

On “Caledonia” by Dougie MacLean

Neil Clark

I knew the melody and all the words to “Caledonia” before I heard the song properly. That’s because I’m Scottish, and we like to get bladdered and sing things at the tops of our lungs.

At Scottish weddings or birthdays, or at any other excuse to consume a healthy skinful, there always comes a certain special point at the end of the night. An hour or two after, we’ll be passed out somewhere, snoring loudly. But not before the night reaches that boozy crescendo. We’ll gather in a circle—arm-in-arm, generation-to-generation, with family and old friends, with people we met two minutes ago—and we’ll sing songs in unison until there’s a tingle at backs of our necks and a warmth in the pits of our stomachs.

“Auld Lang Syne” is a favourite. “The Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond” is another. I’ve heard these songs referred to as ‘Hospital Songs’, because when we sing them together and end up jumping around and jostling in ways that make no logical sense, our chances of ending up in hospital increase greatly. But that never matters. Not until the next morning, anyway.

There are those Hospital Songs, then there’s “Caledonia” by Dougie MacLean. It’s a sad folk song, written in ten minutes on a beach in France when Dougie was feeling homesick for Scotland, performed on an acoustic guitar. It fits perfectly in a medley alongside those other songs, and we sing it just as loud. But there are less injuries induced and there’s more hugging, maybe a bit of kissing if your luck’s in. It’s less of a Hospital Song, but just as much of an anthem. In the words of Dougie himself, “There’s not a pub singer, busker, or pipe band that doesn’t play it.” Add to that many pop stars, whose live rendition of it is always a sure-fire way to get a Scottish crowd singing.

I think that’s because “Caledonia” has the common touch. It’s not about armies conquering other armies. It’s not about getting all the biatches. In Scotland, we like our heroes to be like us. No fanfare. Just good people who we’d be able to have a pint and a wee blether with. And we love our lonesome folk singers—those with nothing but an instrument and some poems and the open road.

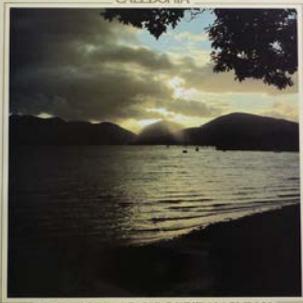
“Caledonia” begins:

I don’t know if you can see the changes that have come over me; In the last few days, I’ve been afraid that I might drift away

Simple, sad, and sweet. And relatable, for any person, at any time in their lives...

It’s 2013. I’m twenty-seven, and I’ve been afraid that I might drift away.

I’m in the check-in hall at Edinburgh Airport. Oddball life choices have brought me here. I’m not flying anywhere. I’m not dropping anyone off, not picking someone up. I’m



Dougie MacLean

“Caledonia”

Caledonia

1978

Plant Life

working here, earning minimum wage and trying to claw my way out of my overdraft. When I was twenty-five, I quit my nicely paid nine-to-five job on a whim. When I told my boss what I was doing, there was still beer on my breath from the night before. It's the dumbest thing I ever did. It's also my proudest moment. I have zero clue what I expected from it, really, and in the end, none of my creative pursuits came off. But I regret nothing and loved every minute of it. Even the bit when my nosediving bank balance inevitably crashed into the red.

When I had to get a job, I looked for something simple and stress-free so I could still write as much as possible.

So, here I am at the airport. My head is all mixed up. In real life, I'm seeing friends and acquaintances my age moving up in the world, getting nice cars, buying homes, getting married, doing a decent job of acting like they have their shit together. Out with real life, Amy Winehouse has fairly recently become the latest to check into the 27 Club, joining many others I'd consider role models and kindred spirits. It feels like I'm in no man's land. Not a homemaker, not a hedonist. Just a twenty-seven-year-old customer services guy on a zero-hour contract.

By this point, I've been doing the job long enough to have worked out the formula: older people (fifty and above) + airports + self-service ≠ a good idea.

I approach an older man, about my father's age. He's at the self-service check-in machine, trying to scan his passport. The document is the wrong way around. It's also on the wrong page and he is rubbing it frantically against a part of the machine that is not the passport scanner, as if the boarding pass genie is going to magically come out of it. It's a common sight in the airport game.

"Let me help you out, sir."

"Cheers, son," he says. "I'd end up getting on the plane to Auchtermuchty if they left me to do this myself."

When you get an instant rapport with a customer it can really make your day. I feel that way with this man. Maybe it's because he's calling me "son", maybe it's something else. Underneath the dry wit he's imparting at every part of this transaction, there's something about his eyes and his voice. A sadness. It makes me think maybe he's been through things like what I'm going through. Maybe he's a drifter too.

I feel a warmth on the back of my neck. There's a familiarity there, like a ghost just walked through me.

He confirms that the details on the screen are correct. He is flying economy class to Amsterdam, then onto somewhere in the Far East. I ask him if he packed his bags himself and if he is carrying any dangerous items. "Packed the bags myself, aye," he says. "And no—no dangerous items. Other than myself." He's got a lot of luggage, and it's all bulky and cumbersome looking, so I ask him if he needs any help with his bags. I'm hoping he says yes. I feel like I will become a wiser man with every minute spent in his company. "You're alright, son," he says. "I'll be just fine." We shake hands and he joins the back of the bag-drop queue.

My shift finishes. I started at 4am and could fall asleep standing up. As I'm weighing up whether I can treat myself to a steak bake and a jam donut from Gregg's on the way home and still be able to pay the rent, "Caledonia" starts swirling around my head.

This is nothing unusual—I'm Scottish. But this time, the voice seems closer, like a ghost. I get a flashback from the shift I've just done. It's the screen of the self-service check-in machine, with that man's details on it. The name on it was D. MacLean. A lonesome folk singer with his instruments and poems and the open road, no fanfare.

I'm hungry, but I bypass Gregg's on the walk home from the bus stop, humming "Caledonia" all the way, looking up and seeing plane trails in the sky.

The song warms the pit of my stomach, just like it has done many times before—in solitude or with friends and family, in good times or in hardship.

And it will warm my stomach many more times as I drift through the years to come.