

THE ROWAN TREE SONG

By Ken McNaughton

*The 2022 British movie “Living” was nominated for two Academy Awards—
Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role for Bill Nighy
and Best Adapted Screenplay for Kazuo Ishiguro.
It includes three renderings of The Rowan Tree Song.*

If you go to the homepage of [Clan Macnachtan Association Worldwide](#), you will see The Rowan Tree listed as the Clan Song. Go to the [Video link](#) and you will hear The Wake & District Public Safety Pipes and Drums playing the traditional Scottish music, from 25 October 2014 in Richmond, Virginia, set to classic Scottish scenes. If you look in the Scotland category of the Articles section, you will find [The Rowan–Tree of Folklore, Legend and Practical Use](#). But why is the song featured in the 2022 movie “Living”?

The movie was directed by Oliver Hermanus from a screenplay by Kazuo Ishiguro, adapted from the 1952 Japanese film *Ikiru* directed by Akira Kurosawa. The story in the two movies is essentially the same, which gives a clue as to why the director has been nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay. In *Living*, Bill Nighy plays Rodney Williams, a senior London County Council bureaucrat in 1953 London, who receives a terminal cancer diagnosis. He withdraws half his life savings, purchases a lethal amount of sleeping medicine, and plans to commit suicide in a seaside resort town. But he meets an insomniac writer who takes him for a night on the town. In a pub, Williams sings “The Rowan Tree,” a Scottish folk song from his childhood.

Returning to London, but not to work, Williams runs into Miss Harris, a former colleague who took up a position at a restaurant while he was away. As Williams’ condition worsens, he attempts to spend more time with Harris, whose youthful vigor he envies, and would like to regain before he dies. Williams rallies his office to construct a children’s playground that has been bogged down by paperwork. Though he is able to push the process through by standing up to his colleagues and superiors, he dies shortly after construction is finished.

His former colleagues pledge to uphold his example, but soon revert to their old ways, as ineffectual, suppressed bureaucrats. Mr. Wakeling, who joined the office shortly before Williams’ diagnosis, reads a letter left for him by Williams, instructing him to remember the playground when he gets discouraged. Visiting the playground, Wakeling meets a police officer who tells him that he saw Williams there shortly before he died, rocking in the swing in the snow, and singing the folk song from his childhood. Wakeling believes that Williams was likely happier in that moment than he had been for a very long time. As the movie ends, [Lisa Knapp, an English folksinger, sings The Rowan Tree](#), the third time the song is heard. The rowans or mountain-ashes are shrubs or trees in the genus *Sorbus* of the rose family, *Rosaceae*, native throughout the cool temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere. But why would a British movie, released in 2022, set in 1953 London, feature a Scottish folk song—three times?



The four verses are reproduced below. The singer loves the rowan tree (row is pronounced as in “I had a row with my wife,” not as in “I row the boat”), because he is reminded of home and childhood. The leaves appear in spring, white clusters of flowers in summer, and bright red berries in the fall. Names are inscribed on the trunk, of dear people, no longer seen. We all sat in the shade underneath the tree, children running around, with necklaces of red berries. My mother smiled to watch the fun, with little Jeannie on her lap, and Jamie on her knee. That’s where my father prayed in the calm of the evening, and my mother sang sweetly, a psalm to the martyrs. Now they’re gone. We don’t meet any more under the rowan tree. But around it, there are holy thoughts, of home and childhood.

Deep nostalgia. For the past. For family. For loved ones no longer with us. Rodney Williams looks back on his life. He thinks about being a child, like the rowan tree leaves in spring. He thinks about the good times, like the white clusters of flowers on the rowan tree in summer. He thinks about warning signs of the coming end, like the red berries of the rowan tree in the fall. He wonders whether in fact, he has climbed the wrong tree, being a suppressed bureaucrat. Whether he has ever done anything of value. For anyone. At the last minute, he can do something for the parents who want a playground for their children. He makes it happen, despite all the odds. And when it happens, he even goes to play on the swings. In the snow. Like a child.

Sir Kazuo Ishiguro wrote the script for *Living*. Born in Nagasaki, Japan, he moved to Britain in 1960 with his parents when he was five, and gained British citizenship in 1983. He met Lorna MacDougall at Christmas in 1979. Both were singers, and MacDougall, a social worker from Glasgow, would play *The Rowan Tree* for him as they fell in love. They married in 1986.

Novelist, screenwriter, musician, and short-story writer, he won the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature, and was knighted for services to literature in the 2018 Birthday Honours.

THE ROWAN TREE [3]

Oh rowan tree, oh rowan tree
Thou'lt aye be dear to thee
Entwined thou art wi' many ties
O'hame and infancy
Thy leaves were aye the first of spring
Thy flowers the summer's pride
There was nae sic a bonnie tree
In a' the country side
Oh rowan tree
How fair was thou in summer time
Wi' a'thy clusters white
How rich and gay thy autumn dress,
Wi' berries red and bright!
On thy fair stem were mony names
Which now nae mair I see
But they're engraven on my heart,
Forget they ne'er can be
Oh rowan tree
We sat aneath thy spreadin' shade
The bairnies round thee ran
They pu'd they bonnie berries red,
And necklaces they strang
My mither, oh! I see her still,
She smil'd our sports to see
Wi' little jeannie on her lap,
And jamie on her knee
Oh rowan tree
Oh there arose my father's pray'r
In holy ev'ning's calm
How sweet was then my mother's voice,
In the martyrs' psalm
Now a'are gane!
We meet nae mair aneath the rowan tree
But hallow'd thoughts around thee twine
O'hame and infancy
Oh rowan tree

“Living” is a remake of legendary Japanese director Akira Kurosawa’s 1952 masterpiece “Ikiru” (“to live” in Japanese), which was partly inspired by the 1886 Russian novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy. The Japanese film examines the struggles of a terminally-ill Tokyo bureaucrat, and his final quest for meaning. The major themes of the film include learning how to live, the inefficiency of bureaucracy, and decaying family life in Japan. The main character

sings a mournful song, the lyrics of which relate to the themes of the film, that life is short. While rowan trees are found throughout the northern hemisphere, The Rowan Tree Song lyrics were written by a Scottish woman and set to a traditional Scottish melody. It has been adopted as the Macnachtan Clan Song.

REFERENCES

1. [Living \(2022\)](#), directed by Oliver Hermanus, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, adapted from *Ikiru* directed by Akira Kurosawa, IMDb.
2. Gallagher, Stevie, “[Nobel-prize winner on why The Rowan Tree is moving film fans to tears in Living](#),” *The Sunday Post*, 14 November 2022.
3. The Rowan Tree Lyrics (1822), songwriters Carolina Oliphant (1766-1845) (Lady Nairne)/Bridges/Mcdermott; Musixmatch.

NOTES

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