

Shane Ó Fearghail

23 April 2021

New England

The reason behind the rhyme

My name is Shane Ó Fearghail and I write songs. As a songwriter I have written many songs. Some for me and some for you. For me songs are a force. They have a time and a place. A joy factor. They can be therapeutic or simply crucial. 'New England' could well be one of those songs.

I love art and I love music. As a songwriter with conviction and an artist with a conscience I try to use that, and where I can approach topical issues with care. I feel any songwriter with an ounce of social awareness, should use their craft to engage conversation, draw attention to issues and call out any injustice that they feel warrants concern or focus - and to do so with craft and with care. To sound out issues that are relevant and need attention. I should also mention I love comedy. For the very same reason!

With 'New England', I tried to do that and approach a subject that was important to me, if a little close to the bone. It is because of the nature of this particular song, that I feel I *should* give an explanation. Why? Because the subject matter is dark. It is complicated, and could be seen by some to be controversial. With my words I have tried to be as honest as I can be; the lyrics of this song being based on actual events. To me these words tell a true story.

In writing this song and telling that story I never set out to offend anyone or to have to defend a position. It's just a song, written from a place of empathy and a strange sense of solidarity. A song written as a result of the events that were unfolding in England and Europe in real time over the last four years.

'New England' - Breaking down the song.

'New England', is a ballad of reflection. It is written from the perspective of a young boy sitting down with his father. The father tells the son the old stories, as they look back across the waves of time and tide in search of understanding. It is an honest account of a shared history.

The catalyst for writing this song was the Grenfell Tower Disaster*. Brexit was its motivation. The history of colonial imperialism was the song's driving force. Written in a traditional ballad style, 'New England' has three verses. Each verse is separated by a chorus. They in turn lead to an outro and a musical reprise.

Written in the narrative form, 'New England' is six minutes thirty two seconds in length. The subject matter is historical in context. Each verse deals with separate issues from past to present. Each chorus through repetition and lyrical development, sets out to root the listener to the message by way of a "lyrical softening" of the harder factual information; thus using the chorus as a "hook"!

Brexit-Tearing.

As mentioned, the motivational factor for writing 'New England' was Brexit. It took four years to write and was written over the course of the Brexit talks and tantrums; as the political debacle played out before our eyes like an imperial game, unmanaged and manhandled for all to see.

For me for a time, it felt as though the ghouls of an imperial past were rearing their ugly heads. A past where the legacy of government and church, creaking with the weight of old bones in closets, pulled strings. Where in those very same halls of power and privilege, the self entitled capitalists and royal imperialists, played part time with people's lives. And as Brexit trundled on with no end in sight, that fear of conflict on the island of Ireland hung heavy in the air we were breathing. It felt as though the past was knocking on mahogany doors once more.

When legacy is Colony

'New England' harks back to the hard truths of an English and British colonial past. Colony is the historical context around which 'New England' is based. And yes, I am fully aware that colony is not only a British legacy, and that Belgium, Spain, France, Portugal, The Netherlands, Germany, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Austria, The USA, China and Japan should all get an honourable mention. The royal houses of Europe even more so.

But as an Irish man my point of focus was with the English and later British administration whom, with weighted footprints scarred and scorched Ireland by way of war, famine, plantation, colony and transportation; and let's not forget Oliver Cromwell and the Tudors and the devastation they wrought. So to be clear, my reference for colony in this piece was the British Imperial government and English kings and queens, lords and barons that came before. And it is through this shared past and my appetite for history that I have a strong factual base to draw from. The harsh reality is, the English and British past is a big part of Ireland's story and, 'New England' for me, is my way of documenting, understanding and in some way coming to terms with that past and shared history.

Hard Facts & Accountability

Colonial expansion has left a blood stain on all of the places it shadowed. English colonial expansions and British Imperial Policy in particular, has left an indelible mark not just on Ireland and the Irish, but everywhere they possessed. And the sun never set on the British Empire! With the fumbling of Brexit, I had visions of old

men in pinstripe suits, spidering their fingers by candlelight, as they licked their lips eyeing future prospects with siphon, spade and ledger in hand.

In today's current climate where we see the rise for justice and equality, and with the 'Black Lives Matter' movements, racism has been placed firmly to the fore; as it should be. Accountability through responsibility is needed. All cards should be on the table here. After all, it was colonial ships that transported African people in their millions for sale into slavery. That cost is immeasurable. English and British ships were instrumental in the slave trade out of Africa, as were their owners, profiteers, lords, kings and queens; lest we forget.

In 'New England', I also remember it was those same master's who were responsible for the transport of many thousands of Irish indentured servants, to work and die on plantations in the new world and the Caribbean, effectively clearing the island for English and Scottish plantations and forced land grabs in Ireland. This in turn fast tracked the destruction of Irish Gaelic culture by way of foreign policy and paved the way for the decimation of Irish forests, to build the ships that pirated the seven seas; the vehicles for the slave trade, colonial expansion and control.

And what of the penal colonies, the famine coffin ships that sailed as a British government stood by, they themselves shipping food & livestock out of Ireland for sale and profit, while millions died of starvation or had to emigrate. What of the people who remained? Turned off their land for sheep and coin, left to die by the roadside. And it was not only Ireland.

Also tragic was that Africa, India, Native America, Australia, New Zealand, South East Asia, Central America & The Caribbean; even Scotland with the 'Highland Clearances' suffered a similar colonial fate. What of Palestine? The information available is staggering. Sickening even. Centuries of greed and colonial raw materials that built the halls of power in the English capitals and her provincial houses. Pillage and plunder was theirs on a global scale. And what of all the cultures and languages lost. Who counts that cost? That is the legacy of colony.

Changing Times

Yes there are some who will argue that the abolishment of the slave trade had its roots in London. But let's be realistic. The slave trade was a British financial reward and cash cow for two hundred years leading up to the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which wasn't enacted until Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833*, some twenty six years later (and not in all parts of the British empire).

The blood had been spilled and the money made. The slave trade continued en mass across the empire for as long as it was possible and for as long as the imperialists could get away with. And yes, I am aware that many in Ireland also made money from this. With the advent of literacy, newspapers, global media and

public opinion, having blood on your hands it seems, was not good for business.

To Conclude

Broaching this subject head on was never going to be easy. It was always going to be complicated. Dangerous even. With this treatise I have tried to be balanced with the facts, to be honest and explain the motivation behind the song i.e. my history! I have good friends in England whom I cherish. I have been cautious to thread carefully and compassionately. To treat this subject with care.

'New England' was never about pointing fingers at the English people. More importantly that finger is pointed at "Old England's" past and a "British Imperial Colonial Policy". And as I have already mentioned, that past is sadly my own and one as an Irish man, that I have had to come to terms with. Our history is intertwined whether we like it or not.

This song has been a catalyst for me. It has been therapy too. I spent three months animating all the sequences, from storyboarding the scenes to researching the artwork and history. To have to animate the Union Jack* and relative symbols was not something that I thought I would ever have to do. At the time I was not happy doing it, if I am being honest, as it brought up so much of the past, so many questions and hard truths. The Union Jack holds negative connotations for me as it does for so many others. It has a tarnished history, and not just in Ireland. But on reflection it is something I am glad I did, because I have no fear of its shape or meaning now.

The same goes for all the royal imperial symbols I drew and animated. I understand them now as well as my relationship to them... and there is a peace in that. I also realise that in animating the Union Jack flag sequence, I became aware that I might be witnessing the last decade in which the Union Jack flies as a flag of the "United Kingdom". That too might be deemed controversial. Honestly, it's just an observation.

To reiterate, I do empathise with the situation that those living in England now find themselves in. As Europeans we are neighbours. Brexit in my mind is a disaster, and not just for English citizens. What of Scotland and the Scottish, Wales and the North of Ireland / Northern Ireland?

'New England' was my way of venting a palpable frustration. The song is out there now as is the video. And sure who knows... maybe you like the song. Maybe you don't. Maybe it will invoke a conversation. Or maybe it won't. But does it matter? It is not a song I ever wanted to promote. In doing so scares me. But I detest greed. So I feel I have to put it out there. It is an ugly conversation and a heartbreaking story. I mourn the past but I am positive about the future.

'New England' is a song I had to write. For me.
Le grá agus grásta

Glossary & Links

Brexit

Brexit was the vote whereby the majority of people in England and Wales chose to secede from the European Union by way of fair elections. Northern Ireland and Scotland on the other hand voted to remain. And yet, within a kingdom united, but equally divided by the Brexti vote, the London government decided to take the whole of the United Kingdom out of Europe's common market and transit area, creating havoc in the process.

Grenfell Tower Disaster

As mentioned, the catalyst for writing this song was the Grenfell Tower Disaster, mentioned and animated in the third verse. The inferno occurred in London on the 14th June 2017, causing the deaths of 72 of the 293 people who were believed to be in the 129-flat tower that night. The enquiry continues.

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

Residents labelled troublemakers

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/21/grenfell-resident-who-raised-fire-concerns-labelled-troublemaker-inquiry-told>

Other Moments of Note & Lyrics

“The Wall”

Here I reference Kilmainham Jail in Dublin and the Pink Floyd's song and video. Both having had a profound effect on me as a child.

Kilmainham Gaol

Many Irish revolutionaries, including the leaders of the 1916 [Easter Rising](#), were imprisoned and executed in the prison by the orders of the UK Government.

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

‘Another Brick In The Wall’ - Pick Floyd.

<https://youtu.be/YR5ApYxkU-U>

“Old Stories”

Is a reference to Jack & The Beanstalk, David and Goliath.

“Tyburn Tree” - Newgate Gallows 1108 - 1783

In the song and video are the references to the Tyburn Tree. The cruelty that was afforded the English and Irish alike at Newgate and Tyburn is something to be remembered.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyburn>

“The inferior sort of the kingdom of Ireland”: Irishmen and Tyburn Tree <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09670889808455589?journalCode=cisr20>

Further Reading

https://www.stmarylebone.org/images/stories/History/Tyburn_Tree_and_Convent.pdf

<https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/tyburn-tree-0014383>

The English Roses

The roses animated in the video represent the royal houses of Lancaster, York and Tudor.

Lancaster Rose

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

York Rose

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

Tudor Rose - Or the Union Rose

The rose that inspired the Union Jack?

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

The British Slave Trade

Colony is a constant theme in the video.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed>

Abolition of Slavery Act 1833

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_Abolition_Act_1833

Penal Servitude

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

The Union Jack

Of course it must be remembered that symbols to some are means of intimidation, subjugation and control to others. With animation, I tried to represent the possibility that the combined three flags or the “flag of the Union” i.e. the Union Jack, dissolve to show one flag left standing alone. Here I pose the question, could the Union Jack be witnessing its last decade?

To note: The Union Jack consist of three crosses. The cross of St George (England). A red cross that sits atop, imposed upon the cross of St Andrew. The cross of St Andrew represents Scotland (blue field with a white saltire), which in turn sits on top of the cross of St Patrick, (red saltire - X-shaped cross) which represents Ireland. An early form of control through the media medium of the time. Flags! I have always questioned why there is no flag representing Wales on this flag of union?

Important to note: Many are not aware that Ireland is still represented on the British royal coat of arms. The golden harp that sits bottom left, on a blue background, which in fact represents the island of Ireland and not just the North of Ireland. Egregious to some.

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

Cases & Capitals

In making the video and when adding text, it became clear that there was a stark contrast between using lowercase words against capitals; e.g. when using “e” for “new england”. To the artist, the softening of this “e” to lowercase had a much cleaner aesthetic than it’s harder and more angular cousin capital “E”. It also became apparent that in doing so a visual tension was created in each chorus, which in turn accentuated the transition from lower case to capitals i.e. “new england” to “Britiannia”, in the outro.

I am aware that in using lower case for “new england”, one might be seen as using bad grammar, and that it might jar with the viewer depending on your persuasion or preference. The use of upper and lower cases throughout the video is for artistic effect to create dynamic transitions and accentuate difference. One could also argue that this “lowercasing”, could also be seen as a reference to the lack of standing that new England now holds on the global stage; as mentioned to me by an English friend.

Red Hand of Ulster

Also known as the Red Hand of Ireland, it is an ancient Irish symbol rooted in [Gaelic culture](#) and dates back to [pagan](#) times. Recently adopted by loyalists and Unionist in the North of Ireland, it is a powerful symbol. In the video it represents both traditions - and can have many meanings depending on your perspective.

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

The Tower Of London & The legend of the Ravens

<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Tower-Ravens/>

The British Isles

Ireland is not Britain. An interesting perspective.

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