

ISSUE TWENTY : WINTER 2022  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS AND MEANING

<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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*Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing Services](https://www.librariespublishing.com/) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](https://www.umn.edu/advanced-study/).

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ISSN 2471-190X

# CONTENTS

## Introductions

Introduction to Issue Twenty By Laurie Moberg, Editor .....	4
Guest Editor's Introduction to Issue Twenty: Rivers and Meaning By Mary Modeen .....	6

## Features

<i>RIVER FUGUES</i> By Margaret Cogswell .....	15
(Re)connecting Community to the Awataha Stream By Laura Donkers and Charmaine Bailie .....	47
TWEED By Tania Kovats and Mary Modeen .....	60
Professor Jiao Xingtao and <i>The Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project</i> By Jiao Xingtao and Mary Modeen .....	100

## In Review

<i>Light and Language</i> at Lismore Castle Arts By Ciara Healy Musson .....	113
---	-----

## Geographies

In the Crook of My Elbow By Katie Hart Potapoff .....	120
--	-----

## Perspectives

River / Museum By Miriam Mallalieu .....	128
---	-----

## Primary Sources

Photo Essay of Ilhabela Rivers By Francisco Pereira Da Silva, Laelcio Pereira Da Silva, and Helena Beutel .....	136
Reflecting On Brackish Waters By Louise Ritchie .....	164
Between Two Rivers: Two Ballads from a Scots Traveller Family By Arthur Watson .....	173

## Teaching and Practice

The River and The Bridge By Robert Snikkar .....	179
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PRIMARY SOURCES

# BETWEEN TWO RIVERS: TWO BALLADS FROM A SCOTS TRAVELLER FAMILY

By Arthur Watson

A generational migration by both sides of my family from upper Donside in Scotland brought them to Aberdeen long before I was born. The city is bounded by two rivers: the River Don to the north and the River Dee to the south. Although both rise in the Cairngorm massif, their journeys to the sea are marked by divergent characteristics, with the Don taking the more benign path:

Ae mile o Don is worth three o Dee,  
Except for mountain, moor and tree.[1]

In pre-Christian times the rivers were cast as twin deities—the Don, male and the Dee, female. This is echoed in Simon Fraser’s drawing where they are cast as witch and warlock.

In Aberdeen, I was unknowingly brought up in a street of tenement-dwelling travellers where I absorbed words of their cant into my native dialect. By the 1950s, most travellers were in various stages of integration into an often-hostile settled community, prized apart from their peripatetic way of life, a life that had been sustained by seasonal farm work and horse-trading, along



*Detail from Fig. 2, Singing in the Gallery (2011) with the last of the great traveller singers: Sheila Stewart (center in black) and Elizabeth Stewart (right in purple), and the author (left).  
Photographer Andy McGregor, courtesy of Steven Anderson.*

with hawking, tinsmithing, and fishing for river pearls. At this time, pioneering work by the poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson had begun to reveal the rich oral culture of the travellers. Henderson refers to the oral traditions of the travellers as “the carrying stream.” In the north-east of Scotland, his principal informant was that doyen of ballad singers, Jeannie Robertson, and her family of singers, storytellers, and pipers. I first heard her sing when a schoolboy interested in folk song. I began to focus on a deeper engagement with the traveller repertory, its content and context, the particulars of singing style, and the primacy of oral transmission.

Here I will reference and sing two ballads from the Robertson family. Although settled in the city, they continued to take the road every summer until the 1950s on their established route: “up the Dee and down the Don.” My growing friendship with Jeannie’s nephew, Stanley, gave further insights into the traveller mindset, its spirituality, and its superstition. In turn, I introduced Stanley to the artist Simon Fraser, already an experienced illustrator and nascent publisher. The resultant book, *Exodus to Alford*,<sup>[2]</sup> was the first of five with Simon and Balnain Books. As a boy, Stanley had joined his family on their annual migration, and this provided both the content and structure

of his first book. It could be seen as sharing aspects of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Each is the work of an individual author who speaks in the multiple voices of invented characters to tell invented stories. It has, however, been suggested that many of the pilgrims’ tales were in circulation long before Chaucer re-presented them. This was also the case with many of the stories in *Exodus to Alford*. Both books use the journey as a device to link the tales and their tellers, but here place is given more importance as a progression through specific landscapes from the author’s lived experience, gained on his annual summer walk.

In the early twentieth century, the Aberdeenshire folk song collector Gavin Greig charted the demise of social singing with the rise of the village hall and its stage dividing communities into active performers and a larger, passive audience. This was in my thoughts when invited to participate in a performance event: “to challenge institutional representations of national identity, by giving voice to non-institutional values” as part of the celebrations for the reopening of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition to Greig’s hierarchy within song, I wished to address the hierarchal context implicit within the venue. The quality of major art collections is established

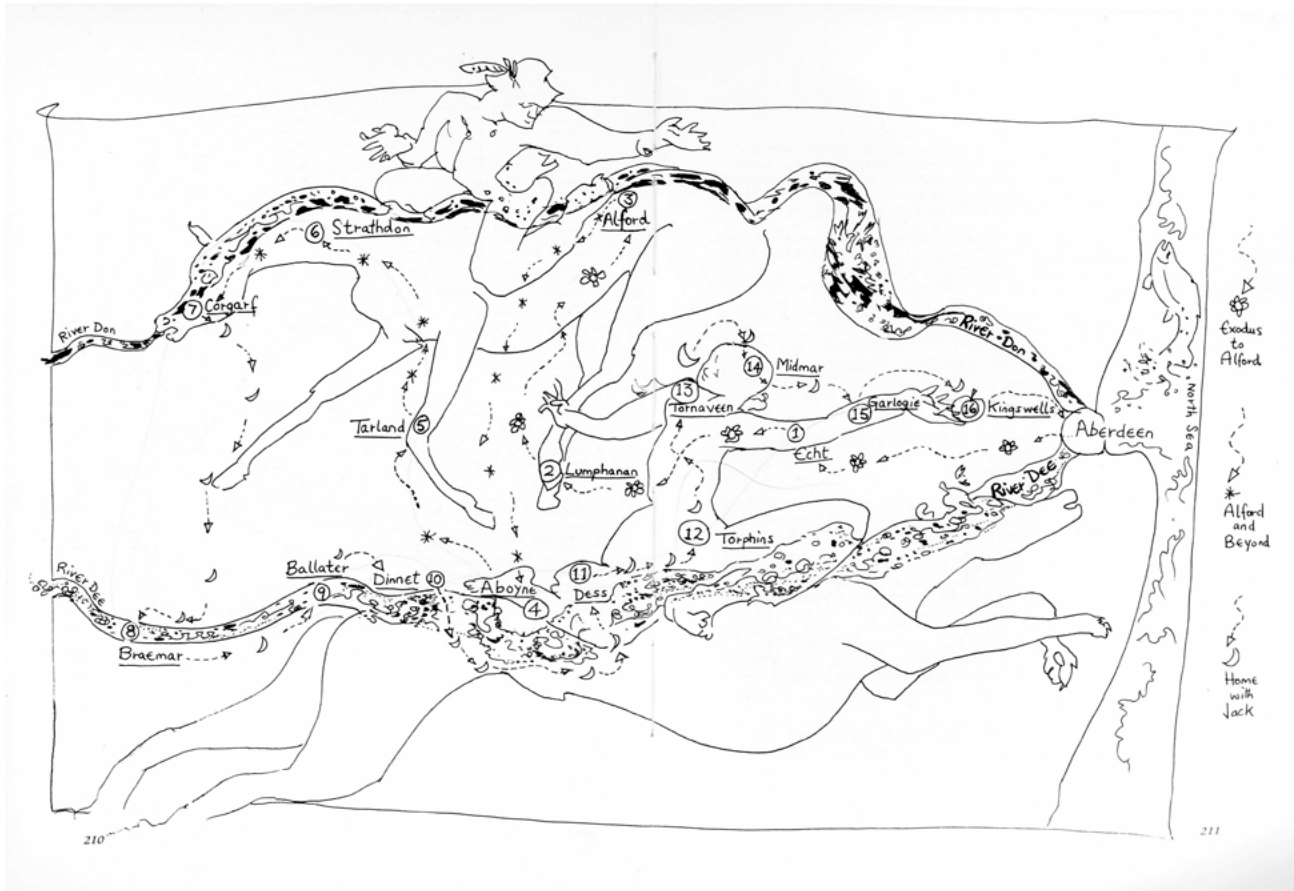


Fig. 1, Simon Fraser’s imaginative drawing of the route used in ‘Exodus to Alford’ (pp. 210–11), including the witch and the warlock. This is more complex than their traditional path up one river and down the other. Here there are multiple crossings between the valleys. Image courtesy of Simon Fraser.



Fig. 2, Singing in the Portrait Gallery (2011) with the last of the great traveller singers: Sheila Stewart (center in black) and Elizabeth Stewart (right in purple), and the author (left). Photographer Andy McGregor, courtesy of Steven Anderson.

through connoisseurship underpinned by informed critique. If, as here, the collection is of portraits, then hierarchies are further expanded by the status of those portrayed.

My response was to deliver a triptych of ballads in which conventions of love and marriage across class divides were broken. One of these is used here: *The Laird of Drum*, from Jeannie Robertson. The laird first courts, and then marries, a shepherd's daughter very much against the will of his family.[4] However, the final verse takes the long view:

Fan he is deid an I am deid  
An baith in ae grave laid, o;  
Fan seven lang years they are past and gone,  
Fa's tae ken hes dust fae mine, o.[5]

The Castle of Drum still stands close to the River Dee, some 13 miles west of Aberdeen, at the outset of the Robertsons' annual journey.

*Listen to 'The Laird of Drum' sung by Arthur Watson. Recording courtesy of Arthur Watson.*

The second ballad instanced here is located close to the end of the trip, at Monymusk on the Don, two days walk from Aberdeen. The tune I use is from a recording of Stanley's father, Willie Robertson, Jeannie's brother.

Although at the time *The Laird of Drum* would have been thought to be transgressive, *Johnnie the Brine* remained transgressive throughout its history. Johnnie sets out, against his mother's advice, to poach deer. After gorging themselves on the venison, Johnnie and his hunting dogs fall asleep. They are discovered by an old man, who

## Footnotes

[1] This illustrates the productivity of the Don valley, which for much of its course flows through prime agricultural land. A further saying defines the turbulent Dee as "drowning three to the Don's one."

reports their transgression to the seven foresters. Two of them shoot arrows at the sleeping poacher, waking him from his sleep. He looses a volley of arrows, killing all but one, then:

He's broken fower o that man's ribs,  
Hes airm an hes collarbane;  
He has tied him fast tae hes high horse back,  
An wi the tidings sent him hame.[6]

*Listen to 'Johnny the Brine' sung by Arthur Watson. Recording courtesy of Arthur Watson.*

As my relationship with Stanley Robertson grew, he shared more of his family history and his reflections on his own life. He spoke eloquently of the importance of his "summer walks" with his extended family through Deeside and Donside. Of all the points on this annual journey, the Old Road of Lumphanan had the greatest spiritual resonance for him. He was conscious that this was the land of Macbeth but it was also the point equidistant from the Dee and Don—the turning point on the road back to Aberdeen and the twentieth century. I visited this location with Stanley and returned there with his friends and family following his funeral at the Church of the Latter Day Saints in Aberdeen. After Lumphanan, the journey back to Aberdeen signaled a return to school yard bullying, to the constraints of tenement life, and to cultural values that were far from his own. But as previously stated, Stanley Robertson was an intensely spiritual man, so even with the problems and practicalities of daily life in the city, in his head he was still living the stories and walking by Aberdeenshire's two great rivers.

[2] S. Robertson with S. Fraser, *Exodus to Alford* (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1988).

[3] S. Anderson, *Your Leaning Neck—Song as Portrait* (Aberdeen: Peacock Visual Arts, 2012). This documents the performances at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) (December 2, 2011) and a further performance at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen, with twin projections from the Edinburgh performances at SNPG, at Peacock Visual Arts. Both programs were devised and presented by artist Steven Anderson.

[4] Unusual for a ballad of this age, the narrative is historically accurate. Following the death of his aristocratic wife, Alexander Irvine, the 11th Laird of Drum married the shepherd's daughter, Margaret Coutts. She was 16 and he, 63. He died six years later in 1687.

[5] *Fan* (when), *deid* (dead), *baith* (both), *ae* (one), *lang* (long), *gane* (gone), *fa's* (who is), *tae* (to), *ken* (know), *hes* (his), *fae* (from).

P. Shouldham-Shaw, E. B. Lyle, and A. R. Hunter, *The Greig-Duncan Folksong Collection*, vol. 4 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990).

This source includes 25 substantive entries for *the Laird of Drum*, which cite 12 texts and 17 tunes (pp. 249–65). *The Greig-Duncan Folksong Collection* was made by Gavin Greig, a schoolmaster, and James B. Duncan, a minister of the Free Church of Scotland. In the early twentieth century, they amassed some 3,500 texts and 3,300 tunes from sources in a relatively small area of northeast Scotland. Their handwritten manuscripts, with tuned in sol-fa or transcribed in staff notation, were lodged in the special collections of Kings College, Aberdeen. The initiative to publish the bulk of the collection cited here came from Patrick Shouldham-Shaw of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. The 8 volumes were issued incrementally between 1981 and 2002, initially by Aberdeen University Press, and on their demise, by Mercat Press.

*The Laird of Drum* is represented by ten full texts, the longest running to 29 verses, 3 of which have tunes, 12 tunes with no texts, and 5 fragmentary texts.

[6] *Fower* (four), *hes* (his), *airm* (arm), *collarbane* (collarbone), *tae* (to), *wi* (with), *hame* (home).

B. H. Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, vol. 3 of 4 (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1996).

Francis James Child brought together narrative ballads from printed and manuscript sources for his collection *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Fellow American Bertrand Harris Bronson undertook an ambitious project to gather versions of those ballads which had survived in the oral tradition since the publication of the Child collection.

*Johnny the Brine* was listed by Child, and subsequently by Bronson, as "Johnnie Cock" (Child no.114) and within the fifteen Bronson variants the hero is referred to as "Johnnie O'Braidisleys," "Johnny Cox," and "Jocky O'Bridiesland," amongst others. Only in Jeannie Robertson's version is the protagonist identified as "Johnny the Brine." 10 examples in Bronson are from the northeast of Scotland, 8 being from Greig and Duncan. Of the other two, one is from John Strachan (recorded by Alan Lomax and Hamish Henderson), and the other is from a recording of Jeannie Robertson made by Henderson for the School of Scottish Studies.

## Recommended Citation

Watson, Arthur. 2021. "Between Two Rivers: Two Ballads from a Scots Traveller Family." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 20. <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/between-two-rivers/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.8794>

## About the Author

Arthur Watson was born in 1951 and educated in Aberdeen where he established an artists' print workshop, gallery, and publisher. At an early age, he spent every summer on a hill farm on upper Donside. At this time, he became fascinated by Aberdeenshire's rich Indigenous culture of folksong, superstition, and history. In 1990, he represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale, going on to exhibit widely in Europe, the United States, and Japan. In 1996, he joined Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, as a senior lecturer. As a member of the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, he served as secretary, and then as the twenty-first president.