

Captain Wedderburn Answers Nine New Questions

©1996 by Howard L. Kaplan

We know of Captain Wedderburn only from Child ballad 46, "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship"; versions in Bronson also carry titles such as "The Laird o' Roslin's Daughter", "Six questions", and "Captain Woodstock". In all versions, Captain Wedderburn desires to bed a woman who expresses her reluctance by insisting that he first answer a series of riddles, often numbering them as she goes, sometimes even factoring the number:

Questions six ye'll answer me, and that is three times twa
Afore I lie in your bed, at either stock or wa'

Captain Wedderburn always insists that, when he is successful (as he always is), he will lie on the more honourable side of the bed, the stock (the outer edge of a frame bed), while she will lie against the wall, both colder and less convenient. All of the verses conclude with couplets that end in "wall" or "wa'".

Child reports only a tenuous connection between the names used in the song and persons known from history. The Sinclairs of Roslin were a distinguished Scottish family, and a George Wedderburn, who died in 1497, did marry the eldest daughter of John Sinclair of Herdmanstoun. The names seem to have been grafted onto the roots of older riddle songs; it cannot be read as history.

I decided to write a new version of this song for several reasons. In many versions of the original, it is not clear whether the Captain wants to gain consent or only feels legally obliged to gain it:

He said unto his servant, "If it was not for the law
I would have that maid in bed with me as she lay next to the wall."

Also, many of the riddles are objectionable to modern ears. In the collected versions, they range from the reasonably sophisticated

... a priest unborn this night to join us twa
Or I'll nae lie in your bed either at stock or wa' ...
The priest he's standing at the door just ready to come in
Nae man can say that he was born nae man unless he sin
A wild boar tore his mother's side; he oot o' it did fa'
Sae we'l baith lie in ae bed And ye'll lie neist the wa'

through the innocuous

And for my dinner you must get me cherries without stones ...
And when a cherry's in blossom I'm sure it has no stones

and the simply unexplained

You must get me some winter fruit that in December grew ...
My father has some winter fruit that in December grew

to those that are simply unacceptable to modern ears

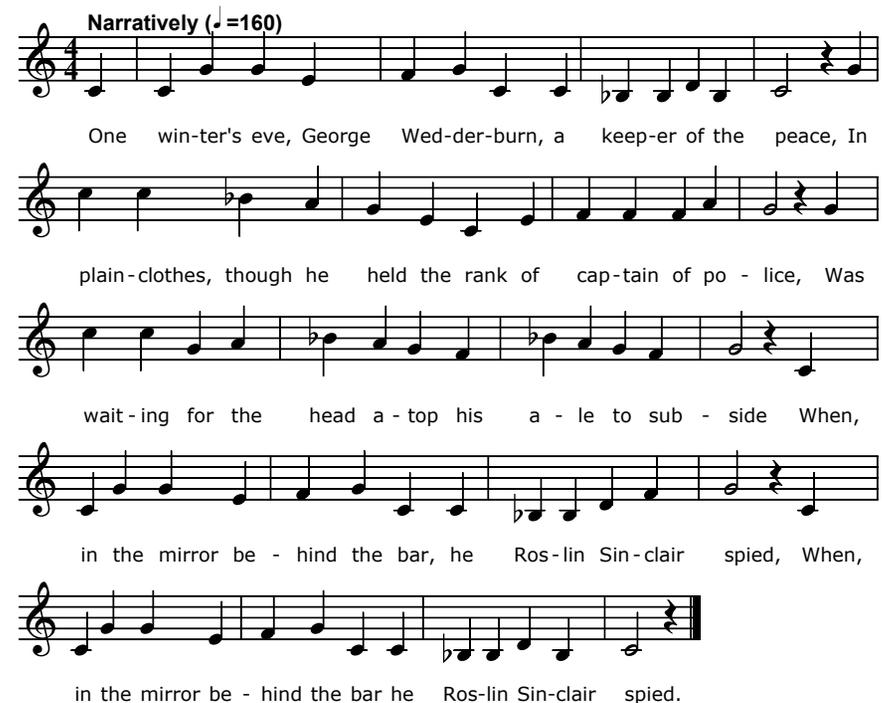
And what is worse than a woman ...
The devil is worse than a woman ...

In rewriting it, I have tried to retain the names, the plot outlines, the question about who will lie next to the wall, and a few details that seem to have been conserved well through many mutations (including the use of a Mixolydian mode), while incorporating riddles that make sense in the 1990s. I have also incorporated cross-references to many subjects featured in my own earlier songs.

The last line of each verse, which repeats the previous line with a slightly altered melody (coming to a full cadence instead of a half-cadence), is suitable for an audience to join with the singer in a setting such as a song circle. The complete lyrics are on the other side of the page.

Key of C, Mixolydian mode

Narratively (♩=160)



One win-ter's eve, George Wed-der-burn, a keep-er of the peace, In
plain-clothes, though he held the rank of cap-tain of po - lice, Was
wait-ing for the head a - top his a - le to sub - side When,
in the mirror be - hind the bar, he Ros-lin Sin-clair spied, When,
in the mirror be - hind the bar he Ros-lin Sin-clair spied.

Captain Wedderburn answers nine new questions

©Howard L. Kaplan 1996

One winter's eve, George Wedderburn, a keeper of the peace,
In plainclothes, though he held the rank of captain of police,
Was waiting for the head atop his ale to subside
When, in the mirror behind the bar, he Roslin Sinclair spied,
 When, in the mirror behind the bar he Roslin Sinclair spied.

They'd rarely spoken in the past, but she was one he saw
Defending many clients at the city's courts of law.
And, by his luck, the hockey broadcast scheduled to occur
Was cancelled, leaving barstools free. Soon one was filled by her...

He offered purchase of her drink to toast the end of day.
She graciously accepted, and chose amber Dubonnet.
And, as she earned as much as did the captain, he soon found
She claimed the opportunity to buy their second round...

Although his ale was quenching, and the conversation fine,
He knew his limit must be two, of liquor, beer, or wine,
As public figure, driver, and example to the young,
And drink could offer no more aid to liberate his tongue...

He said he must decline a third, but wished to know instead,
If she would do him honour, and proceed with him to bed.
She said that, as a gentleman, he must be one who knows
He first must give good answers to some questions she'd propose...

"How can one be a father and be yet a mother too?
How can an insect move the sun that lifts the morning dew?
How can the sea be found within one found within the sea?
Now, quickly, sir, your answers, please, to riddles, one, two, three..."

"The earthworm's body is divided into many parts,
Some female, and some male; it has also several hearts.
The scarab's dung ball is the sun, Egyptian legend tells,
And dung is made of leaves that catch the sunlight in their cells..."

"The starfish, an echinoderm, has neither blood nor bone,
But pumps the ocean's water through his body as his own,
To be hydraulic fluid that extends his many feet.
I trust these answers are correct, though brief and not complete..."

"If you are not a scholar, sir, as so you seem tonight,
You must have heard the strangest songs that anyone would write.
But, as a small fire blazes when its builder adds more sticks,
You need to warm my heart some more. Here's riddles four, five, six..."

"How can a man grow stout and strong if he consume no meat?
How can a bread be staff of life if it contain no wheat?
How can a babe reach half a year if no one bring it food?
Till you have answered these, sir, you have not completely wooed..."

"The protein and the iron from which meat has gained its fame
Are found in roots and fruits and seeds; the quality's the same.
Though hard wheat's gluten traps the gas that lets a light loaf rise,
A rye or barley loaf is wholesome, though of smaller size..."

"And if the mother have the time, physicians say it's best
To nurse a babe till half a year on nothing but the breast.
And though the nursing mother rightly claims to eat for two,
The food is brought to her alone. Have I not answered true?..."

"You are politically correct; your answers have no flaws.
You must be on the mailing list of every left-wing cause.
You did make one request of me; now, I shall give you mine
When I've your answers to my riddles seven, eight, and nine..."

"How can one who will never grow a beard love women well?
How can a man love someone on whom breasts will never swell?
How can I lie with you tonight and not grow thick with child?
I'll pose no questions after these," she said, and then she smiled...

"A beardless cheek and chin enclose an agile tongue within,
Which finds another woman's jewel in tender folds of skin.
A man whose hairy chest can grow no breast will gaily come
In contact with the reason man evolved a fleshy bum..."

"But most prefer their lovers to have organs they don't share.
New lovers may be reproduced if old ones take no care,
So I shall wear a second skin derived from tropic trees,
To keep the population down as we each other please..."

She nodded yes; they took their coats and exited the bar.
He passed the random breath test they encountered in his car.
Arrived, they quickly did commence to kiss, to touch, to laugh,
Once they had tossed a coin to see who'd occupy which half...

Howard Kaplan 172 Howland Avenue Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5R 3B6

howard@thrinberry-frog.com www.thrinberry-frog.com

Performing rights administered by SOCAN

This songsheet was constructed in January 2001