

WHAT TO DO WITH ... FOLKLORE? WHAT TO DO ... WITH BALLADS? REVISITING “MRS BROWN OF FALKLAND”

SIGRID RIEUWERTS

With one of the oldest and most important ballad repertoires in English now published, I would like to revisit the singer Mrs Brown of Falkland (1747-1810) and discuss what is involved in studying ballads in general and her ballads in particular.

Keywords: *ballads, research methodology, orality, Mrs Brown of Falkland.*

Z enim najstarejših in najpomembnejših doslej izdanih angleških baladnih repertoarjev bi se rada vnovič vrnila k pevki gospe Brownovi s Falklanda (1747–1810) in razpravljala o tem, kaj vključuje študij balad na splošno in kaj v posameznostih.

Ključne besede: *balade, raziskovalna metodologija, ustnost, gospa Brown iz Falklanda.*

For generations “Mrs Brown of Falkland” has been a household name in ballad studies. In the canon of traditional ballads in the English language, namely *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898), her repertoire has been given pride of place and indeed, the editor Francis J. Child claims that “no Scottish ballads are superior in kind to those recited [. . .] by Mrs Brown, of Falkland” (Child 1882–98, I.: vii–viii). Given her prime position in Scotland’s oral tradition, however, it is surprising that so little is known about her and the meaning she ascribes to her ballads. Until Child “discovered” this star singer more than two generations after her death, her ballads were only known through the works of eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarians and literary editors, namely Robert Jamieson and Sir Walter Scott.

On the occasion of the bicentenary of her death, we will now be revisiting Mrs Brown of Falkland and assess her achievements. Since I have offered a comprehensive introduction to her life and songs as well as a critical evaluation of her ballads in light of today’s thinking on orality and literacy in my recent publication of her ballads (Rieuwerts, ed. 2011),¹ I would now like to focus on the story behind the story and address the questions posed by the Institute of Ethnomusicology ZRC SAZU in Ljubljana, namely “What to do with . . . folklore? What to do with . . . ballads?”

The ballad is one of the most versatile and ubiquitous genres. It takes the form of a dance or a song, a poem or an internet posting. It is a genre that takes its *Gestalt* from its life setting (*Sitz im Leben*), its book setting (*Sitz im Buch*) or, more recently, its appearance in the digital world (*Sitz im Internet*). While the ballad as poetry is often known only in one form as created by one author or composer, the ballad as song thrives on

¹ All Brown numbers in the text refer to the ballads in this edition.

variation. It is adopted and adapted, orally transmitted or revived from print; it is for one and for all and much more. In short, it is one of the most difficult genres to understand. To Goethe, the ballad genre was the “primordial egg” (see Braungart 1996), the beginning and essence of all other genres and as such, the ballad as a genre can best be described as dramatic, poetic and narrative voices in dialogue. The dominant voice is often determined by the nature of the story, the ability of the author/performer and the imagined audience/readership, the performance situation as well as its cultural setting (for a more detailed discussion see Rieuwerts 2006).

All this must be borne in mind when studying traditional ballads on paper. It is certainly not doing justice to the genre when only one particular version of one specific ballad is studied in isolation or when the living context is not taken into account. After all, traditional ballads only come in the plural – if this is not or never was the case for one specific ballad, then we might not be talking about a traditional ballad (the poetry of the people) but of a literary ballad or street ballad (the poetry of art). Traditional ballads are shaped and reshaped and it is essential to capture the dynamic nature of the genre, its multiplicity and continuous adaptations.

Thus, what are we to do with ballads and where shall we begin? In order to capture the multiplicity of the ballad genre I find three approaches especially beneficial: (1) the study of a particular ballad in all its forms; (2) the study of the songs and ballads of one particular region; and (3) the study of the song and ballad repertoire of one particular singer. In the remainder of this paper – and as a homage to Mrs Brown of Falkland on the occasion of the bicentenary of her death in 1810 – I would like to adopt the third approach and, by drawing on my recent work on the publication of her ballads, discuss one of the oldest and most important repertoires of English and Scottish traditional ballads, namely that of Anna Gordon, Mrs Brown of Falkland (1747–1810).

Although Mrs Brown spent much of her married life at the Old Palace of Falkland (thus the name: Mrs Brown of *Falkland*), she was born on 24 August 1747 in Old Aberdeen. Her name appears as Anne [Anna] Gordon, daughter of Thomas Gordon and Lillias Forbes in the church records of Old Machar. Her father was a professor at the university and thus she grew up in comfortable circumstances, surrounded by educated men. At the age of forty-one she married Andrew Brown, a minister at Falkland, and moved to Fife. After her husband’s death in 1805, she returned to Old Aberdeen where she died on 11 July 1810. All this information can easily be obtained from the official records. But these facts are just the bare bones and it is far more difficult to visualize Mrs Brown as a living person. What for example was her life like before she moved to Falkland? How well was she educated? What was her social role and her self-esteem as an eighteenth-century woman like? What was the socio-cultural setting of her ballads? These are questions more difficult to answer for where do we turn for information? Only occasionally can we catch glimpses through letters from or about her or her family and friends. One such letter is from her father Thomas Gordon to

the son of an old friend, namely Alexander Fraser Tytler in response to a request for information on an old manuscript of songs:

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, at whose request, my Grandson Mr Scott, wrote down a parcel of them as his aunt sung them. (Rieuwerts 2011, 27)

This short bit of information given by her father is invaluable for ballad scholars. We not only learn about Mrs Brown and her place in tradition (she has an excellent memory and remembers almost all the ballads her aunt knew), but also about the making of her ballad manuscript containing both words and music (known as Brown B). On behalf of his friend William Tytler, Thomas Gordon had instructed his daughter to sing them and his grandson to write them down. This was their second attempt, an earlier manuscript contained more texts but no music. This earlier manuscript is no longer extant but a “faithful transcript” of it was made by Robert Jamieson – this is known as Brown A. Just as the two recordings of Mrs Brown’s Ballads, Brown B and the now lost original source of Brown A, were done at the request of the Tytler family, a third manuscript (Brown C) was also created for them: Asked for more ballads by Alexander Fraser Tytler, Mrs Brown wrote down nine ballads with airs for Alexander Fraser Tytler. The music, however, is no longer to be found. Apart from these song and ballad manuscripts, a few of her ballads can be found in letters to Robert Jamieson or in his publication *The Popular Ballads* (1806).

Jamieson was fortunate enough to meet Mrs Brown and record from her own singing. We, however, have no direct access to her ballad performances – the ballads that appear on paper in the Brown manuscripts are mediated. They might be faithful recordings by Jamieson and others, yet they can no longer claim to be the living thing, despite the fact that music is set alongside the words in Brown B and C (now lost). The ballads do not tell their own story – we are not told who sang them (besides Mrs Brown) in what way and on what occasion. The young Tytler must have been just as curious as we are and thus Thomas Gordon goes to great lengths to explain in explaining the sources and the cultural setting of those ballads that had lost their immediate living context by being put on paper. The source of Mrs Brown’s ballads, he claims, is his sister-in-law who in turn had them from “the nurses & old women” in one of the most romantic areas in the Scottish Highlands:

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 [. . .]. This good woman, I say, spent her days from the time of her marriage, among flocks & herds at Allanaquoich her husband’s seat, which, even in the country of Braemar is considered as remarkable for

the above circumstances. She had a tenacious memory, which retained all the songs she had heard the nurses & old women sing in that neighbourhood. 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 imaginations. (Rieuwerts 2011, 27)

It is important to note that Professor Gordon suggests the importance of place. His wife's sister, he explains, was only a temporary resident in this remote part of Upper Deeside. Therefore the songs she had learned from the local women were not originally part of her world nor of his when she moved to Aberdeen. Images of the wild strains of the noble savage come to mind, of pre-civilized forms of poetic expression. To educated men like him and his friend Tytler it was like discovering the music of an unknown tribe in a foreign country.

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. (Rieuwerts 2011, 27)

There might have been another reason as to why these "peculiar" ballads sounded so unfamiliar. The world of eighteenth-century Scotland was clearly divided along gender lines. Only the men were surprised, not however the women living under the same roof. Indeed, it is remarkable that only women are credited with the transmission of these ballads. "I learned them all when a child by hearing them sung by the lady you mentioned (Mrs Farquharson), by my own mother, and an old maid servant that had been long in the family" Mrs Brown explains to Tytler (Rieuwerts 2011, 85). Gender obviously plays a major role in oral tradition and Frances James Child, the man who edited *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* readily acknowledged that "women . . . have been the chief preservers of ballad-poetry" (Child 1873; see also Rieuwerts 2002).

Although we are told that these "tales of chivalry & love" were sung by the nurses and old women in a remote place in the Scottish highlands, we do not learn anything about the ballads' socio-cultural setting, i.e. their *Sitz im Leben*. Were they sung "among flocks & herds" or around the fire or indeed, to amuse the children just as Mrs Farquharson performed them for her nieces as "high entertainment to their young imaginations." If some *Märchen* of the Grimm Brothers cannot really be deemed suitable for a very young audience, certainly the ballads Mrs Brown heard from her aunt are even less so. Those were "stories of family opposition, stories of the other love and stories of murder and revenge" (Buchan 1972: 84), full of violence and the supernatural. Moreover, the longer ballads have more than 50 verses with often "three emotionally interacting characters" with a number of "narrative agents" (like page-boys or birds) – in short, they would be taxing a young audiences' interest and understanding to the extreme.

Therefore, it is more than likely that one and the same ballad appeared in one *Gestalt* “among flocks & herds” in a country setting and in a different *gestalt* in Anna Gordon’s nursery in the city of Old Aberdeen. There is no way of knowing, however, for no other records of those singers are extant. Even Mrs Brown is not sure what the “correct” version of her ballads would look like: “I do not pretend to say that these Ballads are Correct in any way as they are written down entirely from recollection; for I never saw one of them in print or manuscript” (Rieuwerts 2011, 61). This is not surprising since a ballad in living tradition has no “correct” form – it follows the “inexorable law of perpetual mutation” (Motherwell x). If the story is to be transmitted “correctly” over time and space, the *Gestalt* of a text cannot remain the same – not least because its socio-cultural setting is unlikely to remain the same. A ballad in living tradition will be adapted to meet new aesthetic and pragmatic demands and address differing cultural concerns. Thus, there is no single “correct” version and just as multiplicity is at the very heart of a modern concept of culture, variation is also the hall-mark of traditional narratives (see Rieuwerts 2007).

When Mrs Brown worries about her ballads not being “correct”, she is worried about her memory failing her for she states that she had learned all her ballads before she was twelve years old (Jamieson 1806, I.: ix). Obviously she saw herself as being the repository of a long-lost tradition – as the guardian of her aunt’s ballads, not as a ballad singer in her own right. And yet, this is exactly what she was: one of the most important tradition bearers in Scotland. Since her ballads came to be recorded several times, a number of ballads exist in more than one version. Brown 12 (Child 76: “Lass of Roch Royal”) is a good example: in Brown A the ballad is called “Fair Anny” and in Brown C “Love Gregor”. The two ballad versions differ considerably and an “incorrect” recollection cannot possibly be the cause for the differences (for a detailed discussion see Bronson 1969; Buchan 1972; Fowler 1958; Pettitt 1984). Here is the ending of Mrs Brown’s two versions for comparison (Rieuwerts 2011, 164–167). In the story, Lord Gregor has just learned that his lover Fair Annie tried to see him but was turned away:

BROWN A

25. O quickly quickly raise he up
 An fast ran to the stran
 An there he saw her fair Anny
 Was sailin frae the lan
26. An heigh Anny! & hou’ Anny!
 O Anny speak to me!
 But ay the louder that he cried Anny
 The louder roar’d the sea

BROWN C

21. O! he has gane down to yond shore
 side
 As fast as he could fare
 He saw fair Annie in her boat
 But the wind it toss’d her sair
22. And hey Annie and how Annie
 O! Annie winna ye bide
 But ay the mair that he cried Annie
 The braider grew the tide

Both endings of the story about Fair Annie and Love Gregor are cast in the traditional ballad mode and it is likely that Mrs Brown knew a number of versions and collated them – thus arriving at two different versions. Given the melodramatic ending of the earlier version and its better suitability to a young audience, I would like to suggest that this is closer to the ballad she originally heard than the later one. The Brown A version is very much more in line with her repertoire as a whole, as Thomas Pettitt observes:

With few exceptions Mrs. Brown's ballads are of the romantic, frequently sentimental type, with the thwarting or destruction of true love, provoking adventures and confrontations which reveal the resourcefulness of hero and heroine, the machinations of the villain, and which culminate in dramatic resolution or pathetic tragedy. (Pettitt 1984: 17)

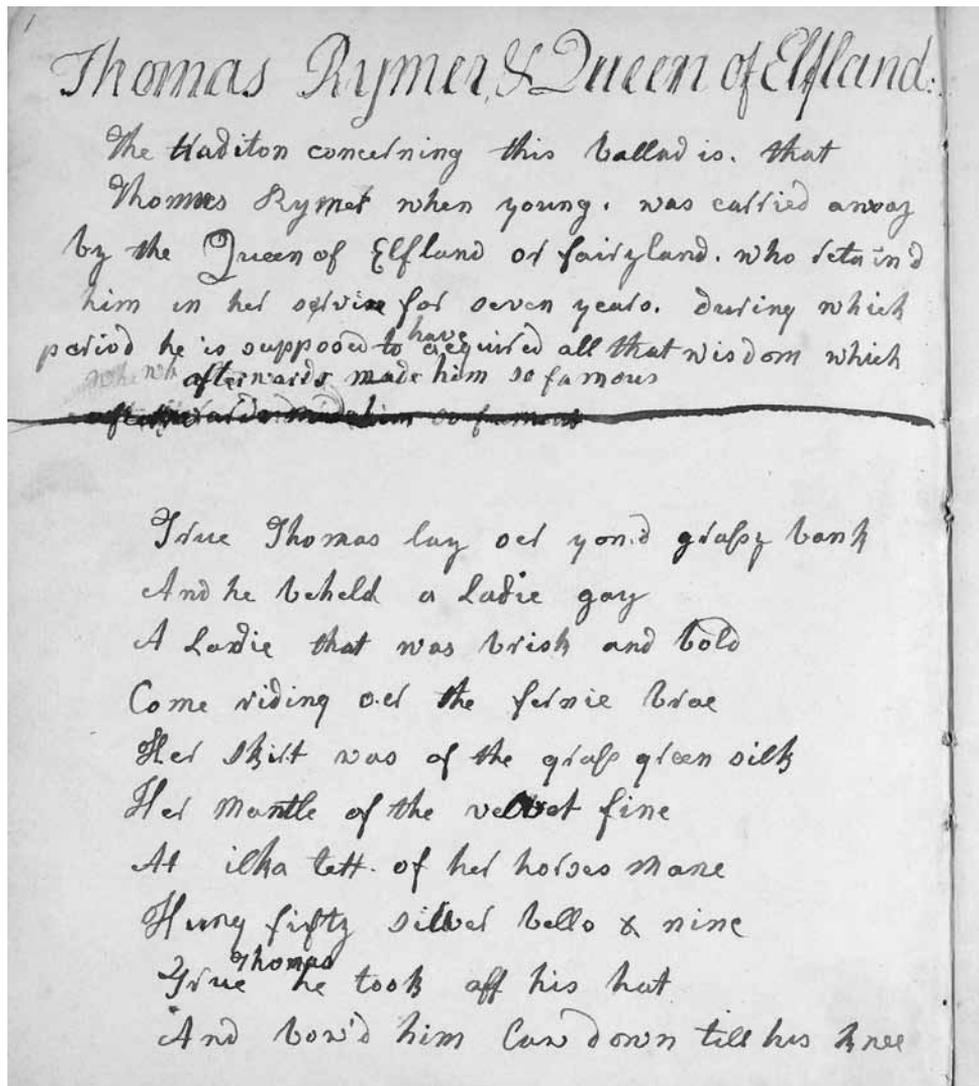
The romantic and frequently sentimental type of a ballad was less favoured by men like Walter Scott. Keen on historical ballads, he did not really take to Mrs Brown's romantic ballads. And when he did eventually publish some of her ballads in the second volume of *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in 1802, he was entertaining doubts about the genuineness of her ballads (see his introduction to "Fause Foodrage"). Mrs Brown would have been accused of "modern manufacture" if it had not been for the "evidence of a lady of high rank" to the contrary (see Motherwell 1827, 2: 279). The irony is that Scott himself admitted to modern manufacturing. The story of Lord Gregor and Fair Annie that he proudly presented as being "now first published in a perfect state" in his *Minstrelsy* under the title "The Lass of Lochroyan" was in fact made up of five copies, one of which was Brown C!

Being steeped in a ballad tradition that was mainly preserved by women, Mrs Brown did not fare well with her male mediators and editors. None of them respected her wish for anonymity or valued her style of narration. Only Jamieson made a point of visiting her; he certainly cared for the stories behind her ballad stories but regrettably very little of that information found its way into his *Popular Ballads* or is preserved in his letters.

Even less so does Mrs Brown give information about the living context of her ballad repertoire. Since no source texts of her ballads are extant, it is difficult to ascertain her own contributions in the transmission of a single ballad or the meaning she ascribes to it. Occasionally does she suggest an interpretation: for example in Brown C, the only manuscript written in her own hand, we find the following note at the beginning of Brown 22 "Thomas Rymer, & Queen of Elfland" (see illustration):

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 acquired all that wisdom which afterwards made him so famous. (Rieuwerts 2011, 294)

Only one sentence – but this nevertheless enables us to contextualise the narrative of Thomas Rymer. Notes like these and the multiple recordings of one ballad from one singer help to place the ballads we find on paper in their appropriate living cultural context and in this respect, Mrs Brown of Falkland's repertoire of thirty-four ballads in fifty-two versions offers unique opportunities to the scholar. In sum, this is what studying folklore and ballad lore is all about: To look for the story behind the story, to study the life-settings of the ballads and to listen to and distinguish the singer's own voice in the text/music mediated by a collector/editor.



A facsimile of page 1 of Brown C in Anna Brown's hand (Alexander Fraser Tytler Brown Manuscript) at the National Library of Scotland, Acc. 10611 (2).

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KAM BI S TO ... FOLKLORO? KAM BI ... S TEMI BALADAMI?
VNOVIČ O GOSPE BROWN IZ FALKLANDA

Balada je najprilagodljivejša in vsepovsod navzoča zvrst. Predstavlja se v podobi plesa, pesmi, pesnitve ali spletne objave. Podobo črpa iz življenjskega okolja (Sitz im Leben – umeščenost v življenju), iz knjig (Sitz im Buch – umeščenost v knjigah) ali zadnje čase s spleta (Sitz im Internet). Orišemo jo lahko kot dramatične, poetične ali pripovedne glasove v dialogu. Rezultat je mnogovrstnost oblik in različic. Tej dinamičnosti se lahko približamo na več načinov. Sama sem pri tem izbrala model preučevanja balad in drugih pesmi izbrane pevke – gospe Brown iz Falklanda (1747–1810). Čeprav gospa Brown zdaj velja za pravo nosilko izvirnega izročila, je bila, dokler je ni odkril Francis James Child, poznana le v delih Walterja Scotta in Roberta Jamiesona. Na podlagi njenega petja družini Tytler so nastali trije pesemski rokopisi. Uspeh teh pesmi se je v precejšnji meri nanašal na sloves »divjih zvokov plemenite naravnosti,« utrjevalo pa ga je tudi poglobljeno zanimanje za takšno romantičnost v tem času. Ob tem ne zveemo ničesar o družbenem in kulturnem prostoru teh balad. Ker so se balade pele »med predivom in čredo« in otrokom, se je zdelo verjetno, da se je ista balada glede na prostor in okoliščine petja pojavljala v različnih oblikah. Pri tem prilagajanju se je gospa Brown zanašala na svoj spomin: to je bilo zelo pomembno, saj se je imela za ohranjevalko davno izgubljenega izročila. Primerjava dveh različic balade, pozneje znane kot "The Lass of Lochroyan" (Mladenka z Lochroyana), najverjetneje nakazuje, da je gospa Brown poznala številne različice te balade in jih je združila v dve varianti. Obe sledita izvirnemu baladnemu načinu, vendar kažeta na to, da ji je na splošno bolj ustrezal sentimentalnejši način. Ker za balade gospe Brown ni izvirnih besedil, je težko oceniti njen lastni prispevek v prenosu določene balade ali v pomenu, ki ji ga pripisuje. Zgodba, skrita za zgodbo, zato še vedno čaka na razkritje.

Prof. Sigrid Rieuwerts
Department of English and Linguistics (British Studies)
University of Edinburgh
27 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, Scotland
rieuwerts@ScottishStudies.eu

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Jakob Welder-Weg 18, D-55099 Mainz, Germany
rieuwerts@uni-mainz.de