

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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The Yew Tree

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cho: My bonnie yew tree
Tell me what did you see

A mile frae Pentcaitland, on the road to the sea
Stands a yew tree a thousand years old
And the old women swear by the grey o' their hair
That it knows what the future will hold
For the shadows of Scotland stand round it
'Mid the kail and the corn and the kye
All the hopes and the fears of a thousand long years
Under the Lothian sky

Did you look through the haze o' the lang summer days
Tae the South and the far English border
A' the bonnets o' steel on Flodden's far field
Did they march by your side in good order
Did you ask them the price o' their glory
When you heard the great slaughter begin
For the dust o' their bones would rise up from the stones
To bring tears to the eyes o' the wind

Not once did you speak for the poor and the weak
When the moss-troopers lay in your shade
To count out the plunder and hide frae the thunder
And share out the spoils o' their raid
But you saw the smiles o' the gentry
And the laughter of lords at their gains
When the poor hunt the poor across mountain and moor
The rich man can keep them in chains

Did you no' think tae tell when John Knox himsel'
Preached under your branches sae black
To the poor common folk who would lift up the yoke
O' the bishops and priests frae their backs
But you knew the bargain he sold them
And freedom was only one part
For the price o' their souls was a gospel sae cold
It would freeze up the joy in their hearts

And I thought as I stood and laid hands on your wood
That it might be a kindness to fell you
One kiss o' the axe and you're freed frae the racks

O' the sad bloody tales that men tell you
But a wee bird flew out from your branches
And sang out as never before
And the words o' the song were a thousand years long
And to learn them's a long thousand more

Last chorus:

My bonnie yew tree
Tell me what CAN you see

This is how the Battlefield Band sing it on 'Home Ground' (great live album!)

[1879:] Nothing could be better evidence of how profoundly the mind of Scotland was moved by the evangel of Knox and his brother labourers than the sudden disappearance from oral tradition of many of the songs and ballads which had been popular for many years. There can be no doubt that many of these songs were what would now be considered highly licentious, although among our rude and plain-speaking forefathers and foremothers they may have passed current without evoking a blush on the face of village maidens. The Reformation called for an alteration in morals as well as in doctrines, and these songs were not only discouraged, but a poetic reformer issued a volume of "Gude and Godly Ballats", in which new and pious words were adapted to the old airs. In poetic merit this collection is wretched [...]. Still, they helped to supplant the old songs and ballads [...]. We hear no more of the "Ring songs" [ballads] after the Reformation, though it is not impossible that they may have been continued in obscure places for some time, especially in quarters where the fervour of the Reformation hardly reached. [...] The struggle for the supremacy of Presbyterianism in Scotland [...] lasted long, and it was [...] no
against France in 1511] placed James [IV of Scotland] in a dilemma from which there was no escape; his obligations under the Auld Alliance of 1491-2 and the Anglo-Scottish peace of 1502, renewed in 1509, were mutually incompatible except when England and France were at peace. [James tried to keep out of the conflict but] Henry, who meant to shine on the battlefields of Europe, had been definitely preparing for war against his brother-in-law. [...] It was only on 24 July [1513] that James summoned the shire levies. [Earl marshal] Surrey had begun to mobilize in London as early as 21 July; [...] his arrangements for organizing the north had been so good that he 'took his field' north of Newcastle on 5 September. James, meanwhile [...] had occupied a fortified camp on Flodden Edge [where Surrey,] on 9 September, came down upon the Scots from the north. They, perhaps fearing that Surrey was off to invade Scotland, perhaps believing that, since he had not come by noon as he had promised, he would n
magnificence) designed a splendid funeral. This did not take place. The royal corpse lay in its lead at Sheen until the house was despoiled after the Reformation, and eventually the embalmed head was hacked off by Queen Elizabeth's master-glazier who used it as a sort of pot-pourri until he tired

of it. All praise must be given to the English who fought a hard action after a long march in bad weather, but James does not deserve the blame which tradition has accorded to him. Not he, but Henry, was responsible for the war, and one reason why he was ill prepared was that he strove to keep the peace till the very last. His conduct of the campaign was not faulty. [...] His defeat in battle was primarily due to the fact that his ill-organized force, numerically not much greater than that of his enemy, was not adequate for its task. The 'Lilt of dule and wae' was heard all over Scotland; but Scotland remained proud of a gallant King. [...] Disastrous as it was, the defeat at Flodden did not affect the churches were built on the site of a pagan yew-grove. The Yew in this song stands near the village of Ormiston, in East Lothian, by the 13th century ruins of the Church of St. Giles. Brian was told about this magnificent tree by an old man in the neighbouring village of Pentcailtland. He went to see it and felt the whole place 'humming with ghosts'. It is not surprising that such an old and majestic tree has a place in the people's memory. The Covenanters preached under its boughs and it seems likely that the young John Knox (born and bred in nearby Haddington) honed his stern fiery message beneath its leaves. One commentator in the late 19th century said "The Yew at Ormiston could tell strange tales, if only we could hear". (Battlefield Band Songbook 123)

[1994:] This song practically wrote itself. I was there, I saw the bird that flew out from its branches and so on, and the song wrote itself. (Brian McNeill, pr. comm.)

[1997:] A campaign has begun to restore the historical standing of John French galley-slave and fell under the influence of John Calvin in Geneva [...]. He returned to Scotland in 1560 and became the driving force behind the Scottish Reformation, the most radical in Europe. Apart from his rejection of papacy and its hierarchy, he led a drive for universal literacy. He wanted a school in every parish, a college in every town and a university in every city. He also wanted regular, organised provision for the poor. Post-war Scotland, secular and hedonistic, where the pubs are open all day on Sunday, has largely forgotten him. [Some historians think] Knox's historical standing had been traduced by the extremism of the militant Protestantism that followed. (Arnold Kemp / Dean Nelson, Observer 5 Apr)

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