

Dick Gaughan Handful of Earth - That Album

By Su Butcher for Adam Gray 'That Album' LinkedIn Live 22 August 2025

Watch here: <https://www.linkedin.com/events/7363127532101017600/>

About the Album

- Released March 1981
- Recorded by Robin Morton at Temple Studios near Edinburgh
- Front photograph by Mick Campbell, Design by Tony Russell

History

- Born Glasgow 1948. His dad was from Leith, his mum was of Irish descent.
- Dick began by singing in Edinburgh folk clubs and became a professional musician in 1970.
- Dick is now 77. Retired from public life in 2017 for health reasons but is coming back into the public eye (see the end of these notes).

Music

- John Peel Sessions
 - Peel called him "one of the five or six great voices of our time"
 - He did three solo sessions for Peel between 1973 and 1977, as well as two as a member of The Boys Of The Lough in 1972 and 1973, and four as singer and guitarist with his group Five Hand Reel between 1975 and 1978. Five Hand Reel were folk rock.
 - https://peel.fandom.com/wiki/Dick_Gaughan
- Stewart Lee listed Handful of Earth in his favourite ever albums. <https://thequietus.com/interviews/bakers-dozen/stewart-lee-interview-favourite-albums/4/>
- Lots of people don't know about Dick because his work hasn't been promoted and much of it is not available digitally.
- Handful of Earth is possibly the only one of his albums that has been digitally remastered (in 2019).
- Many of the songs are played with open tuning on the guitar. There are a few other musicians but mostly it's just him and Rob Morton producing.

Musicians

- Dick Gaughan: vocals, guitar, Telecaster [10];
- Brian McNeill: fiddle [1, 7], acoustic bass [7];
- Phil Cunningham: whistle [1], keyboards [10];
- Stewart Isbister: electric bass [10]

Why this Album for me?

- I saw Dick Gaughan at the Irish Centre in Liverpool probably around 1989 but might have been a little later.
 - I'd never heard of him and don't remember why we went or whom I went with.
 - Dick stood at one end of the room next to a tall bar table on which were two pint glasses of a clear liquid that might have been water and might not, and four packets of Benson and Hedges stacked on top of one another. I can't remember if he smoked during the set, I don't think he did.
 - Held a room of 40-50 people in his hand with just a guitar and his amazing voice.
- I bought the cassette of Handful of Earth, probably on the night.
- It was produced after he had a breakdown after leaving Five Hand Reel in 1978 and experiencing the effect of Margaret Thatcher's election a year later.
- Gaughan had previously been in his own words "more a chronicler than a protagonist" of his political views. He had decided "It was quite clearly time to stop reporting and start participating."
- But the album isn't just about politics. It is a tribute to what it means to be a human being in Scotland and Ireland, peace and violence, justice and injustice, nature and human nature.

Tracks

Side 1

1. Erin-Go-Bragh (Roud 1627; Laws Q20; G/D 2:236) (4.24)
2. Now Westlin Winds (Roud 6936) (4.29)
3. Craigie Hill (Roud 5165) (6.09)
4. World Turned Upside Down (2.45)
5. The Snows They Melt the Soonest (Roud 3154) (4.11)

Side 2

6. Lough Erne (The Rambling Irishman) (Roud 3572) / First Kiss at Parting (5.45)
7. Scojun Waltz / Randers Hopsa (4.05)
8. Song for Ireland (4.59)
9. Workers' Song (2.59)
10. Both Sides the Tweed (Roud 8913) (3.35)

All tracks trad. arr. Dick Gaughan except

Track 2 Robert Burns;

Track 4 Leon Rosselson;

Tracks 6b, 7a Dick Gaughan;

Track 8 Phil & June Colclough;

Track 9 Ed Pickford;

Track 10 words trad., Dick Gaughan, music Dick Gaughan

Side one

1. Erin-Go-Bragh (Roud 1627; Laws Q20; G/D 2:236) (4.24)

- The song may have been written by Robert Tannahill the weaver poet who was a contemporary of Robert Burns and died in 1810.
- What I like about it
 - Lets you know who you are dealing with.
- What it's about
 - Song is about a man from the West of Scotland who is mistaken as an Irishman in Edinburgh and has a run in with the police.
 - Erin go bragh means Ireland Forever
 - Set during the time of the 1798 Irish Rebellion during the Napoleonic Wars which was brutally suppressed but informed Irish nationalism for years after.
 - It deals with the anti-Irish and anti-Highlander prejudices found in Lowland Scotland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Being brought up with Irish grandparents and a Highland Scots mother, I find the irony of the song the best antidote to racism.
- Lyrics
 - Sae come aa ye young people, whairever ye're from,
A don't give a damn tae whit place ye belang;
A come fae Argyll in the Heilans sae braw,
Bit A ne'er took it ill bein caad Erin-go-Bragh.
- Music (From Dick's legacy website)
 - The tune is one of the most common Irish tunes and is used for many songs, including Master McGrath. The guitar was tuned DADGAD, capo at the 5th fret.
- Video
 - Here is Dick performing Erin go Bragh at the WDR Folk Festival at Köln cathedral
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zu1HtV00qw&list=RD2zu1HtV00qw>

2. Now Westlin Winds (Roud 6936) (4.29)

- What I like about it
 - In contrast to Erin go Bragh: the softer side of Dick's work.
- What it's about
 - Beautiful love song. Burns writes about his 'charmer' Peggy Thompson whom Burns met in his 17th summer spent in Kirkoswald where he was supposed to be learning trigonometry but clearly got distracted.
 - "The twin arts of hunting and love-making go together in the mind of the country poet."
 - The first hint of ornithology but not the last. Birds of all kinds...
- Poem by Robert Burns arr. Dick Gaughan. The poem is subtitled 'Song composed in August'
 - Massively loved poem and song by Scots and Irish. It's been performed at the opening of the Scottish parliament.

- Dick said
 - I learned this from Geordie Hamilton, an ex-miner from Kirkintilloch who worked with the Post Office in Edinburgh. He used to frequent the Forrest Hill Bar and was responsible for encouraging and assisting many a young singer. But it was very difficult learning a complete song from him as he had a habit of starting one, singing a verse or two, then saying, “You don’t really want to hear that” and launching into something else.
- Music
 - Jim Malcom said that Dick Gaughan’s rendition ‘nailed it unwrenchably to the wall’
- Video
 - Dick performing Now Westlin’ Winds in “Gaughan”, the 1983 BBC Spectrum documentary about him:
<https://youtu.be/vZ7oYCx6tBw?si=8bgTDNVioYG0Fai9>

3. Craigie Hill (Roud 5165) (6.09)

- Trad. Arr. Dick Gaughan who learned it from Glasgow-born Irish singer, Paddy Tunney. Craigie Hill is a hill overlooking Perth in Ayrshire.
- What it’s about
 - Written in the form of an overhead conversation between two Scottish lovers where one is deciding to emigrate.
 - Dick wrote “So many Irish songs of emigration speak in glowing terms of great success and joy in the promised land of America. This one is much more of a Scots emigrant song in that it is concerned with the reasons for the forced migration and the heartbreak of leaving. It used to be common to hold wakes for those leaving as to those left behind, it was exactly as if they had died.”
- What I like about it
 - It’s interesting to think about this song in the context of the current debate about immigrants here and in the US.
 - It’s also tragic that the young man having been colonised can only see his future in becoming a colonist himself.
 - It made me think of the lyrics of the Manchester Rambler by Ewan McColl “nothing changes it all stays the same”.

4. World Turned Upside Down (2.45)

- Written by (the amazing) Leon Rosselson and Roy Bailey in 1975 and inspired by the Diggers Song, a 17th century song about land rights by Gerrard Winstanley, one of the founders of the Diggers movement.
- What it’s about
 - The Diggers (Or the True Levellers as they called themselves) sought to reform the social order by peacefully creating small egalitarian rural communities and farming on common land. They envisioned an ecological interrelationship between humans and nature.
 - St Georges Hill in Weybridge Surrey was the scene of one of these communities which they set up in 1649.
- What I like about it

- 1649 a key year for England - year of trial and execution of Charles 1st. It was a time of the reformation, and the country was full of people who had been brought up Christian but the established systems were disintegrating and new sects were springing up everywhere. I was brought up a Quaker and George Fox the founder of Quakerism was first imprisoned for preaching in 1649.
- I learned this song from Billy Bragg's version (which he released in 1985 near the end of the miners' strike).
- Billy Bragg did a lot of benefit gigs in the 1980s and says he decided to record it after hearing Dick's version, although Roy Bailey tells a tale that he heard it when they did a gig in Sheffield together. Maybe both are true.
- Dick's version is a little softer, but I love it as much.
- Dick wrote:
 - The English Civil War, which was in fact simply a Bourgeois Revolution, left many of its early supporters feeling cheated and betrayed. The Diggers were Christian, pacifist and could be described as primitive communists. The conclusion of the song, in my interpretation, is that, as they were not prepared to defend themselves, they were annihilated. The evidence of history is that revolutions are usually peaceful - but the resulting counter-revolution is usually extremely bloody and ruthless. Anyone who believes that any ruling class will give up power without extreme resistance is living in a different dimension.
- Video
 - Hear Roy Bailey talk about how The World Turned Upside Down became a "traditional" song for coffee picking in Nicaragua and how he says Billy Bragg came to record it:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtDc2zi0bp4>
 - Here's Dick's version of World Turned Upside Down in the Spectrum documentary:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWzzvnPOyTM&list=RDxWzzvnPOyTM>
 - And here's Billy Bragg performing it in 1998 on his Burns Steer guitar:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apWE0puBAPY>
 - Billy auctioned the guitar off last year and donated the proceeds to Crisis at Christmas.

5. The Snows They Melt the Soonest (Roud 3154) (4.11)

- An English folk song dating back to at least 1821.
 - Believed collected by the Newcastle radical Thomas Doubleday from a Newcastle street singer. Doubleday might have written the words.
 - Beautifully moody.
- What its about
 - Doubleday wrote "It embodies, in a faint degree, that mixture of passions, where bitterness and love, grief and contempt, mix and get the better of one another, as the colours do on a bit of shot-silk."
 - The song makes a connection between times of harvest, weather, seasons, and the hardships and joys that come along with the courtship of a lover.

- Dick wrote:
 - “As I have said elsewhere, on many occasions, there is much more to the lives of ordinary working people than the struggle to survive. The view put forward by, for example, George Orwell in his insulting portrayal of the working class in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, I find grossly offensive and dehumanising. I come from an area and the class like the one Orwell wrote of and while I can understand how our poverty might have looked to the guilty conscience of a former pupil of Eton, he totally missed the point and might as well have been visiting Mars. He was incapable of seeing beyond superficial appearances and appreciating that we are human beings who experience the full range of human life and emotion. Yes, we sing of struggle and hardship—but we also sing of love and beauty, joy and delight. “
- Video
 - Here is Dick singing *The Snows that Melt the Soonest* in 2001 in Oisterwijk. This video gives you a flavour of what being with him at a gig was like: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEoEN95qi-o&list=RDSEoEN95qi-o>

Side Two

6. [Lough Erne \(The Rambling Irishman\) \(Roud 3572\) / First Kiss at Parting \(5.45\)](#)
 - Lough Erne is traditional; Dick learned it from fellow members of Boys of the Lough, Robin Morton and Cathal McConnell. Dick wrote *First Kiss at Parting*.
 - What it’s about
 - Lough Erne is another emigration song, this one from Ireland.
 - I love the way he takes another song about parting and rounds it off with some lovely picking.
7. [Scojun Waltz / Randers Hopsa \(4.05\)](#)
 - Both tunes by Dick featuring Brian McNeill on fiddle and bass.
 - What it’s about
 - Dick wrote: “The first of these was written one morning sitting in Andy Irvine's kitchen in Dublin while we were working (in theory - most of the time we spent talking!) on the songs for [Parallel Lines](#). I had woken really early and was waiting for him to get up and started messing around on the guitar as one does. Something about it felt vaguely Cajun but it was also obviously Scottish, hence the lousy pun in the name. The second is a kind of Danish dance called a 'hopsa' and I learned it from the band *McEwan's Export* when I produced their album in 1979. The main melody guitar was in DADGAD with the harmony guitar tuned DGDDAE”
 - Does the first tune sound scots or cajun to you? And does the second sound Danish?
8. [Song for Ireland \(4.59\)](#)
 - Written by Phil & June Colclough around 1977 who were friends of Dicks.

- What it's about
 - Inspired by a trip the Colcloughs took to the dingle peninsula.
 - Ostensibly a hymn in praise of the beauty of the country but with a sting in the tail.
 - Heather Heywood wrote: "The dream of 'a land where no-one has to fight' is one we would all share, but somehow we always manage to screw things up in the end."
- What I like about it
 - So incredibly evocative of being on the west coast of Ireland, you could almost be there.
 - Reminds me of my visits to Ireland and Northern Ireland during the 1980s, including meeting Terry Waite in Derry and finding out about the reconciliation work there.
- Lyrics
 - Dreaming in the night
I saw a land where no one had to fight
But waking in your dawn
I saw you crying in the morning light
- Video
 - Dick singing Song for Ireland on the Spectrum documentary:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuSAMzvOzo4&list=RDPuSAMzvOzo4>

9. Workers' Song (2.59)

- Written by Ed Pickford, a folk singer and activist who was born in 1943 to a mining family in county Durham.
- What it's about
 - Pretty self-explanatory. Dick's version is the best I've ever heard as it has no messing about its straight to the point with no flannel.
 - A message for our times methinks.
- Lyrics

In the factories and mills
In the shipyards and mines
You've often been told
Keep up with the times
Your skills are not needed
They've streamlined the job
With slide rule and stopwatch
Your pride they have robbed.

But when the sky darkens
And the prospect is war
Who's given a gun
And then pushed to the fore?
And expected to die
For the land of his birth
When he's never owned
One handful of earth.

10. Both Sides the Tweed (Roud 8913) (3.35)

- words trad., Dick Gaughan, music Dick Gaughan
- Dick wrote:
 - The text of this song is a reworking of a song from 1707 about the Treaty of Union to which I added the tune.
 - In March 1979, Scotland and Wales had referenda on the question of devolved 'Home Rule' parliaments. At the last minute, they fell victim to an act of opportunistic treachery by some Labour Members of Parliament from the North East of England who succeeded in forcing through an amendment which meant that a simple majority vote, as is the case for every other election in the UK, would not suffice and that it would be necessary to achieve, not just a majority of votes cast, but at least 40% *of all eligible votes*. To put this in perspective, had this been applied in General Elections, no Government in the UK in the 60s, 70s or 80s would have been elected. It meant that an abstention would, in effect, be a vote against. Scotland was split down the middle with the Nationalists opposing, the Conservatives (naturally) opposing, the Liberals supporting and the Labour Party in tatters with some campaigning for and some campaigning against. The result in Scotland was a majority of votes cast but it just failed to reach the required 40%. In principle I had no objection to the 40% requirement but, in practise, it was a piece of sabotage as it was a complete departure from the principle of majority vote upon which all UK legislation is based.
 - This, and the chaos within the Labour party, whose government was responsible for the referendum in the first place, meant a guarantee of failure. It made James Callaghan's Labour Government look amateurish and incompetent and played a significant part in their defeat in the General Election 2 months later and the election of Thatcher's Government.
 - When the result was announced, I was in the Phoenix Bar in Cork in Ireland (a bit like '*where were you when you heard that Kennedy had been shot?*') and found myself on the receiving end of merciless scorn from the rather left-wing republican clientele there, absolutely incapable of defending the indefensible.

About Dick's recent life:

- Dick retired after a stroke in 2016 and is now legally blind.
- Until recently he has been living quietly in Edinburgh but in January 2024 made a surprise walk on appearance at the Celtic Connections festival as a guest of Billy Bragg. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk5L6mInUbQ>
- In March this year Colin Harper (the Author) launched a kickstarter to create an 8-disk box set of his works which raised triple the target (91k). <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2121905920/dick-gaughan-r-evolution-1969-84-an-8-disc-box-set>
- Billy promoted the kickstarter: <https://www.facebook.com/billybraggofficial/posts/dick-gaughan-is-a-towering-figure-in-folk-music-circles-a-musician-whose-radical/1189392895882367/>

- Colin also launched a fundraiser for legal fees to help Dick get access to his back catalogue which smashed its target in four days.
<https://www.gofundme.com/f/aatux2>
- <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/whatever-happened-to-dick-gaughan-5045509>
- Last month he appeared on a special BBC Radio Scotland Programme talking about the campaign to preserve his music (not currently available to play)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002ft8f>

Find out more:

<https://mainlynorfolk.info/folk/records/dickgaughan.html#handfulofearth>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handful_of_Earth

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dick_Gaughan

<https://www.dandelionradio.com/artist/Dick+Gaughan>

Archived website:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151208060047/http://dickgaughan.co.uk/songs/index.html>

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