

Five Songs

David Gregory

I wrote these songs thirteen years ago, during a period of mourning after the death of my mother. At the time I lacked the mental energy needed to embark on a major new research project, but the loss of both my parents (my father had died some years earlier) caused me to pause and take stock for a while of myself and the society in which I was living. My thoughts somehow found expression in song.

Naturally there are personal elements in these songs, but they also reflect my feelings about the state of the world and some of its major problems, political, social and environmental. My best environmental songs (“Cheviot Dawn,” “Fair Sister,” “Steady State” and “Children of the World”) were published in an earlier issue of *Canadian Folk Music* (Vol. 43.4, Winter 2008-09), so these are some of my more political, historical and personal songs.

“Future Past” is the bleakest, a set of reflections stimulated by the advent of a new millennium and the rather hollow-sounding celebrations surrounding that event. It’s my Cassandra song. I’m a historian who specialises in the study of Victorian England, a civilization at its peak, despite its many and glaring flaws. Things just seemed to go downhill in Europe from 1914 onwards, and some of the most catastrophic mistakes made in the first half of the twentieth century could have been avoided. For example, a compromise peace could have ended World War I before the unnecessary and fruitless blood-letting of the Somme, while Hitler’s accession to power was by no means inevitable. It is often forgotten that he never won an overall majority in a free election, and that the Catholic Centre Party could have joined the German liberals and socialists in opposing the Enabling Act that gave him dictatorial powers. Yet the song is not only about history: the horrors of ethnic cleansing in the lands that I had once known, travelled and loved as Yugoslavia were very much in mind when I wrote it.

“Mountains” is less serious; just a fun song about escaping into the beauty of nature. It evokes many mountainous parts of the world, some of which I have visited and others not. All the Canadian, British and European peaks mentioned are familiar to me. This past summer I did hike the West Coast Trail (it was very strenuous and nearly did me in!) and reclinbed Helvellyn in the English Lake District. A long, long time ago I climbed the Wildspitze, the second highest mountain in Austria. As for Greece, I

have on several occasions travelled around that beautiful and extremely interesting country, although I never made it to the top of Olympus. My daughter Karina did, however; the verse draws on her memories. Moving further east, we are in the realm of dreams and ambitions. Right now wouldn’t be a good time to explore Syria, Iraq or Iran, and Nepal remains a retirement project.

“Roxane” is about another relative whom I had just lost, my cousin, a close childhood friend. On the surface the song has nothing to do with my mother, but looking back I can see that she may have been the real, albeit subconscious, subject. The theme is in any case universal: about our too frequent failure to communicate properly with our loved ones before it is too late to do so. The details are historically accurate: I did participate in an Aldermaston March against the so-called British nuclear deterrent, and I did frequent the Marquee Club in its heyday, when Alvin Lee of Ten Years After rivalled Eric Clapton, Jimmy Hendrix and Keith Richards as the best blues-rock guitarist in London, or in the world, for that matter. To understand “Pride of Man”, a somewhat humorous if rather sardonic ditty, it probably helps to know that two of the *personae* in the song are Alan Lomax and Bob Marley, and that my mother (as she struggled to speak after her stroke) and her crippled sister-in-law are also invoked. It’s a song I don’t particularly care for much any more, but it captured and expressed my feelings at the time and I value it for that. It’s really about the importance of friends and family.

“The Wanderer” expresses my take on institutionalized religion and was clearly influenced by the work of the Jesus Seminar, a scholarly Californian ‘think tank’ that has carefully studied all the early Christian manuscripts, including, but not limited to, those in the New Testament. It’s useful to know that “Q” is the name scholars give to the reconstruction of a lost early Christian manuscript to which two of the NT Gospels are partially indebted. Combined with the apocryphal but fascinating “Gospel of Thomas”, it gives us some insight into what first generation Christians knew of Jesus and his ideas, and helps us weed out accretions added by later Christian writers with doctrines to impose and theological axes to grind. Along with “Cheviot Dawn”, I think “The Wanderer” is possibly the best song I have ever written. I hope it and the other four speak to you.