

Wormwood, lizards and the railroad man Pt.

2

[francis mckee](#)

Jan 11, 2024

The brooding, dreamlike world of *Look Over The Wall* is amplified again in the following song, 'Willie Crotty'. The song emerges from a long slow wave of static and radio transmission harmonics as we tune in to a spectral dimension - voices echo in dub, frequencies resonate shakily, and slowly the song takes form. Flynn's voice is buried amid the surge of electronics, rising and falling amid the hallucinogenic waves of noise.

It's a lament for a legendary highwayman, from the point of view of his lover who reminds him that she had often warned him of betrayal by David Norris, his accomplice in crime.

*"William Crotty I have often tould you,
That David Norris would come round to you.
In Your bed, when you lay sleeping,
An leave me here in sorrow weeping,
Och-hone, oh!
"Oh, the judge but he was cruel,
Refused a long day to my jewel;
Sure I thought that you would, maybe,
See the face of your poo baby,
Och-hone, oh!"* [\[1\]](#)

Crotty worked from a hide-out in a series of caves high in the Comeragh mountains in county Waterford. He was a popular figure in the area, and he mixed easily with the local population. He carried a mythic reputation though:

The interior of [his] cave consists of one large chamber, from which branch off some smaller recesses. These were occupied by Crotty for sleeping and other domestic purposes; but tradition assigns to them a more horrible use. Crotty was reputed to be a cannibal, and he was believed to fill these recesses with stores of human flesh, on which he fed. Hence he was called the "Irish Sawny Bean," after the Highland robber of that name, who is said to have had a taste for the same diet. Crotty was a man of desperate courage and unequalled personal agility; often baffling pursuers even when mounted on fleet horses [\[2\]](#)

Crotty was eventually betrayed by his partner in crime, David Norris, a more strategic thinker who sold him out to save his own skin. Crotty was captured and sentenced to death with no delay despite his wife's pregnancy. He was hanged in 1742 and his head was cut off and stuck on a pike above the gateway of Waterford county jail. This song as a single with an accompanying video directed by Ruth Clinton and Cormac Dermody. The video is perfect for the song, an unsteady nightmarish journey through a dark and cursed landscape.

Flynn pulls back over the course of the next three songs. The first, 'Kitty' is drawn from the Pogues debut album, *Red Roses for Me*. The second, 'The Seasons, is based on a version by the Scottish singer Lizzie Higgins and the third, 'Within a Mile of Dublin', is a traditional reel. 'Kitty' continues the outlaw theme of 'Willie Crotty' but this time the singer is saying a

mournful farewell to his lover as he prepares to make his escape. Flynn's deep bass voice, weary and sad, barely sung over a heavy drone and funereal drumbeat leaves no sense of freedom in the departure. Freedom, in this case, is an alternative form of punishment. An electronic violin modulating in waves of static underline the pain, surging at one point to a near scream.

If 'Kitty' summons the spirit of The Pogues, then 'The Seasons' calls on John Martyn and the muted dub electronics and bass of the *Solid Air* album, which itself paid tribute to Martyn's recently deceased friend Nick Drake. It's the still heart of Flynn's record with a glancing vision of the 'merry laughing summer. That vanishes as quickly as it appeared when the singer affirms that it's the following season that claims him:

But autumn, gentle autumn, with its quiet eyes of gray
Enwrapt me in the twilight, and stole my heart away^[3]

It's a hypnotic song, moving in a stately fashion towards a fade that drifts into the following track 'Within a Mile of Dublin', shifting seamlessly into the opening flute notes like a paired set in a folk session. The rising frenzy of this track (after a quiet start) also recalls the wild intoxication of a session in full swing. Coincidentally it evokes thoughts of the Beatles in their psychedelic pomp – the heavy drone into, the feedback and savage attack of the band, the circular tune with instruments added in every turn spiralling to an orchestral crescendo, a melodic crash landing and a final reprise after Kaija Kennedy commands 'again' as she drops into a looped mantra repeating the phrase 'within a mile from Dublin'. The Beatle DNA of 'It's All Too Much', 'A Day in the Life' and 'Revolution #9' animates this Frankenstein beast, a high point of the album.

Flynn brings the album to a close with two more tracks, both written by Ewan McColl. 'The Lag Song', a prison memoir opens with the damp plunk of a banjo string and a meditation on doing time: 'time just lands in prison/And there it is held fast'. Ironically the album titles emerges from these lyrics:

Look out of the window over the roofs there
And over the walls see the sky
Just one flying leap and you could make your getaway
If only you could fly

McColl cuts off the optimism with that sharp observation on our ability to fly and it seems appropriate in a collection of songs that vacillate between hallucinogenic visions of freedom and prison realities. It's the starkest song on the album and the least processed by electronics, opting instead for background strings. This sounds bleak and it is but it feels necessary as we move into the final track 'Dirty Old Town', a song made famous first by the Dubliners and then again by The Pogues. It's so identified with them that it's assumed the song is about Dublin though it's actually set in the urban landscape of Salford. Ewan McColl was born and raised there after his father, a trade unionist, was blacklisted across Scotland and had to move his family to England for work. Ewan embraced his father's politics. He joined the Young Communist League in 1930, started reading Bukharin, Marx, and Lenin, wrote songs for the hunger marches and participated in the Kinder Trespass for the Right to Roam campaign.

Flynn's arrangement of 'Dirty Old Town' is a quiet masterpiece. He avoids the anthemic singing of the Dubliners and the Pogues, somehow renewing every word, allowing the song to

breathe again. There's an ambivalence in the lyrics that the more famous versions tend to obscure. The rousing chant that it becomes at Old Trafford games seems to pivot on the phrase 'dreamed a dream' – almost a motto for Manchester United. The gritty romance played out against canals and factory walls also beg for a black and white 1960s movie on working class life. Flynn's weary and even tones allow a different verse to come to light:

I'm gonna make me a good sharp axe
Shining steel tempered in the fire
I'll chop you down like an old dead tree

Dirty old town
Dirty old town

It creeps up on the listener in the middle of the song – a sharp axe, chop you down? The dirty old town must go. The romance and the anthems blind us to the reality of the capitalist backdrop in the song and countless singers gloss over the communist anger behind that verse. Flynn doesn't shy from the ambivalence of the lyrics, though. A beautiful, understated, brass accompaniment reminds us of the human love at the core of the piece. Having opened *Look Over The Wall* with a warnings of railroad men that drink your blood like wine, the album closes with a song that reminds us of their presence. Ironically both those urban developers and McColl want to raze the old but 'Dirty Old Town' underscores the humanity that is worth preserving as opposed to the profit margins.

[1] This is taken from a thorough discussion of 'Crotty's Lament' on [tunearch.org](https://tunearch.org/wiki/Crotty%27s_Lament_(1)): [https://tunearch.org/wiki/Crotty%27s_Lament_\(1\)](https://tunearch.org/wiki/Crotty%27s_Lament_(1))

[2] One of the biographical sources quoted extensively on tunearch.org is John Edward Walsh's book *Ireland Sixty Years Ago* (1847)

[3] Quoted in an article on [Mainly Norfolk: English Folk and Other Good Music](https://mainlynorfolk.info/folk/songs/theseasons.html): <https://mainlynorfolk.info/folk/songs/theseasons.html>