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The Famous Ballads of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown (Book Chapter)

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When one thinks of the Scottish enlightenment, one imagines men striding up the craggy peak adjoining Holyrood Park in Edinburgh, arguing and gesticulating, or reading one another's works by candle light, or sitting over whiskey or beer in largely male company. But there were, of course, women who participated in the intellectual ferment of that period. Among other things, women were an important part of the traditional song culture that interested Scottish intellectuals as the antiquarian remains of a precious national culture. Indeed, as Burns and Scott knew, women were often crucial in transmitting and preserving this stream of Scotland's literary history. Thus while learned written and printed investigations were pouring forth from the four universities of Scotland, with reverberations all over the western world, Scottish scholars and philosophers were eagerly collecting and sharing whatever records they could find of a traditional culture that was essentially oral and popular and carried forward

largely by working people and occasionally by their own mothers and aunts. This is the story of the most famous of these women, Anna Gordon, whose repertoire of ballads was the first ever to be tapped and written down by antiquarians and literary scholars, at a time when scholars feared that the oral tradition was in danger of disappearing forever.

* * * *

Songs in eighteenth-century Scotland were the treasures of the poor and the casual possessions of the rich. Traditional music in Scotland had a long history of playing and singing going back at least to early medieval times, despite invasion and civil war, and was fully integrated into the culture as a whole. An unusually musical society, Scotland also had, for a number of reasons, a very permeable interface between classical and popular traditions, between “high” and “low” culture, which added to the widespread popularity of traditional music.¹ People of all ranks played and sang and whistled it. There was (and is) an enormous repertoire of traditional music both in the form of songs and tunes, the bulk of the latter usually composed for fiddle and for the pipes. The illiterate carried this fund of pleasure in their memories, to make their work go faster and to enliven the long dark nights. With the advent of print, the cultivated classes collected

broadsides and song books, created musical manuscripts, and foraged for lost examples of songs and instrumental compositions to add to their national heritage.

In the eighteenth century, intellectuals and scholars turned to this unique repertoire as a particular object of study. Significant figures of the Scottish 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.² 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.

Aberdeen, the city of “Bon Accord” as it came to be known, a city with “as many musicians as magistrates” according to a secular song book published in 1662, boasted one of the oldest “sang schools” in the country, established by James VI in an act of 1579, designed to keep alive “the art of music and singing” following the Reformation. The city elders were charged with supporting this school and paying a music master, and it survived late into the eighteenth century providing musical instruction for young people, girls as well as boys. As early as 1698, the town council of Old Aberdeen, the academic enclave to the north of the main part of the city, tried to ban private music teachers (both women and men) from teaching vocal or instrumental music in an attempt to protect the monopoly of the burgh’s St. Nicholas sang school on teaching music.³ The city also had an official, licensed dancing master in residence from the early eighteenth

century on. And on the streets of the city, itinerant ballad singers sang their wares and sold them for pennies.⁴

This was the city into which Anna Gordon was born in 1747. It was one of the largest in Scotland-- a university town with two old and reputable colleges and its own newspaper, *The Aberdeen Journal*. Anna Gordon's father, Thomas Gordon, was a professor of Humanity—Greek and Latin--at King's college. [IMAGE OF KING'S COLLEGE] Her mother was Lilius Forbes, daughter of the satirist and composer William Forbes. Between the Gordons and the Forbes, perhaps the commonest surnames in the area, Anna Gordon was related to half the gentry of the northeast.

We have no direct evidence of how Anna Gordon Brown was educated, but grammar schools for girls existed in eighteenth-century Aberdeen.⁵ Literacy was highly valued in Presbyterian Scotland in the eighteenth century—one had to be able to read and interpret scripture without an intermediary; it was one of the most educated populations in Europe.⁶ Besides, Aberdeen was a college town and one which gave women as well as men access to higher learning, however informally. For example, Patrick Copland's public lectures in mechanics, hydrostatics, electricity, magnetism, and astronomy were attended by women as well as men. Private classes were also available for women in modern languages, classics, and music.⁷ Anna Gordon's sister Elizabeth, who was two years older and with whom she was raised and educated, was said to have had a college education although neither college officially admitted women. It is likely that the Gordon girls both sat in on their father's tutorial sessions, for professors often supplemented their incomes at that time by boarding and/or tutoring students in their homes.⁸ [IMAGE OF ANNA BROWN'S HOME—HUMANITY MANSE] The few letters of Anna Gordon

Brown's that have survived display an educated mind. In one, she shows her familiarity with the epic poet Ossian and refers to his understanding of "grief in joy;" in another, she thanks her correspondent for sending her a copy of *Oberon* by the German poet Christoph Martin Wieland, whether in German or English we do not know.

One wants to know about the extent of Anna Gordon's learning because she was the carrier, the vessel, the transmitter of a large repertoire of magnificent Scottish ballads for which everyone in the English-speaking world is, or ought to be, grateful. She claims to have learned them as a child, from her mother and her maternal aunt and a servant in their natal household, without any recourse later to the ballad collections of Percy or Herd or any other printed versions.⁹ Because her ballads are remarkable for their artistry, their power, and direct simplicity--with many wonderful aesthetic touches--there has been some question about whether to believe her claim that that her ballads were unimproved from outside sources and that she sang them as she learned them. The ballads she carried in her mind are more complete, more thoroughly beautiful, with consistently purer diction, more poignant details and occasional exquisite touches than have been found in other versions of the same ballads. The repertoire as a whole is of such a high caliber, with so little dross, that it shows a highly selective literary sensibility at work. Francis James Child, the great ballad collector of the nineteenth century wrote on the first page of his magisterial compilation: "No Scottish ballads are superior in kind to those recited in the last century by Mrs. Brown, of Falkland."¹⁰

The quality of these ballads of Anna Gordon's—later Mrs. Brown-- was apparent to collectors in her own time

as well. Robert Anderson, a Scottish literary scholar and biographer, interested in old ballads as were many of the Scottish literati in his day, sent transcriptions of several of Anna Gordon Brown's ballads to Bishop Percy, the famous English collector, copied from a manuscript made in 1783 for one of her father's friends, William Tytler. Tytler had been deeply immersed in Scotland's musical past and was the author of the *Dissertation on Scottish Music*. It was at his request that Anna Brown's ballads had been recorded in writing in the first place. His son, Alexander Fraser Tytler, then loaned the manuscript to Robert Anderson who copied parts of it to send to Thomas Percy. His transmission to Percy was accompanied by the following note.

It is remarkable that Mrs Brown...never saw any of the ballads she has transmitted here, either in print or M.S, but learned them all when a child by hearing them sung by her mother and an old maid-servant who had been long in the family, and does not recollect to have heard any of them either sung or said by any one but herself since she was about ten years. She kept them as a little hoard of solitary entertainment, till, a few years ago, she wrote down as many as she could recollect, to oblige the late Mr W. Tytler, and again very late[ly] wrote down 9 ballads more to oblige his son the Professor [Alexander Fraser Tytler].

Mr Jamieson¹¹ visited Mrs Brown, on his return here from Aberdeen, and obtained from her recollection 5 or 6 ballads more and a fragment. If this treasure excite your Lordship's curiosity, I shall transmit to you the titles of the ballads, with the first stanza, and number of stanzas of each. The greater part of them is unknown to the oldest persons in this country. I accompanied Mr Jamieson to my friend Scott's house in the country, for the sake [of] bringing the

collectors to a good understanding.¹² I there took onus [on] me to hint my suspicion of modern manufacture in which Scott has secretly anticipated me. Mrs. B. is fond of ballad poetry, writes verses, and reads every thing in the marvellous way. Yet her character places her above the suspicion of literary imposture, but it is wonderful how she should happen to be the depository of so many curious and valuable ballads.¹³

So we have Anderson sending copies of Anna Brown's ballads to Bishop Percy and going with Robert Jamieson—another admirer of Mrs. Brown—to visit Scott, where they discussed her “hoard of solitary entertainment” and its provenence. Sir Walter Scott then included some of her ballads in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* published a few years later. These literary men, Anna Brown's contemporaries, were struck with the quality of the ballads that she carried in her memory. They noted the literary cast of her mind—that she wrote poetry, read marvelous tales, and so on. But in the end they did not believe that she *consciously* improved the ballads she sang and recited—unlike Percy, for instance, or Matthew Lewis or Walter Scott, who famously *did* tinker with the ballads that they transmitted to the public.

They did not think that Anna Brown would prevaricate when she said she had not changed the ballads since she learned them as a child. The reason they suspected her at all was because it was not the habit at that time of literary scholars who collected and published ballads to simply present them as they were collected. Thomas Percy, “Monk” Lewis and Walter Scott found it irresistible not to “improve” these anonymous narratives which seemed to belong to no one, which were lacking a single, authoritative version, and which were couched in such deceptively simple language. They could not

help but feel that their educated, poetic intuitions were superior to the effusions of the illiterate people from whom these song texts were assumed to derive. Scott and Lewis even edited those versions of Mrs. Brown's texts that they obtained from William Tytler and Robert Jamieson.¹⁴ Confronted with her entire magnificent repertoire, Scott and Anderson naturally assumed that she had rewritten these ballads that she had gathered through oral transmission from singers who had, in turn, learned them aurally.

Another point to remark from Anderson's letter to Percy is the excitement that the discovery of Anna Gordon's ballads prompted in these men of letters. These ballads represented to them what remained of the earliest known poetry in English. For the Scots especially, Scottish ballads were evidence of a continuous literary tradition independent of, aesthetically superior to, and more ancient than that of England.¹⁵ Traditional music and song in Scotland carried national significance for everyone, regardless of class; ballads were part of their literary heritage--their literature was never thought of as a separate category from their song. "The greater part of them is unknown to the oldest persons in this country," Anderson had written of Anna Gordon's ballads, treating them as rediscovered excavated treasures from the literary history of their country. Alexander Fraser Tytler himself had remarked this to Anna Brown in 1800 when she sent him a set of her remembered texts: "They are indeed consummately beautiful and I regard them as a high acquisition to the Stock of our Old National Poetry."¹⁶

In a broader sense, of course, this interest in balladry and the oral traditions they represented were part of a movement that changed the course of literary history. Their beguilingly fresh diction, neither colloquial nor formal, fired an entire generation of

writers and poets for whom Augustan conventions had become stale. The stark emotional content of the ballads and their unadorned clarity of voice swept away the cobwebs of Neo-classicism, opened the floodgates of Romanticism, and pointed the literary endeavor in a whole new direction. It is no simple coincidence that the collection that inaugurated this new literary movement was called the *Lyrical Ballads* and that the diction and prosody of this new way of writing borrowed much from the traditional ballad idiom. Wordsworth and Scott were deeply influenced by the ballad collections published by antiquarians that they read in their youth, and their imaginations were formed by these materials. As Maureen McLane writes, "It is not an overstatement to say that, in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first of the nineteenth centuries, almost every major British literary poet found him- or herself engaging with oral tradition, as well as with the figure of the oral poet, his work, his cultural position, and his method of composition."¹⁷

Treasure troves like Anna Brown's suggested a whole substratum of literary history, a vast underground wellspring of popular poetry, largely untapped, that had never found its way into print, but which still lived on in the partial memories of the old or the illiterate. Some, like Anna Gordon, were lucky enough to hear them sung, although few were able to retain them after hearing them just once or twice. As Anderson had said in his note to Thomas Percy, "It is wonderful how she should happen to be the depository of so many curious and valuable ballads," unable to entirely allay his suspicions about the scope and quality of what Anna Brown remembered.

The truth is that she was in the right place at the right time, an unexpected heir to a rich tradition. The northeast of Scotland is to this day famous for its wealth of ballad

lore, and many ballads have been collected in Aberdeenshire since Anna Brown's time. The Glenbuchat manuscript, for example, transcribed onto paper watermarked 1814, 1815, 1816, and 1817 but only recently edited, contains 68 ballads that were collected, it is thought, by Robert Scott, the minister of the parish.¹⁸ Even a century later, in the early twentieth century, Gavin Greig, a school master in Aberdeenshire, collected and published in eight volumes hundreds of versions of songs and ballads still being sung by people living in that part of Scotland,¹⁹

What is more remarkable is that Anna Gordon had the native intelligence and taste as a girl to want to learn these splendid ballads when they were sung to her. As her father explained to Alexander Fraser Tytler, the son of his old friend, she learned many of them from her mother's sister who had lived her married life on a remote estate near Braemar. Thomas Gordon wrote the following letter to Alexander Fraser Tytler about this source.

An aunt of my children, Mrs. Farquherson now dead, who was married to the proprietor of a small estate near the sources of the Dee, in the division of Aberdeenshire called Braemar, a sequestered, romantic pastoral country; if you ever went to your estate by the way of the castle of that name, you are not such a stranger to it as need a description. This good old woman, I say, spent her days, from the time of her marriage, among the flocks and herds at Allan a quoich, her husband's seat, which, even in the country of Braemar is considered as remarkable for the above circumstances. She has a tenacious memory, which retained all the songs she heard the nurses & old women sing in that neighborhood. In the latter part of her life she lived in Aberdeen, & being maternally fond of my children

when young, she had them much about her, & was much with us. Her songs & tales of chivalry & love were a high entertainment to their young imagination. My youngest daughter Mrs Brown, at Falkland, is blessed with a memory as good as her aunts, & has almost the whole store of her songs lodged in it. In conversation I mentioned them to your Father [i.e. William Tytler], at whose request my Grandson Mr Scott, wrote down a parcel of them as his aunt sung them. Being then but a meer novice in musick, he added in his copy such musical notes as he supposed, notwithstanding their correctness, might give your father some imperfect notion of the airs; or rather lilt, to which they were sung. Both the words & strains were perfectly new to me, as they were to your father, & proceeded upon a system of manners, & in a stile of composition, both words & music, very peculiar, & of which we could recollect nothing similar...Mrs. Farquherson, I am sure, invented nor added nothing herself.²⁰

So Anna Gordon had the interest, the memory, and the access to an unusual repertoire of old ballads while they were still being heard and sung. She was undoubtedly drawn both to the ballad poetry and to the melodies, for elsewhere she mentions the plaintive melodies of Scotch songs. This ballad repertoire seems to have existed in a woman's tradition that crossed class lines, for her father did not know them although he was very musical; i.e. he was an early member of the Aberdeen Musical Society and a flute player. As he wrote to Alexander Fraser Tytler, "the words & strains were perfectly new to me, as they were to your father, & proceeded upon a system of manners, & in a stile of composition, both words & music, very peculiar, & of which we could recollect nothing similar." Anna Gordon's mother and her aunt were well-born, but the maid

servant from their family from whom she reports that she also learned some of her ballads, and the Scots-speaking staff on her aunt's country estate in Allan a quoi-- "nurses & old women"—belonged to the laboring class that seems to have retained the old ballads the longest as a living tradition. Young Anna Gordon absorbed their ballads like a sponge and she did it aurally, probably singing them along with the older women.

The manuscript that was being passed around among Anderson, Percy, Scott, and Jamieson had been penned by Anna Brown's nephew, Robert Scott, who took down the words and music to the ballads as his aunt sung them at William Tytler's request in 1783. That is, Mrs. Brown was not a passive copyist of the ballads that she heard from her relatives and laboring women, but learned them as a singer does, and had them in her memory as songs. And like any ballad singer, she never sang a ballad exactly the same way twice. Some of her ballads were collected from her several times, with a number of years intervening between sessions, and there are significant differences between these versions. Folklorists have spilt a good deal of ink about these differences, and have asked whether they mean that she simply memorized the ballads imperfectly or rather that she "re-created" the ballad each time she sang them by an oral formulaic method, like that of the "singers of tales" of Yugoslavia described by Albert Lord.²¹ In this method, a combination of memory and oral composition, the narrative sequence of verses and some of the ending rhyme words would be remembered; but the exact wording of the lines might vary quite a bit as the singer drew on a more or less conventional stock of phrases and images, improvising as she went along. According to some ballads theorists, that is how ballads in the popular tradition came to be perfected in the first place—by small evolutionary improvements made by each practitioner, then saved by the next

singer and added to, with a concomitant dropping away of the awkward phrases that did not work or were not memorable.²²

In emphasizing that Anna Gordon Brown learned her repertoire as a singer, I am suggesting that Anna Brown did not consciously alter the ballads that attracted her attention in her youth, but that as a singer with an exquisite sensibility she may have unconsciously improved upon what she learned as she sang them. In the present era, tied as we are to print, we associate poetry-making with an exact sequence of words that has been written down rather than with improvisation on a theme. But oral improvisation was an art form very much alive in Anna Gordon Brown's day. Illiterate as well as literate men and women sang ballads on the streets, at feasts and fairs and in taverns, for a few pence and food and drink.²³ Travelling peddlers—who sold ballads door to door in the form of slips, chapbooks, and broadsides—would often pick them up orally and sing them as well, and this was a Europe-wide phenomenon. One of the most popular novels of the early nineteenth century, Corinne, ou, L'Italie by Mme. de Stael, features a heroine famous for her ability to improvise oral poetry who is adored and celebrated by the people of Rome for her spectacular gift.²⁴

We cannot, at this distance, disentangle Mrs. Brown's artistry from that of the generations that had sung these ballads before she heard them. All that can be said with certainty is that the ballad was a significant art form in eighteenth-century Scotland, prized by scholars and intellectuals, and that Anna Gordon's extensive and excellent repertoire of them was the first to be recorded from a living person. When Alexander Fraser Tytler wrote to her in 1800 to urge her to try to remember more ballads, he called 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....”²⁵ This suggests that most of “the present generation”—by which Fraser Tytler meant people of his (and Mrs. Brown’s) own class—no longer had the desire, capacity, or opportunity to learn the old ballads aurally. No one yet thought to tap the memories of laborers or artisans, as ballad collectors were just beginning to do at the turn of the century. People of fashion at this time seem to have been more eager to imitate the tastes and habits of continental Europe than to learn the old ballads that their older relatives or servants might know. As John Ramsay of Ochertyre complained in 1807, irritated at what he considered a hypocritical taste for Italian opera and French cooking among the Scottish *beau monde*: “Few of our modish Ladies can understand, much less relish a Scots song.”²⁶ As for himself, he felt that “Our sweet Scots melodies *married* to Allan Ramsay’s verse, suit our northern *lugs* better” than Italian art songs “warbled” by Madame Catalini “in a celestial strain.”²⁷

Anna Gordon Brown learned her ballads when she was too young to care about what was sophisticated or prized by the fashionable people of her country. Moreover, she came from a musical family with a prior interest in Scottish song. Her maternal grandfather, William Forbes, was a musician and composer and a fierce Scots nationalist, who wrote polemical satires against the Act of Union in the early eighteenth century. With the usual Scottish combined interest in folk and classical musical traditions, he set traditional Scottish tunes in classical baroque forms--such as the sonata--and composed Scottish tunes for the fiddle. When he died in 1740, he left behind an enormous collection of musical instruments and music books and manuscripts. It was his daughters, and a

maid servant who worked in his household, who sang the ballads that Anna Gordon learned as a girl.

Her own father, Thomas Gordon, was a member of the Aberdeen Musical Society, begun in 1748 by a handful of gentlemen who liked to play music together. Thomas Gordon joined the society in 1750 and apparently played the flute. His older brother, George Gordon, professor of Oriental Languages at King's College, Anna Gordon's uncle, joined the society in 1749. Indeed, the Musical Society had many distinguished members: John Gregory, James Beattie, Alexander Gerard; with a few exceptions, most of the members of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society were also members of the Aberdeen Musical Society.²⁸ Two professional musicians were also founding members of the society: Alexander Tait, the organist at St. Paul's Episcopal Chapel and Francis Peacock, the town's dancing master and an adept on the cello and fiddle. In 1762 Peacock published *Fifty Favourite Scotch Airs* for violin, German flute and violoncello, and a harpsichord bass, a volume which included such classic tunes as "Yellow-Haired Laddie," "The Lass of Patty's Mill," and "The Broom Cowdenknows." Thomas Gordon was on the subscription list for this book, along with most of the rest of the Aberdeen Musical Society, and so we know that this songbook must have been one that Anna Gordon grew up with. Although none of the tunes for "her" repertoire of ballads are among these airs in Peacock's collection-- for they are from a different, although related, branch of the vernacular musical tradition—it bespeaks a general interest in music in her family and at least some knowledge of traditional folk song.

Very soon after it was formed, the Aberdeen Musical Society began to offer public concerts that ladies could attend, with tickets available only through members of

the society. It was stipulated that these concerts would have three acts, that some piece of Corelli's music would be played in each part, and that each act would end with a Scotch song. These concerts were very popular and became more frequent as the years passed. Again, it is likely that Anna Gordon and her sisters and their mother would have attended these concerts. The content of a typical program can be inferred from the music owned by the society, a mix of Scottish, English, German, and Italian composers that included Arne, J. C. Bach, Barsanti, Corelli, Geminiani (including his settings of Scots tunes), Handel, Haydn, Oswald, Rameau, and Scarlatti, among others.²⁹ The shape of the public concerts, with their stipulated Corelli and Scotch songs, the mixture of classical music and Scots vernacular music, "high" and "low," is typical of the range of musical taste in eighteenth-century Scotland.

But, of course, the ballads that Anna Brown preserved for us lie outside both of these traditions, the classical idiom and the vernacular songs of eighteenth-century songbooks. They are neither "high" nor "low." In their diction, narrative complexity, and cultural meaning they do not resemble the brief, light Scotch lyric songs that finished each part of the musical society's concerts and whose airs Francis Peacock collected and published in 1762. Although ballads are also in the folk tradition, they come from a different cultural dimension--heroic in their stature, grand in their narrative reach, ballads can be said to resemble nothing so much as abbreviated epics. Their sophisticated narratives, their use of dialogue, their formulaic imagery, dramatic ellipses, plot structure, details, historic allusion, patterns of alliteration, and so forth locate the poetry of ballads in a different, more involved, and more haunting world than Allen Ramsay's or even Robert Burns' songs.

Musically, ballad melodies are often modal and pentatonic, intensified by their narrow compass, and have a stark simplicity compared with the more elaborate and decorative lyric melodies of the classic eighteenth-century Scottish songs. Ballad tunes are made to carry complex narratives and so they are strong and often hypnotic—“lilts” rather than “airs” in Thomas Gordon’s telling distinction. When these plaintive melodies are combined with the powerful verse tales that they carry, the effect can be overwhelmingly intense. As the *pìobaireachd*, or classical music of the bagpipes, is to the light music of the pipes—marches, strathspeys and reels--so the narrative ballads, sometime called the “muckle” or big songs, are to the simpler Scots lyrics. In these latter, lighter songs, the beautiful and sometimes ornate melodies are the chief source of their appeal. But in the ballads, the tunes—or lilts—must carry narratives of great weight and force without distracting from these words; they must provide for their texts a frame and a solid foundation.

Despite our later interest in the melodies of ballads, it was Anna Gordon Brown’s ballad poetry that earned her a place in the history of literature. The nearly three dozen short epic texts that were recorded from her singing memory and celebrated by the scholars and literati of her day established a paradigm for the ballad that has prevailed ever since. As Thomas Pettitt remarked, “[O]ur inherited notions of what a ballad ought to be are based precisely on...the models furnished by Mrs. Brown in particular.”³⁰ Their literary qualities have been catalogued and enumerated by ballad scholars from Gerould to Buchan³¹, beginning with the impersonal, Olympian point of view characteristic of the epic. There is no psychologizing, no individual subjectivity, no interiority developed for any of the characters and almost no explicit judgment on the part of the narrator. This

impassive exposition alternates with the formulaic and often repetitive dialogue of the characters; the frequent use of incremental repetition creates a rhythm of hypnotic crescendos.

What happens passes in front of our eyes like a silent movie, one scene dissolving into the next without comment or summary. This narrative movement from one scene to another in ballads has been felicitously called “leaping and lingering”—for ballad narratives leap over great swathes of time (seven years at a time) and enormous spaces (oceans and continents) in order to linger in the complications of a single scene. These scenes, which constitute the dramatic cruxes of the ballad, generally occur more than halfway through the dramatic action, like the third or fourth act in a play whose opening acts are given in synopsis but for which we are not present. In one ballad, this central scene begins when a woman’s sweetheart returns from sea on her wedding day and tests her fidelity to him; in another, a woman knocks on her lover’s door with their baby in her arms on a windy night and is not answered by him—he is sleeping—but by his mother, who does not let her in. The movement in ballads from one scene to another is swift and unexplained, as it happens in dreams; one finds oneself in vivid and powerful scenes without it mattering how one got there.

The diction of ballads is simple and stately, the diction of oral poetry. Other features of oral poetry are the frequent use of incremental repetition, formulaic imagery (“gray steed and the brown”; “skin as white as milk”), internal assonance as well as end rhymes, quatrains with a predictable rhyme scheme (such as abcb), and extensive alliteration, mixing the music of language with the music of the melody. There are supernatural portents and signs--rings that change color, talking birds, ghosts, and fairies

and an altogether pre-Christian attitude towards magic and the hypernormal. These are the features of Anna Brown's ballads. Whether they are more fully developed linguistic features of the ballads from the northeast of Scotland or elements that Anna Brown especially remembered or elaborated, we will never know; but in our own day, they are known as characteristics of the "classic" ballad.

What follows is a transcription of one of the most beautiful of Anna Gordon Brown's ballads, taken down from her singing or recitation by her nephew, Robert Scott, in 1783.³² [IMAGE OF THE FIRST PAGE OF THE MANUSCRIPT?] 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 stately way it unfolds, the way the language rhymes and reverberates—these require it to be heard rather than read. To hear it sung, go to [URL XXX](#).

To begin with the title that Anna Brown gives it, "Burd Ellen": John Jamieson, antiquarian and philologist, and the compiler of the first *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* in 1808, wrote that "[b]urd is still used as an appellation of complacency by superiors to women of lower degree."³³ So the complete title, "Lord John and Burd Ellen" may imply a difference of class between the two main characters.

Burd Ellen

- 1 I warn ye all ye gay ladies That wear scarlet an brown
That ye dinna leave your father's house To follow young men frae town.
- 2 O here am I a lady gay That wears scarlet & brown
Yet I will leave my fathers house An follow Lord John frae the town³⁴
- 3 Lord John stood in his stable door Said he was bound to ride
Burd Ellen stood in her bow'r door Said she'd rin by his side.

- 4 He's pitten on his cork-heal'd shoon³⁵ An fast awa' rade he
She's clade hersel in page array An after him ran she
- 5 Till they came till a wan³⁶ water An folks do ca it Clyde
Then he's lookit oer his left shoulder Says Lady can ye wid.³⁷
- 6 O I learn't it i my father house [superscript: wi my bowerwomen] I learn't it for
my weal
Whenever I came to a wan water To swim like any 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
An sighin' says that gay lady I've wet my gouden girdle
- 9 The nextin stap the lady stappit The water came till her pap³⁸
An the bairn that was in her two sides For caul³⁹ began 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' Clydes water There was a yeard fast stane⁴⁰
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 & 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 sall eat the good white meal An ye sall eat the corn
Then will ye curse the heavy hour That ever your love was born.
- 18 O I sall eat the good white meal An your horse sall 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
But a fairer Lady than them a' At the manger stood alane⁴¹
- 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 an 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
O 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 The words to hear frae thee
He is a squires ae 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'⁴²
For the pain that strikes me thro my sides Full soon will gar me fa
- 30 She's lean'd her back against the wall 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 in the silence o the night She heard fair Ellens moan
- 32 Won up won up my son She says Go se how a 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 struck 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 nane 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 row⁴³ her i the silk

36 Cheer up your heart Burd Ellen he says Look nae mair sad nor wae
For your marriage & your kirkin⁴⁴ too Sal baith be in ae day

This elaborate ballad happens in five scenes of varying length and complexity. The first two verses suggest that we are with one of the principals, a “gay” lady—that is, a spirited and lively lady—who wears both scarlet and brown—that is, expensive clothes dyed with rare scarlet dyes as well as homespun. But the unusual first person is dropped after these verses and the ballad resumes the more common third person narrative. Lord John is standing in his stable door and he announces that he is about to leave, to ride away; Burd Ellen, from her bower door, says she will run by his side. Then he puts on cork-heeled shoes--expensive shoes not meant for walking any distance out of doors--and she puts on page's clothes and runs after him. That is all we know about the principals at the outset: she is determined to go with him, on foot if need be.

The next scene occurs when they come to the Clyde river. Lord John looks over his left shoulder, the negative side, and asks if she can wade across. She says that she can swim. But when she tests the water, she finds it is very deep and very cold, and the child that she is pregnant with begins to quake within her. This is the first that we learn of her condition. Then she complains to her unborn child that its father cares little for either of them; but Lord John turns his horse around and takes her up behind him. The situation

has gotten denser: a determined pregnant woman of the lower orders is apparently chasing after her lover who is trying to desert her.

She then asks him where they are going and he points to a castle shining in the distance and tells her that there is a lady in that castle who will keep them asunder. One does not know if the dangerous and mysterious lady is a prior wife, a witch, or a relative. There follows a sequence of rapid exchanges between Lord John and burd Ellen that are like the stichomythia of archaic drama. Lord John threatens her that better food will be fed to his horses and dogs when they reach the castle—white bread—while she will only be fed bran. Her reply is feisty and combative: “O I sal eat the good white bread An your dogs sal eat the bran.” Lord John repeats his threat of bad treatment: “O my horse shall eat the good white meal An ye shall eat the corn” and she makes another cocky comeback. Her replies establish her pluck and hopefulness.

The third and most elaborate sequence begins when they arrive at the castle. Four and twenty gay ladies welcome Lord John while Burd Ellen, although more beautiful than any of them, takes his horse to the stable in the guise of his page. After the bells are rung and the mass is sung—a refrain line common to ballads from this part of Scotland—everyone goes in to eat and burd Ellen is seated with the footmen. There Lord John urges her to eat white bread and to drink beer or wine, in direct antithesis to his earlier threat of bad food, but she tells him her heart is too full of fear and pain to be able to eat anything. Lord John’s wise mother speaks up and asks where he found his page, whose color keeps changing and who looks so sad; “he’s liker a woman big wi bairn,” she says, than a young lord’s page boy. Lord John protests that he is the precious only son of a squire who

follows him out of love. Then he commands burd Ellen to feed his horse, and she obeys him with alacrity.

The fourth scene is in the stable, where Ellen enjoins the horses to move over and make room for her against the wall, for she is in great pain. And there she delivers her child, among the great horses' feet, as the ballad describes it, leaving the listener with the image of a tender newborn baby lying dangerously close to the huge hooves of horses in a stall.

Lord John's mother hears Ellen's groans in childbirth and the baby's cry and sends her son to investigate what is happening in the stable. Her instruction to him implies her knowledge and approval of the situation, contradicting Lord John's earlier warning that the lady of the castle would "sunder" them. He races down to the stable, without stopping to put on his shoes and socks, and kicks open the iron door, calling out to burd Ellen not to be afraid. Then he takes his son and washes him in milk and takes his fair lady and enfolds her in silk—formulaic phrases implying loving, lapping luxury—and assures her that he will marry her on the next day that she goes into church, probably the same day that they christen the child.

Like many of Anna Brown's ballads, this one ends triumphantly with a woman getting what she wants despite serious obstacles. A great deal is left to the imagination: how these two met and became lovers in the first place; what led to Lord John's leaving her; why burd Ellen is so stubborn in sticking with him--whether the hope of a highborn marriage or because she loves him—none of that is spelled out. We have no idea what any of the principals feels until the final scene in which Lord John kicks open the stable door and takes up his newborn son to wash him in milk. Similarly, we do not know why

he assumes that his mother will object to the match or why he threatens that burd Ellen will be mistreated in the castle. The listener can conjecture many different motivations, evolving from many different scenarios, but all of it is simply conjecture. We fill in these details as we hear the ballad, based on our own hopes and fears and expectations, and the blankness of the ballad can accommodate many different fantasies. This is one of the reasons these tale have lasted so long; their flexibility enables many differently satisfying projections. As discussion following ballads always demonstrate, people imagine the scenes differently, conjuring up images in different places in the song and making different assumptions about the histories of the characters and their reasons for behaving as they do. There is a great deal of room for varying interpretations.

In a different genre, in the novel for example, the thoughts and feelings of the three main characters would be spelled out, as well as the scenery and weather, in a fully contextualized realistic account. But the ballad form gives only the barest outline of a story of attempted betrayal and the triumph of fidelity. It might be constructed by the listener as the story of a brave woman who did not give up and who, in the end, got what she wanted. Some have heard this ballad as the story of a cruelly exploitative and cowardly man; still others are struck by the story of the wise old mother who wants her line perpetuated and who therefore accepts a daughter-in-law of lower degree once she has proven fertile. And these are only some of the possibilities. This open-endedness, this capacity of the ballad narratives to be adapted to many different storylines, has led to their not infrequent use over the centuries as plots for plays, prose fiction and, in our own day, graphic novels.

Ballads, of course, were still being sung in the fields and on the streets of England and Scotland when the novel was in its infancy. They are one of the oldest literary forms, probably dating from the middle ages, a recent relative of the oral epic, and they provided stories for the imagination to dwell on long before more modern forms of literary fiction. The ballad has been defined as a folk tale set to music—and if a tale is a short story with the mental proportions of an epic, then ballads are tales.

Ballads are everywhere in the cultural landscape of eighteenth-century England once we start looking for them. One sees visual depictions of ballad singers and ballad sellers in the works of Hogarth and other print-makers. [2 IMAGES OF BALLAD SINGERS—ONE BEING “THE ENRAGED MUJSICAN”] Ballads are sung on the pages of fiction by Tobias Smollet, Oliver Goldsmith, Mrs. Griffith, Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, Walter Scott, and Elizabeth Gaskell. They are the reading matter of Cathy and Hareton in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. Ballad singers appear in works by Eliza Haywood, Frances Burney and, of course, Thomas Hardy. They are referred to casually in the seventeenth-century letters of Dorothy Osborne and the eighteenth-century letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mrs. Delany, Elizabeth Montagu, and Amelia Opie. The seeds of much of Walter Scott’s fiction and narrative verse can be found in the ballads that he collected for a delighted readership in 1802-03. Plays like Nicholas Rowe’s *Jane Shore* (1714) and John Home’s *Douglas* (1756) are based on ballads. Many eighteenth-century writers wrote ballads—among them, Swift, Prior, Smollett, Wordsworth, and Southey. Similarly, it was a form to which a number of aristocratic and middle-class Scotswomen turned their hands: Lady Grisell Baillie, Alison Rutherford

Cockburn, Susanna Blamire, Lady Anne Barnard, and most famous of all, Caroline, Baroness Nairne.⁴⁵

Elsewhere I have written about the gendering of songs and ballads in eighteenth-century Scotland and how the association of women with the preservation and transmission of traditional ballads intensified the nationalistic meaning of this art form.⁴⁶ Anna Gordon, or Mrs. Brown of Falkland as she has been called after Child's usage, is perhaps the most important exemplar of this association. Although our print-conscious age hardly regards the ballad with literary interest any longer, it was of intense interest in the eighteenth century as a record of the earliest known vernacular poetry. In Scotland in particular, for all the reasons of national specificity and cultural interest that I have indicated, ballads were of interest to scholars and antiquaries and ordinary people alike. That the ballad tradition was a women's tradition—in the sense that it was carried in a female line, remembered by women and taught by women to other women and girls—has not been sufficiently emphasized. This ancient poetic form, at least as it was preserved in living tradition in Scotland until the eighteenth century, appears to have been maintained by the musical and poetic talents of women from all ranks of life.⁴⁷ Then as now, cultural historians told one another the story of Anna Gordon Brown, who became the conduit for our common literary and musical heritage—our “best” ballads in English—in the golden age of balladry.

¹ See David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

² 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 the Music of Scotland* (The Bannatyne Club: Edinburgh, 1838), pp. 2-3.

³ Daune, *Melodies*, pp. 20-27.

⁴ The most famous of these, Charles Leslie, aka “Mussel-Mou’d Charlie,” has been written about by Mary Ellen Brown, “The Street Laureate of Aberdeen: Charles Leslie, alias Musle Mou’d Charlie, 1677-1782,” in *Narrative Folksong: New Directions*, eds. Carol Edwards and Kathleen Manley (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 362-378; Ian A. Olson and John Morris, “Mussel-Mou’d Charlie’s (Charles Leslie) 1745 Song: ‘McLeod’s Defeat at Inverury,’” *Aberdeen University Review* 58 (204) (2000), pp. 317-331.

⁵ As early as 1642, Catherine Forbes, Lady Rothiemay, who reports that she had been bred and educated in Aberdeen, left a bequest of £1000 Scots to support a schoolmistress to teach young women to “write and so and any other art or science whair of they can be capable.” Quoted in Shona Vance, “Schooling the People,” in *Aberdeen Before 1800 A New History* ed. Patricia Dennison, David Ditchburn and Michael Lynch (Tuckwell Press, East Lothian, 2002), pp. 309-26, at p. 319.

⁶ For an account of highly educated Scotswomen of Anna Gordon’s time or a little earlier, see Katharine Glover’s account of Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun’s sisters and daughters in “The Female Mind: Scottish Enlightenment Femininity and the World of Letters,” *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 25 (1) (2005), pp. 1-20.

⁷ John Reid, “Late Eighteenth-Century Adult Education in the Sciences at Aberdeen: the Natural Philosophy Classes of Professor Patrick Copland” in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, eds. Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (Aberdeen University Press, 1987), pp. 168-79, esp. p. 170.

⁸ Thomas Gordon advertised for lodgers in 1740.

⁹ Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* was published in 1765 and David Herd’s *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* was first published in 1769. Anna Gordon Brown claims to have learned her ballads a good decade earlier than these.

¹⁰ “Advertisement to Part I” of Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1962). (Originally published in 1883.)

¹¹ Robert Jamieson, *Popular Ballads and Songs from Tradition, Manuscripts, and Scarce Editions*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1806).

¹² Both Robert Jamieson and Sir Walter Scott were at this time collecting ballads for literary anthologies.

¹³ *The Correspondence of Thomas Percy & Robert Anderson*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), at pp. 42-43.

¹⁴ Scott obtained some of Anna Gordon Brown’s ballads from Alexander Fraser Tytler and some from Robert Jamieson. He shared them with Matthew Lewis, who re-wrote several, including “Clark Colven” (Child 42 p. 371), “King Henry” (Child 32 p. 297) retitled “Courteous King James,” and “Willie’s Lady” (Child 6 p. 81). Francis James Child notes in the headnotes to each ballad which of Anna Gordon’s ballads appear in Lewis’ 1801 *Tales of Wonder* or Scott’s 1802-3 *Minstrelsy*.

¹⁵ For another instance of Scottish intellectuals’ interest in old ballads, see Neil R. Grobman, “David Hume and the Earliest Scientific Methodology for Collecting Balladry,” *Western Folklore* 34 (1) (1975), pp. 16-31; Leith Davis, “At ‘sang about’: Scottish song and the challenge to British culture,” in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, eds. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 188-203.

¹⁶ Alexander Fraser Tytler from his estate of Woodhouselee, April 28, 1800; NLS Acc 3639 ff.244-45.

¹⁷ Maureen McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), at pp. 212-213.

¹⁸ Robert Scott, *The Glenbuchat Ballads*, eds. David Buchan and James Moreira (University Press of Mississippi in association with the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2007), pp. xxii-xxiii.

¹⁹ *The Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection*, eds. Patrick Shuldham-Shaw and Emily B. Lyle, vols. 1-8 (Aberdeen and Edinburgh: Aberdeen University Press and Mercat Press, 1981-2002).

²⁰ NLS, Acc. 3640. Letter dated 19 January, 1793.

²¹ Bertrand Bronson, “Mrs. Brown and the Ballad,” in *The Ballad As Song (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969)*, pp. 64-78; David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1997), pp. 51-73; Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

²² The clearest exposition of this position is probably still Cecil Sharp, *English folk-song, some conclusions* (London: Simpkin, 1907).

²³ See *Memoirs of Mary Saxby, a Female Vagrant*, Chelsea: n.d. for the story of an eighteenth-century woman, the daughter of a silk weaver, who was a ballad-singer in many parts of England.

²⁴ *Corinne, ou L’Italie* was published in 1807 and translated into English in 1808—during Anna Brown’s lifetime. For literary treatments of this phenomenon, see Erik Simpson, *Literary Minstrelsy, 1770-1830: minstrels and improvisers in British, Irish, and American literature* (Basingstoke, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

²⁵ Alexander Fraser Tytler from his estate of Woodhouselee, April 28, 1800; NLS Acc 3639 ff. 244-45.

²⁶ *Letters of John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, 1799-1812*, ed. Barbara L. H. Horn (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable Ltd., 1966), at p. 204.

²⁷ *Letters of Ramsay*, at p. 204.. “Lugs” means “ears” in Scots. Madame Catalini is Angelica Catalini, 1780-1849.

²⁸ Henry George Farmer, *Music Making in the Olden Days: The Story of the Aberdeen Concerts 1748-1801* (Leipzig, London, and New York: Peters Hinrichsen Ltd., 1950), p. 91. The initial rules required members to pay a crown per annum to defray the expenses of coal and candles and other necessaries.

²⁹ Farmer, *Music Making*, *passim* and especially Appendix II, musical inventories. For further information about the musical interests of Aberdeen in the eighteenth century, see the catalogue of the *Aberdeen Musical Circulating Library An Extensive Collection of Vocal and Instrumental Music*, “lent out by the year, half-year, or quarter,” and published by A. Brown at Homer’s-Head, Aberdeen, 1798.

³⁰ Thomas Pettitt, “Mrs. Brown’s ‘Lass of Roch Royal’ and the Golden Age of Balladry,” in *Jahrbuch für Volksleidforschung*, 29. Jahrg. (1984), pp. 13-31, at p. 13. Pettitt comments on the homogeneity and essential Scottishness of Mrs. Brown repertoire and suggests the influence of her concept of “the ballad” on subsequent collectors (pp. 17-18).

³¹ Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957); David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London and Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972).

³² This is an exact transcription of Ms Laing III 473 in the Edinburgh University Library.

³³ John Jamieson, *The Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 2 vols. 1808.

³⁴ This first person narrative stance is very unusual in a ballad.

³⁵ Cork-heeled shoes are made for show and not for wear. They are a symbolic sign of wealth.

³⁶ dark

³⁷ wade

³⁸ breast

³⁹ cold

⁴⁰ stone stuck in the mud

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² To move aside in order to make room/ make a space around me near the wall

⁴³ enfold tenderly, wrap around

⁴⁴ Churching, i.e. when a woman is formally re-admitted to the church community after the symbolic defilement of childbirth.

⁴⁵ Sarah Tytler and J. L. Watson, *The Songstresses of Scotland* (London: Strahan & Co., 1871).

⁴⁶ Ruth Perry, “‘The Finest Ballads’: Women’s Oral Traditions in Eighteenth-Century Scotland,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32 (2) (2008), pp. 81-97.

⁴⁷ For compelling evidence that balladry is a woman’s tradition in Scotland, see Mary Ellen Brown, “Old Singing Women and the Canons of Scottish Balladry and Song,” in *A History of Scottish Women’s Writing*, eds. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 44-57.