

THE EDINBURGH
COMPANION TO
SCOTTISH
WOMEN'S
WRITING

EDITED BY GLENDA NORQUAY



The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women's Writing

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CHAPTER THREE

Orality and the Ballad Tradition

Suzanne Gilbert

Until recently, scholarly rhetoric concerning oral tradition has hinged on 'simplicity', 'nature', and 'artlessness', words prominent in essentialist criticism of women's writing. Like so-called 'peasant poets' such as Robert Burns, women have been perceived as reflecting an artlessness which is authentic, part of their nature.¹ Artlessness has been constructed as an admirable quality, attractive to Romantic conceits of original genius and spontaneous composition, most frequently associated with women, children, a supposedly naive, unsophisticated underclass, and with their characteristic types of expression. While in some societies oral tradition may function as cultural capital, it also imposes constraints, discernible in the cluster of meanings linking 'artlessness' to nature and the culturally feminine. A profound ambivalence, coexisting since the eighteenth century, is encoded in definitions of the word: 'artless' has been glossed as 'devoid of art or skill'; 'unpractised, inexperienced, unskilful'; 'unskilled, ignorant'; or 'uncultured' but also as meaning 'lacking artifice, natural, simple'; or, in yet another sense, 'sincere, guileless, ingenuous'.² It can be used to describe oral narratives, songs, and ballads as authentic and unaffected, but also limited in their intellectual range.

Conversely, literary history shows male writers praised as artless if the writer is able to affect simplicity and guilelessness, as in John Dryden's assertion, 'Such Artless beauty lies in *Shakespear's* wit'.³ Concerning his substantial expansion of the ballad 'The Child of Elle'⁴ (7F), eighteenth-century antiquarian Thomas Percy asks that the reader evaluate his additions on the basis of how difficult it is to imitate 'the affecting simplicity and artless beauties of the original'.⁵ Artlessness is nevertheless acknowledged as a powerful and significant aesthetic force: in a lecture on the nature of poetry, Hugh Blair writes, 'It is no wonder [. . .] that in the rude and artless strain of the first poetry of all nations, we should often find somewhat that captivates and transports the mind.'⁶ Women occupy a central position in this aesthetic: in 1893, *The Critic* quoted Edmund Gosse as saying, 'The border ballads have no art, and yet are exquisite; and the history of poetry is adorned by certain

female names which will always preserve their freshness, and which yet were entirely innocent of art.⁷

Presenting a vexing problem for female aspirations to authorship, women and orality have been so close aligned as to be nearly indistinguishable, configured in a context which emphasises the national dimension to their creativity. This chapter traces the ways in which Scottish women have been associated with orality, with particular emphasis on the ballad, where authorship, gender, and nation are closely joined.

‘Custodians’ of Tradition

Oral tradition is by no means exclusively female territory. The family of writer James Hogg boasts a lineage of male storytellers and singers; and among twentieth-century Scottish travellers there emerged a number of strong male tradition-bearers. It is clear, however, that historically women have figured prominently, as writing women themselves have observed. Prefacing *The Collected Poems Lyrical and Narrative* (1902), A. Mary F. Robinson justifies her use of ballad form:

We women have a privilege in these matters. [. . .] We have always been the prime makers of ballads and love songs, of anonymous snatches and screeds of popular song. [. . .] [S]ome old wife or other, crooning over her fire of sticks, in Scotland or the Val d’Aosta, in Roumania or Gascony, is probably at the beginning of most romantic Ballads.⁸

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf quotes Dorothy Osborne, renowned seventeenth-century writer of letters: ‘I walke out into a Common that lyes hard by the house where a great many young wenches keep Sheep and Cow’s and sitt in the shades singing of Ballads.’⁹ Woolf notes Edward Fitzgerald’s suggestion that ‘it was a woman [. . .] who made the ballads and the folk-songs, crooning them to her children, beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter’s night’.¹⁰

Catherine Kerrigan asserts that the ballad ‘presents a vital and sustained women’s tradition’, and that ‘women played such a significant role as tradition-bearers and transmitters that it can be claimed that the ballad tradition is one of the most readily identifiable areas of literary performance by women’.¹¹ Observing that the major collectors of the ballad (Burns, Scott, Hogg, Greig-Duncan) all refer to women ‘as a prime source of their material’, Kerrigan notes the ‘legion of male writers who cite their mother, housekeeper or nurse (Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Cummie” comes immediately to mind) as their first teachers of old songs and stories’.¹² For Alan Bold, women have functioned as ‘custodians of the oral tradition’; ‘the ballads became

old wives' tales', a description he says is not pejorative: 'They were stories passed from mother to daughter, perpetuated by women'.¹³ He gives examples from as early as John Barbour's fourteenth-century poem *The Brus*, in which 'Young women quhen thai will play,/ Syng it amang thaim ilka day'.¹⁴ Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe acknowledges women as his sources for the songs collected in *A Ballad Book* (1823):

These have been mostly gathered from the mouths of the nurses, wet and dry, singing to their babes and sucklings, dairy-maids pursuing their vocation in the cow-house, and tenants' daughters, while giving the Lady [. . .] a spinning day.¹⁵

David Buchan describes eighteenth-century singers, including Mrs Harris, daughter of the minister of Blairgowrie, who learned her ballads before she was ten years of age from 'an old nurse Jannie Scott, whose store of ballad lore was inexhaustible'.¹⁶ William Motherwell commenting on a version of 'Gil Morrice'(83) taken from the recitation of Margaret Paterson, a native of Banffshire who 'learned the ballad there in her infancy', notes that it is '70 years since she committed it to her memory'.¹⁷ Searching for additional ballads for the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98), Francis J. Child acknowledges that women 'have been the chief preservers of ballad-poetry', and entreats 'the aid of gentlewomen in Scotland [. . .] who remember ballads that they have heard repeated by their grandmothers or nurses'.¹⁸

Women have also excelled at lyric song. Throughout the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, Scottish songs that had passed through oral tradition were appropriated and shaped by female authors. Jean Elliott (1727–1805) re-worked 'The Flowers of the Forest', an old song still sung today about the Battle of Flodden Field. Joanna Baillie (1762–1851) was celebrated as a dramatist but also known for popular songs based on legends and ballad narratives, such as 'Tom o' the Lin'. Isobel Pagan (1740–1821), an Ayrshire singer, included in her repertoire her own version of 'Ca' the Yowes to the Knowes', a song made famous by Burns. Drawing on traditional tunes, forms, and motifs, women also composed new songs. Anne Lindsay, Lady Barnard (1750–1825) authored the poignant 'Auld Robin Gray', known to have inspired poets such as Wordsworth. Carolina Oliphant, Lady Nairne (1766–1845) penned many songs anonymously as 'Mrs Bogan of Bogan', including the well-known 'The Laird o' Cockpen', as well as a number of popular Jacobite songs.¹⁹

Besides their roles as informants and composers, women also figure significantly in ballad content. According to Bold, the 'powerful and awesome' figure of the ballad matriarch may be attributed to women serving to perpetuate tradition.²⁰ In some narratives women enact heroic deeds, such as 'Tam Lin' (39) in which Janet rescues the father of her child from the evil Queen o'

Fairies (another powerful female figure), or in 'Geordie' (209), another rescue narrative in which the heroine travels great distances to plead for her lover's freedom. Many narratives deal bluntly with romantic love in terms of realistic concerns about women's economic survival as in the abandoned, pregnant woman's lament of 'The Lass of Roch Royal' (76), or the tragic triangle of 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annet' (73) in which the lovely Annet is passed over for a wealthier rival.²¹ Women's predominant role in traditional expression may be related to the historical function of songs and stories in quotidian life, relationships, and community; but whatever their origins, ballads have been shaped and marked over time by women's concerns.

Post-Union Traditional Informants

At a crucial point in post-Union Scotland, women became informants for collectors and editors such as Walter Scott and Robert Jamieson, who were driven by culturally-nationalist agendas to preserve elements of Scottish culture deemed under threat of extinction. In their zeal to capture the old songs, the collectors managed to preserve volumes of material but in so doing overshadowed their sources. Thus, despite women's importance to balladry, the canonical history of ballads has been written by the men who raided the countryside for gems to grace their collections. These Enlightenment-influenced collectors and editors associated oral tradition with national antiquity and original expression, to Blair 'the rude and artless strain of the first poetry' of the nation.²² For Scott, the ballad can transport the reader to an earlier stage in history; it exhibits 'the National Muse in her cradle'.²³ In this construction, the song itself is gendered female and infantile, but the provider of the song is less important than the 'ancient minstrel' imagined as its original author. Indeed, Scott disparages his sources, believing that '[t]he original ballad suffered irrevocably from passing through the mouths of many reciters', which produced the 'impertinent interpolations from the conceit of one rehearser, unintelligible blunders from the stupidity of another, and omissions equally to be regretted, from the want of memory in a third'.²⁴

The title of Sigurd Hustvedt's *Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Great Britain and Scandinavia since 1800* (1930) traces the culturally masculine narrative of collection that carried well into the twentieth century. This language, suited more to adventure story than scholarly tome, reflects the spirit with which ballad collectors such as Scott and his associates pursued their purpose. On returning from a collecting excursion, Scott wrote to a friend, '[I]n defiance of mountains, rivers, and bogs, damp and dry, we have penetrated the very recesses of Ettrick Forest' and have 'returned loaded with the treasures of oral tradition'.²⁵ The ideal object of their quest was the 'pure' traditional ballad, the product of a simple people whose artlessness and

closeness to nature compensated for a lack of sophisticated style: in other words, a fiction, a 'scholarly mirage'.²⁶ Given the scarcity of ideal objects, the goal then was to train the ballad for polite society. J. W. Hales and F. J. Furnivall also describe Percy's approach to his manuscript in gendered terms, as to 'a young woman from the country with unkempt locks, whom he had to fit for fashionable society'.²⁷

Buried in the grand narrative of antiquarian ballad collection, however, is evidence that the recovery of valuable ballads and songs depended on generations of women who remembered this material. A glimpse of this may be found in records that William Motherwell left of his collecting for *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern* (1827). As Mary Ellen Brown shows, Motherwell asserted 'the trustworthiness of oral tradition', of the importance of sources, and of women's role in transmission; his greatest success was in collecting ballads from a group of 'old singing women'.²⁸

Some 'Singing Women'

Close scrutiny deflates the myth of a homogeneous tradition-bearer: singing women differed widely in education and station in life. We know little about them, and their own reluctance to be named further obscures the record. In an 1802 letter to Robert Jamieson, Anna Gordon Brown writes that Scott's publishing of her name in the *Minstrelsy* has 'vexed' her, and she asks that Jamieson refrain from using her name in his *Popular Ballads and Songs* (1806).²⁹ Margaret Laidlaw Hogg, mother of James Hogg, reportedly chastised Scott for publishing traditional ballads and had no interest in literary fame.

Anna Gordon Brown, commonly known as 'Mrs Brown of Falkland', has been hailed by ballad scholars as 'the greatest informant encountered by any collector of traditional ballads', and as 'the most important single contributor to the canon of English and Scottish popular ballads'.³⁰ Child included all thirty-three of her ballads in the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, twenty of them privileged as 'A' texts, noting: 'No Scottish ballads are superior in kind to those recited in the last century by Mrs Brown of Falkland'.³¹ Among others, she contributed 'Thomas the Rhymer' (37A), 'The Twa Sisters', also known as 'Binnorie' (10B), 'Child Waters' (63B), 'Young Beichan' (53AC), 'Lamkin' (93A), 'Sir Hugh, or, The Jew's Daughter' (155A), 'Willie and Earl Richard's Daughter' (102A), 'The Gay Goshawk' (96A), 'The Lass of Roch Royal' (76DE), 'King Henry' (32), 'The Cruel Brother' (11A), and 'Clerk Colvill' (42A). Mrs Brown's contributions are preserved in three manuscripts used by Scott and Jamieson.³²

Born in Aberdeen a year after the 1746 Scottish defeat at Culloden, Anna Gordon was the daughter of Thomas Gordon, professor of philosophy at

King's College, and Lillias Forbes, who came from 'a singing family of the Scottish highlands'.³³ In 1788 she married the Reverend Andrew Brown of Falkland. She had learned ballads as a young girl in Aberdeenshire from her aunt, Anne Farquharson, whom Brown's father credits with 'a tenacious memory, which retained all the songs she had heard the nurses and old women sing in that neighbourhood'.³⁴ Though Brown's ballads generally have been printed without music, she provided both Scott and Jamieson with words and music in the 'plaintive style' of old Scottish melodies. From an educated and musically literate family, she was acquainted with Percy's *Reliques*, but insisted on having learned the songs orally³⁵ as in an April 1800 letter to Fraser Tytler:

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; but 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.³⁶

David Buchan underscores this female lineage: 'As far as they can be traced [. . .] Anna Gordon's ballads are stories of a woman's tradition; her three immediate sources were women, and the most important of the three, Anne Farquharson, derived hers from the nurses and old women of Allanaquoich'.³⁷ Farquharson's 'songs and tales of chivalry and love' provided 'high entertainment' to the young imaginations of the Gordon children; according to Thomas Gordon, his daughter Anna had 'a memory as good as her aunt's' and 'almost the whole store of her songs lodged in it'.³⁸ Attesting to the power of her early impressions, Brown wrote to Fraser Tytler,

You judge rightly in supposing that I should take pleasure in recalling those scenes of infancy & childhood which the recollection of these old songs brings back to mind, it is indeed what Ossian call[s] the joy of grief the memory of joys past pleasant, but mournful to the soul.³⁹

Robert Anderson writes that Brown kept the ballads 'as a little hoard of solitary entertainment' until finally persuaded to write them down.⁴⁰

Another 'ballad woman' emerging from the eighteenth-century drive to preserve tradition was Margaret Laidlaw Hogg (1730–1813). Some of the eleven ballads for which she may be identified as informant include 'Clerk Saunders' (69), 'Jamie Telfer' (190), 'Johny Armstrong's Last Goodnight' (169), 'The Tale of Tomlin' (39), and, at least partially, 'Auld Maitland'. The eldest daughter of a well-known storyteller, William Laidlaw of Phaup, she was charged after her mother's death with the care of her siblings, which resulted in her leaving school and painstakingly educating herself by reading

the Bible. At thirty she married Robert Hogg, a less than successful farmer. Gifted with a strong memory and active imagination, she soaked up the traditional songs and tales of the borders, as J. E. H. Thomson observed: 'As she had a vivid imagination and a retentive memory, she eagerly heard, and scrupulously retained, the legendary ballads that were floating about the Border district – many of these, it is to be feared, perished with her death.'⁴¹ We know about Hogg only through anecdotes, especially those of her sons James and William. James describes his mother as 'a living miscellany of old songs'.⁴² William's letters reveal a key function of traditional narrative in her day-to-day life: '[O]ur mother to keep us boys quiet would often tell us tales of kings, giants, knights, fairies, kelpies, brownies [. . .] These tales arrested our attention, and filled our minds with the most dreadful apprehensions'.⁴³ As Elaine Petrie observes, for Margaret Hogg the songs and stories served the purpose of amusement 'to keep the bairns out of mischief'.⁴⁴

James Hogg records his mother's meeting with Walter Scott, who had approached her for a performance of 'Auld Maitland', a song with which 'he was highly delighted'.⁴⁵ Scott queried whether or not it had ever been in print – the ballad-collector's constant preoccupation – and she responded with her famous scolding:

there war never ane o' my sangs prentit till ye prentit them yoursel', an' ye hae spoilt them awthegither. They were made for singing an' no for reading; but ye hae broken the charm now, an' they'll never be sung mair. An' the worst thing of a', they're nouter right spell'd nor right setten down.⁴⁶

Here Hogg deploys his mother as representative of tradition in a pointed argument against antiquarianism, adding, 'My mother has been too true a prophetess, for from that day to this, these songs, which were the amusement of every winter evening, have never been sung more.'⁴⁷

In a different historical moment, similarly concerned with cultural and quasi-national identity, another group of women became recognised for their traditional skills. Many ballads, songs, and stories had been preserved among the travellers of northeast Scotland; these came to public attention during the Folk Revival that swept the country in the middle of the twentieth century. Arguably the central figure of the revival, Jeannie Robertson (1908–75) learned ballads from her mother and grew up travelling six months of the year with families for whom songs and stories were the chief entertainment. In 1953 she was 'discovered' by Hamish Henderson of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies, who first recorded her songs. In early life around the campfire, and as an adult living in Aberdeen, Robertson was acknowledged within her family circle as an outstanding singer. But as a mature woman immersed in the folk revival she became internationally renowned as a performer of traditional song. Through analysis of Robertson, James Porter and Herschel

Gower have documented the crucial relationship between singer and song, which has both aided the ballad's survival and illuminated another key to understanding women's connection to oral tradition.⁴⁸

A significant finding in analysis of Revival singers is the songs' evolution over time in a repertoire, reflecting the individual ballad maker's input. Jeannie Robertson's involvement with a 'muckle' or big ballad exists on more than one level: her life experience is the unwritten part of the ballad text as she performs it. She responded in an intensely personal way, for example, to a variant of 'Edward' (13), 'My Son David', a ballad she learned very early from her mother and in adult life associated with the death of her own young son. According to Porter, ballad singing became for Robertson a 'transformative' act, 'a way of distilling the life-world and its experiences in a ritualizing gesture that compresses feeling, cognition and volition'.⁴⁹ Her approach to teaching ballads reveals the significance of transmitting this experience, passed on very deliberately to chosen family members. Nephew Stanley Robertson described the intensity of learning from his formidable aunt:

If I was asking her for a ballad – asking her to teach me – she was very, very strict, very, very hard. 'All right, laddie, I'll learn this song, but I want you to sing it right, sing it proper, an' sing it real.' If I did not sing it *exactly* as she told me, I was in trouble.⁵⁰

Jeannie Robertson's daughter Lizzie Higgins learned ballads from her mother and became a well-known performer in her own right. She too recounted the learning experience, but as relived in every performance: 'I dinna see my audience, I see her and me a wee kid lang afore the war. An as Am singing Am hearin' her singing.'⁵¹ At the very moment of performing a ballad before an audience, Higgins re-enacted the moment of engagement with the source, her mother-teacher; the memory is tied to a point in childhood but carried into the present so that past and present coexist. She sang 'Lord Lovat' (75) only when 'in top form' because of its special significance as a lullaby her mother sang to her when she was very young.⁵² She asserted, 'every one o' these songs, ballads and pipe tunes we sing, they mean something to us privately'.⁵³

This sentiment is shared among singers performing today. Fife native Jean Redpath reports, 'I can never sing a ballad that I don't feel like singing. [. . .] I don't think they work unless they come out of your gut'.⁵⁴ Dundee-born Sheena Wellington had to change 'Sheath and Knife' (16) because otherwise singing it was too painful:

I wasn't sure that I wanted to learn the song, and it took me quite some time to get it learned. And I realized afterwards, after someone pointed out to me that I had altered the tune, that a reason I found 'Sheath and Knife' so difficult is it's

a song that deals with a child's death, and I find them particularly difficult to sing. [. . .] I think we all tend to change the song in some way to suit our own interpretation of it [. . .].⁵⁵

Shared by singers is the conception of 'muckle sangs' requiring a particularly intense involvement, a personal ownership that challenges the faceless anonymity that literary tradition has ascribed to ballad authorship.

Women's active, creative engagement with oral tradition has shaped both song and literature. A line may be followed from early singers to twentieth- and twenty-first-century practitioners of 'living tradition', exemplified by artists such as Jeannie Robertson, Sheila Stewart, Alison McMorland, Jean Redpath, and Sheena Wellington. Young contemporary singers of Scottish song incorporate traditional material into their repertoires. Singer-songwriter Karine Polwart professes a love of traditional ballads 'because of their ability to connect human experiences across the details of time and place, and to take on new resonances for new circumstances',⁵⁶ a sentiment expressed across generations of tradition-bearers. In another vein, writers such as Nan Shepherd, Violet Jacob, Jessie Kesson, Muriel Spark, and Liz Lochhead have been drawn to tradition, appropriating narratives, tropes, and cultural authority for their own, highly original, literary experimentation. Having memorised Border ballads through reading them 'repetitively and attentively', Spark recalled their significance to her: 'The steel and bite of the ballads, so remorseless and yet so lyrical, entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart.'⁵⁷

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Chapter 3 – Gilbert

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