

POEMS AND BALLADS AT 150: INTRODUCTION

L.M. Kilbride

In July 2016 a group of poets and academics gathered at St. John's College, Cambridge, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*.¹ The alignment of the stars was not exact: the first copies of *Poems and Ballads*, as originally published by Moxon & Co., were sent out at the beginning of July 1866. However, the first review of *Poems and Ballads* by Swinburne's friend Thomas Bendyshe, offering long quotations in support of Swinburne's affinity with classical paganism, appeared almost 150 years to the day in *The Reader*. That same day *The Times* ran articles on the losses of the Bohemian army and the subsequent armistice between Prussia, Bohemia, and Moravia, a cholera outbreak in East London, and Mr. Gladstone's and Earl Russell's failure to comment on the Hyde Park Railings affair. On 31 July, as Rikky Rooksby notes in his biography, William Allingham visited Dante Gabriel Rossetti and noticed on the table a small green book (130). It is impossible to conclude that *the rest is history* because the process by which literary history is made is a practice of continual hearing and re-hearing.

2016 was a year for anniversaries: criticism remembered the Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising, and the poems written in that volcanic year without a summer, 1816. However, as Swinburne himself knew, anniversaries are not just about getting your dates right. Anniversaries are, as he wrote in his poem on the first anniversary of the battle of Mentana, what 'Give all men heart' ("Mentana: First Anniversary" 90), and it *was* often "men," as Francis O'Gorman demonstrates in his attention to Swinburne's use of martial metaphor. However different the approaches of the critics gathered here, there is something in *Poems and Ballads* which continues to "give [us] ... heart." Yet the question as to precisely what that is cannot be quickly answered and least of all by a roundabout argument in which the fact that there always seems to be something more to say becomes the seal of enduring value. The risk of tautology is especially acute in the case of Swinburne's first collection. Given that it has received the most critical attention and been most widely anthologized, returning to *Poems and Ballads* might be dismissed by some as a waste

