

In memory of 19 year old Derek Bentley who was judicially hanged, although in many eyes unfairly, on the 28th January 1953, for his part in the killing of P.C. Miles, on a warehouse roof in Croydon, on the 2nd November 1952. May his soul rest in peace.

A SHADOW OF A DOUBT

In the shadow of the hangman's noose
Where execution is the public cry
The onus is upon those, who dispense the law
To make sure that the innocent, don't die
If there is, at all, some doubt
That same law, has made it plain
The black cap on the judges bench
As an ornament must remain
When the ultimate penalty is taking a life
Society should not tread, with fear
As long as the person they finally hang
Has a guilt that is abundantly clear
There are several, basic, human rights
Written down or just merely implied
And killers will claim those very rights
Which their victims they denied
No law would hang an innocent man
I'm sure most people will agree
But that's exactly what happened
In January, nineteen fifty three
Two youths went to a warehouse
Craig had a gun, I must mention
Bentley had a knuckle duster and a knife
Although robbery, was their main intention
Surrounded, by Police, on the flat warehouse roof
Bentley surrendered, without even a fight
Craig drew his gun and fired it wild
His ideas were much grander, that night
Winters coldness gripped the land
When this tragic event took place
Known in legal history
As the Craig and Bentley case
Craig's brother was a small time crook
Twelve years, he was given to serve
And Craig himself was sick with revenge
He would give, what he thought they deserve
His dreams of being a gangster
Had finally flourished that day
There was little concern within his mind
Of the price Derek Bentley would pay
We take our place in a society
Where the law says men must die
Normally we accept, that this is right
But sometimes, we ask why?
Bentley was not a clever lad
His mental age was low
And here we have the classic case
Where the question mark, was aglow

We place our faith, in the law of the land
In which people climb to fame
So when they fail to do their job
Should we also, take the blame?
We're confined in a strange environment
Where people have the voice
But nobody seems to listen
When we want to make a noise
You can stand up and be counted
Or you can paddle in the shallows
Many people braved that storm
When Bentley faced the gallows
It seems, that when a policeman dies
Someone must be swung
Do we grab the nearest straw
When the killer is too young
I'm sorry! this poem does digress
So let's return to our story
Where judicial justice was displayed
In a pathetic wave of glory
Bentley was technically, under arrest
When those fateful words he cried
" Let him have it, Chris" he called
And the hangman's knot was tied
What meaning lay behind those words
Was it , "Give the man your gun?"
Or were they encouragement
To shoot the cops for fun?
It's a pity that, this historical case
Gave Policemen all the credit
What matters to them, is what Bentley said
Not the tone of voice, which he said it
If a Policeman told Craig, "Hand over your gun"
Then Bentley's statement, is not so strange
But if he really intended Craig to shoot
Did he point to someone within range ?
The whole scene was in confusion
When those fateful words, Bentley cried
And were they relevant at the time ?
It was much later when the Policeman died
Those words have a double meaning
That's what this case, was all about
And you would think in a modern society
There was a shadow of a doubt
Bentley was under unstrained arrest
Who could he have possibly harmed ?
He was being held by Police with batons
It was his mate who was ballistically armed
So why did Craig not free his mate
And kill the men he hated?
Because he, alone, understood Bentley's words
Which later would be debated
When P.C. Miles left for work
Bidding his loving, family goodbye

This man was protecting you and me
And didn't deserve to die
This is where fate intervenes
No matter what your race
In simple terms, it places life
At a certain time and place
The dangers that meet those men, everyday
Will often go unheeded
And we are the first to make complaints
When they're not where they are needed
Constable Miles had a major role
In the place that destiny required
Tragically, he stood in the bullets path
When the fatal shot was fired
There is no question, who fired the shot
No devious motive to figure
When the missile left the gun
Craig's finger, was on the trigger
Here, we now had headline news
TWO KILLERS APPREHENDED
Craig and Bentley were bathed in fame
More, than they had ever intended
In criminal indexes, those names appear
And this, is where society is rotten
Who remembers, constable Miles
Buried and forgotten
Again we stray from the point
Why we hanged an innocent man
This was clearly, vindictive revenge
That was part of the systems plan
Why do I make this statement?
You may ask with bated breath
Just look at the time span
From the murder to final death
We are all entitled within the law
No matter the offence
That we should be given, within reason
Time to establish our defence
On the second of November, fifty two
That fatal shot was fired
Two months later, after only two days trial
The jury then retired
So why were they in such a hurry?
And what criteria did they meet?
The Police took longer on my case
For playing football in the street
Bentley was prone to physical fits
He was mentally behind his age
Yet this was not considered
At the vital legal stage
So where was this justice
That we think that we display
Did we have to hang him quick
Lest he run away?

This case has three clear killers
That I can plainly see
We start with the Home Secretary
Who ignored the mercy plea
Then comes dear Lord Goddard
Who's idea of justice, is weirdly odd
He has put more men to death
Than the infamous Sweeney Todd
Last but not least, comes Christopher Craig
Detained until her majesties pleasure
Now this killer roams quite free
Does death have any measure?
I almost forgot the jury
Twelve just men and sane
Let's hope they are never called upon
To make such a mess again
Bentley never killed anyone
The boy had only one crime
He was hanged as an example
A victim of the time
This country made a terrible mistake
And a pardon they must release
It won't help Derek Bentley
But his family, may find peace

James Waddell
10 / 11th August 1995