

# OLD PATTERNS, NEW SONGS

By Brian McNeill

The business of writing songs is a complicated one, not least in terms of motivation. Ask the question: “Why do it?” and you’ll come up with a different answer from every songwriter you ask. But once you rule out the motive of money – and that’s not a negligible factor, there are a lot of commercial songwriters out there – sooner or later the question of conscience will arise. It can’t all be moon, croon and June; most songwriters are eventually driven to use their craft in order to explore something that disturbs them, be that an injustice, a social problem, or simply a challenge to the accepted order of things.

It’s not difficult to write a song about something that gets to you, but it’s difficult to write a good song about that something. You can’t just sound off – songs that do that usually don’t last, whereas songs that sound off and make a point at the same time make people think, and by and large, if they’re well crafted, they do last.

And that’s where the tradition comes in! For those of us who are lucky enough to have an affinity with and a knowledge of traditional music, we can look and see the vast number of songs of conscience and social comment the tradition has. And once we’ve done that, we begin to realize that what the tradition has done is give those of us who are modern songwriters the best of tools; a series of templates.

My tradition is the tradition of Scotland, and it has always been one of the most articulate.

Take a song like “Parcel Of Rogues In A Nation” – a song about political corruption, about Scotland’s leaders being bribed to sell out their own people by voting their own parliament out of existence in the early seventeen hundreds. That song’s still being sung today, sometimes with the words updated. Why? Because bribery and corruption haven’t gone away – and that means that the original writer (we don’t know who he or she was) touched some kind of universal truth. Or take a song like “The Twa Corbies” – one of the best anti-war songs ever written, although not a line of it ever mentions war. The song gives us a savage, simple conversation between two crows who are about to eat the body of a dead knight. The moral of the story is simple; go to war and this is a pretty good chance of the way you’ll end up. Once again, as relevant today as the day it was written. In both of these songs, the single most impressive thing is that they never pull their punches; they are stark, direct and merciless.

So this is the background that’s informed much of my own songwriting. When I wanted to write a song about the hypocrisy of the armistice celebrations in Britain called “Two Minutes Silence”, I went to traditional models. I did what many previous, anonymous writers did before me, and made death into a person with a role to play – in this case she’s a glamorous woman, dressed very fashionably in black. I call her the Widowmaker. She’s always at the graveside when a soldier’s being buried. She’s excited by new weapons. She loves battlefields and slaughter. When the armaments contracts are being signed,

she's laughing with the politicians. In other words, she thrives on the hypocrisy of a culture that mourns its young, brave, dead soldiers but refuses to do anything to stop war happening in the future.

If we look at the song's technique for a minute, one thing's obvious – it's much more effective to have a person that an audience's feelings can fasten on to than just to have a bare statement of fact. No matter how horrific the fact, an audience prefers a face, so the one has to embody the other.

Another technique I've used often (and usually for much gentler, but still social comment themes) is to take an event which personifies my theme, then illustrate it with characters, usually over three or four verses, then tie the whole thing up with a last verse which makes the whole thing relevant. It's a technique I used in the first song I ever wrote. It's called "The Lads O' the Fair" and it's about my home town of Falkirk in the Scottish lowlands.

The song's about the annual cattle market in Falkirk, which was once the biggest market in Scotland. Instead of just telling the story in a dry factual way, I use the first three verses to talk about three of the people who have travelled to the fair and let them tell the listener why they've come. The first is a weaver, who wants to sell his cloth to the farmers' wives he know will be there. The second is a cattle drover, who wants to sell the cows he's just driven from the highlands to the buyers from England, and the third is a ploughboy who wants a job on a new farm and who knows that the farmers will be looking round the fair for employees.

It's the last verse which, as far as I'm concerned, is the important one. It talks about the fact that the three jobs just described have either gone forever, or they've changed beyond recognition. But then it says that Falkirk is still a place where ordinary people work for their living, and that the people who live there now still remember their connection with the past. And let me point out that I unashamedly took the template of the song – rhyme schemes and meter – from a Scottish/Irish song called "The Rambling Siuler (Beggar)". In fact, not only is it not a matter of shame to me, it's a matter of great satisfaction to me to be part of a chain of writers who used the same, proven effective over and over again, tools.

So if you asked me why I write the kinds of songs I do, songs which are politically engaged, songs which talk about the relevance of history to the modern day, then I'd have to tell you that I do it because I couldn't imagine not doing it. I firmly believe that the past has a great deal to teach us about the future, and that a culture's traditions are very often the key we can use to link the two. They've certainly done it for me.

So write your songs. I look forward to hearing them.

Brian McNeill

## Two Minutes Silence

1. When the armistice parade comes round again  
You'll see a woman with a veil standing back behind the men.  
In the bonniest of black she is dressed,  
With a Flanders poppy pinned upon her breast.  
And as the braw flags they wave for the honour o' the brave,  
You'll remember that you've seen her at the side of every grave of every soldier lad who never knew the last kiss they gave would touch her lips  
And that she'd always held their lives in her grip.

Chorus: Two minutes silence for the dead,  
Two minutes more for the dying  
But no silence at all  
For the ones still to fall,  
Till the widowmaker hears the Children crying.

2. She was there when every bayonet was made.  
She was there at the sharpening of every axe and blade.  
She has thrilled to see the arrows in the sun.  
She has smiled upon the forging of the guns.  
And her lust is for the strong, but her scorn is for the weak.  
And her laughter's for the prayer that begs a turning of the cheek, for she knows she'll always lie in the bed of those who seek for ever more –  
to cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war.

## Two Minutes Silence (continued)

3. Geordie sings upon the banks o' the Tyne.  
Geordie's got a job on a fine production line.  
No mention of the wounded or the dead,  
for Geordie's got to keep his children fed.  
And Geordie's tanks roll along between two men, young and strong,  
and each man is sure that the other man is wrong,  
and the widowmaker sings them both a line of Geordie's song  
as they die – with the words Made In Britain in their eyes.
4. End user certificate for sale. The widowmaker swears that the system never fails.  
No bullet or bomb can ever go to corrupt or undemocratic foe.  
But when the tracer bullets fly across the wrong jungle sky because the papers have been forged and the ministers have lied,  
She'll lead you to the Battlefield to see the real end users lying there.  
And you can ask the dead and dying if they care.
5. Come all you politicians, are you blind?  
Or does the sight of crippled children not affect a crippled mind?  
Or is it easy not to see the people die with the widowmaker's hand across your eye?  
And the soldier ladies stand to the anthems of their land,  
Waiting for their orders with their guns in their hands,  
And she smiles even colder as she whispers her commands in your ear –  
And the rustle of the money's all you hear.

@Brian McNeill

## The Lads O' The Fair

1. Come bonny lass lie near me,  
And let the brandy cheer ye,  
For the road from Fife to Falkirk's  
Lang and cold and wet and weary.  
My trade it is the weavin' at the bonny  
town Leven,  
And we'll drink tae the health o' the  
farmers' dames wha'll buy my cloth the  
mornin'

### Chorus:

For you can see them a', the lads o' the fair,  
Lads o' the Forth and the Carron Water,  
Workin' lads and lads wi' gear,  
Lads wha'd sell you the provost's daughter.  
Soldiers back frae the German wars, pedlars up  
frae the border –  
and lassies wi' an eye for mair than the kye  
at the trystin' fair at Falkirk.

2. Geordie, lead the pony, for the path is  
steep and stony,  
And we're three lang weeks frae the Isle  
o' Skye  
And the beasts are thin and bony.  
We'll take the last o' the siller and we'll  
buy oorsels a gill or two  
And we'll drink tae the lads wha'll buy  
the kye  
In Falkirk town the morn.
3. Stand there and I'll show ye, there's the  
town below ye,  
But ye'd best bide here in the barn the  
nicht  
For the night watch dinnae know ye.  
My brother he's a ploughman and I'm  
for feein' now, man  
And we'll drink tae the price o' the  
harvest corn  
In Falkirk town the morn.

4. The work o' the weaver's over, likewise  
the day o' the drover, and the  
ploughboy sits on a tractor now,  
too high to see the clover.  
The workin's no' sae steady, but the  
lads are a' still ready tae drink the  
health o' the workin' man  
In Falkirk town the morn.

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## Twa Corbies (Traditional)

1. As I was walking aa alane,  
I heard twa corbies makin mane;  
The tane untae the titherd' say-o,  
Whaur sall we gang and dine the day?
2. 'It's in ahint yon auld fail dyke,  
I wot there lies a new slain knight;  
An naebody dens that he lies there-o,  
But his hawk an his hound, an his lady  
fair-o.
3. His hound is tae the huntin gane,  
His hawk tae fetch the wild-fowl hame,  
His lady's ta'en anither mate-o,  
Sae we maun mak oor dinner swaet-o.
4. Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,  
An I'll pike oot his bonny blue een;  
We ae lack o his gowden hair-o  
We'll theek oor nest whan it grows  
bare-o.
5. Mony a ane for him maks mane,  
But nane sall ken whaur he is gane;  
Oer his white banes, whan they are  
bare-o,  
The wind sall blaw for evennair-o.

## SUCH A PARCEL O ROGUES IN A NATION

Lyric as sung by Dick Gaughan

Fareweil tae aa our Scottish fame  
Fareweil our ancient glory  
Fareweil e'en tae our Scottish name  
Sae famed in martial story  
Nou Sark rins ower the Solway sands  
An Tweed rins tae the ocean  
Tae mark whaur England's province stauns  
Sic a parcel o rogues in a nation!

What force or guile could not subdue  
Thro many warlike ages  
Is wrocht nou by a coward few  
For hireling traitor's wages  
The English steel we could disdain  
Secure in valour's station  
But English gold has been our bane  
Sic a parcel o rogues in a nation!

O wad, ere I had seen the day  
That Treason thus could sell us  
My auld gray heid had lain in clay  
Wi Bruce an loyal Wallace  
But pith an pouer, till my last hour  
I'll mak this declaration –  
We're bocht an sold for English gold  
Sic a parcel o rogues in a nation!

Song notes: Written about the Treaty Of Union of 1707 which, in theory, abolished the independent Parliaments of Scotland and England and created the Parliament of the United Kingdom. In practice, it merely ended the autonomy of the Scots and reduced us to the status of a province of England.

The "parcel of rogues" referred to were the bourgeoisie of the Scots Parliament who were, quite literally, bribed into voting for the Treaty, completely abandoning all the principles of The Declaration of Arbroath [[the 1320 document declaring Scotland's independence and the model for the American Declaration of Independence](#)].

*Information is from "Dick Gaughan's Song Archive" found in a song text search on the web.*