

20th November 2020

Generous

**“While the wind it does beat, and the rain it does pour,
And aye yon black farmer he on us does glowre.”**

Traditional, The Scranky Black Farmer

The Buchan area of Aberdeenshire in Scotland is probably the richest source of traditional songs in Britain. Because of their origins and style, the songs are known as “Bothy Ballads”, unaccompanied songs composed and sung by the hired men on the farms. The communal circumstances of bothy life lent themselves to the sharing of songs after a hard day’s labour. The story-based songs would frequently describe daily work. Sometimes they were in praise of a sweetheart or even a horse. And often they gave the men a chance to say what they *really* felt about their masters.

After I’d shared thoughts recently about the traditional “Road to Dundee”, someone reminded me of another, less well-known, Bothy Ballad. So I went back to one of my favourite songbooks, *The Scottish Folksinger* by Norman Buchan and Peter Hall, to look again at the *The Scranky Farmer*. This is a song full of complaints about a hard farm-boss, who was, more than most, a *scranky* man – or downright mean.

*At the tap of the Garioch, in the lands of Leith-hall,
A scranky black farmer in Earlsfield did dwell;
Wi’ him I engaged, a servant to be,
Which makes me lament I went far frae the sea.*

The song elaborates on the meanness of the farmer, with the singer deciding there’s no point in continuing to work under such a boss and resolving to head back to sea where, whatever the hardships of naval service, his lot in life was bound to be better than this.

We Scots have a reputation for meanness. It’s simply not true. Our welcome to asylum seekers, legendary hospitality, commitment to charitable giving, time given to volunteering, care for those less fortunate than ourselves, all give the lie to the “mean” label. So let’s sing songs about *that!* Let the stereotype of *The Scranky Farmer* be confined to ballads of yesteryear. Let’s be pleased to be known for a more honest reputation of generosity of spirit.

A prayer for today

“To give, and not to count the cost”. Let this be who we are and what we stand for.

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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