

## **The G.R. Axon Collection of Broadsides**

During the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, the most readily accessible printed wares for the poor were the broadside ballads and the chapbooks which were hawked around by ballad seller, pedlars and chapmen. There are several important collections of this street literature in Manchester libraries, among the better known being the Halliwell-Phillips Collection in Chethams Library and the Pearson Collection in Manchester Local Studies Library.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this essay is to introduce a less well-known source, the G.R. Axon Collection of broadsides which is owned by the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society; a collection which the Society has placed at Chetham's Library on permanent loan

Geoffrey Rogerson Axon, A.L.A. (?1892-1961), 'was the last of a family succession of librarians who had served the Manchester Public Libraries Committee for three generations.'<sup>2</sup> Axon joined the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society in 1919 and became Honorary Secretary in 1920, he held this post until 1926. He allowed his membership to lapse in 1932 but rejoined the Society in 1946 and was elected to Council in 1947 where he continued to serve until his death in September 1961. Although he was never a prolific contributor to the *Transactions*, he did write two small pieces on early Manchester newspapers<sup>3</sup> and a further piece on the printers Roger and Orion Adams thus evincing an interest in early Manchester printing. When Axon started to collect his broadsides is not known. Nor is it known whether he bought them over a period or as a substantially complete collection. Such a collection is, however, well within the family tradition for his grandfather, William Ernest Armytage Axon had acquired an extensive collection of street literature by the time of his death in 1913 and was also known to have owned a substantial number of broadsides including 'two collections of Irish street ballads [and] many hundreds of English street ballads'.<sup>4</sup> It remains a possibility that the broadside collection originally belonged to William and was passed down within the family. In December, 1961, three months after Geoffrey Axon's death, his son Keith wrote to Robert N. Dore, then the Honorary Secretary of the Society to thank him for the letter of condolence which had been sent on the Society's behalf. In that letter, Keith Axon wrote, 'I have found a large number of sheets similar to the enclosed among my father's papers. If they would be of any use to you, or to any member of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, I should be pleased to forward them.'<sup>5</sup> Clearly, they were passed on to the Society for a note on the collection, believed to have been typed by Hilda Lofthouse, the Librarian at Chetham's, records that they were deposited there on behalf of the Society on 10 March 1963.

The Collection consists of 132 broadsides, each mounted on a flimsy backing sheet and numbered in pencil on the verso. The mounting of the sheets was done prior to the collection coming into the hands of the Society or of the library as eleven of the backing sheets have comments in ink in a hand which is said to be that of Geoffrey Axon. These comments are usually by way of an explanation for the subject of the ballad on the sheet. One of these comments, on sheet 12,<sup>6</sup> has a family reference:

Victoria Music Hall (Ben Lang's). Victoria Bridge

Manchester 31 July 1868  
False alarm of fire, 23 persons crushed to  
Death in endeavouring to escape from the  
Building.

Axon's Annals p 316

The majority of the broadsides in the Axon collection were printed in Ancoats, Manchester, this is hardly surprising for in the mid-nineteenth century Ancoats was the home of several chapbook and broadside printers. A list of such printers would include George Jacques who was active in Oldham Road from *c.* 1840-*c.* 1845 and John Cadman of Great Ancoats Street (*c.* 1850-*c.* 1855). A little away from Ancoats, but in nearby Shudehill, was John Wrigley (*c.* 1843-*c.* 1873). The most prolific printers of this period in Ancoats appear to have been John Bebbington of Goulden Street and Oldham Road (*c.* 1855-*c.* 1861) and Thomas Pearson of 6 Chadderton Street (*c.* 1859-*c.* 1866).<sup>7</sup> An indication of the output of these firms can be gained from the fact that Manchester Local Studies Library's collection of Pearson broadsides numbers in excess of 600 sheets. It is not surprising therefore that the majority of the Axon sheets are by Bebbington or Pearson. The complete collection comprises the following sheets:

Printer	Number of Sheets in the Collection
Josiah Deakin, Stockport	1
John Harkness, Preston	2
Swindells, Manchester	5
John Bebbington, Manchester	5
Ex Bebbington	41
Thomas Pearson, Manchester	45
Bebbington with Pearson overprint	4
Anonymous	29
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	132

The Table shows that 5 of the broadsides carry John Bebbington's imprint but that others were printed from stereo plates produced by him. In the Manchester Local Studies Library's collection of Pearson broadsides is a song catalogue published from his address at 6 Chadderton Street, Oldham Road. Pearson advertised that he had 'bought all Wrigley's and Bebbington's stock of Stereotype Plates of Songs and Hymns, Shops and Travellers can be Supplied with as great a variety and as Cheap as any other house in the trade.'<sup>8</sup> The catalogue itself is not dated but a third supplement to the catalogue was issued in April 1872 . This supplement repeats the earlier claim. After the acquisition of the plates, Thomas Pearson attempted to remove Bebbington's name and address with varying degrees of success. He then began to issue sheets which he had printed from Bebbington's plates, sometimes adding his own imprint.

The relatively large category of broadsides which appear to have been produced anonymously has been examined in detail. By a comparison of the use of printer's ornaments and woodcut illustrations on the sheets with those used by Thomas Pearson, it can be shown that it is almost certain that all but one of the anonymous imprints came from the Pearson shop. If these anonymous sheets are included, then some 86 per cent of the total were printed and sold by Thomas Pearson.

Given then that the Axon Collection consists of 132 sheets, a large but not a substantial set of broadsides, most of it by one printer in Manchester *c.* 1860-65, how important is the collection? To the student of street literature, the collection is of importance for a number of reasons. One reason is the scarcity of some of the broadsides it holds. John Harkness of Preston was one of the most prolific broadside printers of the nineteenth century and he has been widely collected and studied. One of the two Harkness sheets in the collection provides the first evidence that this printer had some trading relationship in Liverpool; sheet 38 has the imprint 'J. Harkness, Printer, Church St., Preston, and, 18 Paradise St., Liverpool', an imprint not previously known to Harkness scholars.<sup>9</sup>

The major reason, however, for the importance of the broadside collection is the content of some of the ballads. There are several Lancashire songs, sheet 1, from a 'spoiled' Bebbington plate for example, contains a version of 'Jone O'Grinfield'.<sup>10</sup> The original song of this title was said to have been written by Joseph Lees of Glodwick, near Oldham in the 1790s when England was once more at war with France.<sup>11</sup> Some of the themes of this ballad were used in a later version 'Jone O'Grinfilt Junior' written just after the battle of Waterloo and the words reflected the poverty of the handloom weavers at the time. It is this version which was printed in the collection.<sup>12</sup> Described as 'one of the most dramatic of British industrial songs', the ballad became popular again in the 1860s during the Lancashire 'cotton famine'.<sup>13</sup> Another aspect of the collection which is of major importance is the Irish material which it contains and here we are reminded that W.E.A. Axon's broadside collection is said to have included such material. Mervyn Busted has said that 'Of the 280 ballads in the Axon collection, 53 have explicit Irish references ...'.<sup>14</sup> This figure represents 19 per cent of the total. If one looks, however, at the number of sheets which contain Irish references, then the percentage rises to 36. This is a relatively high figure, but it is impossible to extrapolate from this into the total production of such printed material in the period because we do not know just how representative the collection is. Nevertheless, the Irish material within the collection does indicate the extent to which Ancoats printers were willing to cater for the significant local population. Busted argues that these songs:

'... provide a more direct insight into the thoughts and feelings of the mid-nineteenth century Irish in Manchester than census returns, newspapers and parliamentary reports ... It is also possible that in some cases at least the composer and singer were speaking and singing *on behalf of* and *to* the Irish rather than *from out of* the Irish community of Manchester itself'.<sup>15</sup> He concludes that '... participation in the performance of a song with nationalist overtones ... is an expression of a shared imagined identity and a means of further bonding'.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the collection has important ramifications for the study of the Irish in Manchester in the nineteenth century.

This introduction to the Axon Collection of broadsides has not been intended to be exhaustive but merely to indicate the size and scope of the collection. It is a collection which has not yet been fully researched and is one which should provide much information for local historians, for ballad scholars, for those interested in Lancashire social history and for students of the history of the Irish in Manchester. Whilst the originals will continue to be held at Chetham's Library, a full set of copies of the broadsides will be held by the Society in its own library. We are grateful to Dr. Michael Powell and his staff for providing us with those copies.

- 1 T. Pearson (Publisher): [A collection of 622 single sheets of songs and ballads, chiefly printed by T. Pearson of Manchester]. 4 volumes (c.1850-1873). Manchester Central Library Q398.8 S9.
- 2 Obituary. *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, vol. 71, 1961, p175.
- 3 G.R. Axon, 'A note on the first Manchester Newspaper', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, vol. 41, 1924, pp.137-8; 'A further note on the first Manchester Newspaper, 1719-1725', *Transactions ...*, vol. 68, 1958, p146-7.
- 4 Charles W. Sutton, *Special Collections of Books in Lancashire and Cheshire*, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University press, 1900, p36. Axon's collection of chapbooks was acquired by Manchester Central Library after his death.; it consists of 22 volumes numbered BR398.5 C12 - BR398.5 C33.
- 5 Letter dated 2 December 1961, held with the collection.
- 6 The numbers cited are those on the verso of the sheets and not the printer's sequence numbers printed on the recto.
- 7 For these dates, see V. Neuburg, *Chapbooks, a bibliography of references to English and American Chapbook Literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*, London, Vine Press, 1964; Eddie Cass, Michael J. Preston and Paul Smith, *An Interim Checklist of Printers of Chapbooks Containing Traditional Play Texts*, forthcoming.
- 8 See Manchester Ballads Collection, vol. 1, Manchester Central Library, Cat. No. Q398.8 S9.
- 9 Gregg Butler, personal communication.
- 10 This sheet is reproduced in Martha Vicinus, *Broadsides of the Industrial North*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Frank Graham, 1975, Plate 9.
- 11 John Harland and T.T. Wilkinson, *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire, Ancient and Modern*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn Manchester: John Heywood, 1882, p. 163.
- 12 Whilst the broadside does contain some dialect words, much of the text is in standard English. For a full dialect version, see Harland and Wilkinson, *op cit*, pp. 169-174.
- 13 The ballad is also known as 'The Four Loom Weaver', or 'The Poor Cotton Weaver'. A shortened version was collected from the singing of Beckett Whitehead of Delph by Ewan MacColl and appeared in his *The Shuttle and Cage. Industrial Folk-Ballads*, London. Workers' Music Association, 1954. MacColl sang the ballad on *Steam Whistle Ballads*, Topic Records, 12T104, 1964
- 14 Mervyn Busteed, 'Songs in a strange land - ambiguities of identity amongst Irish migrants in mid-Victorian Manchester', *Political Geography*, Vol. 17, No. 6, 1998, pp 627-665.
- 15 *Ibid* p.646.
- 16 *Ibid* p.660.