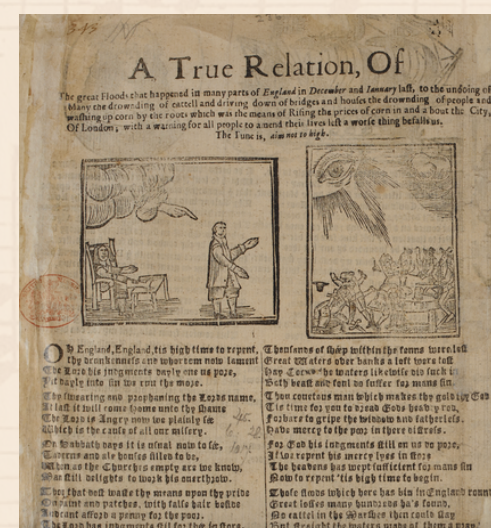


CALL FOR PAPERS

Singing History: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Ballads and the Past

For centuries, the news was sung. As soon as a newsworthy event occurred, ballads were composed, set to familiar tunes, and passed on orally. Printed ballads were sold on busy streets and marketplaces by street singers, who would sing the song as a way of advertising their wares. Ballads combined news, entertainment, and moral lessons in a format designed for maximum dissemination, whatever the literacy rate. They are therefore excellent sources for examining how ordinary people – rather than just educated elites – were encouraged to understand the society in which they lived. Songs told the news of disasters, politics, crime and punishment, military conflicts, and sports. They also sang about workers and labour protests, emigration and new lands, and they told stories of heartbreak, loss, and victory. Ballads were often deliberately sensationalist, consciously seeking to manipulate our emotions.



This conference will explore not only this long-standing European tradition of mass media, but also trace its evolution – through transportation ballads and songs about convict shipwrecks – to 19th-century Australia, a land already rich with Indigenous musical culture. Here, topical songs were often printed in newspapers, and editors commissioned ballads as a way to invent a romanticised image of the fledgling colony. How did this European practice engage – or not – with Australian Indigenous culture, the longest sustained traditions of song in the world?

We invite talks and performances from a range of disciplines that will highlight the multi-media aspects of song and balladry in all its forms, including lyric, music, image, material form, performance, and practice in Europe, Australia, and beyond.

We are also interested in how the digital humanities have transformed our understanding of historical song. How can we use technologies and tools of the 21st century to bring songs from the past to a modern audience? How can existing databases, such as those documenting Australia's convict history, be linked to those cataloguing song, such as convict ballads? Trove has become an indispensable tool for contextualising the past, but how can we use it to connect and expand these linkages historically, contextually, and digitally?

This 2-day gathering at the National Library of Australia, Canberra, will bring together historians, literary scholars, singers, musicians, musicologists, art historians, folklorists and folk song practitioners, scholars in digital humanities, archivists, librarians, and anyone interested in topics such as, but not limited to:

- ballads, songs, and balladry
- how popular song figures in musicology
- folklore and folk song studies
- singers, songwriters, and the songwriting process
- the history of news, news media, and 'fake news'
- political history, military history, colonial history
- convict history, convict ballads
- Australian history, Indigenous history, diasporic histories (including the many emigrant groups to Australia)
- music and nation-building, national and sporting anthems
- protest songs
- maritime and shipwreck history, sea shanties
- history of sports and sports songs
- digital history, digital humanities, digital cultural heritage
- archives, Trove, libraries (esp. digitised collections)
- print media, print culture
- visual material culture, broadsides

Keynote speakers include:

- **Professor Siv Gøril Brandtzæg** (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), expert in Comparative Literature, broadside ballads and digital humanities.
- **Dr Angela McShane** (Warwick University), social and cultural historian of balladry in Britain.

The symposium will also launch the database **Singing the News**, hosted by the Centre for Early Modern Studies (CEMS) at the Australian National University.



Australian
National
University



Submission Details:

Given the many disciplines that study song, we invite a range of conference formats: traditional papers and panels, but also lightning talks, workshops (such as singing, music or dance lessons), and performances – feel free to get in touch to discuss ideas you might have about presentation formats.

Please submit abstracts of c.250 words, plus a short bio (100 words) by 30 March 2027 to **SingingHistory2027@gmail.com** with the subject line "Singing History 2027 Proposal". Notifications of acceptance will be provided by the end of May. If you need earlier confirmation for travel or funding purposes, write to **SingingHistory2027@gmail.com**.

A limited number of modest travel bursaries will be available for HDR/ECR scholars. If you are interested in applying for a bursary, please include a statement of need with your abstract which details your access to travel funding.

Conference organising committee: Una McIlvenna, Julianne Bell, and Madeleine Sargeant.
This conference is an outcome of ARC FT230100537 'Singing the News: Ballads as News Media in Europe and Australia 1550-1920'.



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