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## IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGINAL “SKEWBALL”

By Seán Ó Cadhla

### Introduction

The well-known horseracing ballad “Skewball” has been widely documented in oral tradition on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as on numerous English broadside printings.<sup>1</sup> It recounts the tale of a mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century horserace held at The Curragh of Kildare in which a heavily-backed mare is comprehensively beaten by a relatively unknown skewbald gelding, leaving the mare’s owner - along with much of the assembled onlookers - significantly out of pocket. The ballad became widely popularised in North America where it was first published in a song book in 1826 (Benton, pp.3-4). It was later subsumed into African-American song tradition, whereupon it was reconstructed in numerous versions as a “call-and-answer” work anthem sung by slaves who gave it the new title of “Stewball.” Alan Lomax has also documented African-American chain-gang versions of the ballad in his various prison recordings (Lomax 1994, pp.68-71; Scarborough 1925, pp.61-4).<sup>2</sup> Versions bearing distinctive similarities in style, form and content to the earliest collected versions of *SB*, were widely collected throughout North America as late as the 1930’s (Flanders 1939, pp.172-4), while oral versions have been documented in Ireland throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the latest being in March 1979 (Shields 2011, pp.58-9).

While always retaining a certain degree of continuity in terms of the general narrative recounted, the ballad has undergone numerous metamorphoses over time - particularly with reference to the *dramatis personae* involved – which has often resulted in the obfuscation of the original race detail.

By closely examining contemporary records, as well as drawing relevant comparisons with a diverse range of collected versions of the ballad, the author has sought to establish the historical facts which lie behind the narrative recounted in *SB*. The earliest version of *SB* to which a date has been definitively assigned is that published in the songbook, *The Vocal Library* (Souter ed. 1818, p.526). Due to the significant timeframe between this publication and the actual mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century horserace recounted in *SB*, the author has also examined the preceding period with a view towards unearthing possible earlier sources for the ballad, and will present a recently discovered MS version which provides further evidence of the historical origins of the ballad under review.

### **Differing Narratives**

The central narrative recounted in *SB* has changed considerably over the centuries, and has continually proven to be quite flexible and adaptable to the expectations of its varied audiences. Such narrative malleability is to be expected in a folk ballad that was based on 18<sup>th</sup>-century events in Ireland, gained prominence as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century English broadside print, became subsumed into African-American slave culture, and ultimately became popularised on both sides of the Atlantic in the folk revival of the late 1960's and early 1970's. However, from the most cursory comparisons, both between and, indeed, within the respective oral and broadside genres of *SB*, clear divergences can readily be observed in terms of certain aspects of the general narrative recounted, the presence of specific folklore motifs, and in particular, the *dramatis personae* cited within the ballad. There remain, however, key narrative features that are common to all documented oral and broadside versions of the ballad, namely:

- (i) Following a direct challenge, a horserace for a considerable purse is arranged to be held in Kildare;
- (ii) Only two horses – both owned by Englishmen - are mentioned as partaking in the contest;
- (iii) Of the competing horses, one is a grey mare of considerable repute, the other being a comparatively unknown skewbald gelding;<sup>3</sup>
- (iv) Upon hearing of the challenge and the wager that has been laid, the skewbald - the clear second favourite in the contest - instructs his master to bet heavily upon him, as he is assured of victory;
- (v) The skewbald wins easily, to both the surprise and delight of the assembled crowd.

The race favourite is known variously as either Grey Mare, Maid Sportly or Miss Sportl(e)y/Portsley/Sportsly/Sprightly, or in later versions as Miss Grizzle, and is owned by Sir Ralph Gore.<sup>4</sup> The lesser-favoured horse, known as Skewball throughout all versions - the sole continuity found among any of the characters involved - is in the charge of Arthur Mervin.<sup>5</sup> Both Gore and Mervin were well-known figures in Irish horse racing circles at the time, and both served as presidents of the Irish Jockey Club in the late 1750's (Carpenter 1998, p.312).<sup>6</sup> Despite the overall subject matter of both oral and broadside versions broadly sharing the common structure shown above, there is one major distinction between them, that is, Skewball's propensity to speak at key intervals, a motif

that has been almost completely excised from all broadside versions with the exception of two.<sup>7</sup>

### Historical Context

The accurate historical identification of racehorses in popular culture, along with the dating of their various feats, can prove somewhat haphazard for a number of reasons. Firstly, before the advent of centralised racing authorities, it was not uncommon for different horses to share the same name.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, racehorses were quite often known by a nickname, as well as their official studbook title, e.g. the 1745 and 1748 Curragh Royal Plate winner 'Irish Lass', was popularly known as 'The Podareen Mare' (Cox 1897, p.107); her contemporary, 'Othello', was known as 'Black-and-all-Black' (Pick 1803, p.97), etc. Regarding the name Skewball, there is further potential for confusion. As already discussed, along with being the actual name of the horse under discussion, "skewbald" was also used as a description for horses of chestnut or bay colour that had significant white markings which very often lead to ambiguity in accounts of races.

Notwithstanding the above, it would appear certain that the Skewball of ballad fame was a bay gelding bred by Sir Francis Godolphin (the 2nd Earl of Godolphin) of Cambridgeshire, and foaled in 1741 (Pick 1803, p.91; Harewood 1835, p.309) at the stud of Sir John Dutton of Sherborne. In 1743, Skewball began his racing career in England, and had several owners throughout the 1740s, with varying levels of success. He was brought to Ireland in mid-1751, following his sale to Arthur Mervin after a successful outing at the Huntingdon races. According to the *London Evening Post* (27 July 1751):

"Mr. Elston's bay Gelding Skewball, got by the  
Godolphin Arabian.... The betts [sic] were Two to One

on the field, against a horse and considerable sums laid even between Skewball and Little John; the Gelding won very easy, and was immediately sold to Mr. Mervin for Ninety Guineas, to run in Ireland.”

As already mentioned, significant narrative variations are evident among versions of *SB* collected in both broadside and oral traditions, respectively. Notwithstanding this, it can be established that a horse race of some importance did in fact take place at The Curragh, upon which the ballad under review was based. Similar to the ballads, contemporary records also disagree as to key aspects of the race itself, particularly in terms of the dates and characters involved. The confusion mentioned above with regard to the name Skewball is not helped by further ambiguity with his opponent’s name, as it can be established that the name of the grey mare mentioned in the ballad was, in fact, Grey Mare (Pick 1803, p.504). Both the *General Advertiser* (11 April 1752) and the *London Evening Post* (9-11 April 1752) state:

“Ireland... Dublin, April 4. On Monday last [i.e., March 30th] the Races began at the Curragh of Kildare, when the Grand Match for 300l between Sir Ralph Gores’s Grey Mare and Arthur Mervin Esqr.’s Horse, Scuball, was run which was won with great ease by the latter.”

The Irish-published newspaper *Pue’s Occurences* (27 April 1752) records the event as follows:<sup>9</sup>

“Last Monday [i.e., March 30th] a match was run at the Curragh by Sir Ralph Gore’s grey mare, and Arthur Marwin’s Esq., bay horse, Scuball, which was won with great ease by the latter; the odds before starting were 6 to 4 on the grey mare, so the knowing ones were greatly taken in.”

Similarly in Heber (1753, p.106):

“On the thirtieth of March, Mr. Marvin’s bay Gelding, Skew-Ball, got by the Godolphin Arabian, weight eight stone seven pound, beat Sir Ralph Gore’s Grey Mare, got by Victorious, weight nine stone, four miles, three hundred guineas each.”

Pond’s *Sporting Kalendar* (1752, p.97) incorrectly dates the race two days earlier to March 28<sup>th</sup>, but again the challenge is run between Skewball and Grey Mare.

In an interesting development, some later published references to the race from the late 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century, while retaining continuity with the date of March 30<sup>th</sup>, now erroneously record the match as being between Skewball and Miss Sportl(e)y.

*The Sporting Magazine* (October 1795 Vol. 6, p.187) states:

“1752, March 30. Mr. Arthur Mervin's bay gelding, Skew Ball, got by the Godolphin Arabian, weight 1 [sic] st. 7lb. beat Sir Ralph Gore's grey mare, Miss Sportley, got by Victorious, weight 9st. for 300gs each, four miles in the Curagh of Kildare. Skew Ball ran the four miles in seven minutes and fifty one seconds.”

Brown (1830, p.277) records the match as follows, the reference being repeated ten years later by Whyte (1840, p.490):

“1752, March 30th. Mr Arthur Mervin's bay gelding, Skew Ball, got by the Godolphin Barb [sic], with a weight of eight stone seven pounds, beat Sir Ralph Gore's gray mare, Miss Sportly, got by Victorious, with a weight of nine stone, for three hundred guineas each, four miles on the Curragh of Kildare. Skew Ball ran the four miles in seven minutes and fifty-one seconds.”

At this point, versions of the ballad – which was by now enjoying a wide circulation in broadside format – also incorrectly cited Skewball's opponent at The Curragh in March 1752 as being either Maid Sportly or Miss Sportl(e)y/Portsley/Sportsly/Sprightly, and would appear to provide evidence of the use of broadsides as historical reference points by sports journalists of the time. It should be noted that no news or sports journals record Skewball as ever racing against an opponent known either officially or colloquially as Miss Grizzle, as recorded in the Mayne (Belfast) broadside, along with several later oral versions of the ballad.<sup>10</sup> It is the author's contention that these name substitutions functioned simply as expeditious literary devices employed by

ballad printers in an effort to contemporise their wares for specific local considerations.

Following his ballad-inspiring defeat of Grey Mare at The Curragh in March, for the remainder of 1752 Skewball went on to enjoy the following series of prolific victories in Ireland (Heber 1753, pp.109, 115, 116, 119, 122): 29<sup>th</sup> of May at Trim - £40; 29<sup>th</sup> of July at Rathoath - £30; 12<sup>th</sup> of August at Navan - £20; 27<sup>th</sup> of August at Luttrellstown - £50; 23<sup>rd</sup> of September The Curragh - 50g.

Skewball's last recorded outing in Ireland was an uncontested match on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1755 at The Curragh, where he "won... starting alone." (Heber 1756, p.90)

### **Towards Locating an Original Version**

While *SB* has always enjoyed a well-established position within the oral canon in Ireland, it has been more popularly documented on broadside ballad sheets in England. Over the course of the current research, the author has located 27 printed broadside sources for the ballad, under various titles, from the early-to-mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>11</sup> The earliest printed version of *SB* to which a date can be definitively assigned is that found in *The Vocal Library* (Souter ed. 1818, p.526), and is referenced as such by Flanders (1939, p.173) and Thompson (1958, p.83).<sup>12</sup> Having dated the race to March 1752 however, we are left with the obvious quandary as to what versions, if any, were in circulation in the years immediately following the race itself. An examination of various ballad collections reveals other printed versions which may well have been in circulation before this date, but due to the inherent difficulties involved in the accurate dating of certain broadside material from this period, we are unfortunately not in a position to date them to a specific year with any degree of certainty.<sup>13</sup> Due to the later popularity and broad geographical spread of the

ballad, however, it would seem fairly unlikely that versions were not in circulation in the intervening years between the actual race date of March 1752 and the publication of *The Vocal Library* in 1818.

As part of ongoing research of the Filgates of Lisrenny Papers - a diverse collection of estate records and personal papers, catalogued and held at the Louth County Council Archives, Dundalk - the author has uncovered a previously undocumented manuscript version of the ballad entitled "The Noble Scuball."<sup>14</sup> The Filgate version of *SB* displays some notable distinctions when compared with later broadside printings, particularly in terms of the length of the ballad, and also the presence of an underlying folklore motif, but otherwise retains the common narrative evident elsewhere, i.e. Skewball is brought to Ireland by Mervin; Gore challenges Mervin at The Curragh; Skewball's opponent is the much-favoured, Grey Mare; Skewball wins easily, ensuring heavy losses for Gore and the assembled crowd. Filgate shows the same general syllabic pattern per line as that of the broadsides, however it does display several inconsistencies in this regard which would tend to suggest documentation via oral transmission. It will also be noted that Filgate is in agreement with the established historical facts regarding the actual 1752 race, and does not show the broad narrative variations evident in later broadside printings.

The Filgate MS, transcribed by one Francis Lucas Lee, reads as follows:<sup>15</sup>

"Come all you brave gallants and listen to all,  
And I will sing you the praise of Noble Scuball,  
Who is lately come oover [?] as I understand,  
By brave Arthur Marvin the peer of the land.

And of his brave actions you heard of before,

How he was challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore.  
Five hundred guineas on the course of Kildare,  
To run with the sporting gallant grey mare.

When Scuball he heard of the wager being laid,  
He said to his master be not afraid.  
Five hundred guineas you may lay on the course,  
And I will cover your castle with red matches [?] of gold.

Brave Arthur Marvin, smiling did say:  
Get ready, brave nobles, for tomorrow is the day.  
Get ready your horses and saddles prepare,  
For we we [?] must away to the Curroh [?] of Kildare.

When Scuball he came to the middle of the course,  
He and his rider began to discourse:  
Come my brave rider and tell unto me,  
How fare is my disting [?] post is from me.

The rider look'd back and this he did say:  
You may go very easy for we will win the day.  
Such leaping and josing the [?] had for a while,  
The more she stood back law full [?] a mile.

When Scuball came to the winning post,  
He bid all his nobles for to drink a toast.  
Now since you laid all your purses on the grey mare,

Now she is bet and the sorrow ma care [?].

Tullymeela, March  
the 9<sup>th</sup> 1764 four [?]  
Fryday evening within Six  
minutes of Six o clock"

Francis Lucas Lee

As shown above, Filgate contains seven verses as opposed to the 11-verse structure found in all broadside printings with the exception of two.<sup>16</sup> The following verses, absent in Filgate, are taken from *The Vocal Library*, and are common to all English broadside printings, with the exception of some minor changes in phraseology:

Verse 4:

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd forth,  
The people came flocking from East, South and North,  
For to view all the sporters, as I do declare,  
And venture their money all on the grey mare.

Verse 5:

Squire Mervin then, smiling, unto them did say:  
Come, gentlemen, all that have money to lay;  
And you that have hundreds I will lay you all,  
For I'll venture thousands on famous Skew Ball.

Verse 7:

The time being come, and the cattle walk'd out,

Squire Mervin order'd his rider to mount.  
And all the spectators to clear the way,  
The time being come not a moment delay.

Verse 8:

The cattle being mounted away they did fly,  
Skew Ball like an arrow pass'd Miss Sportly by;  
The people went up to see them go round,  
They said in their hearts they ne'er touched the ground.<sup>17</sup>

It will be noted that these verses do not in themselves significantly alter the basic narrative of the ballad, and are essentially dramatic devices which serve to heighten the pre-race suspense, thus making the ballad more appealing to its prospective audience. With this in mind, we may somewhat safely assume that they were later interpolations for which a ballad printer was responsible, and that Filgate is closer to what may constitute an original of *SB*. The significant corruptions evident within the MS would lend further support to the previous suggestion that this particular version was transcribed from an oral source.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Filgate also contains the folklore motif of the speaking horse (pre-, mid- and post-race), which has been all but excised in the English broadside prints. The popular belief in horses possessing human faculties is well-attested in Irish oral tradition, and would provide further evidence to suggest that the ballad enjoyed an oral existence for a considerable period before the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century broadside versions, and that the narrative for *SB* may simply have been grafted onto a well-established, pre-existing folklore narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, the MS transcription is dated to “March 9<sup>th</sup> 1764”, making this the earliest complete version of *SB* yet for which a date can definitively be given. The back of the sheet also cites the year 1764 and states, “This is for Miss Elinor Filgate of Lisrenny”, along with what appear to be monetary calculations.<sup>20</sup> In dating the transcription to 1764, it can be stated definitively that within 12 years of the race itself, a well-established oral version was in circulation in Ireland – some 54 years before the first English broadside printing to which a printing date has hitherto been definitively assigned, i.e. that of *The Vocal Library* of 1818. This key evidence tends to refute an English origin for *SB* which the ballad’s popularity and ubiquity within the 19<sup>th</sup>-century English broadside canon might otherwise suggest.

### Concluding Remarks

- It can be established that the ballad “Skewball” (Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456) contains a historical narrative which recounts the tale of a two-horse match held at The Curragh of Kildare on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1752, in which a heavily-backed favourite is resoundingly defeated. The contest - resulting from a challenge between the two owners for a considerable purse - was held between a previously unknown skewbald gelding (Skewball, b. 1741) and a grey mare of considerable repute (Grey Mare, b. 1745), owned by Arthur Mervin and Sir Ralph Gore, respectively. Both of these men were well-known figures among the Irish and English horseracing fraternities of the mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century. Collected versions of the ballad examined as part of this paper, while displaying at times considerable variations in terms of the general narrative recounted, certain folklore motifs, and particularly the *dramatis personae* involved, all retain Skewball’s triumph as central to the progression of the narrative.

- The earliest version of *SB* for which a printing date and location has been definitively assigned hitherto is that found in *The Vocal Library*, a songbook published in London in 1818 – some 66 years after the race itself. That *SB* is of Irish origin, and had a previous oral incarnation which circulated for a considerable length of time before its appearance in *The Vocal Library* (along with the numerous broadside printings of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century) is supported by an MS version dated to 1764, discovered among the “Filgates of Lisrenny Papers” (Louth County Council Archive Collection), whilst researching this paper. The significant corruptions evident in this MS would further suggest that this version was documented via oral transmission. All broadside printings (with the exception of two) show a common 11-verse structure, as opposed to the 7 verses found in Filgate, the additional 4 verses being later interpolations for the sake of dramatic effect. Filgate also retains the folklore motif of a horse possessing human faculties, a feature which would be more in keeping with oral tradition, and would suggest that such an oral incarnation of the ballad existed before the popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century English broadside versions, from which this motif has been almost completely excised.

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## **NEWSPAPERS & PERIODICALS**

*General Advertiser* (London)

*London Evening Post* (London)

*Pue's Occurences* (Dublin)

*The Sporting Magazine* (London)

## **WEBSITES**

The British Book Trade Index (**BBTI**) [www.bbti.bham.ac.uk/](http://www.bbti.bham.ac.uk/)

Eighteenth Century Collections Online (**ECCO**) [www.gale.cengage.com/](http://www.gale.cengage.com/)

## **RECORDINGS**

Lomax, A. (1997) *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from the Parchman Farm 1947-48. Volume 2: Don'tcha Hear Poor Mother Calling? Rounder.*

# **APPENDIX**

## **BROADSIDE PRINTINGS**

Bathcelar (London)

[Madden Coll.: London Printers 1, # 630]

Birt (London)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 19(78)]
Croshaw (York)	[Bodleian Library: B29 24/2]
Eyres (Warrington)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no.
CW3316680623]	
Ford (Chesterfield)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 5, # 25]
Forth (Pocklington)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (4021)]
Harkness (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 26(51)]
Harkness (Preston)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 1, # 721]
Hoggett (Durham)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 1, # 613]
Howard & Evans (London)	[Madden Collection: Slip Songs O-Y, #1682]
Jackson (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 1406]
Jennings (London)	[Madden Coll.: London Printers 1, # 479]
Mayne (Belfast)	[Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 999]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (73)]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (3533)]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289b)]
Pitts (London)	[Madden Coll.: London Printers 1, # 725]
Ryle (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289a)]
Sergent (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CB3330619539]
Stephenson (Gateshead)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1785)]
<i>The Vocal Library</i>	[London, 1818]
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B6 (54)]
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1784)]
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (290)]
Walker (Durham)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 1, # 676]
Wright (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B28 (274)]

## MS VERSIONS

Filgate MS

*PP00001/002/004/001: Filgates of Lisrenny Papers*  
(Louth County Council Archive Collection,  
Dundalk).

Peter Buchan MS

*MS 29,408, 29,409: Collection of ancient Scottish  
and English ballads, formed by Peter Buchan,  
corresponding member of the Society of Antiquaries  
of Scotland, and used by him as the foundation of  
his "Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of  
Scotland, hitherto unpublished" (British Library,  
London).*

P.J. McCall MS

*Collection of Ballad Sheets and Cuttings of Songs  
made by PJ McCall, laid down in 13 volumes*  
(National Library of Ireland, Dublin).

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<sup>1</sup> Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456. The ballad is known variously as "Skew Ball", "Scewball", "Scew Ball", "Screw Ball", "Skyball", "Scuball", etc. For the purposes of this paper, the generic abbreviation *SB* is used.

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<sup>2</sup> See also, Lomax, A. (1997) *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from the Parchman Farm 1947-48. Volume 2: Don'tcha Hear Poor Mother Calling?* Rounder.

<sup>3</sup> Mackay (1888, p.196) offers the following etymology for the word 'skewbald':

"*Skybald*, apparently the same as the English *skewbald* and *piebald*, terms to designate a horse of two colours, marked as cows and oxen more usually are. Both *skybald* and *piebald*, as well as the English *skewbald*, have their origin in the Gaelic. *Sky* and *skew* are corruptions of *sgiath*, a shade, a dark shade ; *pie* comes from *pighe*, a *pie*, or *magpie*, a bird whose black plumage is marked with a white streak ; *bald* is derived from the Gaelic *ball*, a mark or spot; whence *skybald* is shade-marked, and *piebald* is marked like a bird. Jamieson says that, in Scotland, *skybald* signifies a base, mean fellow, a worthless person, and that it is also applied to a man in rags and tatters. Possibly this metaphorical use of the word arises from the fact that the rags of such a person are often of various colours. Locke, the celebrated English metaphysician, uses *pie-bald* in a similar sense, "a piebald livery of coarse patches." In Yorkshire, according to Wright's Provincial Dictionary, *skeyl'd* signifies *parti-coloured*, which is apparently from the same Gaelic root as *sky* and *skew*."

<sup>4</sup> The mare is referenced as "Miss Grizzle" in both the Mayne broadside printing (Belfast) and in the P.J. McCall MS (National Library of Ireland). Also referenced as, "Miss Greazle" (Eddie Butcher recording - Shields 2011, pp.58-9),

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“Miss Grissel” (Peter Buchan MS; Flanders 1939, pp.172-4) and “Miss Grizzel” (Eddie Butcher recording - Shields 1988, pp.16-7). Sir Ralph Gore is variously referenced as “Sir Francis Gore” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Sherrif Moir” (Peter Buchan MS) and “young Mrs. Gore” (Eddie Butcher recordings: Shields 1988, pp.16-7; Shields 2011, pp.58-9.)

<sup>5</sup> Alternative spellings in English broadsides include: Skew Ball, Scewball and Scew Ball; Also, “Scuball” (Benton 1826, pp.3-4; Thomson, ed. 1958, pp.82-4), Sku-ball (Flanders 1939, pp.172-4) and “Skyball” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast). Mervin is referenced variously in English broadsides as “Arthur Irmin / Irvine / Irving / Irwin / Iwrin / Merlin / Merwin / Mirvin / Morvin; Also, “Arthur O’Mearlin” (Peter Buchan MS) “Arthur Marvin” (MS Filgate), “Arthur Marvel (Benton 1826, pp. 3-4), “Arthur Melvin (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Artumaro” (Flanders 1939, pp.172-4) and “Spurmurthy” (Thompson 1958, pp.82-4).

<sup>6</sup> As well as the pair’s prominence among the racing fraternity, Gore was also a major landowner in Fermanagh and of Cromwellian planter background, a fact which may well have added to the ballad’s broad appeal in Ireland, especially when his mare was defeated so heavily by an unknown horse of inferior pedigree.

<sup>7</sup> See broadside printings: Stephenson (Gateshead); Mayne (Belfast).

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<sup>8</sup> Cheny (1729 p.54), for example, records a horse named Skewball running in Durham in 1728. Likewise, Weatherby (1858 p.377) lists another Skewball as having been foaled by Tandem in 1786.

<sup>9</sup> Covering the fortnight of Tuesday 31 March – Monday 13 April.

<sup>10</sup> A single verse with the name “Miss Grizzle” is cited by Scarborough (1925, pp.61-2) quoting a communication sent to her by Professor Kittredge, who attributed the verse to “Manchester (England) broadside (Bebbington, No. 206)”. The author has been unable to locate extant evidence of this printing in any of the collections or archives examined as part of this paper. The verse is quoted as follows:

“When that they came to the middle of the course,  
Skewball and his rider began a discourse,  
Come, my brave rider, come tell unto me,  
How far is Miss Grizzle this moment from me.”

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Both Flanders and Thompson cite the 1822 edition of *The Vocal Library* as the earliest printed source for *SB*.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, two song garlands printed in the North-West of England during this period, namely: “A New Garland Containing Three Choice Songs. 1. Nancy’s Love for her Serjeant. 2. Skew Ball. 3. The Oxford Scholar” (E. Sergent,

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Preston) and also, “William and Susan’s Garland; Containing four good songs, viz. 1. Sweet William and Black Ey’d Susan. 2. Sweet William’s happy return to Susan. 3. Sweet Susan’s loyalty rewarded. 4. The famous Scew Ball” (Eyres, Warrington). (The inclusion of *SB* in the latter would seem to have been as a mere afterthought). ECCO tentatively dates these printings to “[?]1790” and “[?]1760” respectively, but this cannot be conclusively proven to any satisfactory degree.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Sale of Farm Stock’, PP00001/002/004/001: Filgates of Lisrenny Papers (Louth Co. Council Archive Collection).

<sup>15</sup> Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.

<sup>16</sup> Exceptions are the Wright printing (Birmingham) which omits verse 5, and an anonymous, undated printing, Bodleian Library: Harding B 6 (54), which shows only eight verses, four of which contain only two lines.

<sup>17</sup> Verses 4 & 5 above read after Verse 3 in Filgate. Verses 7 & 8 above read after Verse 4 in Filgate.

<sup>18</sup> Possible suggestions for some of the more notable corruptions evident in Filgate may be arrived at by drawing comparisons with the *Vocal Library* printing, which show the following similarities:

**Filgate**

**The Vocal Library**

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Verse 3: "red matches of Gold"

Verse 3: "fine mass of Gold"

Verse 5: "my disting post"

Verse 11: "the distant chair"

Verse 7: "Sorrow Ma Care"

Verse 11: "broke Sir Ralph Gore"

Note: The above comparisons can be readily made with several other broadside printings.

<sup>19</sup> For examples of the prevalence of speaking horses within Irish folklore, see: Ó Duilearga (1935, p.153); Ó hÓgáin (1977-79, pp.199-243); Ó hÓgáin (2006, p.284; O'Keefe (1859, p.69).

<sup>20</sup> Elinor Filgate (née Byrne) died in 1799.