



ALLAN CUNNINGHAM  
**TRADITIONAL TALES**  
EDITED BY TIM KILLICK

E.A. Hornel,  
'A Galloway Idyll',  
cover image for  
*Traditional Tales*.

*A review of*  
**Alan Cunningham:**  
*Traditional Tales*

**Sophia Kingshill**

**M**ost of the tales in this collection first appeared in the *London Magazine* between January 1821 and June 1822. In July 1822 they were reprinted in two volumes, with some revisions and additions, under the title *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*. The most recent edition, until now, was published in 1884, and this is thus the first reprint in well over a century. It is a handsome production, including two essays written by Cunningham to introduce the magazine versions of the stories, as well as Tim Killick's informative introduction, a useful glossary, and endnotes providing some historical and critical background.

Cunningham was born in Dumfriesshire, but his regional interest covered both sides of the Solway, and metaphorically too he was a borderline figure, neither strictly a collector nor exactly a creator. His poetry became known from Robert Cromek's *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810), ostensibly a book of traditional ballads, but in fact consisting largely of Cunningham's compositions (as Cromek may have known from the outset, though this question was never definitively answered). The presentation of original or heavily doctored work as orally transmitted material was a technique that Cunningham used repeatedly. In *Traditional Tales*, his own verses appear in every story, generally described as an 'old ballad', a song 'still to be heard' in Cumberland, an 'ancient prophecy', and so on. He believed that his faking was undetectable: 'I could cheat a whole General Assembly of Antiquarians with my original manner of writing and forging ballads,' he declared in a letter to his brother. Elsewhere, however, he claimed that he was genuinely reproducing what he had heard. In his first introductory essay for the *London Magazine*, he asserted that 'In regard to all the more poetical communications of my friends, I imitated the scrupulous fidelity of that prince of editors, honest Joseph Ritson' – although five years later, in the introduction to his *Songs of Scotland* (1825), he was less keen to compare himself with Ritson, who he said 'doubted almost all that other men believed', and whose 'fastidiousness, and querulous regard for accuracy, did far more harm than [Thomas] Percy's rich and fruitful imagination'.

Imagination was clearly the quality that Cunningham most admired, and in retelling his tales, as Killick notes, he regarded himself as licensed to embellish at will, much as an oral storyteller

would have been. Local tradition certainly supplied at least some of his material. Again from his preamble to *Songs of Scotland* comes an account of a youth's abduction by fairies and his sister's failure to rescue him, a straightforward variation on the Tamlane legend that Cunningham says he heard in childhood as having happened to a neighbouring family. In *Traditional Tales* this appears as 'Elphin Irving, the Fairies' Cupbearer', dolled up with romantic and personal detail that obscures more than it illuminates.

In most cases, we cannot compare Cunningham's unadorned sources with his elaborated version, and it can be hard to guess where 'tradition' ends and authorial intervention begins. His tale of 'The Haunted Ships' is cited in Wilbur Bassett's examination of maritime legends *Wander-Ships* (1917), during a discussion of cursed vessels, as 'one of the most interesting of all this group of stories'. Interesting it is, with its decayed wrecks explained as the remnants of phantom ships piloted by demons, but Cunningham's framing of the narrative in terms of personal experience – 'One fine harvest evening, I went on board the shallop of Richard Faulder' – is misleading to the unwary reader. I have myself been guilty of taking Cunningham's 'I' as a more reliable narrator than seems at all likely on reading the whole volume.

Cunningham's contemporaries applauded him, with reservations. Walter Scott's praise – 'A man of genius' – has a sting to follow: 'who only requires the tact of knowing when and where to stop'. James Hogg remarked in a similar vein that Cunningham's fancy 'was boundless; but it was the luxury of a rich garden over-run with rampant weeds'. Later assessments, in terms of folklore collection, have ranged from Bassett's enthusiasm to Richard Dorson's comment, in *The British Folklorists* (1968), that *Traditional Tales* 'might more accurately have been titled "Literary Tales Faintly Suggested by Oral Traditions"'. In *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (1967), Katharine Briggs mentions him briefly but not dismissively, suggesting that he was one of the earliest exponents of 'first-hand research'. Tim Killick's balanced introduction gives both sides of the argument, allowing a new generation to make up their own minds about Cunningham's value as author and interpreter.

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Sophia Kingshill