

## Musical Traditions in the Forbes Family of Disblair, Aberdeenshire

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This paper describes the musical activities of the immediate forebears of the ballad-singer Mrs Anna Brown of Falkland (1747–1825), and is intended to supplement the account recently published by David Buchan (Buchan 1972 : 62–64). Two general conclusions emerge which Buchan does not reach: (i) that classical and folk music were not socially divorced in eighteenth-century Scotland, since two male members of Anna Brown's family took an absorbing interest in classical music while three female members were recorded as being singers of traditional ballads and (ii), that it was not essential, in the eighteenth century, to have inherited ballads from one's parents in order to learn to sing them.

Anna Brown's maternal grandfather was William Forbes of Disblair. He was a keen amateur musician: the auction sale of his property after his death included many instruments and volumes of music (Buchan 1972 : 63). He was also a composer, whose compositions, though obscure, appear to have been of seminal importance to the development of Baroque style in Scots fiddle music. Probably from about 1710 he wrote large numbers of folk-fiddle variations on popular tunes, incorporating in them up-to-date Italian Baroque techniques; notable is his 21-strain set of 'John Anderson my Joe,' which is divided into eight sections in varying rhythms and speeds to give something of the effect of a Corellian *sonata da chiesa* (NLS Adv. MS 5.2.25). His fame as a composer had reached Edinburgh by the time he died, for in 1740 David Young copied eleven of his variation sets into the McFarlane MS (NLS MSS 2084, 2085). Of these eleven, two—'Maggie Lauder' and 'Three good Fellows'—were re-worked by a more famous violinist/composer, William McGibbon of Edinburgh, and published under the latter's name in 1742 and 1746, while a further two—'Willy was a wanton Wag' and 'My Nanny O'—were published around 1773, though unascribed and in somewhat corrupt texts (McLean *c.* 1773 : 24, 26).

William Forbes' creative output extended to poetry. Between 1700 and 1704 he published several anti-Union satires, written in polished heroic couplets in the manner of Dryden. The National Library of Scotland has a number of original prints of these; so far, however, they seem to have escaped the attention of Scottish literary scholars.

Forbes' relationship with his wife was curious, to say the least. Born in either 1662 or 1671 (both dates are indicated by AUL MS500), he got married in 1689 to Elizabeth Bateman, an impecunious Englishwoman in the wig-making trade, and during the 1690s they produced a son, John. She divorced him in 1704, but they co-habited

again between 1708 and 1719, during which time at least one of their three daughters Anne, Elizabeth and Lillias was born. After 1719 they again separated. Mrs Forbes took charge of the daughters and fleeced the estate so remorselessly for alimony that Forbes was left almost penniless by 1725. From then on Forbes was supported by a series of loans from George Skene of Skene: by the time of Forbes' death in June 1740, his accumulated debt to Skene was 4,000 merks. Later there was a legal wrangle between Skene and the daughters over the division of the estate (AUL MS 500).

Lillias Forbes was the mother of Mrs Brown of Falkland. In an autobiographical letter (Buchan 1972 : 64, 298) Mrs Brown stated that she had learnt ballads from both her mother and her aunt Anne. Thus both Anne and Lillias sang ballads. But it seems unlikely that they could have acquired the tradition either from their mother (who was English) or from their father (who did not bring them up). Another letter indicates that Anne Forbes learnt ballads from nurses and old women in the Braemar district, after her marriage to Joseph Farquharson of Allanaquoich (Buchan 1972 : 63). But the foundations of her singing ability must surely have been laid at an earlier age. It seems likely, then, that both sisters learnt ballads from their mother's domestic servants.

It is unknown how much contact Lillias Forbes had with her father. Interestingly, however, she married a man whose interests were similar to his, for Thomas Gordon, Professor of Humanities at King's College, Old Aberdeen, was another artistic intellectual. Shortly after their daughter Anna was born in 1747, Gordon joined the newly-formed Aberdeen Musical Society, membership of which was open only to musical performers (Farmer 1950 : 31). Thus Gordon must have been a competent player on one of the eighteenth-century gentlemen's instruments—violin, cello, or transverse flute. Music was no passing whim for him, as he maintained his membership of the Musical Society for over twenty years and served on the Society's committee from 1770 to 1772 (APL Walker 10632, 10633). At the same period, then, that Mrs Anna Brown was learning her—subsequently famous—ballads from her mother at Humanity Manse, Old Aberdeen, her father was going out every Friday night to meet his cronies and play through the latest European music by Handel, Arne and Hasse.

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