

Song History: Only Remembered
by Will Quale, Nov 2021

Horatius Bonar, an Edinburgh pastor (1808-89), wrote a ten-stanza poem "The Everlasting Memorial" which was published in his *Hymns of Faith and Hope* (1860).[1] Ira Sankey, the American religious singer (1840-1908), adapted three stanzas of Bonar's poem, wrote one new stanza, and wrote the music (with its familiar chorus) for the hymn he titled "Only Remembered" in 1891.[2] Sankey's lifelong mission was as the singer in a singer-preacher partnership with Dwight Moody; the pair toured England several times, meeting Bonar on an early tour. Of "Only Remembered" Sankey later wrote "**Dr. Horatius Bonar, of Edinburgh, wrote the words of this hymn, which I set to music in 1891. I sang it as a solo in the Tabernacle in London at the funeral of my friend, C.H. Spurgeon, the great London preacher.**"[3]

BONAR 1st stanza

*Up and away, like the dew of the morning
Soaring from earth to its home in the sun,--
So let me steal away, gently and lovingly,
Only remembered by what I have done*

SANKEY 1st stanza

*Fading away like the stars of the morning,
Losing their light in the glorious sun--
Thus would we pass from the earth and its toiling,
Only remembered by what we have done.*

BONAR 8th stanza

*I need not be missed, if another succeed me,
To reap down those fields which in spring I have sown ;
He who ploughed and who sowed is not missed by the reaper,
He is only remembered by what he has done.*

SANKEY 2nd stanza

*Shall we be miss'd though by others succeeded,
Reaping the fields we in springtime have sown?
No, for the sowers may pass from their labors,
Only remembered by what they have done.*

BONAR 9th stanza

*Not myself, but the truth that in life I have spoken
Not myself, but the seed that in life I have sown,
Shall pass on to ages,--all about me forgotten,
Save the truth I have spoken, the things I have done.*

SANKEY 3rd stanza

*Only the truth that in life we have spoken,
Only the seed that on earth we have sown;
These shall pass onward when we are forgotten,
Fruits of the harvest and what we have done.*

In 1986, English folk band Swan Arcade recorded the first three stanzas of Sankey's arrangement with electric guitar and bass accompanying vocals by band members including Jim Boyes (later of Coope, Boyes & Simpson).[4]

John Tams had already made a name for himself writing and adapting music for theatre through the 1980s, with some of his songs -- notably "Rolling Home" written for 1985's *Cider with Rosie*, Sheffield[5] -- rapidly entering the folk canon and often rapidly becoming regarded as "trad". (Of "Rolling Home", Tams has said "**Rolling Home**" *has been conspicuous at festivals and folk clubs for many years, often introduced as a "traditional" song. Nothing could please me more.*[6]) He was asked to write music for 1990's *The Ship*, a play produced in a Glasgow shipyard and set during its final working days (1960s) before the industry's collapse; during the performance, the cast assembles a 67-foot wide ship which is launched out into the harbour in the final scene.[7] In creating the music for *The Ship*, Tams found Sankey's "Only Remembered" and adapted it -- taking only Sankey's first stanza and chorus, and to that writing a new second stanza, sung as a solo in the performance:[8]

TAMS *The Ship* stanza

*Who'll sing the anthems and who'll tell the story
Will the line hold? Will it scatter and run?
Shall we at last be united in glory?
Only remembered for what we have done*

Never one to allow a hit song to be used only once, Tams adapted his adaptation for 1994's *Big Picnic*, [9] another Glasgow production staged in the same shipyard, this time set during World War I (telling the story of the shipbuilders who -- despite having an occupation which exempted them from service -- volunteered in great numbers for the army, believing the romantic propaganda).

Meanwhile, in the early 1990s Jim Boyes had formed a vocal trio with Barry Coope and Lester Simpson, and for their debut album -- 1993's *Funny Old World* -- they recorded their own arrangement using Sankey's/Tams's first stanza, Sankey's third stanza, and Tam's new stanza from *The Ship*; the song featured on 1995's *We're Here Because We're Here* (concert album) and 1999's *What We Sing* (compilation album, using the 1995 recording),[10] as well as 2006's *Private Peaceful* (concert album). [11]

Never one to allow a hit song to be used only twice, Tams adapted his 1990 adaptation for 2007's *War Horse*, a National Theatre production (the story of English plough horses conscripted for World War I cavalry service) which saw immense success at home, on world tours, and in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation (for which Tam's song was recorded with a chorus of 300 singers, then cut from the film! [6]). For this, Tams wrote one new stanza, and created a four-stanza arrangement using *The Ship* stanza 1, this new stanza, Sankey's stanza 3, and *The Ship* stanza 2:

TAMS *War Horse* stanza

*Horses and men, plowshares and traces,
The line on the land and the paths of the sun.
Season by season we mark nature's graces.
Only remembered for what we have done.*

War Horse and its John Tams soundtrack achieved even greater fame with the centenary of World War I, culminating in John Tams singing "Only Remembered" in the Royal Albert Hall for a combined theatre and television audience of 53 million, including the Queen, in 2014.[12] Meanwhile, in smaller

venues Tams and Barry Coope often performed as a duo on the folk circuit during the centenary years.
[13]

Never one to allow a hit song to be used only thrice, Tams adapted his 2007 adaptation for 2017's *The War Horse Songbook*, a storytelling collaboration with singer Bob Fox, for which Tams changed the second line in Sankey's stanza (to "*Only the deeds when our journey is run*") and wrote one additional stanza (inserted as the fourth):

TAMS Songbook stanza

*Where are they running? Why are they falling?
Fewer still fewer than what was begun
Ghosts in the morning mist voicelessly calling
Only remembered for what we have done.*

This was recorded by Bob Fox with full orchestral score from the musical.[14]

Though the source of the song was Bonar and Sankey, without Tams's secular adaptations (and Coope, Boyes & Simpson's performances and recordings of Tams's adaptations), "Only Remembered" would likely never have become the popular folk anthem it is today.

Of his adaptation process, Tams wrote: ***I trawled obsessively, the Moody and Sankey hymnbook seeking songs and anthems that might otherwise be overlooked. Right or wrong I edited out many of the "Godly" references and made new verses in an attempt to add more to the portfolio of people's anthems. I wasn't trying to de-Christianise them, just to reappraise them, put them back to be sung out loud by anyone who took something from them, Christians and Non-Christians alike? Maybe it's about context and there's none better for "Only Remembered" than "War Horse." "Lest we forget" runs deep in the play. The melody, which I love, is not mine – composed by American Methodist Ira D. Sankey with original words by Horatius Bonar. I remade most of the words to our "War Horse" needs.***[6]

But with so many arrangements and rearrangements having been recorded and performed in the folk world, and with additional local adaptations and parodies continuing to be written,[15] the song's adaptability can sometimes get in the way: Dick Greenhaus wryly observed in 2004 on how this song had been rearranged so many times that sometimes nobody really knows quite what they're singing along (or even leading) with when it gets led at a folk session:[16]

*Soaring from earth like a fly in molasses
Taken aloft like a slug on the wing;
Seen only dimly through mists as time passes
Where are the words I am trying to sing?*

*Vaguely remembered, almost remembered
Vaguely remembered from what I have sung;
La la la la la la la la la-la
Vaguely remembered from what I have sung.*

Coda (local connection):

Richie Davis pointed out that Dwight Moody -- the Gilbert to Ira Sankey's Sullivan -- was from Northfield, Mass., and founded the local schools which today are the combined Northfield Mount Herman School. This reminded me of the story of the Moody and Sankey first meeting at a church conference in 1870, as related in Wikipedia:

*Moody was instantly impressed as Sankey demonstrated his ability to enliven an audience rendered soporific by inactivity and overlong prayers by giving an impromptu rendering of the hymn "There is a fountain filled with blood". Meeting Sankey at the end of the session, Moody demanded that the young man join him in his mission work: "**I have been looking for you for the last eight years**".*

It took Sankey six months of deliberation to decide to give joining Moody a try; after a week of working with Moody, Sankey quit his day job and their close partnership continued for life (29 years, to Moody's death).

Notes:

- [1] https://www.google.com/books/edition/Hymns_of_Faith_and_Hope_First_Series/oq2sPOxZZaoC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA71&printsec=frontcover
- [2] <https://hymnary.org/hymn/HHNO1908/185>
- [3] Sankey (1907, *My life and the story of the gospel hymns...*): <https://archive.org/details/mylifest00sank/page/378/mode/2up?q=spurgeon>
- [4] Swan Arcade (1986 recording): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rmFXPYbjWE>
- [5] <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=68960&threadid=68960>
- [6] <https://www.folkradio.co.uk/2017/10/garland-for-joe-war-horse-songbook/>
- [7] <https://www.theglasgowstory.com/image/?inum=TGSB00370>
- [8] *The Ship* (1990 recording): <https://www.dropbox.com/s/a2efvqpy3zfvw1a/Only%20Remembered-The%20Ship.mp3?dl=0>
- [9] *Big Picnic* (1994 recording): <https://www.dropbox.com/s/n0r21m72kkeeHy1/Only%20Remembered-Big%20Picnic.mp3?dl=0>
- [10] Coope, Boyes & Simpson (1995/99 recording): <https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=eDC2KkQkfsE&list=PLTOWo0KwU25MCIjVgBG9FLY9t2FPB5B3W>
- [11] Coope, Boyes & Simpson (2006 recording): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyoJn8Ebb7I>
- [12] John Tams (2014 Royal Albert Hall): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKXADjROrH8>
- [13] John Tams & Barry Coope (possibly 2016 live): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58ySPo1Z2BA>
- [14] Bob Fox (2017 recording): <https://soundcloud.com/david-suff/only-remembered-bob-fox>
- [15] <https://www.morrisfolkchoir.org/p/covid-songs-2020.html>
- [16] <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=153659>

poem by Horatius Bonar (1860)
“The Everlasting Memorial”

Up and away, like the dew of the morning
Soaring from earth to its home in the sun,--
So let me steal away, gently and lovingly,
Only remembered by what I have done.

My name and my place and my tomb, all forgotten,
The brief race of time well and patiently run,
So let me pass away, peacefully, silently,
Only remembered by what I have done.

Gladly away from this toil would I hasten,
Up to the crown that for me has been won ;
Unthought of by man in rewards or in praises,--
Only remembered by what I have done.

Up and away, like the odors of sunset,
That sweeten the twilight as darkness comes on,--
So be my life,--a thing felt but not noticed,
And I but remembered by what I have done.

Yes, like the fragrance that wanders in freshness,
When the flowers that it came from are closed up and gone,--
So would I be to this world's weary dwellers,
Only remembered by what I have done.

Needs there the praise of the love-written record,
The name and the epitaph graved on the stone ?
The things we have lived for,--let them be our story,
We ourselves but remembered by what we have done.

I need not be missed, if my life has been bearing
(As its summer and autumn moved silently on)
The bloom, and the fruit, and the seed of its season ;
I shall still be remembered by what I have done.

I need not be missed, if another succeed me,
To reap down those fields which in spring I have sown ;
He who ploughed and who sowed is not missed by the reaper,
He is only remembered by what he has done.

Not myself, but the truth that in life I have spoken,
Not myself, but the seed that in life I have sown,
Shall pass on to ages,--all about me forgotten,
Save the truth I have spoken, the things I have done.

So let my living be, so be my dying,
So let my name lie, unblazoned, unknown ;
Unpraised and unmissed, I shall still be remembered ;
Yes,--but remembered by what I have done.

adapted and set to music by Ira D. Sankey (1891)
“Only Remembered”
stanzas 1,2,3 recorded by Swan Arcade (1986)

Fading away like the stars of the morning,
Losing their light in the glorious sun--
Thus would we pass from the earth and its toiling,
Only remembered by what we have done.

Shall we be miss'd though by others succeeded,
Reaping the fields we in springtime have sown?
No, for the sowers may pass from their labors,
Only remembered by what they have done.

Only the truth that in life we have spoken,
Only the seed that on earth we have sown;
These shall pass onward when we are forgotten,
Fruits of the harvest and what we have done.

Oh, when the Saviour shall make up His jewels,
When the bright crowns of rejoicing are won,
Then shall His weary and faithful disciples,
All be remembered by what they have done.

John Tams
adapted for The Ship (1990, Glasgow stage production)
also used for Big Picnic (1994, Glasgow stage production)

Fading away like the stars in the morning
Losing their light in the glorious sun
Thus shall we pass from this earth and its toiling
Only remembered for what we have done

Who'll sing the anthems and who'll tell the story
Will the line hold? Will it scatter and run?
Shall we at last be united in glory?
Only remembered for what we have done

John Tams
adapted for War Horse (2007, National Theatre)

Fading away like the stars in the morning,
Losing their light in the glorious sun,
Thus would we pass from this earth and its toiling?
Only remembered for what we have done.

Horses and men, plowshares and traces,
The line on the land and the paths of the sun.
Season by season we mark nature's graces.
Only remembered for what we have done.

Only the truth that in the life we have spoken,
Only the seed that in life we have sown:
These shall pass onwards when we are forgotten:
Only remembered for what we have done.

Who'll sing the anthem, and who'll tell the story?
Will the line hold; will it scatter and run?
Shall we at last be united in glory?
Only remembered for what we have done?

Coope, Boyes & Simpson
arranged for Funny Old World (1993 album)
also on We're Here Because We're Here (1995 concert album)
also on What We Sing (1999 compilation ; 1995 recording)
also on Private Peaceful (2006 concert album)

Fading away like the stars in the morning
Losing their light in the glorious sun
Thus shall we pass from this earth and its toiling
Only remembered for what we have done

Only the truth that in the life we have spoken,
Only the seeds that in life we have sown:
These shall pass onwards when we are forgotten:
Only remembered for what we have done.

Who'll sing the anthems and who'll tell the story
Will the line hold? Will it scatter and run?
Shall we at last be united in glory?
Only remembered for what we have done

John Tams
adapted for The War Horse Songbook (2017 album)

(same)

(same)

(same, except line 2)
Only the deeds when our journey is run

Where are they running? Why are they falling?
Fewer still fewer than what was begun
Ghosts in the morning mist voicelessly calling
Only remembered for what we have done.

(same)