

# The Death of Ellen Brown

Dear Andrew

## Mural Trail 2011

It is my pleasure to enclose a record of the Miners' section of the 2011 Murals Trail for your records. I have inserted photographs, where appropriate.

## Foreword



The Death of Ellen Brown was first performed on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2011 as part of the 'Murals Trail' festival in Prestonpans. This short report is for archive purposes as part of the overall activities within the Prestonpans Area.

This short play described the plight of miners and their families working in the coal pits in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The scene focused on the death of a young and heavily pregnant woman Ellen (*played by Margaret McCabe*) and examined her relationship with God and her unborn child as she was dying. The play was set at the former colliery of Prestongrange within the huge, now disused, brake calipers that used to control the descent and ascent of the miners to and from the pit in the 1960s. The stage, a 'womb like' metal structure, was completed by the cross (timber prop – sourced on site) that trapped Ellen. She was supported in her role by *Faith-Ann Mulgrew* who played her sister Mary. Ably and caringly directed by *Mhairi Gilroy* [2<sup>nd</sup> year student, Queen Margaret University], the play is a tribute to those that died in the collieries of Scotland during this period.

The performance of both actress was extremely moving; the deep frustration, despair, love and resignation felt by Ellen was sensitively and caringly captured by Margaret's interpretation; as was the strength and final weakness portrayed by her sister Mary played with great care and commitment by Faith-Anne. A sensitive directorial performance by Mhairi Gilroy, ensured the symbolism of the environment and the set details were not lost on the audience in this very professionally directed short play.

The short play ended with a poignant message from Mary with the overall event ending with a uplifting musical performance of '*The Black*' sung by East Lothian's *Coreen Scott* with the wonderful *Sean Paul Newman* on the guitar.

**This was based upon a true story.**

Robert Allan

# The Death of Ellen Brown

Two women are lying together, the elder of the two holding her heavily pregnant sister in her arms. They are in total darkness. The pregnant woman is weeping.

**Ellen Brown**(aged around 30) Drawer - Margaret McCabe

**Mary Mcleod** (aged around 40) – Faith-Anne Mulgrew

**Directed by:** Mhairi Gilroy

**Written By:** Robert Allan

**Mary** (In the darkness she strokes the hair of her fallen sister) Dinnae fash now Bairn, they will find us for sure, they ken there has been a fa' and the men will be here soon.

**Ellen** (She smiles through obvious pain and tears) Bairn, ye still ca' me a bairn – I'm thirty years auld and with ma fourth bairn on the wey and ye still ca' me Bairn.

**Mary** (She smiles and continues to stroke Ellen's hair) You are my wee sister, ye'll always be my wee sister and so I will always ca' ye ma wee bairn.

*They stay silent for a short while*

**Ellen**

Am I badly trapped Mary?

**Mary**

(In the darkness she looks up suppressing the great need to cry)  
Can you no feel the weights against yer leg Ellen?

*Note: Mary Realises that Ellen has no feeling in her legs and that this is a bad thing she decides to take action.*

**Ellen**

I cannae Mary, I don't feel a thing, I'm no in pain just cannae feel anything

**Mary**

Well Bairn, there is a timber prop over both yer legs, just above the knee. I tried to see if I could move them but ...I could'nae (pause, then she nods gently) The men will be here soon and they will be able tae shift it. But in the meantime I am goin' tae see how far the collapse is along the shaft and tae see if I can make ony progress so you keep quiet here her till I get back.

**Ellen**

(She cries out but there is pain in the cry) Oh please dinnae leave me Mary, I'm so afeart, please dinnae...

**Mary**

(Loudly but with care) Now enough o' that. What would our mither say if she heard that then ? Her twa lassies greetin' in the dark? She would be black affronted she wid. Naw, now you stay here – I need to find out how bad the fa' is tae see if I can talk wi' the men.

**Ellen**

Aye Mary, 'm sorry. I'm afeart and dinnae want tae be alane in the dark.



Ellen and Mary Trapped in a rock fall



Mary leaving Ellen to search for hope

**Mary** I know ma bairn but I need to make a move and tae guide these men. (She kisses Ellen’s forehead) I willnae be long now, less than ten meenites (Gingerly she begins to move along the shaft making sure she doesn’t put any more pressure on Ellen).

(Pause)

**Ellen** It’s me and you now wee one. From one ‘bairn’ tae anither we are both in the dark here eh? (She smiles and rubs her pregnant stomach). Just anither twa weeks and you would have seen the Sun. (Pauses and says quietly) Now I’m nae sure if either o’ us will ever see the sun.

I’ve always been afeart o’ this darkness, since a bairn of fower when I first came down tae work. I had tae get over that fear fast or face the skelp o’ the reddsmen. I quickly learned tae fear that mair (she ironically laughs). Still, I never ever got used tae this and couldnae wait tae draw the clean fresh air after shift.



Ach, I’m being an old misery guts – of course ye’ll see the sun, breathe the fresh air and play wi yer sisters and brithers. Its winter up their jist now – a bit colder than being down here. And that’s why we are doon here tae bring heat tae other folks families. This is hard but honest work. Oh I cannae wait tae git up top and cuddle my weans. I’ve been in Fa’s before and the men have got me oot easily.

That was your auntie I was speaking tae earlier. She’s awa young one tae see if there is a wey oot, (she laughs and grimaces in pain at the same time).Did ye hear her? She calls me the Bairn (she laughs) I love her so much but she aye plays the big sister card – her wi’ nae man and nae weans. Och that sounds terrible and I dinnae mean onything by it but I’ve lived, I’ve experienced pain giein’ birth tae you and yer brithers and saisters, aye and ...well I’ve seen twa o them die. Aye, one at birth and one at three years. (She pauses and lets out a short desperately sad cry. Aye an’ noo i’ll top that – killing my bairn by dieing mysel’ (she sobs uncontrollably).

(suddenly, violently and angrily she curses)



Why hae ye forsaken me Lord, why have you forsaken this unborn soul on my body who’s done nae harm tae man nor beast. Have I been such a bad wummin as tae have this wrath laid upon my head and the heid of this wee life (she clutches her stomach).

Have I no drawn enough coal in this bastarding dark hole? Have I now sacrificed enough-

blood - ma life and the life o' mine in tribute tae ye. (She weeps in pain as much as desperation) Oh forgive me Lord forgive ma mortal doubts for I dinna ken what i am saying. I'm in pain Lord I dinnae ken what I am saying. I really need you lord like I've never needed help before, I need you tae help this wee life below my heart (she rubs her stomach) and...if ye save me I'll be the best mither a woman can be and worship ye day and nicht, I'll work harder - onything I can dae - jist help me please Lord.. (she is losing consciousness intermittently - she is beginning to resign herself to her impending death).

Well wee one it will be soon be time fer us tae meet with yer da, brither and sister. They'll be waiting fer us. It will be a sunny day when we meet them - the miners gala - there will be sunshine and songs and cakes tae eat, aye sugar coated, as many sweetsies as you can eat. There will be a coconut shy tae. I loved the coconut shy. Once I won a coconut. It was like a treasure - I had never seen one afore. Once it was cracked (gentle laugh)and we sooked oot the milk then the coconut was inside for us aw tae... (she feels her stomach and heaves and again desperately cries - she realises the baby inside her isn't moving anymore and is now dead- crying she says softly) Dinna leave me bairn, dinnae leave without me. Oh my God, did I have tae witness anither bairn diein' ? And I couldnae even hold this one in my airms and tell it I loved it, kiss its heid or say my good byes. This shouldnae be happening, naebody should have ta die like this alane and in the dark. She shouts, Its no fair, Its no fair. She shouts tae her sister, Mary, for God's sake Mary, I need you my darling sister. (she begins to ramble)Mary I need you please come back, I need ye, we both need you. Please come back (she drifts into god blessing unconsciousness)

**Mary** (Mary returns, crying and tired and without hope. The previous control gone, She appears defeated). Ellen, I can hear them digging a long way off but I dinnae think we have enough air here. (She starts crying - with a degree of panic in the cries - and puts her arms around Ellen) I dinnae want tae die Ellen, I dinnae want tae die, no here in the dark . I cannae even see yer face (she Panics).

**Ellen** (Ellen is near to death now and she knows it) Mary, you do know that I love you sister.



**Mary** Aye, an I love you too Ellen (she cries)

**Ellen** (Ellen is the stronger of the two now). I'm going to meet mammy and daddy now Mary, oh God (she cries in pain) Promise me you'll look afer ma weans Mary promise me.

**Mary** Of course I will but you'll see them again, you'll see....she realises Ellen is dead) Ellen, Ellen

she screams dinnae leave me, dinnae leave me here in the dark. She weeps uncontrollably.

The drama has ended and Mary stands up:

It was about an hour later the men found me, I wis barely breathin. Ma poor sister was brought oot after a great struggle tae move the timber support that had pinned her down. The men weeped as they carried her oot her broken body and many 'o' the men were angry and took it tae the big hoose only tae be met wi the maister's men and the soldiers.

I kept my promise tae the bairn and looked after her weans. In turn they spent their lives in the pit tae but there was a new hope because o Ellen's death and the death o many other men, women and children. Colliers were beginning to form themselves together fer improvements in their work. I'll be long deid before real change happens though. (she turns awa)

The End

# The Black

## A tribute to the colliers of Prestonpans

Written by Robert Hunter Allan, Music by Coreen Kathlyn Scott & Sean Paul Newman

### Verse 1

We dug doon deep in the dark fer coal  
Way doon deep in that narrow hole  
We broke oor backs in search of black  
They spent oor families for they'll n'er cam back

### Chorus

And in oor hearts and for all oor line  
We dug for life in deep dark Mine  
oor blood's no red oor blood is black  
They spent oor lives and broke oor Backs

### Verse 2

For they took the weans fer they were sma'  
For they took oor wives cause they could cra'  
They broke oor hearts and made us slaves  
And let us rot in those darkened caves

### Verse 3

But the world does change and changed it did  
It saw us lift oor heads wi pride  
We formed oor union which made us strong  
We telt the owners that they were wrong

**Verse 4**

We made a country , an empire too  
And on our backs the nation grew  
We heated the hooses wi the coal we hurled  
We powered the steam that moved the world.

**Verse 5**

And now they close they say we're spent  
The pits are deid but they'll repent  
there is a hundred years or more below  
We'll come again and under we'll go

**Images from the event**  
Mhairi introducing the event



The twa sisters



Faith-Ann heading off!



Faith-Ann caught heading off!



A very pleased Mhairi (and no wonder!)



The whole crew!



The whole crew plus writer.

Images taken during the play.





Margaret and Faith-Ann sharing a joke.





Last words of direction from Mhairi!



Margaret performing.



The return of Mary.



Ellen Pleading to Mary to look after her weans



Faith-Ann's feet!



**The Death of Ellen Brown, played by Margaret McCabe and Faith Ann, directed by Mhairi Gilroy.  
Music by Coreen and Sean Paul.  
Written by Robert Allan**