



## TILLER'S FOLLY HAS WEAKNESS FOR B.C HISTORY

Mike Devlin / Times Colonist Feb 18, 2015

Tiller's Folly has been singing the praises of British Columbia for the better part of 20 years. Despite its longevity, frontman and primary songwriter Bruce Coughlan said the Vancouver Celtic trio could easily go another 20, given the province's rich history.

"There is no shortage of material," Coughlan said. "It's finding the time, more than anything else."

Tiller's Folly has focused its songwriting sights on B.C. history for the duration of its 18 years. The topic is a rich one. In fact, the group manages to balance its paid concerts with free elementary school performances, a move designed to bring facets of Canada's heritage, culture and history to an entirely new audience for the band.

As per custom, Tiller's Folly presaged its concert Friday at Fairfield United Church with an appearance Wednesday morning at Cloverdale Elementary, one of 1,200 school shows the band has given to date. The scope of that statistic has even Coughlan marvelling at its impact.

"We've managed to influence a full generation of British Columbia students, I guess."

Coughlan, who is joined in the group by bassist Laurence Knight and fiddler Nolan Murray, succeeded famously with the songs he wrote for the 2008 album, *Stirring Up Ghosts*. The initial run — released to commemorate British Columbia's 150th anniversary — sold out quickly, prompting the band to prep it for re-release. Coughlan, who by his own admission never stops writing, decided to write a new set of songs to accompany the reissue, bringing the total count to 24 songs spread over two discs.

The collection of historically based songs runs the gamut, in terms of topics. As with anything the band does, there's a healthy Victoria vibe running through the songs, from *The Ghost of Kitty O'Reilly* — the name of a ghost that reportedly haunts Point Ellice House — to John Tod, the fur-trading namesake of a house in Oak Bay that is said to be the oldest residence in Greater Victoria. *The Bitter End* is another Victoria-themed composition concerned with prohibition-era rum-rummers and murder in and around Victoria, Coughlan said.

Further adding to the local connection at the concert on Friday are hometown heroes Nellie Quinn and Jeremy Walsh, who will open the show. Quinn, who plays fiddle in Vancouver group the Town Pants, played with Tiller's Folly in October at the Irish Music Festival in Ocean Shores, Washington. Out of that collaboration came the decision to play a show together in Victoria, Quinn said.

"I just wanted to hang out with them more," the 24-year-old said with a laugh. "They are so great to listen to."

Coughlan said his interest in B.C. history was piqued early on. As a teenager, he travelled extensively throughout B.C., albeit with little pocket money. To occupy his time, especially in the smaller towns, he often found himself in places trafficked by tourists.

“The best entertainment was always in the book shops, museums and heritage sites,” he said.

He rarely turns off his analytical mind. When he sees something of interest, chances are it will wind up in one of his songs. He is never at a loss for material, either. Information suitable for a song always has a way of presenting itself, Coughlan said.

“I once lived on a ship that had been a floating brothel in San Francisco. It wasn’t until years later that I found a book, *The Columbia Is Coming*, that said the same floating brothel had, in a previous life, been a hospital ship up and down the B.C. coast.”

Coughlan is aware that the content of Tiller’s Folly songs is not for everyone; the topic of B.C. history is an unbearably dry one for some. His job is to make the songs as musical as they are educational.

“It has to be palatable. The tough part is to condense four or five books in order to get as much of the story as I can. Condensing that down to three and a half minutes then becomes the challenge. We try and keep things as organic as possible to produce a song with lasting, long-term appeal.”