

Folk Song: The Oak & The Ash

“The Oak and the Ash” is a traditional English folk song that reflects both the natural landscape of England and the deep emotional ties people have to place, identity, and home. Like many folk songs, its exact origins are uncertain, however, one of the earliest printed versions appears in *A Book of Roxburghe Ballads* (printed in 1847), which contained over 1300 ballads from the 17th century.

The song is closely associated with the northern counties of Westmorland, Cumberland, Durham, and Northumberland, with some versions replacing “Westmorland green” with “Cumberland green.” In 1882, printers of this song noted:

“Sir Walter Scott, in his novel Rob Roy, makes the narrator of the tale in recounting recollections of his childhood, tell how his Northumbrian nurse (old Mabel) amused him by singing the ditties of her native country, and specially names O! the Oak and the Ash and the Bonny Ivy Tree as a Northumbrian ballad.”

Its lyrics center on the oak, the ash, and the bonny ivy tree—three plants that were quite familiar to people living in the English countryside. These trees and plants carried symbolic meaning. The oak often represented strength and endurance, the ash was associated with everyday usefulness and rural life, and the ivy symbolized faithfulness and enduring attachment.

At its heart, “The Oak and the Ash” is a song of longing and belonging, suggesting a deep emotional connection to home. This theme would have resonated strongly in a time when people were beginning to move more frequently for work or opportunity, yet still felt rooted in their local landscapes. The repeated imagery of trees and countryside creates a sense of stability and identity in contrast to the changes taking place in society.

Musically, the song has been passed down through oral tradition, which means that different versions of both the lyrics and melody exist. Like many folk songs, it was not originally written down but learned and shared by ear, often sung in homes, gatherings, and local communities.

“The Oak and the Ash” offers a glimpse into a way of life where nature, memory, and identity were closely intertwined, and it remains a gentle reminder of the enduring human desire to belong to a place and to remember where one comes from.

The Oak & The Ash Lyrics

A North Country maid up to London had strayed
Although with her nature it did not agree
She wept and she sighed, and bitterly she cried
I wish once again in the North I could be.

Chorus:

Oh the oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree
They flourish at home in my own country

While sadly I roam I regret my dear home
Where lads and young lasses are making the hay
Where the merry bells ring and the birds sweetly sing
And the maidens and meadows are pleasant and gay

Chorus:

Oh the oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree
They flourish at home in my own country

No doubt did I please, I could marry with ease
Where maidens are fair many lovers will come
But he whom I wed must be North Country bred
And carry me back to my North Country home

Chorus:

Oh the oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree
They flourish at home in my own country

Of parks they may talk where 'tis fashion to walk
I'll own the gay throng is a wonderful sight
But nought have I seen like the Westmoreland green
Where all of us danced from the morning 'til night!

Chorus:

Oh the oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree
They flourish at home in my own country

The Oak and the Ash

