

CDSS Sings: The Three Ravens

by Lorraine Lee Hammond



Picture two or three large black birds perched on bare branches in a stark tree at the edge of a brown, harvested field. As the autumn sun fades away, the air turns brisk. Perhaps these are crows, perhaps they are ravens. Crows and ravens are near relatives. The ravens have a more massive body and a larger beak. This is a familiar autumn sight in rural New England, and in England, Scotland, Germany, Denmark and so many other places where folk ballads have strong roots.

As I write this I am distracted briefly by a conversation among crows outside my window in Brookline, Massachusetts. There was a version of the ballad “The Three Ravens” in my elementary school songbook, accompanied by a haunting black and white illustration of beady-eyed birds eyeing the body of a slain knight in armor lying below them on a field, sword and shield beside him.

The tune I remember was also haunting and, like the story, sounded ancient. I did not know then how ancient both tune and story were, and I applaud the editors of that old fourth or fifth grade textbook for bringing such a powerful song into the lives of many children. My thanks to my classroom teachers who made time for music in our school day, and also understood the value of traditional song.

My remembered version from those years was most likely the one from English composer Thomas Ravenscroft’s *Melismata*, his collection of twenty-three songs for “court, city, and country humours” published in 1611.

Ballad collector Francis James Child indexed “The Three Ravens” as number twenty-six in his definitive work, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Child included the Scottish Twa Corbies as well. Often ballad scholars are able to trace story lines in the British ballads back to Norse themes and antiquity. The crows/ravens eyeing the battlefield may harken back to the pair that legend says flew down to earth each day to spy on humankind, returning to Odin to report what they had seen.

Here are two facsimile pages from the 1611 edition of “Melismata.” [Click either of the images for a PDF with larger versions.](#) The full edition is available at pbm.com/~lindahl/ravenscroft/melismata

A facsimile page from the 1611 edition of "Melismata" titled "COUNTRY PASTIMES." It features musical notation for three parts: Treble, 2. (Tenor), and 4. Voc. (Vocal). The lyrics are: "Here were three Ravens fit on a tree, Downe a downe, lay downe, lay downe. There were three Ravens fit on a tree, with a downe. There were three Ravens fit on a tree, they were as blacke as they might be, with a downe downe, downe, downe, downe, downe." Below the music are several stanzas of lyrics, including: "The one of them laid to his mate, Downe a downe lay downe, with a downe." and "So with they can their Master keep, with a downe." The page is numbered 21.

A facsimile page from the 1611 edition of "Melismata" titled "COUNTRY PASTIMES." It features musical notation for three parts: Treble, 2. (Tenor), and 4. Voc. (Vocal). The lyrics are: "Here were three Ravens fit on a tree, Downe a downe, lay downe, lay downe. There were three Ravens fit on a tree, with a downe. There were three Ravens fit on a tree, they were as blacke as they might be, with a downe downe, downe, downe, downe, downe." Below the music are several stanzas of lyrics, including: "The one of them laid to his mate, Downe a downe lay downe, with a downe." and "So with they can their Master keep, with a downe." The page is numbered 22.

I especially enjoy the Youtube performance by Vokalensemble diapason.

[Click here](#) or the image below to play the video on YouTube.



And now my own setting of the Ravenscroft version in modern notation. The melody uses a mixed mode, common to Elizabethan era music. It is basically drawing from the dorian minor. I transposed the song from Gm to Am because I found that Am was more easily accessible for singers and note readers.

The Three Ravens

From Ravenscroft's *Malismata*, 1616

Am G Am E

There were three ravens sat on a tree, Down, a down, hey down a down. And

5 Am G E7 C G

they were black as black could be, with a down. Then one of them said to his mate,

10 Am E Am E7 Am

"Where shall we our break-fast take?" With a down, derry derry derry down down.

There were three ravens sat on a tree,
 Down a down, hey down, hey down,
 They were as black as black might be,
 With a down.
 The one of them said to his mate,
 Where shall we our breakfast take?
 With a down, derry, derry, derry down, down

Down in yonder green field,
 Down, a down, hey down, hey down,
 There lies a knight slain 'neath his shield,
 With a down.
 His hounds they lie down at his feet,
 So well they do their master keep,
 With a down, derry, derry, derry down, down.

His hawks they fly so eagerly,
 Down a down, hey down, hey down,
 No other fowl dare come him night,
 With a down.
 Down there comes a fallow doe
 As great with young as might she go
 With a down, derry, derry, derry down, down

She lifted up his bloody head,
 Down a down, hey down, hey down,
 And kissed his wounds that were so red,
 With a down.
 She got him up upon her back,
 And carried him to earthen lake,
 With a down, derry, derry, derry down, down

She buried him before the prime
 Down a down, hey down, hey down,
 She was dead herself ere e'en-song time,
 With a down.
 God send every gentleman,
 Such hawks, such hounds, and such a leman.
 With a down, derry, derry, derry down, down

[Click here](#) or on the notation for a downloadable PDF version of the tune and lyrics.

And in the fashion of ballads whose themes run deep in our human consciousness, there are countless versions of The Three Ravens/Twa Corbies. It found its way to North America in the Thomas Ravenscroft 1611 version, which included his four-part vocal harmony arrangement. And Cecil Sharp collected a very different variant, Poor Old Crow, from Mr. Ben Burgess in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1916. [Click here or on the image below for a PDF.](#)

Poor Old Crow - Mr Ben Burgess Charlottesville, VA, September 28, 1916

I also offer a Scottish version that I learned many decades ago from a very young Jane Trezise. Janie was five or six years old. I was in my thirties, and we enjoyed each other's company greatly as we bounced around Scotland in the back of a van. I was touring with Janie's parents Cilla Fisher and Artie Trezise, and the late Rick Lee, and as two folk duos we had an ambitious tour that took us from Edinburgh to Orkney. Janie was out of school and traveling with us. We entertained each other with songs. I close this article with Three Crow, a song that I learned from Janie, and I have since taught to many classrooms of young children. The Three Ravens has proven itself a very durable ballad indeed. [Click here or the image below for a PDF.](#)

Three Crow

Scottish Traditional
from Lorraine Lee Hammond
learned from Jane Trezise

My favorite Youtube link for this song, published on October 11, 2011, features Órla and Róise Ni Eadhra singing a “wee scots song.”

[Click here](#) or on the image below to play the video on YouTube.



Lorraine Lee Hammond is a traditional singer, songwriter, teacher and instrumentalist whose credits include a Homespun dulcimer instruction series, and two Appalachian dulcimer books with Yellow Moon Press. She has performed and recorded extensively with her husband, guitar virtuoso Bennett Hammond. She lectures in American Folk Music and World Music at Lasell College in Newton, MA, and is Music Director for the WUMB/fm Summer Acoustic Music Week and Weekend programs.

October 26-28, 2018

Cloud TEN

Cedar Stanistreet, Donal Sheets, Arthur Davis, Ness Smith-Savedoff

Wind that Shakes the Barley
Bill Dudley, Kathie Aagaard, Sarah Mitchell

and

Andy Shore

Pinellas Park, Florida

Details: www.tampabaycontra.com
or call 727-823-2725