The Flowering Thorn

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In his note on the ballad of “Rosie Anderson,” twelve versions of which appear in his collection, Gavin Greig makes the following observations:

Few traditional songs are so well and so widely known as “Rosie Anderson.” We may take it to be about a century old, judging from the date of the events to which it refers.... Rose Anderson it seems was the daughter of a merchant in Perth and was married at the age of sixteen to another Perth merchant. As a result of certain discoveries an action for divorce was raised by the aggrieved husband, which, after much litigation, was at length granted. Lord Elgin’s own first marriage was dissolved in 1808, possibly as a result of the Rosie Anderson affair.... The opinion may be ventured that only the folksinger, armed with his unconscious art, his unpretentious style and his ingenuous ethic, could well afford to handle the delicate theme. The fact is that folksong has been able to deal with many situations that literary song would hardly dare to touch, with the result that the humbler minstrelsy covers a vastly wider area of human experience. (1963: article 127)

Greig’s view of folk singing in this extract, based on ideas formed before he had his eyes opened to its true nature by his collecting experience, connects it with the humbler ranks of society, the uneducated peasantry, as was common in other European cultures. He speaks of “unconscious art,” “unpretentious style,” and “ingenuous ethic” before admitting that “folksong has been able to deal with many situations that literary song would hardly dare to touch.” But this was not because of the reasons he gives. In Scotland, folk song has never been confined to any one social class since we have ballads and songs composed by all kinds of people, from kings to ploughmen. Greig’s last sentence shows that he has learned to view folk song in a different light because experience has shown him that it “covers a vastly wider area of human experience.” Many ballads and songs that have been popular for generations have dealt with scandal, human frailty, and tragic relationships and have been widely sung by all kinds of people.
David Graham-Campbell, a Perth local historian, gives the following information germane to the ballad of “Rosie Anderson”:

Everyone regarded Thomas Anderson as a man of substance, and his daughter Rose as an heiress—an eminently suitable bride for the up-and-coming son of another wealthy merchant. Sure enough, in that year 1792, Rose Anderson was married, with the promise of a tocher [dowry] of £3000 to Thomas Hay Marshall, the eldest surviving son of another Thomas Marshall, who was very much a member of the Beautiful Order [the local oligarchy.]

(Graham-Campbell 1985: 2)

Sadly, Marshall, whose public life had been crowned with success, was not so happy in his marriage, a fact made clear by a petition to the Consistory Court when Marshall sought a divorce on the grounds of his wife’s adultery.

The divorce petition named two officers who had been stationed in Perth: the Earl of Elgin, who commanded the Elgin Fencibles, and Dr. Harrison, medical officer to the Durham Rangers. The Earl of Elgin’s lodgings were located across the road from Hay Marshall’s house in Charlotte Street, and servants who were called upon to give evidence testified that when Hay Marshall was away from home, the Earl and Rosie “exchanged signals from their windows, sent each other frequent notes, and…[he] visited her late at night, when they sat together in the gloaming, refused to have candles brought and even blocked up the keyholes so that they should not be watched” (Graham-Campbell 1985: 7). Rosie’s parents had them followed up Kinnoull Hill, a popular resort for courting couples, where a woodcutter’s son saw them disappear into a thicket. Rosie stated in her defense that her parents had forced her into the marriage and Hay Marshall was only interested in her money. As this was probably at least partly true, the ballad can, like many songs, be seen as a largely one-sided version of the story.

Set amid some of the most beautiful countryside in Scotland, Perth in the 1790s was an exciting place to be. It had had city status since medieval times, when it received its charter from William the Lion and became the capital of Scotland and the site of the royal court, with a fine pre-Reformation church that still stands. In the eighteenth century, the city was emulating Edinburgh, which had become the capital, by building a New Town of fine Georgian houses. Land for this new development was originally part of the property of Blackfriars Monastery and had been purchased by a prosperous merchant, Thomas Anderson,
who had drawn up the plans for the new buildings. Anderson's son-in-law, Thomas Hay Marshall, oversaw the actual implementation of the plans.

Thomas Hay Marshall, whose statue stands outside Perth Museum with the Latin inscription “Cives Grati,” was a member of one of the group of Perth families who controlled the town through a system known as the Beautiful Order. The Marshalls were well-to-do linen merchants, who also served on the council; Hay Marshall’s father had been provost, or mayor, of Perth. He married Thomas Anderson’s daughter Rose, who, as we have seen, was regarded as a rich heiress and proved to be rather wayward.

Thomas and Rosie occupied a house beside the North Inch, still an extensive grassy park beside the River Tay. In those days, before the New Town development, washerwomen used it as a place to bleach their clothes, but flooding has always been a problem along the River Tay and its tributaries, which together put more water into the North Sea than any other river system in Britain. When the river floods, the North Inch becomes a loch; indeed, the name Inch, from the Gaelic *innis*, suggests it may at one time have been an island. It was also, incidentally, the site of the Battle of the Clans in 1396 and is connected with ballads and legends about William Wallace.

George Penny, a Perth weaver reports that the Inch “was bounded on the north by a wall called the White Dyke, which was said to have been built by the fines levied from the brewers and bakers for fighting with the weavers; and was erected to prevent encroachments of the Muirton farmers [to the north of the city] who were in the habit of taking a few furrows, from time to time, from the common good” (1836: 7). Before the new development, the Dunkeld Road and the Town Lade ran across the Inch, but these were moved farther back from the river, the former behind the new terraced houses, and a racecourse was laid out on the Inch. The park then became a place where the townspeople walked out in their Sunday best in front of the fine houses of Rose Terrace, which looked across the Inch and the River Tay to Kinnoull, a spectacular wooded hillside with a sheer cliff, the scene of many a suicide, even to the present day. At one end of this terrace is a house still called Provost Marshall’s that was to have become the new town residence of Hay Marshall and his wife. The circumstances that prevented this from happening form the substance of the ballad of Rosie Anderson.

In the 1790s, Perth, being a garrison town, was full of regiments raised for the Napoleonic Wars and its streets must have been full of scarlet and blue uniforms, worn by handsome young men. Thomas Hay Marshall, already involved with the local militia, made the patriotic gesture, which proved a miscalculation as far
as his marriage was concerned, of holding open house for all officers billeted in the town. He himself, being absorbed with both business and town affairs and the overseeing of the New Town development, probably had little time for the social life that his wife enjoyed; he was clearly not always present when officers took advantage of his hospitable offer to call at the house in Charlotte Street.

At this time, Perth was also a hotbed of antiwar and republican radicalism allied to the movement for Parliamentary reform. The Tree of Liberty was raised by the Friends of the People on the Inch to celebrate a French victory over England. France was traditionally a friend and ally of Scotland, and not only the working people but also many of the professional classes were against the government, the war, and the gentry.

The Marshalls and Andersons, of course, like other families who owed their position to the Beautiful Order, would not have sympathized with this cause. Even a moderate radical like George Penny, whose Traditions of Perth refers to the order as an “abominable system, calculated for the complete subversion of the liberties of its citizens” (1836: 16), could see that reform was needed, but was not prepared to adopt violent means to achieve it. The leaders of the radical movement were often weavers, perhaps because, having a thriving trade, they were able to devote time to political agitation. The subversive activities of the reformers and republicans and the public disorder these caused, however, were another issue that preoccupied Thomas Hay Marshall in his civic role. In 1799 Rosie was in London, running up bills for fashionable clothes despite a legal injunction issued by her husband two years previously. David Graham-Campbell details examples of her purchases as “a lady’s habit of superfine dark blue cloth with two rows of double gilt buttons, and a similar one of brown cloth, with three rows of gold buttons, two silk corsets and two velvet collars, two colored bonnets and two livery round hats, together with three more hats later in the year and a fur cape” (1985: 9). A divorce was granted in 1803, and Hay Marshall died five years later from “problems of ill health and overwork” at the age of thirty-eight.

Probably as a consequence of the decline in the linen trade in Perth, which was based on hand-loom weaving, Rosie’s father’s fortune had evaporated. Rosie claimed that that was the point when Marshall began seeking a divorce, having turned a blind eye to her indiscretions until then. Perhaps to dodge creditors, and also because of the scandal in the town, Rosie had to go with her parents and live in Edinburgh, where she continued to have liaisons with officers “from a fort or battery between Newhaven and Leith” (Graham-Campbell 1985: 9). Graham-Campbell’s account concentrates thereafter on Hay Marshall’s life, which
ended not in the house in Rose Terrace, which he never occupied, but in another called Whistlecroft, on the other side of the River Tay in Kinnoull.

The ballad tells us that Rosie went to London, had a son, and spent time in Bedlam, or Bethlehem Hospital, the insane asylum of the time. As the ballad story closely adheres to the truth in the earlier part, it seems likely that the latter part may also be accurate. The sympathy of the balladeer, however, seems to be entirely with Hay Marshall, who was popular and respected in his own community. No doubt this had some effect on the popularity of the ballad, although the willingness of people to sing about Rosie’s misfortunes also suggests an element of schadenfreude. This, of course, is not unusual in ballad tradition, where many older ballads probably owe their long life at least partly to the fact that people enjoy scandalous stories about the high and mighty. Certainly the use of English in the ballad suggests that it may have been a printed broadside rather than created orally and therefore easily circulated in something like this form:

Rosie Anderson [collated version by Sheila Douglas]

Hay Marshall was a gentleman as ever lived on earth
He’s married Rosie Anderson, a lady intil Perth.

He’s courted her, he’s married her, made her his wedded wife,
And on that day I dare to say he loved her as his life.

There was an assembly intil Perth and Rosie she was there
Lord Elgin danced with her that night and did her heart ensnare.

Lord Elgin danced with her that night and he’s convoyed her home
Hay Marshall he cam rushing in afore he set her down.

I’m all into surprise he said, I’m all into surprise
To see you kiss my wedded wife before my very eyes.

I did not kiss your wedded wife Lord Elgin he did say
I only brought her home to you from the dangers of the way.

Then Betsy she was sent for the truth for to relate
I would have brought my lady home, Lord Elgin took my place.
Altho you be a lord, he said, and I but a Provost’s son  
I’ll make you smart for this, my lord, altho you think it fun.

He’s tane his Rosie by the hand and led her frae the room.  
I’ll send you to far London till all this strife dies doon.

She had not been in far London a month but barely nine  
When word came to Hay Marshall that Rosie had a son.

O wae be tae ye rose sae red, that ever I loved you!  
What made you leave your own true love to tread the beds of rue?

Hay Marshall’s down to far London with money in his purse  
To try and find some witnesses his Rosie to divorce.

Hay Marshall’s twenty witnesses and Rosie has but two.  
Alas, said Rosie Anderson, whatever shall I do?

If ’twere to do that’s done, she said, if ’twere to do that’s done  
Hay Marshall’s face I would adore, Lord Elgin’s I would shun.

But Spring is coming on, she said, the regiments are near  
Perhaps I’ll find some officer my broken heart to cheer.

Now she has got an officer and he has proved untrue  
And he’s left her in Bedlam her folly for to rue.

Now all ye ladies far and near a warning take by me  
And ne’er forsake your own true love for any lords you see.

Notes
1. This was the same Earl of Elgin who brought back the Elgin Marbles.
2. It was on this hillside that Patrick Geddes, one of the greatest Scottish generalists,  
pioneering botanists, town planners, and environmentalists, spent his childhood.
3. The Friends of the People began in Perth and grew out of an organization called the  
United Scotsmen.
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