# ENGLISH AND SCOTCH HISTORICAL BALLADS. EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION, NOTES AND GLOSSARY, FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS

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English and Scotch Historical Ballads. Edited, with Introduction, Notes and Glossary, for the Use of Schools by Arthur Milman

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ARTHUR MILMAN

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# English and Scotch

# HISTORICAL BALLADS

*EDITED, WITH*

*INTRODUCTION, NOTES, AND GLOSSARY, FOR THE*

*USE OF SCHOOLS*

BY

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# INTRODUCTION.

## *POPULAR POETRY.*

In an historical survey of the popular poetry of all nations, an able German writer[1] thus defines the sense in which he uses the term. Popular poetry, he says, is that which 'has had its origin among and has emanated from the people, which has been vivified by its joys, watered by its tears, and which then returning again, as it were, to the soil whence it was drawn, has largely influenced its character.' At some period of a nation's history it seems universally to prevail, and the especial form that it assumes, the particular need which it seems to supply, cannot fail to ensure its acceptance with a people at that period of their development when, as yet untinctured by letters, they mainly depend upon oral transmission for a knowledge of past events and of great deeds, doing, or done in days gone by, deeds in which their pride and glory as a nation may consist. For what are the requisites, the general characteristics, of popular poetry? It must be unflagging in spirit, of rapid and picturesque brevity, bold and distinct in its delineation of character and incident: 'It must strike the popular

[1] Talvi, *Versuch einer geschichtlichen Characteristik der Volkslieder germanischen Nationen*, from which the substance of the following remarks is taken, and partly translated.

eye, cleave to the popular ear, stir the popular heart.'[1] But if it has indeed fulfilled all these conditions it would seem as if it might be employed for purposes of education even at the present time. For it is in fact through poetry that we are wont to derive our first impressions of history, that our curiosity is awakened, our interest excited, our attention secured. All the vast learning and critical judgment of a Niebuhr would be ineffectual to attract a young student if his sympathy had not in the first instance been enlisted by the lays and legends, now deemed fabulous, of ancient Rome; and it is probable that the historical plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Sir Walter Scott, have in many cases given the first impulse to such a study of English history as has in after years been fruitful, it may be of laborious and useful research, at any rate of intelligent and pleasureable pursuits. But as few things cling more closely to the memory than old songs and national ballads, so few are more instructive or throw stronger side-lights on the life of a bygone age. However rude and artistically incomplete they may be, as illustrations of national manners, as the result of genuine feeling, as expressions of a common popular sentiment, they are for many purposes invaluable records. And it is more particularly in a twofold aspect that ballad poetry is of such use to the historian. In it the special characteristics of each individual race are most entirely preserved, unsullied by any foreign intermixture; in it, again, are enshrined in pristine purity and freshness all those sentiments and aspirations which are of every age and of every nation. Popular poetry is in its nature the offspring of a particular place, steeped in all the prejudice and local colouring peculiar to that place, and yet there is a family likeness between its several branches—a common religion, a common humanity, a common system—which compels

[1] *Quarterly Review*, vol. lxxi.