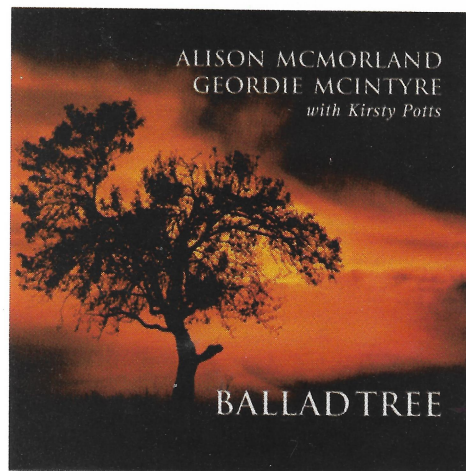


# A Sisterhood in Ballads

by Alison McMorland



**"The ballad tree, rooted in the past, living today, will send forth its branches into tomorrow."**  
Evelyn Wells, American ballad scholar.

Ballads are the aristocracy of the folk tradition, certainly for the singer and enthusiast, and for the scholar a vast heritage in continuing and future research. As a singer I have been privileged to be drawn into the world of ballad studies through the work of Ruth Perry, who holds the Ann Fetter Friedlander Professor of Humanities, Emeritus, at MIT, and is a past President of the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies with a number of scholarly articles and publications. Ruth's research and writings on Anna Gordon, Mrs Brown of Falkland, is groundbreaking. Gavin Greig in *Last Leaves Of Traditional Ballads And Ballad Airs*, says: "Of all the preservers of Scottish ballads, the most esteemed and one of the most prolific was an Aberdeenshire lady, Anna Gordon, daughter of Professor Thomas Gordon of Kings College, and wife of the Rev Andrew Brown of Falkland. Mrs Brown was born in 1747 and had learned most of her ballads before the age of twelve years from her mother, her aunt (Mrs Farquerson of Allanquoich, Braemar) and a maid in her mother's family." I'd like to tell how I came to collaborate with Ruth Perry in her research, whilst also referring to the times we were living in then and to the early beginnings of The Living Tradition.

Pete Heywood's forward-thinking series, *The Tradition Bearers Scots Songs and Ballads*, included my *Cloudberry Day* album in 2001. This led me to sing at the Old Songs Festival in New England where we struck up a friendship with the influential Patons. Coming off the stage, Caroline Paton greeted me with her sweet smile and told of meeting Hamish Henderson on an

early visit to Scotland with son David in her arms. At the Folk Legacy stall, Sandy Paton and my partner Geordie McIntyre spontaneously exchanged songs. Geordie sang *Tam Lin*. A small crowd gathered around which retrospectively reminds me of when, guesting at the Smithsonian's 1976 bi-centennial, I stood beside Bert Lloyd in a wide passageway whilst he sang *Prince Heathen* to six or seven listeners. Such is the power and passion endowed by singers of ballads. The Tradition Bearers Scots Songs and Ballads series issued my CD, *The Ballad Tree*, with Geordie McIntyre and Kirsty Potts in 2002. We dedicated it to Hamish Henderson. Over the next 10 years we were regular visitors to the States on singing tours and at festivals where we experienced tremendous hospitality, warmth and generosity from exceptional people there. Ruth Perry particularly appreciated our singing and invited us to sing ballads in her *Folk Music Of North America And British Isles* course at MIT. This was the musical landscape when important contacts were made and friendships formed within the wide family of the folk world.

In 2006, Ruth's research on the life and times of Anna Gordon was in its preliminary stage, and when she planned a trip to Edinburgh to access authentic manuscripts and correspondence at Edinburgh University Library and Register House, we naturally offered to aid and abet her before she headed north to Aberdeen. The East Lothian town of Tranent was our first destination, 10 miles south-east of Edinburgh. I was particularly keen to trace the steps of Anna Gordon myself, and on the Sunday morning we drove to visit the parish church in Tranent, the last ministerial post held by Rev Brown. Parked at the side gate we saw parishioners leaving in twos and threes, slowly filing through the graveyard making towards the gate leading into the manse where the Browns would have resided. Entering the kirk to seek the beadle's permission and help, he told us to follow the congregation into the manse. The retiring minister, Rev Hogg, had given his last service the previous week and was now flitting. The manse was empty, all were welcome to take a last look before it was being sold to be converted into flats. Inside, most people seemed to wander around the flagstoned ground floor with its large kitchen and off rooms. I climbed the stone stairway to the first-floor area. The living room was still carpeted, with curtains hanging in the three windows. Alone and standing to look out one of the windows, the stillness was palpable. Shocked by what was to happen to this 17th century building, I imagined

Anna standing on this very spot, looking down at the garden, then the graveyard and kirk – of succeeding ministers with wives and families making an unbroken chain in serving the ministry. Ghosts reverberated in the air. I headed out for the graveyard to look for Andrew Brown's last resting place which took time until I entered a small walled enclosure at the back, and there it was next to other headstones of previous ministers. When Ruth viewed it, she was thrilled and knelt on her knee to take down the fulsome inscription composed by Anna in her last farewell to her husband.



Ruth transcribing the gravestone

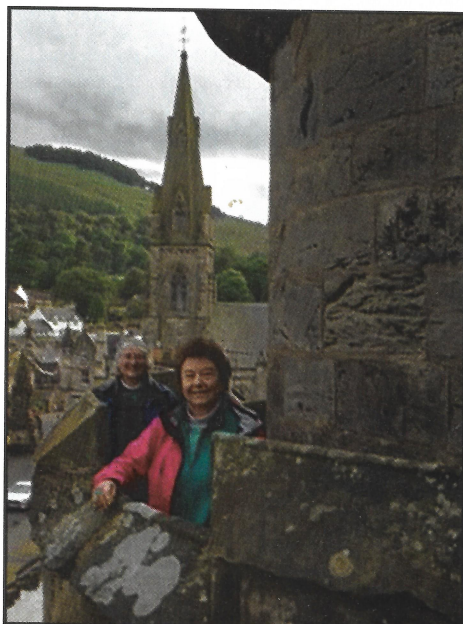
At home, when talking of our day's experience together, Ruth suggested that I could collaborate by producing an accompanying CD to slip inside the book cover of her anticipated biography. Inspired by the moment in which Anna had come alive for me, I agreed. The following year (2007), Ruth sent me a xerox of the manuscript prepared in 1783 for William Tytler with music transcripts by Anna's nephew, Robert Eden Scott. I was both excited and stimulated to see the handwriting of Anna Gordon giving the ballads of her childhood. Wanting to get a feel and sense of the ancient, I copied into my song book the decipherable text of *Lady Elspat*, saying to myself, yes, I could sing this, and put it to the back of my mind. At the time I was deeply involved with Elizabeth Stewart in working together on her memoir, *Up Yon Wide And Lonely Glen*, which was uppermost in my mind but nevertheless relevant. Elizabeth, too, was in the oral tradition having heard and learnt ballads in childhood through the maternal side of her family - her aunt Lucy of the famed Stewarts of Fetterangus.

A further seven years passed during which time Ruth forwarded papers she had presented at conferences, or which had been published in journals and books about the eighteenth century - on Anna Gordon,



her ballads, and the times she lived in. I was motivated to pull together ideas for the accompanying CD to complement the biography. We had agreed to keep quiet regarding our future collaboration, and from 2014 onwards on her summer visits, Ruth and I met to further our plans. We considered relevant ballads and had a fascinating stay in Falkland to meet with Ninian Stuart, Hereditary Keeper of Falkland Palace (now managed by National Trust for Scotland). He showed us the oldest part, where the Rev Brown and Anna lived at the start of their married life. Our host took us into his private rooms, out of bounds to visitors doing the tour of the palace, and then up to the tower to view a carving, dated 1816, on one of the turrets. It was a memorable visit. During our annual summer meetings taking us up to 2019, as the chapters for the biography were finished, Ruth would forward me copies. Her analysis of the ballads was illuminating; recordings for the CD were in progress. We had listening sessions and came to the decision that it should *not* be slipped into the cover of the book - but stand alone.

My idea for the complimentary CD was to create the intimacy of the world of women and family, creating a sound memory of the sisterhood in ballads. I invited Jo Miller, ethnomusicologist and community musician, to be part of this project - who better, as in 1996 she had worked closely with Emily Lyle to record 10 of Mary Macqueen's ballads to accompany the first volume of Lyle's *Andrew Crawford's Collection Of Ballads And Songs*, issued by the Scottish Text Society. Publications from this source are immensely informative, giving wide ranging research articles by scholars in *Ballads And Songs - International Studies*, by editor Sigrid Rieuwerts. In the 2011 Scottish Text Society Fifth Series, she edited *The Ballad Repertoire Of Anna Gordon, Mrs Brown Of Falkland*.



**Ruth and Alison in Falkland**

Returning to Jo's involvement on the CD, she and I separately sing seven unaccompanied ballads, my daughter Kirsty Potts and I sing together on the eighth, and Jo's son Owen Sutcliffe adds another family dimension by accompanying her on the flute for *King Henry*. This was the instrument Robert Eden Scott used in musically transcribing his aunt Anna's ballads in 1783 - which I'd seen in the xerox manuscript prepared for William Tytler. I explored what other instrument could minimally support our singing. Anna's sister Elizabeth had married John Scott, and when they went to live in America she had a guitar shipped out to her along with other items. Accomplished guitarist and ballad singer Alasdair Roberts provides sympathetic accompaniment to my singing of *The Gay Goss-Hawk*. The third musician used on one track is the fiddler, Daniel Thorpe.

Daniel was my starting point in learning the ballads. I asked him to prepare a CD

of the 12 chosen ballad tunes as my aid in absorbing them before working on the narratives. I remember traditional singer Packie Byrne telling me that songs were in the air where he grew up. I wanted to have the ballad tunes I was about to sing 'in the air'. My mother's fiddle playing was also an emotional memory from my childhood. The process of learning and singing long ballads from the printed page required me to internalise the unfolding scenes and familiarise with the protagonists before moving on to the next action in the unfolding story. I found handwriting each of the scenes helped me to assimilate the language and rhythm as well as the narrative, a slow process. Fitting the words of the first few verses from the printed page into the given melody is the breakthrough moment for me - until finally the ballad comes together. However, the oral tradition, as I know it through hearing and learning intimately from the ballad singing of first Lucy Stewart and then her niece Elizabeth, reverberates deep inside me and informs my singing. Their intense, slow delivery which allows the experience of 'living the ballad', and for the listener to be drawn into the underlying emotion, is mesmeric. Hamish Henderson, my mentor and friend, wrote on the release of my 1977 album, *Belt With Colours Three*, that I "breathed new life into ancient memorials." Surely this is what all singers of ballads and songs do, time is made audible in singing our cultural heritage.

My collaboration and interchange with Ruth Perry has been a long and extraordinarily rich journey. Her biography, with the working title, *The Ballad World Of Anna Gordon, Mrs Brown Of Falkland*, is all but finished, as is the accompanying double CD with liner notes by Geordie McIntyre. Our last meeting together was in summer 2019. In February 2020, I recorded *Lamkin*, then the pandemic and lockdown hit us all. Our country was in shock and grief, but is now emerging from it.



*Thank you Living Tradition!*

**"Their music is bold, joyous, highly infectious"**  
-- fROOTS

**"Joyful and sophisticated" -- Dálthí Sproule, Altan**



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