The History of a Book: Arthur Rackham and Some British Ballads

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Abstract

Published in New York in 1919 and in London in 1920, Arthur Rackham’s collection and illustrations of specifically British ballads appeared at the end of the Great War. However contemporary, Rackham’s own patriotic collection also follows the much older tradition of ballad collection; indeed, he prefaces his book: “Several of the Ballads in this book are based on the great work of Francis James Child, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads.”

But why would a children’s book illustrator explore this world of literary and oral tradition? This illustrated thesis takes a look at Rackham’s particular talent—one which E. V. Lucas describes as a combination of “grace and grotesque”—successfully trying his hand at earlier historical and heroic characters in the adventurous ballad tradition. It also explores that tradition in general, Francis Child’s collection, and the selections chosen for Some British Ballads as a post-Great War, patriotically-themed luxury Christmas book.

Some British Ballads

1919, 1920

“What a power localising a myth has.” —Arthur Rackham on Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens

After a brief decline in Rackham’s income during the war, Rackham and his publishers found that publishing patriotic, illustrated luxury books brought the public’s attention back to book illustration. Some British Ballads, therefore, was published as such by Constable in England in 1920. The book is filled with 44 Rackham-selected ballads almost exclusively belonging to the Child collection, and was an immediate success both critically and financially.

In Some British Ballads, “[the] strange mix of reality and fantasy gives Rackham’s illustrations an evocative power.” To him, they were one and the same, imagination was not some place to be trifled with in order to escape the real world. Rather, they existed in parallel; the fairy world, to Rackham, was an embellishment. Perhaps this is why his work so resonated with the young soldier who had been wounded in what seemed to be an irreplaceable war. The fairyland of Rackham’s illustration was, at the end of the Great War, what those recovering from the war needed to be reminded of.

The Great War 1914-1918

A few years prior to the publication of Some British Ballads, the fanciful and the imaginative of Rackham’s Victorian world were almost set aside when Great Britain entered the First World War in early August 1914. The feeling of nostalgia for an earlier romantic time did not diminish with the onset of war, however, and the nineteenth-century idea of the fight, as a romantic and chivalric mark of honor, was carried into the early twentieth century in literary attempts at patriotism.

If “illustration is as capable of varied appeal to literature itself”, artwork, too, was readjusted in the form of propaganda posters. Not all artwork was such, however; during wartime, it became clear to Rackham that he would have to illustrate heroism a little closer to home; having served in the war himself, Rackham understood the gravity of war. Through patriotic books such as Some British Ballads, he replaced violent terrors with those which would “reflect the nation’s mood of patriotism and martial endeavor”, as well as strengthen the cultural and historical background which had been so recently clouded by the war.

I am urged by my son who is wildly fond of your work, and when he was getting better from very bad wounds received near Ypres, your illustrations of Books were his great joy and delight.


Bibliography


The Connoisseur, Vol. LVI, 1920

Some British Ballads (1825-1896)

“Several of the Ballads in this book are based on the great work of Francis James Child, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads.”

-Arthur Rackham in his preface to Some British Ballads

Known in part for his work The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, Francis James Child was an American scholar and folklorist who lived and worked during the later half of the nineteenth century. His anthologized collection of ballads, later referred to simply as the “Child Ballads”, became the “canon” collection. It consists of what Child called “traditional balladry”: 305 collected and numbered ballads from an oral narrative tradition. Printed in five volumes, the Child Ballads include tales of romance, honor, enchantment, and heroism; some have been rewritten as fairy tales; others are known today in prose as classic British folk tales, such as those of Robin Hood and King Arthur.

Arthur Rackham (1867-1939)

Known for his “grace and grotesque”, late-Victorian book illustrator Arthur Rackham lived in a period where the fairy world was parallel to his own. Much like the characters in his illustrations for J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens (1906), a part of Rackham never really grew up; his work was able to reflect the whimsical and imaginative, the heroic and theatrical, in both his landscapes and their inhabitants. Rackham became known for his work on classics such as William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1908), Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (1907), and sections of Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle (1910 and 1911); some classics became known through Rackham’s work. With his eye upon the fantastic, the literary, and the fairy/folk tale, it comes as no surprise that Rackham’s interest in the Child Ballads and in the earlier ballad/folk tradition appeared in the post-Great War patriotic book, Some British Ballads.

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