

1-1-2012

# THE PRINTED RECORD OF AN ORAL TRADITION: ANNA GORDON BROWN'S BALLADS

Ruth Perry  
*MIT*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Perry, Ruth (2012) "THE PRINTED RECORD OF AN ORAL TRADITION: ANNA GORDON BROWN'S BALLADS," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, 71–91.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu).

## **THE PRINTED RECORD OF AN ORAL TRADITION: ANNA GORDON BROWN'S BALLADS**

*Ruth Perry*

Traditional ballads—those sung narratives whose origins are uncertain and whose authorship is unknown—have been difficult for literary scholars to account for and to analyze. Anonymous folk songs, they have moved between oral tradition and printed versions in broadsides or chapbooks and back again over the course of many centuries. They rarely have a single definitive text but can be found in many variants, making textual analysis tricky. Most scholars who have studied ballads are either medievalists—when the ballads are thought to have originated—or eighteenth-century scholars—the century when ballads were first collected. Francis J. Child, Harvard's first professor of vernacular literature in English, was both. He thought of ballads as our “earliest known poetry,” whose “historical and natural place is anterior to the appearance of the poetry of art”; and he collected as many of them as he could with all their rich variations in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Child's collection was largely bibliographic: he gathered the texts of ballads for the most part without their melodies. He corresponded with scholars throughout the British empire, particularly in England and Scotland, who could forage for him among old manuscripts and rare books for specimens. Much of that correspondence is still in the Houghton library at Harvard. His magnificent collection inspired much ballad scholarship for a while in the early twentieth century, in the wake of his multi-volume publication, but by the last part of the century the impetus was gone and it died back again. Now, once more, scholars are turning to this hybrid genre—perhaps because visual media bring us nearer to oral performances or because our relation to definitive print is infinitely complicated by the internet. There seems to be a groundswell of

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis James Child, “Ballad Poetry,” *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia*, vol. 1, ed. Frederic A.P. Barnard, et al. (New York: A.J. Johnson & Son, 1877), 365-68, and reprinted in vol. I of the Loomis House edition of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (2001), 5 vols., xxvii.

interest in these survivals of traditional culture and a number of studies have appeared in recent years treating ballads in their relation to song and other oral forms on the one hand and to poetry, novels, and other printed forms on the other.<sup>2</sup>

But scholars of eighteenth-century literature—and earlier periods as well—do not yet know enough about oral tradition, how ballads and tales and songs were kept alive over the centuries in the telling and singing, generation after generation. All we have to go on are moments of oral practice or transmission glimpsed in letters and memoirs, and the printed records of these traditions as they were written down. What I want to consider here is what survives in the printed record of an oral text—and what is lost. My examples come from one of the earliest oral sources of ballads collected in the eighteenth century: Anna Gordon from Aberdeen, who married Andrew Brown, a minister in Fife. Of her repertoire Child remarked: “There are no ballads superior to those sung by Mrs. Brown of Falkland in the last century.”<sup>3</sup>

Ballads were still a living form in the eighteenth century. Sung in the fields and on city streets, hawked at country fairs and on street corners, they were sold throughout the British Isles by peddlers who covered the length and breadth of the country on foot. Ballads were sung by ordinary people in their cottages at night before the fire or in local taverns to entertain an evening. John Clare’s father knew more than a hundred ballads and would sing them as requested over a pint in the local pub on a Saturday night. Women sang ballads as they spun thread or yarn, felted cloth, or shelled peas. People pasted the broadsides up on the walls of their cottages even when they could not read, for the pleasure of the decorative woodcuts that adorned the top or bottom of the sheet.

---

<sup>2</sup> Some recent books using ballads as evidence are: Scarlet Bowen, *The Politics of Custom in Eighteenth-Century British Fiction* (New York and Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Marc Caball and Andrew Carpenter, eds., *Oral and Print Cultures in Ireland, 1600-1900* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010); Philip Connell and Nigel Leask, ed. *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge,: Cambridge, University Press, 2009); Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Erik Simpson, *Literary Minstrelsy, 1770-1830* (New York and Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2008); Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also the special double issue edited by Ruth Perry of *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* vol. 46, nos. 2-3 (Summer-Fall, 2006) on *Ballads and Songs in the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>3</sup> Francis James Child, Advertisement prefacing vol. I of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882-1898), 10 vols.

Youngsters learned ballads from members of their families, their neighbors, and from peddlers and hawkers. They are one of the oldest forms of narrative in English, probably dating from the middle ages, a recent relative of the oral epic. They provided stories for the imagination to dwell on long before more modern forms of literary fiction.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, a few antiquarians and collectors began to interest themselves in the earliest specimens of these printed broadsides, the so-called “black letter” ballads, printed in heavy gothic typefaces dating back to the Renaissance and beyond to the dawn of printing. Even as they bought up the older sheets, newer “white letter” ballads in lighter, cleaner typefaces were being turned out and sold by the thousands. But as literacy spread and the musical tastes of urban dwellers became more sophisticated, ballads were increasingly associated with the rural poor, the old, the illiterate—the socially marginal. As they disappeared from the daily life of the upwardly mobile classes, they began to interest the literati as early examples of English poetry from an age of oral composition. And so it was that the beginnings of ballad collecting and of nascent ballad scholarship co-existed in the eighteenth century with the waning of ballad singing as a popular, familiar, everyday practice among well-to-do city dwellers. As living traditions begin to disappear, they re-appear, framed, on the walls of museums or printed between the covers of books. Edwin Muir wrote of ballads, “The singing and the harping fled / Into the silent library.”<sup>4</sup>

Samuel Johnson, who never liked music, mocked the antiquarian interest in old ballads in his day. In *Rambler* 177, he invented a set of absurd virtuosi, of whom Cantilenus “turned all his thoughts upon old ballads,” for he considered them “the genuine records of the national taste. He offered to show me a copy of *The Children in the Wood*, which he firmly believed to be of the first edition and by the help of which the text might be freed of several corruptions . . . .”<sup>5</sup> The notion of a first edition of so apparently trivial a text as a broadside of “*Children in the Wood*” was ridiculous to Johnson, and he lampoons his imagined antiquarian who prized such cheap ephemera. He was also mocking an old *Spectator* column, for in 1711 Joseph Addison had described seeing such a printed page pasted up on the wall of a cottage, which he said gave him “exquisite pleasure.” “My Reader will think I am not serious,” wrote Addison, “when I acquaint him that the Piece I am going to speak of was the old Ballad of the *Two Children in the Wood*, which is one of the Darling Songs of the Common People, and has been the Delight of most

---

<sup>4</sup> This line is from “Complaint of the Dying Peasantry,” which can be found in his *Collected Poems*, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> *The Rambler*, number 177 (November 26, 1751).

*Englishmen* in some Part of their Age.”<sup>6</sup> Addison went on to analyze the emotional power of this “pretty Tragical story”—its language, its incidents, and its ornaments—and his column is probably the first example of literary criticism of a ballad text.

The appeal of oral traditions, especially for intellectuals, lies in their imaginative embodiment of face-to-face communities in touch with one another directly rather than through the mediation of print or electronics: words spoken between people who could smell, touch, and see one another. We treasure our family’s stories, the scraps our parents told us about their grandparents, and all kinds of kinship lore. The notion that people sang ballads to one another, preserving them for centuries, is exciting because it seems to put us in touch with people from another era who sang the same songs we can hear today. Cecil Sharp commented on the “amazing accuracy” of oral transmission over two hundred years, after hearing a Robin Hood ballad sung almost “word for word the same as the corresponding stanzas of a much longer black-letter broadside preserved in the Bodleian Library.”<sup>7</sup> Such feats lodge the power of memory—and hence the capacity to confer a kind of immortality—in ordinary human beings, rather than in the huge media machines that nowadays calculatedly generate fame.

Not until the later eighteenth century did intellectuals think to collect ballads from living people, rather than in the form of printed broadsides as Johnson’s caricatured antiquarian does. The earliest oral repertoire to be so collected was that of Anna Gordon Brown, a middle-class woman from Aberdeen who had learned her ballads before she was ten from her mother, her maternal aunt, and from a maidservant who had worked in her mother and aunt’s natal home. Some of the ballads she learned from her maternal aunt also came from Braemar, in upland western Aberdeenshire, where this aunt’s married life was spent, sung by local people there and possibly by migrant workers called “tinkers” or “travelers.” Anna Gordon Brown was born in 1747, and her mother and aunt presumably learned their ballads in *their* youth; hence her repertoire of ballads must date back to at least the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and probably earlier.

It was her father’s friend, William Tytler, who cared deeply about Scottish music and wrote a treatise on it, and who first occasioned the writing down of Anna Gordon Brown’s ballads.<sup>8</sup> Her father, a professor

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Spectator*, number 85 (Thursday, June 7, 1711).

<sup>7</sup> *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions*, quoted in Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, published originally by Cambridge University Press, 1977, but updated and enlarged for Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 138.

at King's college—now part of the University of Aberdeen—mentioned in conversation to Tytler that his youngest daughter knew a great many ballads, and Tytler entreated that they be copied down for him. So together with her nephew, Robert Eden Scott, Anna Gordon complied. “Both the words & strains were perfectly new to me,” wrote Thomas Gordon of the result of this effort, “& proceeded upon a system of manners, & in a stile of composition, both words & music, very peculiar, & of which [I] could recollect nothing similar.”<sup>9</sup> These were probably not, then, ballads sung everyday on the streets of Aberdeen, but were a collection from the wider bounds of the North East of Scotland, probably from a specifically woman's singing tradition, previously unknown to this professor of Greek and Latin and Natural Philosophy from King's College in Aberdeen, but now of particular interest to him and to his friend, William Tytler.

Indeed, many of the intellectuals who were part of the ferment now seen as the Scottish Enlightenment were interested in Scottish balladry and traditional folk music. Significant figures of the Enlightenment—Dr. William Tytler, Dr. James Beattie, Dr. John Gregory, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, and Henry Home, Lord Kames—all wrote treatises on the unique melodic qualities of Scottish song; and literary men such as Dr. Robert Anderson, Robert Jamieson, Sir Walter Scott and Joseph Ritson wrote about the simple but magnificent poetry of the old ballads.<sup>10</sup> These men were investigating what we would now call historical sociology, the history of societies and cultures, as well as the antecedents of their own national heritage.<sup>11</sup>

The “re-discovery” of ballads and vernacular poetry by such historians and literary scholars set the stage for the Romanticism of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in England and in Scotland the song poetry of Robert Burns, the historical romanticism of Walter Scott, and the song and ballad compositions of a number of eighteenth-century Scotswomen, including Lady Grisell Baillie, Alison

---

<sup>8</sup> William Tytler's *A Dissertation on Scottish Music* (1779) is printed as an appendix to Hugo Arnot's *History of Edinburgh*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1788), 3:624-42. I discuss his essay in an earlier essay on Anna Brown's ballads, “The Finest Ballads’: Women's Oral Traditions in Eighteenth-Century Scotland,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32. 2 (Spring: 2008): 81-98, especially p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Thomas Gordon to Alexander Fraser-Tytler, January 19, 1793. NLS Acc 3639 and also William Tytler Brown manuscript Harvard University.

<sup>10</sup> See also Neil R. Grobman, “David Hume and the Earliest Scientific Method for Collecting Balladry,” *Western Folklore*, 14, 1 (January 1975): 16-31, and Perry, “Women's Oral Traditions,” *op. cit.* pp. 82-86.

<sup>11</sup> William Daune, *Ancient Scottish (sic) Melodies from a Manuscript of the Reign of King James VI with An Introductory Enquiry Illustrative of the History of Music of Scotland* (The Bannatyne Club: Edinburgh, 1938), 2-3.

Rutheford Cockburn, Susanna Blamire, Lady Anne Barnard and most famously, Caroline, Baroness Nairne. As Matthew Gelbart has shown, the study of popular ballads and vernacular folk music was constitutive of the category of art music of high culture.<sup>12</sup> In Scotland, where the category of song was never distant from the category of poetry and where most poets also wrote songs, intellectuals eagerly saw the uncovering of their traditions of balladry as evidence of a literary heritage independent of English cultural hegemony and preceding it. They turned to this unique repertoire as a particular object of study.

After several sets of her ballads had been taken down and sent to William Tytler, Mrs. Brown was importuned several more times for ballads, including by William Tytler's son, her childhood friend, Alexander Fraser-Tytler. Manuscript copies of her ballads began to circulate among intellectuals of the day. Robert Anderson sent some to Thomas Percy, editor of *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765); and copies from Fraser-Tytler's manuscripts were handed around among the major collectors of the day: Joseph Ritson, Robert Jamieson, Matthew Lewis, and Walter Scott.<sup>13</sup> The correspondence about these ballads as well as what is written on the edges of the manuscripts—the marginalia, the bits and pieces of lore that were part of the oral tradition but that never made it into printed copies—these ephemera give us some insight into the process of oral transmission and its transfer into print.

Most ballad texts, whether oral or written/printed, are attended by such lore. Every ballad singer, then and now, carries in their minds information about each ballad they sing—such as where they learned it and how they interpret it. Sometimes it is historical information that informs their knowledge of the ballad, gleaned at some point in their singing career. For example, Alan Lomax's recordings of the late Jeannie Robertson's singing include an interview in which she insists that "My Son David" (her version of "Edward," or Child 13) is "a true song," that it really happened. "As far as I've heard the story," she continues, "John wanted to be the master but David was the oldest. And he was master, you see. And both of them was a rich man's sons. And of course, John was headstrong and he wanted his way. And David couldn't think of it,

---

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See my forthcoming essay, "The Famous Ballads of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown," in Ellen Pollak, ed. *A Cultural History of Women in the Age of Enlightenment* (Berg Publishing); see also *The Ballad Repertoire of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown of Falkland*, ed. Sigrid Rieuwerts, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Scottish Text Society, 2011), especially pp. 27-53, for an account of the borrowings among these scholars.

you see, so the two of them fought. So David had killed him.” The brothers’ relationship, their class, their age order and their personalities—these things are not in the ballad text itself; but for Robertson, they are part of the ballad. Speaking of “The Handsome Cabin Boy”—in which a cabin boy turns out to be female and becomes pregnant—Robertson tells Lomax that her mother, who taught her the ballad, told her that the girl “wanted to travel by seas. Her mind was set on travelling by sea.” And so “she dressed herself up as a boy. Cut off her hair, and dressed herself up as a boy and went on as a cabin boy, you see. Of course, the captain—he must have found out, you see.” Again, the motive for the cross-dressing “cabin boy” is not formally there in the text, but supplied by the performer.<sup>14</sup>

When Anna Gordon wrote down “Thomas Rhymer” for Alexander Fraser-Tytler, the ballad which a hundred years later became Child #37, she gave it the full name she knew it by—“Thomas Rymer & Queen of Elfland”—and included the following introductory remark on the first page:

The tradition concerning this ballad is, that Thomas Rymer when young. was carried away by the Queen of Elfland or fairyland. who retain'd him in her service for seven years. during which period he is supposed to have acquir'd all that wisdom which afterwards made him so famous.<sup>15</sup>

We may suppose that this was what she had heard about it from whoever taught it to her and what she might have said about it to people when she sang it to them. This understanding informed her singing of the ballad. She also wrote down for Alexander Fraser-Tytler the translation of two terms occurring in the song: “Lillie leven” which she translated as “flowery lawn,” and “fairlies” which she translated as “wonders.” Whether these were localisms that she felt impelled to explain to a man from Edinburgh, or archaic terms that she thought he might not know, we do not know. But they were ballad words familiar to her that she thought Fraser-Tytler might not know—part of an oral tradition that she felt had to be explained to him. What she did not write down, because everyone of her day knew it, is that the color “green” is the color of fairies—the

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from liner notes to “Queen Among the Heather,” a portrait from the Alan Lomax collection, recorded in London in 1953, re-mastered by Rounder Records Corp. in 1998. Rounder 11661-1720-2.

<sup>15</sup> The manuscript of Anna Brown’s ballads in her own handwriting is on long term loan to the National Library of Scotland, Acc 10611 (2). The xeroxed copy of it is Acc 3640.



color of the Queen of Elfland's skirt and the shoes she gives Thomas Rhymer at the end of the ballad. That is a bit of Scottish oral tradition that did not need to be written down.

She did not divide the text into stanzas in her manuscript, setting the song out as follows:

True Thomas lay oer yond grassy bank  
 And he beheld a Ladie gay  
 A Ladie that was brisk and bold  
 Come riding oer the fernie brae  
 Her skirt was of the grass green silk  
 Her mantle of the velvet fine  
 At ilka tett of her horses mane  
 Hung fifty silver bells & nine  
 True Thomas he took aff his hat,  
 And bow'd him low down till his knee  
 All hail thou mighty queen of heaven  
 For your peer on earth I ne'er did see  
 O no O no true Thomas she says  
 That name does not belong to me  
 I am but the queen of fair Elfland  
 And I'm come here for to visit thee  
 But ye maun go wi me now Thomas  
 True Thomas ye maun go wi me,  
 For ye maun serve me seven years  
 Thro weel or wae as may chance to be  
 She turned about her milk-white steed  
 And took true Thomas up behind  
 And ay whenever her bridle ran,  
 The steed few swifter than the wind  
 O they rade on and further on,  
 Until they came to a garden green  
 Light down light down ye Ladie free  
 Some of that fruit let me pu. to thee  
 O no O no true Thomas she says  
 That fruit maun not be touchd by thee  
 For a' the plagues that are in hell  
 Light on the fruit of this countrie.  
 But I have a loaf here in in my lap  
 Likewise a bottle of claret wine  
 And now ere we go farther on  
 We'll rest a while and ye may dine  
 When he had eaten & drunk his fill

The Ladie say'd ere we climb yon hill  
 Lay down your head upon my knee  
 And I will show you fairlies+ three  
 O see not ye yon narrow road  
 So thick beset wi thorns & briers  
 That is the path of righteousness  
 Tho after it but few enquires  
 And see not ye that braid braid road  
 That lyes across yon Lillie leven\*  
 That is the path of wickedness  
 Tho some call it the road to heaven  
 And see not ye that bonny road  
 Which winds about the fernie brae  
 That is the road to fair Elfland  
 Whe[re] you & I this night maun gae  
 But Thomas ye maun hold your tongue  
 Whatever you may hear or see  
 For gin ae word you should chance to speak  
 You will ne'er get back to your ain countrie  
 For forty days and forty nights  
 He wade thro red blude to the knee  
 And he saw neither sun nor moon  
 But heard the roaring of the sea  
 He has gotten a coat of the even cloth  
 And a pair of shoes of velvet green,  
 And till seven years were past & gone  
 True Thomas on earth was never seen  
 + *wonders*; \**flowery lawn*

The "seven years" of Thomas Rhymer's servitude in Elfland, mentioned by Anna Gordon in her introductory note, is there in the fifth verse and also in the last two lines: "And till seven years were past & gone / True Thomas on earth was never seen." But the fact that it was in Elfland that "he acquired the wisdom that he was famous for," as she puts it, and that he was reputed to have wisdom in the first place, this additional information is not in the ballad. Thomas the Rhymer was a legendary figure with reputed prophetic capacities whose dates are usually given from 1220-1297. He hailed from Earlston (then called "Erceldoune") in Berwickshire, on the Scottish border, and it is said that he was given the sobriquet "true" because he never lied. All this is implicit in the introductory note that Anna Brown wrote out for Alexander Fraser-Tytler when copying the ballad, an ephemeral note as it happens, that was never picked up in Child's collection nor in Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the*

*Scottish Border* (1802-3). But Anna Gordon Brown obviously considered it part of the lore that went with the ballad, and the note along with her translation of a few odd words are the residual signs of an oral tradition that attended the ballad into an era of writing and print.

“Child Waters” is another ballad that Anna Gordon Brown wrote out for Alexander Fraser-Tytler in her own handwriting, and the manuscript we have of it provides further insight into the intersection of oral and print traditions. First, “Child Waters” is the name Francis James Child gives the ballad (Child 63 in his numbering system) because that is the name of the hero in Percy’s version printed in *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Anna Gordon called her ballad “Burd Ellen” the first time she recorded it; many years later when she wrote it down she gave it the title “Lord John and Bird Ellen”—“burd” being a poetic word for a woman, usually a young woman, sometimes a wife. John Jamieson, editor of a Scots dictionary of 1808 defines it thus: “[b]urd is still used as an appellation of complacency by superiors to women of lower degree.”<sup>16</sup> So the second title Anna Brown used, “Lord John and Bird Ellen,” implied a difference of class between the two main characters.

In the first written transcript of this ballad from the oral tradition, Anna Gordon’s nephew took it down from her singing or recitation. The second time Anna Gordon Brown herself took pen in hand and wrote it out for Tytler’s son, Alexander Fraser-Tytler, when he requested her to do so in 1800. He was delighted with this and the other ballads she sent him and replied thus:

Some of them are highly beautiful, and all of them curious and interesting as specimens of our antient popular Poetry—The only one of which I had any previous acquaintance is Love Gregor, of which several Stanzas are printed in a collection published at Edinr by one Mr. Herd about 20 years ago—but your Edition is much more complete—Those which please me most are Fa’sse Foutrage, the Bonny Footboy and Bird Ellen. They are indeed consummately beautiful and I regard them as a high acquisition to the Stock of our Old National Poetry—The Music is a valuable addition—You say my dear Madam that you may have fragments of others—It is unconscionable in me to tax your politeness thus severely; but I own the desire I feel to rescue from Oblivion those precious morsels of Genius and Feeling which are perhaps preserved in the memory of one or two of the present generation, who like yourself, have taste to cherish them, is a strong

---

<sup>16</sup> John Jamieson, *The Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 2 vols. 1808.

inducement with me to urge you to a new exertion of your kindness in committing to Paper for me, such even of those imperfect & detached fragments as your happy memory can recall—To assist you in this, I will send you Mr. Herd's Collection [ . . . ].<sup>17</sup>

As Alexander Fraser-Tytler's response demonstrates, intellectuals of the day regarded these ballads as "antient national poetry." He calls them "precious morsels of Genius and Feeling which are perhaps preserved in the memory of one or two of the present generation, who like yourself, have taste to cherish them." By "one or two of the present generation," Fraser-Tytler means people of his (and Mrs. Brown's) own class; neither he nor his father had thought to tap the memories of laborers or artisans as collectors did subsequently. Indeed, it may be that Anna Gordon Brown's ballads received more attention from the literati of her day *because* she was one of their class, and they knew how to find her.

Commenting nearly a hundred years later on the class of people who knew and carried ballads, Child posited that before the coming of book culture, before educated people read as a leisure activity and before the "the poetry of art" appeared, people of all classes had known these ballads, had sung and listened to them. But once the distinction between high and low art began to appear, popular poetry was "no longer relished" by the upper classes, and was "abandoned to an uncultivated or not over-cultivated class—a constantly diminishing number."<sup>18</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, ballads were carried mostly in the memories of the laboring classes, as can be seen by those who taught Anna Brown's mother and aunt their ballads—a maidservant, and in rural Braemar, farm workers, "and nurses and old women in the neighborhood." In a modern poem called "The Quiet Grave" and dedicated to Cecil Sharp, the poet U. A. Fanthorpe wrote about the class of people who carried folk music in England in the beginning of the twentieth century. The kingdom she refers to is the kingdom of folk music:

Who held the keys to the kingdom?  
Unfriendly old men in workhouses;  
Bedridden ninety-year-olds terrorized  
By highhanded grandchildren; gipsy women

---

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Fraser Tytler from his estate of Woodhouselee, April 28, 1800; NLS Acc 3639 ff. 244-45.

<sup>18</sup> These quotations are from Child's essay "Ballad Poetry," which appeared in Johnson's *New Universal Cyclopaedia*, vol. 1, ed. Frederic A.P. Barnard, et al. (New York: A. J. Johnson & Son, 1877), 365-68.

With the long memories of the illiterate;  
 Old sailors who could sing only  
 Within the sound of the sea. These  
 Held the keys to the kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

In 1800, when Alexander Fraser-Tytler told Anna Brown that she was only one of a handful of people who knew the old ballads and had the taste to cherish them, he was recording his impression that people of the educated classes were no longer learning and singing these ballads as they once had. He sent her David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs: Heroic Ballads, etc. collected from memory, tradition and ancient authors* (1769; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 2 vols. 1776) to jog her memory and encourage her to write down more of the ballads she had learned as a child. Up to this time, as she wrote to Fraser-Tytler, she had never seen any of the old ballads in print or manuscript but had relied only upon her own memory after learning them orally as a child.

The first time "Burd Ellen" was committed to paper was when Robert Eden Scott took it down from Anna Gordon's oral recitation sometime before 1783. The second time it was written down, in 1800, Mrs. Brown was her own scribe, writing the words out and looking at what she had written as she went, a process as much like composing as like remembering and speaking or singing. The differences between the two versions are instructive and folklorists have debated whether or not they furnish evidence of imperfect memorization—after all these notations were seventeen or eighteen years apart—or whether they are evidence of the oral formulaic method of composition, in which the ballad is re-created anew each time it is sung, and what is remembered is not individual words but word clusters and a sense of the shape of the whole. Did Anna Brown imperfectly remember the ballads she had learned so many years before as a girl, or did she, like the epic singers of Yugoslavia studied by Albert Lord,<sup>20</sup> re-create the ballad each time she sang it, choosing from a large store of variant verses and formulaic phrases as the mood suited her, and varying the rhyme words as the lines of each quatrain came out? As described by David Buchan, the singer in this process—who is an oral poet of sorts—is not fixated on particular words as are literate poets who insist on one correct lexical sequence for their

---

<sup>19</sup> U. A. Fanthorpe, *Selected Poems* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1986), 22. This poem comes from Fanthorpe's first collection, *Side Effects*, first published in 1978. Thanks to Susan Morgan who first introduced me to this poem and this wonderful poet.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

poems, "but instead works through sounds and word-groups."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the story is an idea that can be spun out of a variety of materials and does not rely on a particular memorized text. The specific language is ephemeral, although the essence of the tale is not.

Here is Anna Gordon's version of "Burd Ellen."<sup>22</sup>

- 1 I warn ye all ye gay ladies That wear scarlet an brown  
That ye dinna leave your fathers house To follow young men frae town
- 2 O! here am I a lady gay That wear scarlet & brown  
Yet I will leave my fathers house An follow lord John frae the town.<sup>23</sup>
- 3 Lord John stood in his stable door Said he was bound to ride  
Burd Ellen stood in her bow'r door Said she's rin by his side.
- 4 He's pitten on his cork-heal'd shoon<sup>24</sup> An fast awa' rade he  
She's clade hersel in page array An after him ran she
- 5 Till they came till a wan<sup>25</sup> water An folks do ca it Clyde  
Then he's lookit o'er his left shoulder Says lady can ye wide<sup>26</sup>
- 6 O I learn't it in my father's house [superscript: wi my bowerwomen]  
I learn't it for my weal  
Wheneer I came to a wan water To swim like ony eel.
- 7 But the firstin stap the lady stappit The water came til her knee  
Ohon alas! said the lady This water's oer deep for me.
- 8 The nextin stap the lady stappit The water came till her middle

<sup>21</sup> David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk*, (1972; rpt. Tuckwell, 1997), 158.

<sup>22</sup> This is a transcription of the ballad as it appears in Ms Laing III 473 in the Edinburgh University Library. The text (in Robert Jamieson's handwriting, according to the Scottish Text Society edition, *op. cit.*) is an exact copy of the manuscript that Robert Eden Scott made of this ballad and nineteen others of his aunt's ballads some time prior to the 1783 manuscript of fifteen additional ballads made by Robert Eden Scott and now held by the National Library of Scotland. To hear the ballad sung for modern audiences, go to the Penn Sound Classics web site.

<sup>23</sup> This first person narrative stance is very unusual in a ballad.

<sup>24</sup> Cork-heeled shoes are made for show and not for wear. They are a symbolic sign of wealth.

<sup>25</sup> dark

<sup>26</sup> wade

- An sighin' says that gay lady I've wet my gouden girdle
- 9 The nextin stap the Lady stappit The water came till her pap<sup>27</sup>  
An the bairn that was in her twa sides For caul<sup>28</sup> begane to quake
- 10 Lye still lye still my ain dear babe Ye work your mither wae  
Your father rides on high horseback Cares little for us twae
- 11 O about the midst o Clyden water There was a yeard fast stane<sup>29</sup>  
He lightly turn'd his horse about An took her on him behin
- 12 O tell me this now good Lord John An' a word ye dinna lee  
How far it is to your lodgin' Whare we this night maun be
- 13 O see you nae yon castle Ellen That shines sae fair to see  
There is a lady in it Ellen Will sunder you and me.
- 14 There is a lady in that castle Will sunder you and I  
Betide me well betide me wae I sal go there & try
- 15 O my dogs sal eat the good white bread An ye shall eat the bran  
Then will ye sigh and say alas That ever I was a man
- 16 O I sal eat the good white bread An your dogs sal eat the bran  
[superscript: Sin food that love is fed upon is neither bread nor bran;]  
And I hope to live an bless the day That ever you was a man
- 17 O my horse sal eat the good white meal An ye sal eat the corn  
Then will ye curse the heavy hour That ever your love was born
- 18 O I sal eat the good white meal An your horse sal eat the corn  
[superscript: I may, I may, Lord John what eer I eat Or meal or corn]  
An I sall bless the happy hour That ever my love was born
- 19 O four & twenty gay Ladies Welcom'd lord John to the ha'  
But a fairer Lady than them a' Led his horse to the stable sta'
- 20 An four & twenty gay Ladies Welcom'd lord John to the green

---

<sup>27</sup> breast

<sup>28</sup> cold

<sup>29</sup> stone stuck in the mud

- But a fairer Lady\* than them a' At the manger stood alane<sup>30</sup>
- 21 Whan bells were rung & mass was sung An a' man boun to meat  
Burd Ellen at a bye table Ama' the footmen was set
- 22 O eat & drink my bonny boy The white bread & the beer  
The never a bit can I eat or drink My heart's sae full of fear.
- 23 O eat an drink my bonny boy The white bread an the wine  
I canna eat nor drink master My hearts sae full o' pine
- 24 But out it spake lord John's mother An a wise woman was she  
Whare met ye wi that bonny boy That looks sae sad on thee?
- 25 Sometimes his cheek is rosy red An sometimes deadly wan  
He's liker a woman big wi bairn Than a young lords serving man
- 26 O it makes me laugh my mother dear Sic words to hear frae thee  
He is a squires ain dearest son That for love has follow'd me  
[superscript: That I got in the high countree]
- 27 Rise up rise up my bonny boy Gi my horse corn and hay  
O that I will my master dear As quickly as I may
- 28 She's ta'en the hay under her arm The corn intill her han'  
An she's gane to the great stable As fast as e'er she can
- 29 O room ye roun my bonny brown steeds O room ye near the wa'<sup>31</sup>  
For the pain that strikes me thro my sides Full soon will gar me fa
- 30 She's lean'd her back against the wa Strong travail seiz'd her on  
An even amo the great horse feet Burd Ellen brought forth her son
- 31 Lord John mither intill her bow'r Was sitting all alone  
When i the silence o the night She heard fair Ellen moan

---

<sup>30</sup> "Alane" is literary Scots in this context, according to Dr. William Donaldson (in conversation). The implication is that Robert Eden Scott—or Anna Gordon—had familiarity with the conventions of written Scots because this is a Southern form and does not fit the rhyme scheme nor would have been conversationally used in the northeast where "aleen" would have been the expected form.

<sup>31</sup> To move aside in order to make room/ make a space around me near the wall.



- 32 Won up won up my son She says Go se how all does fare  
For I think I hear a womans groans An a bairn greeting sair
- 33 Oh hastily he gat him up Stay'd neither for hose nor shoone  
An he's taen him to the stable door Wi the clear light o the moon
- 34 He strack the door hard wi his foot An sae has he wi his knee  
An iron locks an' iron bars. Into the floor flung he  
Be not afraid Burd Ellen he says Thers none come in but me
- 35 Up he has taen his bonny young son An gard wash him wi the milk  
An up has he taen his fair lady Gard row<sup>32</sup> her i the silk
- 36 Cheer up your heart Burd Ellen he says Look nae mair sad nor wae  
For your marriage & your kirkin <sup>33</sup> too Sal baith be in ae day

This magnificent ballad cannot be fully apprehended if one simply reads the words on the page. The pace set by the melody, the relentlessness of the tale, the way it unfolds, the way the language rhymes and reverberates—these require it to be heard rather than read.<sup>34</sup> There are a few oddities in the manuscript that never found their way into print. For example, in the fifth verse, the one about swimming like an eel, the line “wi my bowerwomen” is written in as an alternative above “I learned it in my father’s house” which scans better; both are in the same handwriting in the original manuscript. Anna Gordon apparently sang it both ways. Verse 26, too, has an alternative line penned in above the first one. It looks as if Anna Gordon first sang “That for love has followed me” as part of Lord John’s assertion to his mother that his young page is a squire’s own dearest son and not a pregnant woman. It is a dramatic line, because it is so close to the truth but without revealing Burd Ellen’s sex. The superscript “That I got in the high countree” is more non-committal, a formulaic and forgettable line. There is no way of knowing if Anna Gordon learned it both ways to begin with, or if she composed the better line but felt compelled to include the more conventional one when formally committing the ballad to paper.

The more interesting examples of afterthought lines written in with a superscript in this manuscript, though, come in verses 16 and 18, in that sequence of rapid exchanges between Lord John and Burd Ellen that are like the stichomythia of archaic drama. The lines penned in above the

---

<sup>32</sup> enfold tenderly, wrap around

<sup>33</sup> churching i.e. when a woman is formally re-admitted to the church community after the symbolic defilement of childbirth.

<sup>34</sup> See note 22.

ordinary verse lines construct an alternative persona for the heroine. Lord John has threatened her with feeding better food to his horses and dogs when they reach the castle—white bread—while feeding her only bran. Her reply is feisty and combative; “O no you won’t” she retorts in essence. The alternative lines, written in above, show her deflecting this challenge rather than meeting it—putting herself above – or beyond—it: “food that love is fed upon is neither bread not bran.” It does not matter what I am fed she says, rather than the original cocky comeback, “O I sal eat the good white bread An your dogs sal eat the bran.” That difference is echoed in the incomplete superscript line in verse 18—a line that the transcriber either didn’t quite catch, for it is not metrically complete, or that his aunt Anna Gordon could not quite remember. But there too, Burd Ellen responds to Lord John’s repeated threat of bad treatment—“O my horse shall eat the good white meal An ye shall eat the corn”—by putting herself beyond it: “whateer I eat or meal or corn”—presumably meaning that it does not matter what I eat, whether meal or corn. Again, one does not know when or where these additional lines were learned, nor if Anna Gordon wrote them, whether she ever sang them, or which sense of the heroine was primary for her.

A comparison between the words contained in this, the so-called Jamieson-Brown manuscript of 1782-3 and the version that Mrs. Brown wrote down herself in 1800 for her old playfellow, Alexander Fraser-Tytler, yields a few interesting differences.<sup>35</sup> Beginning with the title, “Lord John and Bird Ellen” as opposed to simply “Burd Ellen,” class differences are greater in the later version and that difference emphasized. “O here am I a gay Ladie That wear scarlet and brown / Yet will I leave my fathers Castle” are the words of the opening verse instead of “leave my father’s *house*.” Or “my horse shall eat the baken meat And you shall eat the corn” rather than “my horse shall eat the *good white meal*.” (italics added) And Lord John’s mother is on the stair, not in her bower, when she hears Burd Ellen’s moan from the stable. That is, she had stairs, and hence more than one floor; in other words, she lived in a great house rather than a rural cottage.

Furthermore, the ending is fuller and more dramatic in the later 1800 version that Anna Brown penned. For when Lord John bursts into the stable

The never a word spake that Ladie / As on the floor she lay  
But hush’d her young son in her arms / And turn’d her face away

---

<sup>35</sup> In the ballad repertoire as edited for the Scottish Text Society, *op. cit.*, this is the difference between “Brown A” and “Brown C.”



later in life! Does the difference record a cultural shift in gender relations? A change in personal circumstances? A late remembered version from her youth?

When Anna Gordon first sang the ballad for her nephew to take down for her father's friend William Tytler, she was an unmarried woman of thirty-five or six, living in her father's house. When she wrote out these verses for Alexander Fraser Tytler seventeen or eighteen years later, she was a married woman, a minister's wife, living in makeshift accommodations in the semi-ruined Falkland Palace in Fife, for the parish never built her husband a proper manse. When I think of her sitting and writing out these verses quietly to herself, it seems appropriate that there would be more consciousness of class and upward mobility and more wallowing in romantic love—subjects more consonant with writing and literacy and heightened private consciousness. One is almost inclined to believe that these verses were set down under the influence of writing itself. Whereas the final verse of the earlier version that she recited or sang, that quick last verse about kirkin' and marriage both being on one day, that verse which returns the couple and their child to the parish through the public ceremonies of baptism and marriage—that verse feels as if it is from an older culture. It re-integrates the individuals into the larger community, as befits a song from an oral tradition, and returns us to a kind of *status quo ante* before the action of the ballad began. This movement, returning the audience to the real workaday world after dwelling in the world of imagination, is characteristic of the final verses of many popular ballads.

We cannot ask Anna Gordon Brown to account for the difference between these versions, and we cannot even be sure that the earlier one is closer to the way she first learned it – although I am suggesting that. But the difference between the two versions demonstrates how a ballad might evolve and change within the tradition in the hands of a skilled and confident practitioner, whose life experiences change the psychological terms of the story for her. It might also be an illustration of what happens to an oral text as it modulates into writing, when the conventions and predispositions of literacy begin to overlay and alter it, when it is culturally updated by a mind no longer just singing it from orally-fashioned memory, but also creating it anew, silently, on the page.

The story of Anna Brown's versions of this ballad end here, but I cannot resist a coda involving the manuscript of the ballad itself. Robert Jamieson composed a few spurious final verses to this great ballad, which he wrote down on the margins of this manuscript sometime around 1799. They clearly come from his leaden pen for the diction is far from that of popular ballad idiom:

- 37 She heavit up her droopin head, O but her face was wan  
And the smile upon her wallowt<sup>37</sup> lips Wad mellit heart o' stane
- 38 "O blissins on thy couth<sup>38</sup>, Lord John! Well's me to see this day!  
For mickle hae I dane and dreed; But well does this repay!
- 39 And O, be to my bairmie, kind, As I hae lovit thee!"—  
Back in his tremblin arms she sank, And cald Death closed her ee!<sup>39</sup>

These verses are so nineteenth-century! The pale, drooping maiden, her sickly blessing on her undoer, her physical weakness—this was the woman who swam halfway across the Clyde, pregnant!—her inevitable death following sexual relations without marriage: these tropes are familiar to us from the melodramatic fictions later in the nineteenth century. This sentimental treacle is only noteworthy in being slightly earlier historically than one would have expected to find it.

Jamieson was proud of his additions, however, and printed them in his *Popular Ballads and Songs* (1806) where he gives the reader entire freedom to accept or reject them.

Whether the catastrophe is rendered more affecting by the three stanzas I have added at the end; or whether I may expect praise or blame for having sacrificed poetical justice to what appeared to me to be natural probability, is what I cannot determine; different readers will probably be of different opinions; and such as prefer the piece in its original state [may pass] over such lines as ...not authentic.<sup>40</sup>

But what does "authentic" mean in a tradition where everything seems so ephemeral, where there are no fixed forms, where the same singer makes and unmakes verses, shuffles and re-shuffles them, and where different singers carry still other variants of a ballad. This is a fluid tradition, which if it lives, is always changing. Child lists ten variants from different sources for the ballad he calls "Child Waters" and the versions from Anna Gordon Brown that I have been comparing here only constitute one of them.

---

<sup>37</sup> withered, faded

<sup>38</sup> amiability, kindness

<sup>39</sup> Robert Jamieson wrote these verses on the manuscript he copied from Robert Eden Scott, EUL Ms Laing III 473, and then published them in his *Popular Ballads and Songs*.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Jamieson, *Popular Ballads and Songs*, 113-14.

And yet there is a reason that Anna Brown's ballads are considered "superior." The ballads that belonged to an oral tradition have certain formal characteristics, and one can distinguish them. The diction is simple, direct, and unsentimental. We move among a few vivid scenes, recounted in the third person or in dialogue. Descriptions are formulaic, as in fairy tales; no judgments are given. Jamieson's maudlin verses are interesting historically, but they are out of keeping with the rhetorical world of Anna Gordon's beautiful ballad. Francis James Child remarks in his essay on "Ballad Poetry" that popular ballads "are extremely difficult to imitate by the highly-civilized modern man, and most of the attempts to reproduce this kind of poetry have been ridiculous failures."<sup>41</sup> It takes a restrained hand and a sensitive ear to write "folk music"—that genre favored by modern singer-songwriters who all copyright their material yet whose compositions will probably prove more ephemeral than the traditional stock for all that they are written down.

Anna Gordon Brown's ballads, on the other hand, imbibed from the deep stream of oral song culture flowing through the northeast of Scotland in the eighteenth century, are still being sung and passed around and enjoyed two hundred years after her death. We must be grateful to her, as Alexander Fraser-Tytler was, for learning them and for having "the taste to cherish them." We all owe a debt, too, to those collectors who wrote them down for us, who preserved for us this ephemera of the past, who made a printed record of an oral tradition, for it allows us a glimpse at the aural art of another age.

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

---

<sup>41</sup> F. J. Child, "Ballad Poetry," *op. cit.*