or the printers that owned them. At the same time these songs were part of an older oral culture. Official news was still aired 'at the usual place', and the newspapers regularly reported bell ringing, illumining of windows, and general pageantry designed to express a particular opinion.[24] Print was not distinct from this communal discourse but had instead become an integrated component of traditional communication networks, and in his account of *The Contest*, the editor of the *Newcastle Freemen's Magazine*, James Murray, used the rather revealing phrase 'buzzed abroad' to describe the dissemination of political news in the town.[25]

[24] With reference to the King's Proclamation, *Newcastle Courant*, 9 September 1775.
[25] James Murray, *The Contest*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1774, p.29.

The nature of this political discourse made songs a particularly useful propaganda tool, as short lines of rhyming verse set to a familiar tune make it easier for listeners to remember the details of what was heard. In an oral culture this also made it possible to compose a fixed narrative. Unlike traditional story telling, in which the details are relatively fluid and only the underlying message is maintained, verse introduces a level of fixity to the performance as the words can be remembered and repeated verbatim. The ballad was, therefore, well suited to the permanence of the written word, and yet setting them in print did not detract from their oral qualities. As Laura Mason points out, in reference to the singing on the streets of Paris during the French Revolution, songs offered a particularly accessible discursive forum and could be appropriated and transformed as vocal inflections, gestures and the circumstances of the performance all affected the meaning conveyed; and audiences could help to shape this meaning by expressing opinion in shouts or applause, or even another song.[26]

The composers of political ballads might have been aiming to engender a particular perspective or attempting to tag their songs to popular opinions, but either way they were participating in a publicly aired conversation, and traces of this discursive oral quality can be found in the electoral ballads printed in Newcastle. *The FREEMAN's WISH* and *A NEW SONG*, for instance, presented competing words set to the same tune, and *The FREEMAN's WISH* even directed the reader to 'see the other party's ballad'.[27] Significantly, *A NEW SONG* emphasised the blending of oral and literate cultures with the lines: 'When songsters are singing, And bells are all ringing, As lovers of truth, it behoves us to write'. Both of these songs were explicitly responding to the word on the

[26] Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution*, London 1996, p.3.
[27] *The FREEMAN's WISH*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(23); *Blackett and White, A NEW SONG*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(9).

street, and they also raise the possibility of rival performances competing to be heard. Moreover, the majority of the electoral songs were written as a series of short verses with a chorus line designed to hit home the message, and so lent themselves to group renditions. It should, however, be noted that not all of the ballad sheets made reference to a familiar tune to which they were to be sung. It might be that these were distributed by ballad singers who advertised the tune as they hawked their wares, but it is also probable that at least some were printed to be read. That said, the author of *A New MEDLEY* assumed that the audience would be familiar with the repertoire of political songs from both sides of the debate that were parodied 'To the Tunes of all the Election Songs hitherto published in Newcastle upon Tyne'.[28] It is also telling that a number of the ballad sheets included footnote translations of colloquial terms, in one case explaining that teedy was 'a local expression used when children are peevish and fretful', which is suggestive of a transfer from oral production to print in order to extend the social and geographical reach of the song.[29]

THE VOICES IN THE CROWD

Regardless of whether the electoral ballads were an oral composition committed to print or were penned as propaganda, there were plenty of references to singing in the songs, and at times the volume of the participants in the political street theatre is almost audible. Whilst adding to this cacophony, the anti-reform ballad *A New Election SONG* condemned the 'mighty racket' made by the opposing faction, opening with the lines: 'Come forward from your lurking holes, Ye patriotic boys, And shew the vigour of your

[28] *A New MEDLEY*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(27).
[29] *The TRUTH of the MATTER*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(33).

Souls, In something more than noise.'[30] The source of this noise was Nelly's coffee house, a known venue for the reformers where it might be expected that the clientele would be making their voices heard.[31] But it was not only those that 'smok'd their pipe with Nelly' that attracted the attention of this ballad writer, and the song went on to encourage the 'Ladies' who 'Unite their pretty voices, And squeal as loud as they can squall, In favour of our choices.'[32] Electioneering was clearly a raucous affair, and within the clamour of popular politics the distinction between stalwart activists and political 'spectators' was extremely ambiguous.

The 'pretty voices' of the ladies are perhaps the most notable indication of this inclusiveness. Women were excluded from the franchise, and were rarely mentioned in other political literature, but they made a regular appearance in the lyrical contest, and one ballad even purported to be 'By a LADY'.[33] Their presence was not always appreciated, and references to the amount of attention a candidate received from 'the ladies' were often used to diminish his credibility. Notably, the only political letter found in the local newspapers that claimed to be from a woman (signing herself 'Sylvia') provoked a patronising comment from the editor about a 'lass of Spirit'.[34] Women were, nevertheless, on the streets during the election campaign, whether they were described as 'lasses' or 'ladies'; and just six years later the seventeen-year-old Annabel Carr noted in a letter to her eighteen-year-old brother that she had ridden into Newcastle during the polling for the 1780 election where 'there was a mob of near 2000 peoplle assembled but

[30] *A New Election SONG*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(1).
[31] A subscription was opened at Nelly's coffee-house, for the support of Mr. Wilkes in 1770: John Sykes, *Local Records: or, Historical Register of Remarkable Events*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1833, Vol.I, p.271.
[32] *A New Election SONG*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(1).
[33] *A Song for the Independent Burgesses of Newcastle. By a lady*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(10).
[34] *Newcastle Chronicle*, 9 July 1774.

no mischief done.'[35] Annabel, who was the daughter of an extremely wealthy local merchant, might have distinguished herself from the mob, but she did not consider the political pageantry unsuitable for a well-heeled young lady.

Annabel's youthful letter also draws attention to another disenfranchised group that were making their voices heard on the streets. The rumbustious nature of popular politics had an inherent appeal to the young, and while the hubris of youth might always be a visible and volatile element of a political crowd this was particularly so in 1774. The generational tensions discernible during this election had long and tangled roots that were not restricted to the Newcastle area, but local circumstances exacerbated this social division as calls for political reform became entwined with youthful demands for autonomy.[36] This meant that youth was perhaps a more prominent feature of the political ballads than it would otherwise have been. Reference was made to votes bought with gingerbread and candy, while *The YOUTH's DELIGHT* sarcastically praised the sitting MP, Walter Blackett, who was in his sixties and was repeatedly accused elsewhere of being old and out of touch.[37] It is also significant that as a result of the prevailing life-cycle employment structures the young were disproportionately represented within the servant class, working as apprentices or in domestic service, and so age and social status were often confounded. As a consequence, it is difficult to distinguish the youthful element of the crowd from the third disenfranchised group that made an appearance in the ballads; this being the more predictable component of the mob, the lower orders.

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[35] Letter from Annabella Carr (1763-1822), 3 September 1780, Carr-Ellison [Hedgeley] Mss, Northumberland Record Office, NRO855/A/3/Box 6/3.
[36] Crosbie, 'The Rising Generations'.
[37] *The TRUTH of the MATTER*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(33); *The YOUTH's DELIGHT*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(31).

Given the nature of the franchise in Newcastle the poorer voters were artisans and tradesmen not the labouring ranks but, as the ballads make clear, the lack of a vote did not prevent participation in popular politics. In one of his contributions to the discordant war of words, the Durham Muse accused the reform candidates of rousing the 'rabble' in Sandgate, the least salubrious neighbourhood in Newcastle, claiming they 'Rail at the *great*, the poor to please'.[38] Raising the spectre of the mob had particular force in the north east of England. The dominance of the coal trade in the region resulted in concentrations of threateningly large numbers of labouring men, and in Newcastle it was the Sandgate area that provoked such anxieties as it was home to the keelmen (or boatmen) who transported coal on the Tyne. This community had a reputation for being troublesome. They had been very visible in the angry crowds that had sacked the guildhall in 1740, and strikes were not uncommon, demonstrating their ability to act collectively.[39] Furthermore, the Durham Muse's concerns about rabble-rousers were not unfounded. Some people in Sandgate had conspicuously radical intent; most notably, the young schoolteacher Thomas Spence (1750–1814) whose political ideas spawned the Spencean societies of the early nineteenth century.[40]

Spence contributed to much of the pro-reform propaganda produced in Newcastle during the early 1770s, and may even have penned some of the election ballads. In 1775, he was expelled from the Newcastle Philosophical Society after publishing a lecture he had given entitled 'Property in Land Every Man's Right' in contravention of the society's

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[38] Durham Muse, *P-'s last Interview with his Friends, at the Matted Gallery*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(22).
[39] Joyce Ellis, 'Urban Conflict and Popular Violence The Guildhall Riots of 1740 in Newcastle Upon Tyne', *International Review of Social History*, Vol.25 No.3, 1980, pp.332-49; Joseph M. Fewster, *The Keelmen of Tyneside: Labour Organisation and Conflict in the North-East Coal Industry, 1600-1830*, Woodbridge 2011.
[40] P.M. Ashraf, *The Life and Times of Thomas Spence*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1983; Malcolm Chase, *"The People's Farm": English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840*, Oxford 1988.

rules.[41] But, as Eneas Mackenzie noted in his historical account of the town (written in 1827), it was said that 'the expulsion was not for printing it only, but for printing it in the manner of a half-penny ballad, and having it hawked about the streets'.[42] In response Spence had established his own debating society in his school on Broad Chare in Sandgate, where a group of young men, including the engraver Thomas Bewick, met to discuss the issues of the day. 1775 was also the year that Spence published his *Grand Repository of the English Language* in which he laid out his method of English grammar based on a phonetic alphabet.[43] It was his friend Bewick that cut the typeset for this new alphabet, and like Bewick, Spence evidently appreciated the value of oral communication. Both his half-penny ballad and his phonetic alphabet attempted to bridge the gap between print and the spoken word in order to make his radicalism more accessible to the lower ranks of society.

THE SOCIABILITY OF SONG

This image of sedition on the streets of Sandgate should not be overstated. It is important to recognise that the political circus in 1774 did not exist in a cultural vacuum but became part of a bustling urban environment where singing was commonplace and the electoral ballads were simply added to the cultural repertoire. It was in Sandgate, or 'the Billingsgate of the north', where the historian John Brand disapprovingly suggested traditional ballads were still sung to children during the 1770s. Again, the prominence of song can be seen in *The Keel-Row*, a ballad that is still regularly reproduced in collections

[41] Walter Scott, *The Monthly Chronicle of North-Country Lore and Legend*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1887, p.299.
[42] Eneas Mackenzie, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, including the Borough of Gateshead*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1827, p.400.
[43] *Newcastle Courant*, 2 September 1775.

of folk songs, which includes the line 'as I went up Sandgate, I heard a lassie sing'.[44] In 1736, local historian Henry Borne noted that the open space in Sandgate, known as Sandhill, had traditionally been 'a Place of Pleasure ... for the Towns-People ... where the Inhabitants were wont to assemble for their recreation'.[45] Sandhill remained a venue for impromptu open-air events such as celebrating the coronation of George III, or the withdrawal of the press gang (a common threat to the keelmen community) and music was a central feature of such festivities.[46] Borne also described the road leading from Sandhill to the Quayside as 'the great Place of Resort for the Business of the Coal-Trade ... [where you could] see almost nothing but a whole Street of Sign-posts of Taverns, Ale-houses, Coffee-houses, &c'.[47] At this time there was at least one resident bard who would have plied his trade in these drinking establishments. This was David Hall, better known as Blind Davy, 'who from frequently chaunting sonnets of his own composing, and from the similar misfortune of loss of sight was often stiled the Newcastle Homer'.[48]

Sandhill was a 'Place of Pleasure' that co-existed with the more genteel leisure venues in the upmarket areas of Newcastle, and its oral traditions were not the heritage found in refined antiquarian collections. They were, instead, a lived vernacular culture, handed down through the generations but intrinsically dynamic nonetheless. Resident poets were a vital component of this communal discourse and while Blind Davy had

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[44] Interestingly, although it is generally accepted to have originated in Newcastle, the musical score for this ballad was first published in *A Collection of Favourite Scots Tunes, Edinburgh c.1770*, possibly reflecting the Scottish identity still associated with Newcastle's keelmen, many of whom were of Scottish descent. The first local publication of the Keel-Row appears to be Joseph Ritson's *The Northumberland Garland: or, Newcastle Nightingale: A matchless collection of famous songs*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1793, p.68. For a discussion of the origins of the ballad see Walter Scott, *The Monthly Chronicle of North-Country Lore and Legend*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1887, pp.266-68.

[45] Henry Bourne, *The History of Newcastle upon Tyne: or, the ancient and present state of that town*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1736, p.123.

[46] Roz Southey, *Music-Making in North-East England during the Eighteenth Century*, Aldershot 2006, p.68.

[47] Bourne, *The History of Newcastle upon Tyne*, pp.132-3.

[48] John Sykes, *Local Records*, Vol.I, p.189.

passed away at ‘a very advanced age’ in 1749, and so could be seen as a remnant of the seventeenth century, the bard was not a dying breed. In 1785 a successor to Newcastle’s Homer, the self-styled bard and poet ‘old Titus’, published a satirical account of life in Sandgate in which he described a whole host of characters, at least some of whom appear to have been based upon local residents. This included reference to a ‘Young Parnel’, who also had ‘the Muse’s call; But strives to humour friends and Foes, In hopes to please them all’. Titus warned this novice that his aim was ‘Impossible!’ [49] Yet, while advising the young Parnel to place virtue before popularity, he did not advocate indifference towards an audience. He might have committed his words to print, but this bard was steeped in an oral culture in which a performer had no difficulty in judging the reception of their work, and he reminded other authors to ‘let *Readers* have a word, With you, and your succeeders; For all your pen appears a sword, It has its edge from Readers’.[50] This must have been patently clear to those who printed political ballads in the hope that readers would broadcast the opinions they contained whilst engaging in the traditional pastime of singing. It is even possible to speculate that Titus might have been one of the contributors to the electoral debates that were aired in song in 1774. But what is more certain is that Sandgate continued to be a place where local bards could find an audience for their musings long after Blind Davey performed his last sonnet.

The electoral ballads slotted easily into this cultural setting, and as the political campaign provided a new topic of conversation, it increased the volume of this already cluttered soundscape. It was, for instance, amongst the coffee houses of Sandhill that Nelly’s could be found, where the reformers were accused of lurking about and making a

[49] Titus, *Caps Well Fit*, Newcastle 1785, p.83.
[50] Ibid, p.80.

lot of noise.[51] Such venues tend to be associated with rational political discourse but they were also places where topical ballads were sung, and in Birmingham the self proclaimed 'veteran in the class of political-ballad street-scribbler', John Freeth, drew crowds to his coffee house to hear him perform.[52] But it should not be assumed that customers in the ale houses and taverns of Sandgate would have been less interested in the election than their coffee-drinking contemporaries. Sandhill was an entertainment district and during the summer of 1774 the political contest was the biggest show in town.

Two ballads written as lyrical newscasts (rather than short verses with chorus lines) provide telling evidence of this political cabaret. Firstly the *Two Famous Candidates* reported the arrival in town of the reform candidates; portraying the event as a prolonged pub-crawl that had rendered the prospective MPs legless. It was said that they were greeted by a ballad singer who sung their praises, but it was also suggested that the crowds had goaded the canvassers with songs.[53] In a direct response, the second ballad entitled *The TRUTH of the MATTER* provided an alternative account of these events. Whilst deriding the abilities of the rival songster, it was claimed that those who sang to greet the reform candidates were 'not by great ones hired'.[54] This implied that the composer of the *Two Famous Candidates* was paid to sing the derogatory tale of debauched electioneering, but it could also be that the second ballad singer had greeted the reform candidates with song and wished it to be known that they had not been hired to do so. It is difficult to determine whether the printed political ballads were sold for a profit or produced to be given away like handbills that were on occasion 'thrown through

[51] The coffee house was owned by Nelly Waterwood, see William Whitehead, *The Newcastle and Gateshead Directory, for 1782, 83, and 84*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1784.
[52] John Horden, *John Freeth (1731-1808): political ballad-writer and innkeeper*, Oxford 1993, p.1.
[53] *Two Famous Candidates*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(15).
[54] *The TRUTH of the MATTER*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(33).

every door' in the town.[55] However, *The TRUTH of the MATTER* incorporated a closing request to the audience to 'Now bid your rhymester strew these palms, And trumpet loud your praises'. This was a busker's performance committed to print, and while it might have been designed to make it look like the singer was not in the pay of a political party, it nonetheless serves to remind us that such rhymesters were part of the entertainment industry and electioneering was a spectacle from which they could make money; whether or not they were directly paid to produce propaganda.

A Breach of the Peace

The depiction of a political pub-crawl in the *Two Famous Candidates* might have been an exaggerated slur upon the reformers, but this is not to say that it had no basis in truth. It was expected that candidates would lavishly treat their constituents, which was likely to involve a trip to the tavern, and there were certainly plenty to choose from in Newcastle. *The First Newcastle Directory* (1778) listed only five coffee houses but included one hundred and seventy-five ale houses, and given that not all of the local businesses were included in the directory this probably underestimates the number of drinking establishments.[56] Alcohol was evidently a prevalent aspect of social interaction. The local brew, and the drinking culture that went with it, was even eulogised in the ballad *Newcastle Ale*.[57] Some of the political ballads were also particularly well suited to tavern life, but this did not necessarily diminish their political force. This is clearly seen in *The Burgesses' SONG* which, the reader was told, had first been sung at a Sunderland

[55] On 21 October 1775 John Wesley's so called *Calm Address* against the American rebels had dominated the front page of the anti-reformer *Newcastle Courant*, and the following week the pro-reformer *Newcastle Journal* and *Newcastle Chronicle* claimed that printed handbills of Wesley's sermon had been thrown into every house and shop in the town.
[56] William Whitehead, *The First Newcastle Directory*, Newcastle 1778 [reprinted 1889].
[57] *The Duke of Gordon's Garland*, Newcastle upon Tyne c.1785.

meeting of the regional Constitutional Club.[58] This political association had been formed during the town moor affair, and its members had given the local dispute over land rights national notoriety through their correspondence with the Society for the Supporters of the Bill of Rights.[59] The song they were being associated with had a threateningly serious political message. It railed against authority with the lines, 'They've said, which shews their ignorance, That we're the earth's base scum, And passive meek obedience Would best such folks become', before offering the rousing consolation that 'scum, when the pots are boiling, boys, Will ever be at top.' Such sentiments must have raised concern for the civic authorities, all the more so because this was essentially a drinking song and included a number of calls to raise a glass to the reform candidates.

Politics, alcohol, and hot-headed young men made for a dangerous cocktail, and by the time that the hustings were opened in early October, more than three months after the canvassing began, it was agreed by all of the candidates in Newcastle 'That there shall be no chairing, music, or flags, till the final close of the poll'; the polling lasting eight days in all. The political elite on both sides of the contest were apparently uneasy about the level of popular participation, and the editor of the radical *Freemen's Magazine* suggested they thought 'that chairing [and] music ... tended only to inflame the heart, without informing the head; and by that means, urged persons of weak judgement and strong passions into disorders, disturbances, and riots.'[60] The authorities would take an even firmer stance just seven years later. As Thomas Bewick recounted in his memoirs, it was possible to look back nostalgically to the singing days of his youth as 'a cheerful,

[58] *The Burgeſſes' SONG*, Bodleian: Harding B 29(24).
[59] Initially formed as the Constitutional Club of Durham, Newcastle and Northumberland, by the time of the election in 1774 the association had become more urban in focus and was styled the Newcastle and Sunderland Constitutional Club.
[60] *The Burgesses Poll at the Late Election of Members for Newcastle upon Tyne* [The second edition, corrected], Newcastle upon Tyne 1775, pp.6-7.

lively time', but all this had changed 'when public matters cast a surly gloom over the character of the whole country; [and] these singing days, instead of being regulated by the magistrates, were, in their wisdom, totally put an end to.'[61] This was in reference to the Common Council order, passed in November 1781, banning singing clubs. When this was reported in the *Newcastle Courant* it was claimed that these clubs were 'managed and conducted by evil-minded, dissolute, and disorderly pretences' who had 'seduced and drawn into their infamous associations a number of Apprentices, Journeymen, Shopkeepers, Servants, Gentlemen's Servants, and other unwary Young Men, to their great loss and discredit.'[62]

The desire to limit the opportunities for such social disorder needs to be seen in the light of more general concerns about the unruly behaviour of youths and the pernicious effects of music. In an attempt to improve public order on the streets of London during the 1750s the novelist and JP Henry Fielding proposed a scheme whereby 'Persons who knew of any Gaming-house, Hops, Dancing-bouts, illegal Music-meetings, and other illegal Assemblies, [would be asked] to give immediate Notice by penny-post Letter, without Name, mentioning only the Place where the Disorder was carried on'. After his plan was put into action, it was claimed that 'Numbers of young Women have preserved their Characters, and young Men their Morals.' For it was 'Apprentices and Servants of both Sexes, together with whores, [that] usually make up these Balls and Assemblies; And ... the Moment the Neighbour, Father, Master, or Mistress, discover the Haunts of their Children, Servants, or Apprentices, a Letter immediately goes to the

[61] Bewick, *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick*, p.60.
[62] Southey, *Music-Making in North-East England*, p.195.

Justice, and they are taken in Surprize.'[63] Similar concerns were raised in 1778 by William Smith in his observations on the law, where he complained that 'The ballad-singers ... are very injurious to the morals of our youth, who listen to their lewd songs till their passions are enflamed; they then retire at a little distance, where they pick up a filthy diseased prostitute'; going on to note in lurid style:

> Observe who listens to and buy those lewd ballads, and you will find that young people of both sexes, particularly apprentice boys, servant maids, and gentlemen's servants, are the purchasers. They read them with the greatest avidity, and thereby poison their morals, by affording fuel to their turbulent passions. They retail amongst each other the vicious ideas conveyed in these ballads, 'til they work up their unruly passions to a desire of gratification, which is certain misery and infamy to a woman, and seldom fails to bring the man at last to Tyburn [the most infamous of London's gallows].[64]

Such anxiety about the links between music and unruly youth can be found in Newcastle dating back at least as far as 1603 when a bylaw was passed stating that apprentices were 'forbidden to 'use any musick either by nyght or by day in the streetes',[65] and almost a century later the apprentice Merchant Adventures of the town were prohibited from attending music houses.[66] Therefore, to at least some extent, the decision to ban singing clubs can be seen as a traditional response to age-old concerns about keeping youths in check.

POLITICAL INTONATIONS

The perceived link between singing and public disorder might not have been new but the political connotations of balladry were changing, which significantly altered the nature of

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[63] John Fielding, *An Account of the Origin and Effects of a Police Set on Foot by His Grace the Duke of Newcastle in the Year 1753, upon a plan presented to his Grace by the late Henry Fielding*, London 1758, pp.17, 30-1.
[64] William Smith, *Mild Punishments Sound Policy: or observations on the laws relative to debtors and felons* [The second edition], London 1778, pp.44-5.
[65] Cited in Mackenzie, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne*, p.666.
[66] Ibid, p.668.

this social threat. While ballads had been an oppositional tool throughout the eighteenth century, in earlier decades the tradition and custom of the medium was linked to a Jacobite desire to reinstate the Stuart Monarchy. Without wishing to oversimplify what was a far wider and more complex social transition, it is fair to say that attachments to the past had been tainted with an air of sedition as they were associated with a rejection of the centralising Whig policies of the Hanoverian regime. But by the 1770s, with the Tories back from the political wilderness and any lingering hopes of a Stuart king long gone, traditional songs had lost their association with such treachery. This transition coincided with the growing interest in edited collections of ballads, and while the debates between antiquarians can not be reduced to a dichotic disagreement, contrasting the views of two collectors with strong links to the north east of England brings the changing political tone of the ballad to the fore.

Thomas Percy (1729-1811), who one the most prominent ballad collectors of the later century, dedicated his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) to the earl of Northumberland's daughter (one of the Old Catholic families in the north). Percy considered 'Old Heroic Ballads' to be the 'remains of our ancient English bards and minstrels', who had frequented courtly circles. In comparison to these dignified 'oral itinerant poet[s]' of bygone days, he described 'ballad-*writers* ... for the press' as 'an inferior sort'.[67] Percy's aim was to remove the corruptions introduced by such hacks in order to restore ballads to their former glory, but the rival ballad collector Joseph Ritson (1752–1803) accused him of distorting a vernacular tradition in order to make it suitable for a refined audience. Moreover, while Ritson agreed that the advent of print had been

[67] McDowell, 'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*', pp.152-3; see also the reworking of this essay in *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500-1800,* ed. Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerrini, and Kris McAbee, Farnham 2010.

'fatal to the Minstrels' of old, he thought this was an innovation to be celebrated as the 'origin of the modern English song; not a single composition of that nature, with the smallest degree of poetical merit, being discoverable at any preceding period.'[68] The printed ballad was not therefore a corrupted relic of a more noble oral culture. Nor was it a lingering remnant of a less sophisticated age. Instead, it was recast as progressive.

Ritson, who was born in Stockton-on-Tees, published several collections of local songs including *The Bishopric Garland: or, Durham Minstrel* (1784) and *The Northumberland Garland: or, Newcastle Nightingale* (1793). But he is best known for his *Robin Hood: a collection of all the ancient poems, songs, and ballads, now extant, relative to that celebrated English outlaw* (1795). He studiously rejected political ballads as too partisan to be of merit, and yet to extol balladry in opposition to elite Whig cosmopolitanism was in itself a politicised act. Ritson's ideological stance has, however, perplexed historians. He has been described as a 'crank' that combined reactionary Jacobitism with radical Jacobin tendencies, and as an 'anti-aristocrat republican' who was guilty of 'cultural chauvinism' and 'bourgeois prejudice'.[69] While certainly complex, his radicalism and antiquarian interests were not inherently incongruous. Earlier in the century opposition to the Whig-dominated Hanoverian regime had confounded Tory and anti-elite sentiments, and given both a reactionary inflection. But as these two elements of the political sphere became more distinct, attachment to customs such as balladry could be associated with either a veneration of tradition, or an interest in vernacular culture that had decidedly class-based undertones.

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[68] Sweet, *Antiquaries*, p, 340; McDowell, 'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*', pp. 152, 167.

[69] Murray Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain*, Basingstoke 1997, pp.157-8; Dave Harker, *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British "folksong" 1700 to the Present Day*, Milton Keynes 1985, pp.18, 26.

It is not clear whether Joseph Ritson knew Thomas Spence, but they both knew Thomas Bewick, who produced the typeset for Spence's phonetic alphabet and the woodcuts for Ritson's *Robin Hood*. In the hands of such men ballads had taken on a conspicuously radical tone. It is not that they shared a political outlook. Unlike Ritson and the more conventionally radical Spence, Bewick was a moderate and, as John Brewer notes, he wished to redefine the criteria for gentility, so as to gain the cultural authority of a gentleman on his own terms.[70] Despite their differences Spence, Ritson, and Bewick were all asserting the value of their culture as part a progressive discourse. Not all reformers had radical intent. Nor were they the only people singing ballads in Newcastle. But, when Spence penned his half-penny ballad on land reform, the political qualities of the medium were in tune with the message he wished to convey. Simply engaging in the vernacular custom of singing could be seen as a critique of authority, and so those who raised their voices for the reformers took on a more menacing appearance.

The ballads had not been permanently claimed for the radical cause. By the time that Ritson published *Robin Hood* the political climate in Britain had been transformed by events across the Channel and, as Paula McDowell notes, in the wake of the French Revolution new ballads were being written in 'an attempt to counter the spread of republican ideas'. For instance, Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-98) included the ballad 'Patient Joe; Or the Newcastle Collier', which sought to discourage support for the reform movement.[71] By the end of the century the number of reform songs had dwindled to a handful, and the first decades of the nineteenth century saw a huge

[70] Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp.510-11.
[71] McDowell, 'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of *Ballad-Making*', pp.172-3.

increase in loyal ballads.[72] Symbols of 'old England' previously linked to sedition had by 1815 been rehabilitated, and like the once Jacobite oak leaf, ballads had lost their exclusive association with political opposition.

THE CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE

Despite the claims of some antiquarians, ballads were not static historical artefacts. Even traditional songs that could be traced back generations continued to depend upon the circumstance of the performance to give them meaning. It is because they retained this oral quality that published ballads expose the fluid divide between print and the spoken word, and in doing so they also draw attention to the discursive relationship between printed text and its readers. The election campaign of 1774 offers a glimpse into this oral realm because the electoral ballads both amplified the cultural soundtrack that accompanied the printed word, and left a lasting record of this amplification. This not only demonstrates the continued importance of signing as a means of reporting current affairs, but also highlights the sociability of song and the role of the entertainment industry in increasing the volume of the campaign.

The ballads contained a variety of contributions to the public debate, from menacing to frivolous. Some represented printed propaganda that was broadcast through the act of singing, but equally the talk of the town was committed to print, allowing local bards to be heard by those separated by distance or wealth from the pageantry of the political street theatre. In addition to the dedicated political activists, the 'mob' attracted to this spectacle was said to include reasonably good natured lads and lasses, the unruly poor, and even the 'ladies' were making their opinions known. It was, however, rowdy

[72] Mark Philp, 'Music and Politics'**,** *Resisting Napoleon: the British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797-1815*, ed. Mark Philp, Aldershot 2006, p.174.

young men that were seen as the greatest threat to public order, and while this was a perennial source of concern, the radical ideas of some had heightened the anxieties of the authorities. It is only possible to fully appreciate the tone of the political racket, and the official response to this breach of the peace, when changing attitudes towards the vernacular custom of ballad singing are taken into account. Yet, it was evidently not just hot-headed young radicals and their fair-weather friends that were making a lot of noise.

As the banks of the Tyne reverberated with political discord even disinterested bystanders would have found it hard not to overhear the election news that was buzzed abroad. Moreover, although their subject matter did not have the same enduring appeal as songs of old battles and great deeds, topical ballads can not be isolated from the wider culture of song. Singing in all its forms was part of the social life that animated a community, and the electoral ballads were an integrated element of this communal discourse. Consequently, while the songs printed in 1774 allow us to hear the electoral cacophony, and to pick out some of the voices in the political crowd, they also provide an auditory snapshot of a constantly changing urban soundscape that was overlaid with the resonance of custom and tradition but not unduly constrained by the echoes of past generations.