

Dirty Old Town

written by Ewan MacColl

http://www.songplaces.com/Dirty_Old_Town/Salford_Greater_Manchester_England

"Dirty Old Town" is the iconic anthem of industrialized northern European discontent. The song, originally composed by the British folk singer and social activist Ewan MacColl, was later made popular by Irish bands such as The Pogues and The Dubliners, giving rise to a common misconception that the song was written about Dublin. "Dirty Old Town," however, was written about MacColl's hometown of Salford, then a part of Lancashire (now part of Greater Manchester), in Great Britain. Salford is and was an industrial centre for the United Kingdom, with a thriving textile industry pre-dating even the Industrial Revolution, and a busy port that served as a trade hub for Western Europe. Canal building and the epoch of the steam engine furthered the city's industrial progression and factories great and small popped up along the River Irwell. The song is about growing up amid the brick and smoke of Salford.

The song is, in essence, a psychological tour of a superficially productive world, deadened by industry, but coloured with lines unabashedly hopeful. The narrator haunts factories and canals, watching trains move across horizons darkened by a cloudy sky while cats and sirens wail. Despite the gloom penetrating everything the narrator sees and hears - from misty beaches to women walking the street - there is redemption in this song. The singer "smelled a spring on Salford wind" and anticipates the movement of the dreary factory town to brighter months. (...) With the scent of spring on the shifting winds, the narrator finds his love, despite all his revulsion for the grime of Salford, there among it all, by a gas works croft.

This song is covered widely and resonates with listeners who can appreciate real work and the hardships that come with it – the kind of work done with "a good, sharp axe tempered in the fire." In an era where the billionaires never get their hands dirty and rarely produce anything of value, this might be just what we need – a reminder that there's only so much a working man can take before he uses his tools for rebellion.

~ Maggie Grimason