# Coming Back through Ballads

**By Moira Cameron**

*It is May, 2011 in Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. The Northern Arts and Cultural Centre, the region's only concert hall, is hosting for the first time the annual conference of the national Storytellers of Canada / Conteurs du Canada. Concurrent to the conference, the N.A.C.C. is also running its 7th annual Storytelling Festival and tonight is the first of a two-night concert featuring only Northern performers.*

*Ben Nind, the Executive Director of the Northern Arts and Cultural Centre and organizer of the festival and conference, walks on stage and introduces the next performer to the audience – me. I walk into the white light of the stage. When the applause dies down, I begin the most ambitious concert set of my career as a balladeer.*

*Moira Cameron*

Two months previously, when Ben had approached me to see if I thought I would be ready to perform at this year's festival, I was not sure. But I told him I would. It was a significant decision, because although I have performed ballads and stories at folk clubs, house concerts, and music and storytelling festivals since I could talk, I had taken a sabbatical since the death of my husband two years earlier. Steve was my biggest fan and supporter. His death not only left the expected emotional void, but I found I was unable to sing anything in my repertoire because almost every ballad reminded me of my loss.

Also, performing ballads requires a certain kind of creative energy. I have to be able to emotionally connect to the story and characters in the ballad, and transmit that connection to my audience. In order to cope with my grief, I had placed a psychological filter on my empathy, disabling me from feeling or transmitting the ballads. I had put all ballad singing on hold and didn't know when or even if I would be able to sing them again.

When I agreed to perform at the Yellowknife Storytelling Festival, I had no idea if I would be able to do the ballads justice. This concert would be a test; not only telling me if I was ready to be a performer again, but if ballads still had the power to make me feel whole. I had lived and breathed ballads my entire life. They were the framework on which I built my perceptions of myself and my understanding of the world around me. Before my husband died, I would not have been able to imagine a life without ballads. Would I truly be facing that awful possibility? My success or failure at this concert would answer that question.

Committed to an attempt at a comeback, I spent weeks trying to decide what to perform. I knew I needed to do something different enough to distract me from the anxiety I felt about the significance of the performance. I also felt that choosing material from my existing repertoire might trigger memories of my husband and thereby disrupt my ability to perform. I considered many themes, all of which I knew might make interesting performances, but they were all notions I had worked with in the past. Then a seed of an idea occurred to me – a concept so different it felt inspired. Would it work? My audience would not be very familiar with the ballad genre. Would I be able to pull it off in such a way that would maintain their interest, entertain them, while at the same time allow me to reconnect with and express my lifelong passion?

> *I place a cup of water in front of me and begin speaking: "When I have performed here at the storytelling festival in the past, I have always tried to come up with a*

*theme to my sets – something that in itself tells a story. Tonight, I will be doing something I believe has not been done in a concert setting before. I am going to sing for you one ballad and I am going to sing it over, and over, and over, and over again, as many times as I can in the next thirty minutes."*

*I pause for effect. I go on to explain that the folklorist Francis Child created family groupings of the ballads he collected, each containing several versions of the one ballad.*

*"I have been singing traditional ballads since I could talk," I continue. "I can honestly say there is nothing that thrills me more than coming across a new version of a ballad I am already familiar with. I cannot explain why that thrills me so much, so I am hoping that by sharing with you several versions of one ballad, I will be able to convey to you some of my passion for this genre of music. The ballad I have selected for this experimental concert set is called Child Ballad #20: The Cruel Mother."*

Having finally decided on the nature of my concert set, I needed to pick the versions of the Cruel Mother I wished to sing. I already had two versions in my repertoire; one I had learned over 20 years ago from the American ballad singer, Hedy West, and one I had learned more recently from the Scottish ballad singer Norman Kennedy (who in turn learned it from Jeannie Robertson). Another version had been on my 'to learn' list for years; one from the singing of Britain's Frankie Armstrong. I found a fourth version recorded by A.L. Lloyd. And for my fifth, I selected a children's street song version.

As I began practising my set, I very quickly discovered an unexpected challenge. I was accustomed to singing ballads somewhat freely, not worrying overly much about being precise with the lyrics. After all, if I momentarily forgot a common ballad cliché in a particular ballad I was singing, I could easily substitute the phrase with another common cliché either from a different version of the same ballad, or from some other ballad altogether. In this situation, because I wanted to demonstrate the differences and similarities between all these versions, I needed to recall their unique lyric phraseologies more exactly.

One of the most common reactions I have gotten from audience members over the years is: "I don't know how you remember all the words!" The secret all balladeers know so well is that it really isn't that difficult. The lyric clichés are mnemonics which, together with repetitive lines, help us remember the story sequence. However, for this particular set, I was finding that my usual process of remembering the words of a ballad was now more of a hindrance than a tool.

I gradually overcame this challenge by making the links between the unique way each version's lyrics and tune told the same story, and how my perception of the 'feeling' or message of each version changed. I have always been aware how tunes and lyrics affect my perception of the storyline. This was not a new concept to me. But my understanding of this concept reached a depth I had never before experienced during the course of my preparation for this performance. In fact, this became the real theme of my concert: how my perception of the ballad's story evolved from one version to the next.

Coincidentally, the order I chose to present my material, arranged from the longest version to the shortest, emphasised the story of the evolution of my perception. I chose to begin the set with the ballad I learned from Norman Kennedy because his lengthy version had the most detailed storyline. The audience would hear the 'complete' story before hearing the more fragmentary ones. In Kennedy's version, the mother's motives and feelings were described from start to finish, making it easier for me and the listener to empathize with her situation. The focus of the ballad, I decided, was on the mother and her feelings and subsequent behaviour.

The next ballad I chose was from A.L. Lloyd, also found in the *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*. Lloyd's version was shorter and had a markedly different emphasis. It seemed to me, especially when I sang it immediately following Kennedy's, that although the mother was still a somewhat sympathetic character, more of the focus of this ballad was on the crime itself, and the feeling of guilt that haunted her. It was almost as though guilt itself was personified in the ballad.

Frankie Armstrong's version, which I chose next, was very similar to Lloyd's. Both ballads had verses describing a Lady Macbeth image of trying to get rid of the real or imagined sight of the blood. I noticed, however, that the tune of Armstrong's ballad caused me to feel cut off from all connection to the mother. Her tune was very regimented, having one note per syllable for the most part, and was very reminiscent of a funeral dirge. My sympathies had now

shifted entirely to the victim (one child, in this version).

For my next version, I selected the one I have been singing the longest, learned from American ballad singer Hedy West (off her 1967 LP *Ballads*). Compared to Kennedy's version, this one was a mere fragment of the story. The tune was jauntier sounding, making it impossible for me to feel any connection to any of the characters in the story. When I sang this after singing the preceding ballads, I realized the focus of the ballad seemed to have shifted from the story's characters to the story's listeners. It was society's feelings that were important; the unforgiving attitude regarding the unfathomable crime of infanticide committed by a mother.

Given the subject matter of this Child ballad, it might have seemed impossible to end my set on a light note, but I could do so with the inclusion of a children's street song version. I learned that there were several such versions; some of them clapping chants, some of them skipping or circle songs. I took a folksinger's licence and merged the lyrics of the chant "There was a lady dresst in green" (found in Bronson's *Singing Tradition of Child's Popular Ballads*) with the tune of the song "Wella wella" which had a very singable chorus. Some of the lyrics were similar to the Lady Macbeth verses in Lloyd's and Armstrong's versions. But other than that, the story of the ballad felt much more contemporary, as though it were based on a real event covered by the media. If there was an identifiable focus to this version, it was the morbid fascination many of us are guilty of having with stories of violent crimes.

Each day for a month, I practised this set from start to finish, including introductions. I had never practised so diligently for a performance before, but I needed to be sure that if I experienced any kind of emotional reaction to being back on stage singing in front of people, I would be able to go on auto-pilot. The result of my extensive preparations exceeded my expectations. Not only was I able to reconnect to and sing ballads again, but the effect I had hoped to achieve by subjecting an audience to a 30-minute concert of one traditional ballad was a great success.

> *After the concert, several members of the audience approach me, admitting that when they heard my opening words – that I was going to sing the same ballad over and over again – they had honestly felt dismay, sure that this concert would be unimaginably tedious. But as soon as I started singing, and they heard and felt the differences between each version, they were hooked. I can tell from the compliments I receive that the passion I feel for ballads made its impact on my listeners.*
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> *I am feeling a tremendous high; not simply because of having performed well. I sense a shroud has been lifted. I feel the power of the ballads once again stirring within me. What the audience didn't – couldn't – realize is that this choice of set, unique as it was, not only rekindled my existing passion, but left me with an even deeper appreciation of the genre. Realizing this, I feel immensely relieved.*

The ballads have brought me back.

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**Norman Kennedy's version (recorded on his CD: *'Live' in Scotland,* Living Tradition "The Tradition Bearers" series, 2001)**

There was a lady in the North,
*Aye the rose and linsey O*
She fell in love wi' her fai-ther's clerk,
*Doon by the green-wood sidey O.*

He courted her for a year and a day,
And syne this fair maid he did betray.

She leaned her back against a tree,
And there the salt tear, it lidded her e'e.

She leaned her back against a thorn,
And there twa bonnie boys to her was born...

She's taen a penknife frae her side,
With it she's twined them o' their sweet lives.

She's taen the kerchief frae her heed,
Tae mak' for them their winding sheet.

She's lain them 'neath a marble stane,
Thinking tae gang a maiden hame.

As she was walkin' by the school,

She saw twa bonnie boys playin' at ball.

"Oh bonnie boys, gin thou were mine,
I'd dress ye up in satins sae fine."

"Oh cruel mither, when we were thine,
We saw very little o' your satins sae fine."

"Oh bonnie boys, come tell tae me,
What will the judgement on me be?"

"Seven lang years a bird in the wood,
And seven lang years a fish in the flood.

"And seven lang years a warnin' bell,
And seven lang years in the pits o' Hell."

"Welcome, welcome bird in the wood,
And welcome, welcome fish in the flood.

"And welcome, welcome warnin' bell,
But God's mercy keep me frae the pits o' Hell."

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**A.L. Lloyd's version, from *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (recorded on the compilation CD: *English & Scottish Folk Ballads*, Topic Records, 1996)**

She leaned herself against a thorn
*All alone and so lonely,*
And there had two pretty babes born
*And it's down by the green wood side-y.*

"Smile not so sweet my bonny babes;
If you smile so sweet, you'll smile me dead."

She took off her ribbon bells
All for to make the mourning knell.

She had a penknife long and sharp,
She pressed it through their tender hearts.

She digged a grave beyond the sun
And there she's buried them sweet babes in.

She stuck her penknife in the green,
But the more she wiped the more blood was seen.

She threw the penknife far away,
But the farther she threw, the nearer it came.

As she was going by the church,
She seen two pretty babes on the porch.

As she came into her father's hall,
She saw two pretty babes playing at ball.

"Oh babes, oh babes, if you were mine,
I'd dress you up in the scarlet fine."

"Oh mother, oh mother, we once were thine.
You didn't dress us in scarlet so fine.

You took a penknife long and sharp,
And pressed it through our tender hearts.

You dug a grave beyond the sun,
And buried us under a marble stone."

"Oh babes, oh babes, what have I to do
For the cruel things I did to you?"

"Seven long years a bird in the wood,
And seven long years a fish in the flood.

Seven long years a warning bell,
And seven long years in the deeps of Hell."

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**Frankie Armstrong's version (recorded on her LP *Lovely on the Water*, 1972)**

There was a lady lived in York,
*All alone and alone-y-o*
She proved a child by her own father's clerk
*Down by the greenwood side-y-o.*

She leaned her back against a thorn,
And there she had her baby born.

She pulled out her wee penknife;
And she took that sweet babe's life.

She wiped the penknife on her shoe,
The more she wiped the more red it grew.

She wiped the blade all on the grass,
But the harder she wiped, the blood ran fast.

She washed her hands all in the stream
Thinking to turn a maid again.

As she was a-walking down to her father's hall,
She saw three babes a-playing at the ball.

One dressed in silk, the other in satin
The other naked as ever was born.

"Oh little babe, if you were mine,
I'd dress you in silk and satin so fine."

"Oh mother dear, I once was thine,
You neither dressed me course nor fine.

The coldest clay it was my bed;
The green grass was my coverlet."

"Oh my fine babes, what will become of me?"
"You'll be seven long years a bird in the tree.

"Seven long years the tongue of a bell;
And seven long years as a porter in Hell."

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**Hedy West's version (recorded on her 1967 LP *Ballads*, and collected by Cecil Sharp from Mrs. Mary Gibson, Marion NC, 1918**

There lived a lady in New York
*All alone and alone-y*
She fell in love with her father's clerk
*All down by the greenwood side-y.*

As she was walking over the ridge,
She found herself a-growing big.

She leaned her back against an oak,
First it bent and then it broke.

She leaned her back against a thorn,
And there she had two little babes born.

She carried a penknife both keen and sharp;
She pierced those little babes through the heart.

She buried them under a bunch of rue,
And prayed to the Lord that they'd never come to.

As she was walking back that day,
She saw two little babes at play.

"Babes, oh babes, if you were mine,
I'd dress you up in silks so fine."

"Mother, oh mother, when we were thine,
You neither dressed us course nor fine."

"Mother, oh mother, for our sakes,
You'll always carry the key to Hell's gate."

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**Children's version: tune and some lyrics from "Wella, Wella" (performed by the Clancys and the Dubliners), and other lyrics from Bronson's *The Singing of Child's Popular Ballads*, "There was a lady dresst in green"**

There was a lady lived in the wood,
*Wella, Wella, Wailla*
She had a baby three months old
*Down by the river Sailla*.

She had a penknife, three foot long,
She stuck it in the baby's head.

She washed the penknife in the well,
The more she washed, the more blood fell.

There came a rat-tat at the door,
Three policemen came rushing in.

"Are you the woman what killed the child?"
"I am the woman what killed the child."

Off to prison she did go,
The rope got chucked and she got hung

The moral of this story is
Don't stick knives in babies' heads.