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PRESS RELEASE - January 8, 2024 - Asheville, NC

## Fiona Ritchie of NPR's long running The Thistle and Shamrock Celtic roots music program to host Burns Night fundraiser in Asheville for regional disaster recovery

**Event Name:** Asheville Sister Cities Inc. 2025 Robert Burns Night Supper

**Date:** 5:00 - 9:30 pm Saturday, January 25, 2025

**Place:** Biltmore DoubleTree (AKA DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Asheville - Biltmore)

[ashevillesistercities.org/burns](http://ashevillesistercities.org/burns)

**Introduction:** The Dunkeld and Birnam, Scotland committee of [Asheville Sister Cities Inc. \(ASCI\)](http://Asheville Sister Cities Inc. (ASCI)) will be hosting a visit by Fiona Ritchie, of NPR's (National Public Radio's) award winning and long running [Thistle and Shamrock](http://The Thistle and Shamrock) Celtic roots music program which [ended on September 30, 2024 after 41 years of weekly broadcasts](http://ended on September 30, 2024 after 41 years of weekly broadcasts). Ritchie will be traveling from her home in Dunkeld, Scotland to join in co-hosting the annual ASCI Robert Burns Night Supper in celebration of Robert Burns's birthday on January 25, 1759. This will be the 266th celebration of the Bard of Scotland's birthday which has taken the form of a traditional Burns Night ceremony since 1801. Tickets and complete event and fundraising information for the event are online at [ashevillesistercities.org/burns](http://ashevillesistercities.org/burns).

**Fundraiser:** Proceeds raised from sponsorships and [2025 Burns Night Fundraiser](http://2025 Burns Night Fundraiser) charity auction and raffle will be contributed toward regional hurricane disaster recovery. [Sponsorships](http://Sponsorships) are available for \$300 to \$2500 or one may [contribute any amount](http://contribute any amount). Proceeds from [ticket sales](http://ticket sales) will be contributed toward The Thistle & Shamrock Roots Music Collection at the University of North Carolina at Asheville (UNCA). This collection contains recordings of all the Celtic musical artists curated and aired on NPR's The Thistle & Shamrock. This exciting and important collection will become part of UNCA's Center for Roots Music, housed in Ramsey Library on the university campus. In partnership with Asheville Sister Cities Inc. and the Swannanoa Gathering, these archives will provide engaging, valuable material for faculty-led research, student exploration and study, and will be the foundation for a possible annual Celtic Music & Arts Symposium. The Thistle & Shamrock Roots Music Collection, generously donated to UNCA by Fiona Ritchie, is a unique record that will enrich UNCA campus life and research, while continuing to build upon the stories and connections central to Western North Carolina history and cultural diaspora. Prior [ASCI Burns Night fundraisers from years past](http://ASCI Burns Night fundraisers from years past) have gone to the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, the Niel Gow Memorial in Birnam, the Birnam Arts, the Dunkeld and Birnam Archive program, and the Dunkeld and Birnam in Bloom landscape project.

**Fiona Ritchie:** Ritchie, a native of Scotland, developed The Thistle & Shamrock show in 1981 at WFAE in Charlotte, North Carolina. It later debuted in June 1983 on radio stations across American Public Radio before moving to NPR in September 1990. The Thistle and Shamrock was amongst the first NPR programs to be carried by WCQS when it began broadcasting from UNCA. WCQS later became the flagship station of Blue Ridge Public Radio. The Thistle & Shamrock became one of the most popular music programs in the history of public radio in the United States. It was most recently heard by 237 NPR

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affiliate stations and has been the most listened-to Celtic music program in the world until Ritchie's retirement in September, 2024. For over more than 4 decades in conjunction with the program, Ritchie has played over 30,000 music tracks, hosted over 400 guests, 200 live performances, and traveled to 70 locations throughout the United States. "The history of NPR is defined by shows like The Thistle & Shamrock," said Keith Jenkins, NPR's Vice President of Visuals and Strategy. "The sense of wonder, joy and discovery that Fiona's show brought to listeners for over 40 years is irreplaceable but we are eternally grateful we've all been able to take this musical journey with her." Ritchie's awards include six World Medals from the New York Festivals' International Competition for Radio Programming, and a Flora Macdonald award from St. Andrews University (NC), which also conferred upon her the degree of honorary doctorate. She is also a 2018 Folk Radio Hall of Fame inductee and a 2016 Scottish Traditional Music Hall of Fame inductee. In 2014, Ritchie was named in Queen Elizabeth II's Birthday Honors List and, at Buckingham Palace, received the high honor and designation from Her Royal Highness as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). [4] Ritchie also serves as a popular instructor of Scottish song each summer during [Traditional Song Week](#) of the Swannanoa Gathering at Warren Wilson College.

**Dunkeld and Birnam, Scotland:** Ritchie has been a key founding leader in the historic 2017 establishment of her home villages of Dunkeld & Birnam, on opposite banks of the River Tay in Perthshire, Scotland, as a Sister City with Asheville. [Official proclamation events](#) [5] were held that year in Birnam and Asheville. Since then, there have been numerous group and individual visitations between the two settings, including a Warren Wilson Scotland academic field course, and UNC Asheville's first international trip in September 2019. A second such excursion is planned for 2025. According Rick Lutovsky, co-chair of the ASCI Dunkeld & Birnam Sister City Committee, "There is a growing interest in developing this sister city relationship drawing upon our many common characteristics and interests: the considerable Scottish ancestral roots throughout the Southern Appalachians; parallel economic characteristics such as art, music, recreation and tourism; the striking physical beauty of our two settings; education; health affairs including an holistic approach to wellness; a strong sense of community; the Presbyterian (Church of Scotland) heritage; and, an abiding love of nature and commitment to stewardship of the surrounding physical environment." [6]

**Event:** The evening's entertainment includes piper [Alex Stewart](#), fiddler [Andrew Finn Magill](#), and dancers from the local Asheville branch of the [Carpenter Academy of Irish Dance](#). A Thistle & Shamrock Retrospective Interview with Fiona Ritchie will be co-hosted by Doug Orr during a cash bar reception with complimentary warm Scottish appetizers from St. Andrews Square (AKA Absolutely Yummy Catering) in Waynesville, NC. A ticketed and optional Scotch and Spirits Tasting will be hosted by [Highland Brewing's](#) pioneering local craft brewer Oscar Wong. This Burns Night event includes a full traditional Burns Night ceremony, three course dinner, and wee drams of single malt Scotch Whisky to toast the haggis. A special group rate for overnight accommodation at the Biltmore DoubleTree is available before January 3, 2025.

**Program:** The evening's ceremony follows a ritual set down since the first Burns Night in 1801. A participatory Parade of Tartans led by the piper and fiddler playing "Scotland the Brave" is followed by a "Selkirk Grace" and "Address & Toast to the Haggis". The dinner meal includes traditional Scottish Cock-a-Leekie soup and a dessert of Sticky Toffee Pudding. Guests will be able to select from three options for the main course. The ceremony continues with Fiona Ritchie presenting the "Immortal

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Memory” oration in recognition of Robert Burns’s birthday and ideals. After additional performances by the piper, fiddler, and dancers, Burns Night concludes with a “Toast to the Lassies” and “The Reply” followed by all guests singing the all-time third most popular English song, “Auld Lang Syne” which Burns preserved for posterity. Following Burns Night, the online fundraising auction and raffle winners will be announced during an After-Hours Cèilidh.

**Burns Night:** Burns Night is a worldwide celebration of Scottish heritage and traditions (somewhat akin to St. Patrick’s Day for the Irish) as represented by celebrating the birthday of Scotland’s greatest poet, Robert Burns 1759-1796. Burns lived at a time of drastic transition for the Scots as their culture and traditions were fading, diluted, and subsumed by the union with England in 1707. Burns devoted the end of his life to preserving these traditions of freedom, love of country, nature, and life through over 700 songs and poems. Burns was thus seen by many as an embodiment of independent Scottish culture. As such, Burns Night is a national holiday in Scotland and throughout the world celebrated by both Scots and Scots at heart to commemorate not only the man but also his ideals and how these have influenced Scotland and the world. Burns had a gift for sympathizing with others, especially the poor and downtrodden, and was always anxious to advocate for their plight. His greatest works were a vivid insight into the aspirations and anguishes of the less-privileged and his hopes for equality and a better world. Thus Burns’s poems touch on themes of hypocrisy, hard life, appreciation for nature, liberty, inequality, anticlericalism, gender roles, Scottish cultural identity, and man’s inhumanity to man. He wrote scathing satires and tender love songs delivered in a direct, playful, yet sympathetic voice that spoke to all walks of life. In short, Burns Night celebrates Scottish culture through one of its greatest influencers and the ideals for which he stood.

**Local Historic Connection:** Western North Carolina and Asheville have strong colonial ties with the Scots. During the early part of the 1700’s, many Highland Scots (especially from Argyl) migrated to Eastern North Carolina and settled near the Cape Fear River [1]. However, In the later 1700’s and early 1800’s many Scots from both Ulster and the Scottish Highlands migrated to Western North Carolina down the Shenandoah Valley from formerly established Scots colonies in Western Pennsylvania [2]. By the time of the Civil War, ten of thousands of Ulster Scots, or more generally Scots-Irish, had migrated to Western North Carolina [2]. Today North Carolina has the largest population of self-identified Ulster Scots than any nation in the union at 2.9% [3]. While there are Burns Nights held in other communities in North Carolina, there were none in Asheville. So with the help of our friends in Scotland, Asheville Sister Cities decided to use this opportunity to return the tradition of Burns Night to Asheville.

**Local Musical Connection:** Colonial and Early-American migrants to the mountains of the southern Appalachian region brought a wealth of traditional ballads and tunes from the British Isles and Ireland, a carrying stream that merged with sounds and songs of English, German, Welsh, African American, French, and Cherokee origin. Their enduring legacy of music flows today from Appalachia back to Ireland and Scotland and around the globe. In 2014 Fiona Ritchie co-authored with Doug Orr (co-chair of the ASCI Dunkeld & Birnam Sister City Committee) the New York Times Best Selling Book [Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia](#) which guides readers on a musical voyage across oceans, linking people and songs through centuries of adaptation and change. The foreword was written by Dolly Parton. The book is now in its fourth printing and has one of the largest sales in the history of the century-old UNC Press. It has received numerous recognitions including the Thomas Wolfe Literary Award and inclusion in New York Carnegie Hall’s Concert Series “Migration:

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The Making of America". The co-authors have made over sixty book presentations, including the Edinburgh International Book Festival – the largest in the world, Belfast's Linen Hall Library and the New York Grolier Rare Book Society. Radio interviews have taken place at numerous NPR affiliate stations, including a 2016 interview with former Blue Ridge Radio News Director David Hurand for airing on Blue Ridge Public Radio.

**New in 2025:** New to Burns Night this year will be our much anticipated in-person visit by Fiona Ritchie. The Burns Night Fundraiser auction and raffle will be online for the first time. And for those who can't get enough Burns Night, the After-Hours Cèilidh has been added as an option.

**Takeaway:** We wish all to feel welcome in takin' a cup o' kindness in celebration of Robert Burns and Scottish culture regardless of one's own heritage. Join us in the fun of following a traditional Burns Night Ceremony filled with music and song for a worthy cause!

**Contact:** Tom Good, ASCI 2025 Robert Burns Night Supper Event Director by text at 802-793-7571 (no voicemail please) or [tomgood@ecologicarchitecture.com](mailto:tomgood@ecologicarchitecture.com).

#### Useful Links:

- A shorter version of this [Press Release](#)
- ASCI 2025 Burns Night [Fundraiser](#)
- ASCI 2025 Burns Night [Tickets Sales](#)
- ASCI 2025 Burns Night [Event Information](#)
- ASCI Robert Burns Night Supper [background information](#)
- [Support ASCI Burns Night](#)
- [Past ASCI Burns Night Fundraising Beneficiaries](#)
- [Past ASCI Burns Night Highlights](#)
- [ASCI Burns Night Partners](#)
- [ASCI Burns Night Traditions](#)

#### Endnotes:

- [1] <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/highland-scots/>
- [2] <https://dh.wcu.edu/index.php/2011/12/07/the-migration-of-the-scotch-irish-from-ulster-to-western-north-carolina/>
- [3] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotch-Irish\\_Americans#cite\\_note-89](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotch-Irish_Americans#cite_note-89)
- [4] <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/28/g-s1-6875/nprs-the-thistle-shamrock-radio-program-to-end-this-fall>
- [5] <https://mountainx.com/news/dunkeld-and-birnam-become-ashevilles-newest-sisters/>