

M. J. GRANT

AULD LANG SYNE

A Song and its Culture





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Morag Josephine Grant



This work is licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

M. J. Grant, *Auld Lang Syne: A Song and its Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0231>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0231#copyright>. Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>. Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0231#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800640658

ISBN Hardback: 9781800640665

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800640672

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800640689

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800640696

ISBN XML: 9781800640702

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0231

Cover illustration: Hetian Li, CC BY 4.0, based on a photograph by Ros Gasson/Scots Music Group.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

6. The Song of Parting

When George Thomson published Ludwig van Beethoven's arrangement of *Auld Lang Syne* in 1841, it was followed by what may seem a surprising addition to his Original Scottish Airs—*God Save the Queen*. According to Thomson himself, “Tho’ Scotland has no claim to this national Air, yet its beauty, with the pure harmony of Bishop, & the elegance of the Scotch Verses, will, the Editor hopes, render it an acceptable Finale to his Collection.”¹ Nevertheless, if Thomson’s intention of providing a fitting finale to his life’s work via the national anthem is interesting, the conjunction with *Auld Lang Syne* is interesting indeed. Whether it reflects existing practice is difficult to tell. What is certain, however, is that the development of *Auld Lang Syne* into the definitive song of parting coincides with its becoming one of the most important of Scottish, but also of British, patriotic songs. This chapter will explore these developments, and the broader social and political developments of which they are a manifestation.

6.1 *Good Night, And Joy Be With You All*

The meeting went off in grand style, the procession was dignified and attractive, and then the convivial fraters, encircling the table drank the usual round of toasts until it came to the call of “Our Poet-Brother Burns.” Then the man of genius and humour arose. All awaited the fun and frolic, the olio of song and anecdote, of quip and quirk and snipsnap, which, when his exhilarated imagination came into play, made Burns “the soul of good fellows.” It was the prime piece of the feast to hear Robert Burns. The visitors had come—some of them—expressly for this purpose. Imagine, then, the surprise of the hearers when the tall, swarthy, broad-shouldered songster arose, flashed his black eyes upon the expectant circle, and, with a slow, melancholy cadence that went to every heart, sung his most celebrated hymn [...]

In the interest of dramatic effect, this quotation is paused here. The occasion described, with a hefty dose of poetic licence, is Burns’s last Lodge meeting in Tarbolton before his planned departure for the West Indies. And the song he reputedly sang on that occasion was...

1 The additional Scottish verses were by D. M. Moir. In some editions, *God Save the Queen* is followed by two other Irish songs arranged by Bishop, *The Merry Men Of Anster* and *The Barring Of The Door*. The song before *Auld Lang Syne* in Vol. VI is *The Emigrant’s Farewell*, poem by T. Pringle, arrangement by Beethoven.

"The Freemason's Farewell." For nearly a century that song has delighted English-speaking people in all climes, and given life and spirit and pathos to their feasts. In the annual festival held on St. Andrew's Day by the Grand Lodge of Scotland a moment is chosen to give fullest effect to the sentiment from the oldest Mason present.²

Burns's *Masonic Farewell* as it is often called (K115, full title *The Farewell. To the Brethren Of St. James's Lodge, Tarbolton*) is to the tune of *Good Night And Joy Be With You All*, which he would later instruct James Johnson to use to close the last volume of the *Scots Musical Museum*. After the poet's death, Johnson honoured this wish, printing two sets of words to the tune: an earlier eighteenth-century version, and Burns's Masonic song.³ In honouring *Good Night And Joy* in this way, Burns was following the practice of many songbooks and tunebooks of the eighteenth century.⁴ Accepted by many authorities as the traditional song of parting at Scottish gatherings before *Auld Lang Syne* displaced it, the tune is old enough for versions to be included in Henry Playford's *Original Scotch-Tunes* (1701); it also appears, named only as "Good Night", in the Sinkler Manuscript (National Library of Scotland, MS 3296 (Glen 143 (i)), ca. 1710). One of the most interesting aspects of the song is that there are numerous very different texts to it—not, as is more often the case, a standard text and then a number of variations, but completely separate sets of words, several of which seem to have been accepted by various groups or authorities as the "real" text. Even Walter Scott, who published a version in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, had difficulty with pinning down the song, noting that

The following verses are said to have been composed by one of the ARMSTRONGS, executed for the murder of Sir JOHN CARMICHAEL of Edrom, warden of the middle marches [...] The tune is popular in Scotland; but whether these are the original words, will admit of a doubt.⁵

The verses Scott included were also those that appeared along with Burns's text in the *Scots Musical Museum*, one of the earliest existing versions. Another eighteenth-century version appears in at least two songbooks of the 1760s and 1770s, including in a book used by Burns;⁶ the first verse of this version begins by noting "How happy is he, whoever he be / That in his lifetime meets one true friend."

Probably the most frequently circulated text for *Good Night And Joy* in the nineteenth century was the version written by Sir Alexander Boswell (1775–1822), son of the more famous James Boswell, but there are also versions of the song by or attributed to many of the most well-known Scottish songwriters of the period—Carolina Nairne,

2 Clipping from the Mitchell Library Robert Burns Collection, shelfmark 52947, which names the author as Rob Morris and the source as *The Voice of Masonry*, a periodical edited by Morris from 1859. I have been unable to access the original source.

3 Johnson 1803, 620 (song 600).

4 For example, McGibbon ca. 1759, III; Murray 1778 (last song in the main section, before a collection of catches and glees); Bib. II/1786/2, Bib. II/1791.

5 Scott 1802, 183.

6 Bib. II/1765; Bib. II/1778.

Joanna Baillie, James Hogg, and Robert Tannahill, as well as Burns. The versions by Nairne and Hogg have much in common, and one verse in particular is interesting for a certain similarity to the childhood verses of Burns's *Auld Lang Syne*. In the version attributed to Hogg, this reads:

O we hae wander'd far an' wide,
 O'er Scotia's land of firth an' fell,
 An' mony a simple flower we've cull'd,
 An' twined them wi' the heather-bell:
 We've ranged the dingle and the dell,
 The hamlet an' the baron's ha',
 Now let us tak a kind farewell,
 Good night an' joy be wi' you a'.

In the version attributed to Nairne, it reads:

Oh, we hae wander'd far and wide,
 O'er Scotia's lands o' frith [*sic*] and fell!
 And mony a simple flower we've pu'd,
 And twined it wi' the heather-bell.
 We've ranged the dingle and the dell,
 The cot-house, and the baron's ha';
 Now we maun tak a last farewell:
 Gude nicht, and joy be wi' you a'!

Many of the texts to *Good Night And Joy* are specifically the song of one who is due to depart the next day, and who must now take leave of his or her friends. In the Armstrong version alluded to by Scott, the "departure" is the protagonist's execution; in Lady Nairne's version, the last verse's reflection on the imminent death of minstrelsy has Jacobite connotations (and perhaps connotations of the Act of Union's "end of an old sang"), while Hogg's version is more tightly constructed as a minstrel taking leave after the evening's entertainment. Tannahill's version features a soldier who is about to depart for the wars. It is impossible to know which version would have been sung whenever it was announced on concert programmes or mentioned in newspaper reports of formal dinners; such sources show, however, that *Auld Lang Syne* did not fully replace this multilayered *Good Night And Joy* until well into the mid-nineteenth century. At the 1825 Alloa Burns Club Anniversary meeting, for example, *Auld Lang Syne* was sung following a toast to early departed friends of the Bard; at the end of the celebration, those present sang *Good Night And Joy*.⁷ We have also seen how the same applied at the largest of the Burns centenary celebrations to have taken place in Paisley in 1859. The song or its tune also continued to close many publications even after the singing of *Auld Lang Syne* at the end of gatherings became widespread.⁸ *Good*

7 Anon. 1825/2.

8 For example, Cameron 1857; Bib. II/1858; Surenne 1883. Aitken 1874 places *Auld Lang Syne* and *Good Night And Joy* together, but neither at the end.

Night And Joy's popularity and standing is also reflected in the number of texts on it contained in Alexander Whitelaw's *The Book of Scottish Song* (1848). This collection claims to be comprehensive both in scope (the preface speaks of some 1,270 songs) and in historical coverage: for example, it includes *Old Long Syne* as it appears in Watson's collection as well as both Ramsay and Burns's versions of *Auld Lang Syne*. Whitelaw places Hogg's version of *Good Night And Joy* at the very end, immediately preceded by Burns's *Masonic Farewell*; he also prints three other sets of words to the song which appear to be of more recent provenance.

Though Anne Dhu Shapiro has suggested that the tradition of singing *Auld Lang Syne* at the end of public gatherings was established by the time *Rob Roy Macgregor*, or, *Auld Lang Syne* was premiered, she does not give evidence of this and I have not found anything like consistent sources before about the 1840s.⁹ The earliest song collections to place *Auld Lang Syne* at the end do come from much earlier in the nineteenth century, but such examples are scattered and inconclusive. The first may be the tiny *The Diamond Songster: Containing the Most Approved Sentimental Scottish Songs*, published in Baltimore in 1812: this also includes *Good Night And Joy*, but places it earlier.¹⁰ *Auld Lang Syne* is also the last tune in a volume of Scots, English and Irish songs published in Edinburgh around 1818–1820, which gives it as being “Sung by Mr Sinclair”.¹¹ It also comes last in the second part of Nathaniel Gow's *The Vocal Melodies of Scotland* of 1820, and in Duncan McKercher's *A Collection of Strathspeys and Reels* of 1824. It is interesting that two out of the three are in books of instrumental tunes only—perhaps M2 was felt more appropriate for the last dance. Viewed statistically relative to the number of books in circulation, however, it is dangerous to draw too far-reaching conclusions.

The earliest source I have found for the specific use of *Auld Lang Syne* to mark a parting comes from the *Edinburgh Advertiser* in 1822, reporting on the departure from Leith of the 41st Regiment, *en route* to India:

An immense crowd had assembled on Castle-hill, to witness their departure, by whom the brave fellows were loudly cheered, which their conduct during their stay here well entitled them to. In the street the crowd was so great that the regiment could not move for some minutes, its fine bugle corps at the same time playing “Auld Lang Syne”.¹²

The choice of this song, at the height of its post-*Rob Roy* popularity, is not surprising, particularly when we consider that regimental bugle calls very often started with melodic motifs structured exactly like the opening of *Auld Lang Syne*.¹³ These links between *Auld Lang Syne* and the military are important, as is the larger historical context which saw these troops leaving for India at all.

9 Shapiro 1990.

10 Bib. II/1812/2. The publisher of this volume, F. Lucas Jr., was better known as a cartographer. In the accompanying volume, Bib. II/1812/1, the last song is called *Katy, Will Ye Marry Patie* though the text mentions only “Menie” and “Johnie”. In the song, Menie laments their imminent parting.

11 Bib. II/1818/1.

12 *The Edinburgh Advertiser*, 16 February 1822.

13 See Murray 2001.

6.2 The Song of Empire

As the popularity of *Auld Lang Syne* increased, so too did the tendency to refer to M2 musically in the many early romantic operas, ballets and symphonic works to have Scottish themes.¹⁴ Such references are mostly found in works which have fallen out of use, an exception being Herman Severin Løvenskjold's music for the highly influential ballet *La Sylphide* (1836). In this case, M2 appears in adapted and abbreviated form in the overture and first scene of the first act. Only the first part of the tune is heard, and this in a form related to its appearance in both *Rosina* and the earliest versions of "Sir Alexander Don's Strathspey". M2 also appears in the ballet music for Hippolyte André Jean Baptiste Chelard's opera *Macbeth* (1827), and in another ballet set in Scotland, *La Gipsy*, which premiered in 1839. The reviewer of this last work complained that

The music, which is announced as the work of three composers, I could not well understand, for even "God save the King," "The Campbells are coming," "Auld Lang Syne" and other "auld acquaintances" introduced into it, were like the young whiskered Englishmen one meets on the boulevards, so much disguised and disfigured as to forbid the belief that they claimed to be of British origin.¹⁵

Much the same criticism is levelled by the *Times* reviewer at the vocal quintet based largely on M2 which appeared in Louis Niedermeyer's opera *Marie Stuart* (1844). Arias and themes from Niedermeyer's works were a popular choice for arrangement by other composers writing in the main for the domestic market. Probably the most popular piece to be excerpted from *Marie Stuart* was one called *Les adieux de Marie Stuart*, but it was another, the vocal quintet *Pour les attraits de belle dame*, which introduced M2, and probably for this reason it became a popular concert item in both England and Scotland in the 1850s and 1860s. Critical opinions of it varied, however: a writer in *The Scotsman* found it "well written and rather remarkable",¹⁶ while the reviewer of *The Times* accused Niedermeyer of "utterly spoiling" the melody,¹⁷ though with reference to the score it is difficult to see how exactly it has been spoilt except by association. An earlier review in *The Times* noted that the quintet "always pleases, because the venerable Scotch air, 'Auld Lang Syne,' is one of its principal themes", but he also suggests that neither the piece nor the opera as a whole have anything else to recommend them.¹⁸ When M2 appears, interspersed with a duet between Marie Stuart and Bothwell, it is sung by Marie Stuart and then echoed in a straightforward quartet arrangement for the characters Georges, Kennedy, Bothwell, and Rizzio. The text expresses the Queen's suffering: only absence can remedy it, she says. An English version of the text, though not a direct translation, was made

¹⁴ See Fiske 1983 for more on this general phenomenon.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 2 February 1839.

¹⁶ *The Scotsman*, 11 October 1869.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 8 September 1854.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 24 September 1852.

by George Linley, who takes the opportunity to specifically call the song *In Days Of Langsyne*.¹⁹

Increasingly, M2 began to be used not merely to refer to Scotland, but as a sort of Scottish anthem. An early example is Joseph Labitzky's *Great Quadrille of All Nations*, dedicated to Prince Albert and performed at Her Majesty's Theatre in London in 1850 by an enormous musical force which included the orchestra of the Grand National Concerts, the Bands of the 1st Life Guards, the Grenadier Guards, the Scots Fusilier Guards, and choristers from the Berlin Chapel Royal.²⁰ *Auld Lang Syne* appears in the "Grand Finale" which also featured *Rule Britannia*, *St. Patrick's Day*, *Yankee Doodle*, an unnamed German air, *Vive Henri Quatre*, the German and Austrian national anthems and *God Save the Queen*. N. C. Bochsa also introduced M2, along with *God Save the Queen*, the *Marseillaise*, *Yankee Doodle*, *St. Patrick's Day* and *Hail Columbia* in his harp piece *The Nations, a Melange Containing Six Melodies*, published in New York in 1854. M2 appeared as a matter of course in specifically Scottish medleys: Edward Roeckel's *Highland Dreams* for solo piano, published in 1852, introduces several Scots airs and closes with M2, which is given a disproportionately large build-up and ends "con fuoco";²¹ Another piece, Henry Oakey's *Recollections of Scotland* (1855), starts rather than concludes with *Auld Lang Syne*.²²

What of the Scots themselves? Was *Auld Lang Syne* merely used in these other contexts because it was one of the most well-known Scots songs abroad, or did it enjoy a similar status within Scotland itself? In the earlier nineteenth century, *Auld Lang Syne* was one of the most popular Scots songs, but around the mid-century this begins to change. It is as if one of those eponymous racehorses, having run most of the distance with the rest, suddenly breaks away from the field. It is also noticeable that so many Scots writing about the song specifically refer to the affection in which it was held, almost as if they are in ignorance of what it increasingly meant to people from other countries as well. Many such references point in particular to the effect the song had on Scots residing or sojourning in other countries. As a speech at the Burns Supper held by the Garnock Burns Club in Ayrshire in 1872 puts it:

When in a foreign land, whose heart does not glow with warmer emotions at the singing of Auld Langsyne. Even in our own family circles, when it is sung, it recalls to our imagination the place of our birth, the haunts and connexions of our childhood; and it is with no small degree of pleasure we look back with lingering fondness and mingled feelings to these hallowed and endeared associations. Away in the wild African desert, when that noble, brave, and intrepid Scotchman Livingstone, bade good-night to the energetic Stanley, and retired to read the tidings from home that the young American

19 Linley 1873.

20 According to the advertisement in *The Times*, 13 November 1850.

21 The other tunes are named as "The ewe bughts", "The bonnie house o' Airlie", "We're a' noddin", and "Queen Marie".

22 The other tunes are "Mrs McLeod", "John Anderson My Jo", "Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch", and "Tullochgorum".

had brought him, we can fancy the gush of feeling that would thrill through his whole being when he thought of the days of auld langsyne. Auld langsyne has become our national air. By it Burns has bound Scotchmen more to Scotland; and wherever they may be, they can never forget auld acquaintance or the days of auld langsyne.²³

Studies of Scottish nationalism since the Act of Union have noted that developments in Scotland took quite a different path from other countries. Despite the turmoils of the Jacobite period, and the persistence of Jacobite feeling in many parts of Scottish society even in the later eighteenth century, a distinctively Scottish nationalism, a concerted movement for Scottish sovereignty over Scotland's affairs, only really developed in the last three to four decades of the twentieth century.²⁴ These later developments will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 12; important for the present chapter are the factors which led to Scotland not merely retaining a distinct sense of its own identity, but also situating that identity within a larger context of being both "Scottish" and "British". And "British", in this regard, generally meant "British Empire".

The Act of Union left much in Scottish civil society intact—its legal system, its education system, its church. Though the actual autonomy of these institutions would gradually become eroded, by the early nineteenth century the Scots were not only profiting from, but also contributing disproportionately to, the growth of the British Empire. Moreover, by this point Scottish identity had also become linked to another area in which they were seen to be highly successful, the military: the combination of distinctly Scottish regiments fighting for the British cause is a further reason why a sort of Scottish and British "dual nationality" became possible.²⁵ The reception of *Auld Lang Syne* in mid-nineteenth century Britain provides a remarkably concise example of these processes at work. Conversely, this larger picture helps explain why, by the later nineteenth century, *Auld Lang Syne* could become one of the most important of *British* national songs.

The military and patriotic uses of *Auld Lang Syne* demonstrate both implied and inherited significance (in the sense discussed in Chapter 1). The tune M2 lends itself very well to interpretation as a slow military march, and this remains one of the most frequent styles in which *Auld Lang Syne* is interpreted, particularly in purely instrumental versions. Such interpretations may also be a way of referencing the specifically Scottish origins of the song: after all, it is the pipes and drums of Scottish regiments that, for many people, define what Scottish music "is".²⁶ M2 may well have been used in a military context at an earlier stage.

23 *The Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald and West Coast Advertiser*, 1 February 1873 (clipping held in ML "Burnsiana", cat. no. 52940, 29–30).

24 See McCrone 2017; Harvie 1998.

25 McCrone (2017) suggests that the end of conscription may have contributed to the reduced sense of "Britishness" which triggered Scottish nationalism in the later twentieth century. National service was abolished in the United Kingdom in 1960.

26 The same would apply, in the later twentieth century, to the tune of *Amazing Grace*. This has been presumed Scottish ever since a recording of it by the Pipes and Drums of the Royal Scots Dragoon

That Scottish identity, and specifically dual Scottish and British identity, should have become fused with the image of the fearless Scottish soldier is not so surprising when we consider the impact that wartime has on a society, and that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Britain was very often at war. The Highland regiments were set up in the later eighteenth century as a way to channel energy and, more importantly, loyalty after the second Jacobite uprising, and as the Jacobite threat waned, so the Jacobite star rose in terms of cultural artefacts and symbolism. That this happened at the time of the Napoleonic Wars is surely no coincidence, and the surprising popularity on the London stage of *Scots Wha Hae*, a song about the defeat of the English army at Bannockburn, begins to make more sense from this angle. Indeed, in some editions of George Thomson's *Select Collection*, vol. III, he specifically appealed to this new-found sense of patriotism, noting that "By changing *wha* into *who*, *wham* into *whom*, *often* into *often*, and *sae* into *so*, the following song will be English; and by substituting *GALLIA* for *EDWARD* and *BRITAIN* for *SCOTLAND*, it will be adapted for the present time".²⁷

Burns's *Auld Lang Syne*, with M2, also appeared in the period of the Napoleonic Wars, with the first concrete evidence of its usage occurring in the years around the Battle of Trafalgar, and the second flurry of interest coming close to the Battle of Waterloo and the period of social upheaval which followed. Songs often become established in the popular memory at a moment of national crisis, or in the context of a social movement. Sometimes, they have an implied link to the events or struggle in question, but in other cases they may simply drift into this constellation because they were then popular. This is the case with many songs used in by soldiers in wartime—there is even a theory that the Mexican word for an American, *gringo*, derives from the Scots song they were most likely to hear American soldiers singing during the US-Mexican war, *Green Grow The Rashes O*.²⁸

There is, however, very little direct evidence to connect *Auld Lang Syne*'s ascent with the Napoleonic Wars specifically. Later in the century, there are some references linking the song or phrase to this period, but these probably have more to do with later cultural conventions and a kind of nostalgia for the solidarity of the war effort. Thus, a newspaper commentary from the early 1850s, which argues for the setting up of a permanent British militia, invokes "that 'Auld lang syne,' when volunteers, and militia, and balloting, and substitutes, and exercise days, and militia colonels and majors, and the *feux de joie* on the 4th of June, were household words, as inseparable from our idea of England as ships of the line";²⁹ this comment comes two years before the Crimean War ended the long period of peace which seems to have ignited this strange nostalgia

Guards became a major hit in the 1970s. Though there are certainly musical reasons for suggesting that the tune may have derived from Scottish Gaelic music, *Amazing Grace*'s use as a specifically "Scottish" tune does not predate the recording in question. See Turner 2002.

27 Thomson [1802?], III, preface to song 133, *Scots Wha Ha'e* (here called *The Royal Scot's Address To His Army At Bannockburn*).

28 Dichter & Shapiro 1977, 82.

29 *The Times*, 17 February 1852.

for war. Another reference comes in the title of a novel published in 1878 by William Clark Russell, set during the Napoleonic wars, in which a young man is press-ganged and thus separated from the woman he has secretly married: the final chapter cites the lines “But seas between us braid hae roar’d / Sin’ Auld Lang Syne” [*sic*]. It is one of several later nineteenth-century novels to refer to “auld lang syne” in its title.³⁰

However, if chapbooks and other publications from the Napoleonic period are anything to go by, it was not *Auld Lang Syne* but two other songs not entirely outwith its orbit that defined these conflicts in song. The first of these is Burns’s own *The Soldier’s Return* (K406). This recounts almost exactly the same story as Ramsay’s version of *Auld Lang Syne*—a soldier returns home to find his true love is still true—and is thus one of the more positive of the songs of war in Burns’s collections (compare it, for example, to *Logan Water* (K409) with its attack on the war-mongering politicians who have left the narrator’s children effectively fatherless). Songs of reassurance are common in wartime—*We’ll Meet Again* is one well-known example. The other song often encountered in this period, Blamire’s *The Chelsea Pensioners*, employs another common sentiment for wartime propaganda: that everyone, even the old and apparently weak, has their part to play. Blamire’s song was probably written in 1776 and may refer to the call-up of war pensioners to fight on the British side during the American War of Independence.³¹ In that period, there were at least two different versions of the song doing the rounds, one placing the two old soldiers on the Jacobite side, one on the Hanoverian side; the former seems to have been the more popular.³² *The Chelsea Pensioners* is sung to an unrelated tune called “The Days o’ Langsyne.”

It was not “The Days o’ Langsyne”, however, but “Auld Lang Syne” that was played on the fife and drums when a later generation of Chelsea pensioners marched for inspection at Woolwich in 1845.³³ By this point, the second great surge in the popularity of the song was well underway, a surge to which many different factors probably contributed. One of these may have been the communications revolution initiated by the construction of railways: the increased mobility of all types of “carriers of song”—people and print—had a natural impact on the ability of songs to quickly fuse across a large cross-section of the population. The rise of *Auld Lang Syne* is comparable in time to the establishment of a number of other songs which remain popular to this

30 See Chapter 7, below.

31 Maycock 2003, 79–80.

32 Thus, according to Patrick Maxwell, “The author’s fine taste perceived that, however gallant the conduct of William Duke of Cumberland might have been considered by his countrymen, his fearful proceedings at Culloden, and subsequently, would never allow a song, in which his military career was commemorated, to become popular in Scotland; and thus ‘The Duke’ was altered to ‘the Prince,’ and ‘William’ to ‘General’.” It may be more fittingly adapted to our own times by retaining ‘the Duke,’ and substituting ‘Arthur’ for ‘William’; Maxwell, notes in Lonsdale 1842, 175–176. Maycock 2003 adopts this explanation and states that the song only became popular in Scotland when this change was made. However, it is more convincing to link the popularity of the song to the rehabilitation of the figure of the Highland soldier around the time of the Napoleonic Wars, with the express intent of persuading Scots to join up.

33 *The Times*, 1 June 1846.

day, including the Christmas carol *Stille Nacht/Silent Night*, and a song which in many ways is comparable to the position and popularity of *Auld Lang Syne* in the nineteenth century, *Home, Sweet Home* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7).

This era, and the transformations in social life that would gather speed in the decades that followed, have become inextricably linked with the name of the young woman who became Queen Victoria in 1839. Given Victoria and Albert's love of Scotland, and the influence which they and their family had on the development of other British customs—such as the Christmas tree—it is only reasonable to wonder if the further dissemination of *Auld Lang Syne* and its traditions were under a similar influence.³⁴ Victoria's own published diaries and reminiscences at no point mention the song, however, and other evidence linking the Royal Family to the song or its sentiments can generally be explained with reference to its general use and popularity. This applies, for example, to the phrase "For auld lang syne" which appeared on a wreath sent by the Prince and Princess of Wales on the occasion of the death of the wife of the Chancellor of Bath and Wells in 1899.³⁵ Victoria herself would frequently have heard *Auld Lang Syne* on her birthday, which, in her later years, she often spent at Balmoral: the choir from the nearby village of Crathie often treated her to a concert of Scottish songs, and *Auld Lang Syne* was there among them, right before *God Save the Queen*.³⁶

On the other hand, Victoria's reign, and particularly the start of her love affair with Scotland, had an impact in other ways. As Alex Tyrell has discussed, the veritable "Balmorality" triggered by Victoria's trip to Scotland in 1842 represented "a form of Scottishness that, unlike contemporary visions of Irishness, carried no threat to the Union."³⁷ Those with a keen eye for the commercial interest were quick to capitalize, and not only in the British Isles: tartan was soon all the rage in Paris. This period also saw the ascendancy of a number of entertainers whose repertoire was dedicated to Scottish song and culture. Chief among these was John Wilson (1800–1849), who performed for the Queen in 1842 and cannily dedicated his edition of *The Songs of Scotland* to her. The official record of Victoria's first visit to Scotland in 1842 dedicates more space to the attire worn by the female guests at a reception in Dalkeith Palace than it does to the musical entertainments on offer, but it does mention the songs sung by Mr Wilson "at her Majesty's request": *Auld Lang Syne* is not among them. *Auld Lang Syne* is also conspicuous by its absence from the published programmes of Wilson's "Scottish Entertainments".³⁸ *Good Night And Joy* appeared as the last song on

34 The Christmas tree, a tradition that Albert brought with him from Germany, became generally popular in Britain after the Royal Family were pictured gathered round their tree in the *Illustrated London News* of 1846.

35 *The Times*, 20 April 1899.

36 See, e.g., *The Times*, 27 May 1872, 26 May 1873. In 1885, the choir sang to the Queen in October, and this time the programme started rather than finished with *Auld Lang Syne*—and was immediately followed by *Coming Through The Rye*. See *The Times*, 24 October 1885.

37 Tyrell 2003, 71.

38 See various programmes and books of words relating to Wilson's entertainments, primarily in Edinburgh, held in the NLS, shelfmarks S.218.c.(1–18), APS.1.87.84, APS.1.78.

at least one of his programmes, though his preferred song of parting seems to have been *Tak Yer Auld Cloak About Ye*. That *Auld Lang Syne* was not billed could indicate that the song's zenith had not been reached; it could also indicate that its current or recent popularity ran counter to the historical tone that Wilson was aiming for in his entertainments. Another purveyor of Scots musical fare, John Templeton, was more closely associated with the song, possibly since appearing as Francis Osbaldistone in *Rob Roy Macgregor, or, Auld Lang Syne* in the 1830s.³⁹ A dinner given in Templeton's honour in Edinburgh in 1844 is one of the earliest recorded instances of the song being used at the close of a gathering: the evening "was wound up by Mr Templeton singing 'Auld Lang Syne,' the company joining in chorus [*sic*]"'.⁴⁰

As the example of Labitzky's *Quadrilles* has already indicated, the Victorian era was also the era of the mass choral and orchestral event, a trend facilitated both by changes in the way music was taught, using the tonic sol-fa system, and by a movement towards promoting organized singing for moral and social betterment.⁴¹ *Auld Lang Syne* was one of the items to be sung by a massed choir of, reputedly, 6,000 voices at the Great Choral Festival held at the Crystal Palace—previously home to the Great Exhibition—in June 1859. The conductor of this event, G. W. Martin, seems also to have been involved in concerts held the next year in Exeter Hall in London, where it was advertised that "Auld Lang Syne and the Last Rose of Summer with be performed by 1,000 voices";⁴² his arrangement also featured in another Crystal Palace concert of one thousand voices that took place in August 1860.⁴³ At the earliest of these three concerts, *Auld Lang Syne* was played immediately before the national anthem.

By the later 1850s, then, *Auld Lang Syne* was probably the most well-known of all Scottish songs; the Scottish regiments, meanwhile, were synonymous with British military prowess and the glory of Empire. There could hardly be a more succinct exemplar of both these facts than a song and piano fantasia written in the late 1850s and republished in Britain and America in several versions right up until World War I. *Jessie's Dream*, composed by John Blockley to a text by Grace Campbell, integrates programmatic references to *Auld Lang Syne*, *The Campbells Are Coming*, and *God Save the Queen*. The advertisement for the ballad that appeared in *The Times* of 15 March 1858 claimed it "moved the audience to tears": where, it does not say. Most editions of the song include a lengthy note explaining the incident on which it was based, which occurred in 1857 toward the end of the first stage of the Siege of Lucknow in India.⁴⁴ This note purports to derive from a letter written by a French doctor and published in a journal called *Le Pays*. The doctor recounts a tale told him by one of the women

39 *The Scotsman*, 21 November 1838.

40 *The Scotsman*, 25 September 1844.

41 See, for example, Mackerness 1964, Pearsall 1973, McGuire 2009.

42 *The Times*, 18 July 1860.

43 *The Times*, 3 August 1860.

44 The Siege of Lucknow occurred during the First War of Indian Independence (generally termed the Indian Mutiny/Indian Rebellion by British historians).

rescued. She describes how, after almost a hundred days of siege and with many at death's door, a Scottish corporal's wife called Jessie Brown developed a fever and went into a trance:

Suddenly, I was aroused by a wild unearthly scream close to my ear; my companion stood upright before me, her arms raised, and her head bent forward in the attitude of listening.—A look of intense delight broke over her countenance; she grasped my hand, drew me towards her, and exclaimed, "Dinna ye hear it? dinna ye hear it? Ay, I'm no dreamin', 'tis the slogan o' the Highlanders! We're saved! we're saved!"

The Englishwoman recounting the tale heard nothing, and after a short while Jessie sank to the ground again—only to jump up again:

"Will ye no believe it noo? The 'slogan' has ceased indeed, but 'the Campbells are comin'! D'ye hear, d'ye hear?" At that moment we seemed indeed to hear the voice of God in the distance, when the pibroch of the Highlanders brought us tidings of deliverance, for now there was no longer any doubt of the fact. No, it was indeed the blast of the Scottish bagpipes, now shrill and harsh, while threatening vengeance on the foe, then in softer tones seeming to promise succour to their friends in need.....To our cheer of "God save the Queen," they replied by the well known strain that moves every Scot to tears, "Should auld acquaintance be forgot".⁴⁵

The ballad *Jessie's Dream* takes the form of a first-person narrative in which Jessie dreams of her home in the Highlands, and then awakes to realise that the "slogan" she hears is real, at least for her (her English companions cannot hear it). This slogan marks the break between the first and second stanzas, while the verse tune of M2 marks the transition from the second to the third verse; the beginning of *God Save the Queen* functions as a coda. Blockley's music and Grace Campbell's text conflate elements of the two stages of the Siege: at the end of the ballad, Jessie toasts "Bold Havelock and his Highlanders", referring to the 78th Highlanders, who were indeed implicated in first relief; Blockley's programmatic fantasia, however, talks of the "Advance of the 93rd Highlanders", who were involved in the second relief rather than the first. Both the ballad and the piano fantasia version of *Jessie's Dream* were republished several times over the next half century, including in a semi-dramatised version for schoolgirls.⁴⁶ Many other documents testify to the contemporary popularity of the tale: a broadside published in New York, for example, paraphrases the account, and mentions the coming of the Campbells and their playing of *Auld Lang Syne*.⁴⁷ There is also another song on the event, by Thomas Crawford and Mrs Weir, published in the

45 As excerpted in Blockley 1860. Several elements of this legend are interesting for the picture they give us of the image the Highlander possessed by this point in the nineteenth century—note, for example, the faintly supernatural qualities attributed to Jessie; note also the difference in language, and in dress (Jessie wears a plaid).

46 Other sources consulted were Blockley & Campbell 1903/1, 1903/2, 1914, 1915. C.f. also Murray 2001 on the military use of the song.

47 Bib. II/ca. 1858.

same year, with almost the same title, and a title page too similar to be accidental.⁴⁸ It, too, takes the opportunity to include a snatch of *Auld Lang Syne*.

Jessie's Dream was published at a time when the forces of the British Empire were being put to the test in several places in the world at once, and this return to war after a relatively long period of peace, coupled with an upsurge in emigration, may also have had an impact on the establishment of *SΩ*, as two British military traditions also demonstrate. The first has already been mentioned with regard to an early incidence in Leith—the practice of playing *Auld Lang Syne* as troops were leaving barracks or a town where they had been stationed. The other is the practice of the tune being played when military regiments receive new colours: specifically, *Auld Lang Syne* is played when the old colours are being taken away.

The playing of *Auld Lang Syne* as ships leave port may or may not have begun in a military context, but it certainly would have taken on new significance following the outbreak of the Crimean War. The earliest references in *The Times* to the song being played when ships leave dock date from the summer of 1852, the first coming in a report of a race held by the Royal London Yacht Club. The six yachts which competed were accompanied by a steamer, the *Meteor*, presumably carrying spectators along with a military band:

At Gravesend the *Meteor* passed a large emigrant ship, and the band of the Royal artillery [*sic*], who were on board the steamer, and added very much to the pleasure of the day by their excellent music, struck up “*Auld Lang Syne*.” The old familiar air must have touched a responsive chord in the hearts of many of the emigrants who crowded her sides, as was evidenced in the hearty cheer they gave.⁴⁹

Shortly afterwards, another report relates the departure from Cork of the Channel fleet. Again, a steamer—this time the river steamer *Prince Arthur*—carried an enthusiastic crowd to watch the proceedings:

After steaming close to the flag-boat [...] the course of the steamer was altered, and she approached the men-of-war, which were sailing south with all sails set. She went alongside the *Prince Regent*, 90, Captain Hutton, with the blue flag of Rear-Admiral Corry flying from her peak. The German brass band on board the steamer played “*Rule Britannia*,” and the passengers saluted the officers and crew of H.M. ship with three hearty cheers and cries of “*The British navy forever!*” The excellent band of the *Prince Regent* was piped on deck by her gallant commander, when they played “*St. Patrick's Day*,” and concluded with “*Auld Lang Syne*.”⁵⁰

From 1854, and the outbreak of war, the number of reports of *Auld Lang Syne* being played for departing troops increases significantly.

The playing of *Auld Lang Syne* as regiments bade farewell to their old colours goes back to at least the mid-1860s. Thus, when the Prince of Wales witnessed the removal

48 Crawford & Weir 1858.

49 *The Times*, 28 June 1852.

50 *The Times*, 31 July 1853.

of the old colours of the Honourable Artillery Company at Finsbury in 1864, the new colours “were borne high in the air to the front, with a slow and stately march, under an escort, the band playing the ‘National Anthem,’ and the time-worn banners which they supplanted, and which were some 50 years old, were carried to the rear to the tune of ‘Auld lang syne.’”⁵¹ This tradition would appear to derive from the by then widely established tradition of using *Auld Lang Syne* at parting; it also indicates, however, the kind of status *Auld Lang Syne* was rapidly achieving in the national consciousness. In 1877, for example, a *Times* report on the visit of the Conservative foreign secretary, Lord Salisbury, to Bradford could state without any irony or further commentary that “The magnificent gallery was crowded an hour before the meeting commenced, and the interval was spent by the audience in singing ‘Rule Britannia,’ the ‘National Anthem,’ ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ and other national airs to an accompaniment on the organ.”⁵² When William Gladstone visited Leeds in 1881, the organist played *Rule Britannia*, *Auld Lang Syne*, and *God Save the Queen* as well as a classical selection while the crowd were waiting.⁵³ Reports that the National Anthem was sung after *Auld Lang Syne* become more frequent outside Scotland from the 1880s, but must also be read in conjunction with other evidence, such as the use of the song at the changing of regimental colours. This presents us with a new chicken-and-egg dilemma: a song which achieves this status is, quite naturally, the song that is chosen to mark the climax of related public and artistic events; this begs the question of what role this status played in the wider establishment of SΩ, or whether it was the other way around.

6.3 The Song of Parting

One of the difficulties in tracing the establishment of SΩ is that benefit and bane of the historian’s life: hindsight. What may now appear to be logical steps towards the one common goal actually mask a number of different possible motivations among a number of different social groups, living on opposite sides of the world, sharing some aspects of a common cultural heritage but often interpreting it in different ways. In this context, exactly how a particular practice occurred initially is less significant than the factors that lead to it being adopted, and sometimes spontaneously adopted, by a number of other groups and eventually by large numbers of the population. For this to happen, there needs to be some sense that the tradition “makes sense”, in a frame which may be provided by the inherited or implied significance of the elements of the tradition in question. The next stage is the focussing of this tradition in such a way that other related traditions either fade away, or become tangents to the mainstream practice.

51 *The Times*, 30 June 1864. The many other recorded instances in *The Times* include the changing of the colours of the 89th Regiment at Aldershot, presided over by Queen, reported on 6 April 1866; 67th Regiment at Portsmouth, reported 26 August 1868; 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment, reported on 7 April 1877.

52 *The Times*, 12 October 1877.

53 *The Times*, 8 October 1881.

At this point it is worth reminding ourselves that the full text of Burns's *Auld Lang Syne* implies a reunion rather than a parting. This is important not least because the use of *Auld Lang Syne* as a song of greeting continued for quite a long time, in parallel to the tradition which eventually overtook it. Much of the evidence for this comes from political rallies: this relates back to the use of the song to pay tribute to elder statesmen and the like, and it also emphasizes historical continuity, just like the many references to the phrase "auld lang syne" which pepper the speeches of British politicians standing for re-election from around the second quarter of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ In 1856, for example, the arrival of General [Lewis] Cass at the rally at which Democratic candidates for the US Presidential Election were chosen, prompted the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*; Cass had been the Democrat's presidential candidate eight years earlier.⁵⁵ In Britain, meanwhile, the song's use as a song of greeting was particularly established in connection with the Liberal Party, and two politicians in particular, John Bright and William Gladstone. In 1858, *Auld Lang Syne* greeted T. M. Gibson and John Bright when they arrived at a *soirée* in their honour in Manchester. Bright was also greeted with *Auld Lang Syne* at a Liberal peace rally in 1878, and at rallies in Lancashire, Manchester, and Birmingham in the 1880s.⁵⁶ The earlier references to Bright are important since we might otherwise logically presume that the song's great tradition in Liberal circles at this time was related to the Scottish credentials of Gladstone, who was also very frequently greeted by *Auld Lang Syne* after his re-election to Parliament in 1880; this followed the so-called "Midlothian campaign", often regarded as the first modern political campaign, and named after the Scottish constituency he stood for.

The specifically Liberal tradition of greeting Bright and Gladstone with *Auld Lang Syne*, which may have had an element of "welcoming back" these men into power, is seen in quite sharp relief if we compare it to other reports of the song being used in the presence of Gladstone as Prime Minister. Liberal meetings at Nottingham in 1887, and at Birmingham in 1888 used the song on Gladstone's arrival or ascent to the platform; in the Birmingham case, the crowd had also sung *Auld Lang Syne* and *For He's A Jolly Good Fellow* after a speech by Gladstone given a few days previously.⁵⁷ At the Borough Road College reunion in London in 1880, however, he heard *Auld Lang Syne* in its by then more usual context—one verse sung at the end, just before *God Save the Queen*.⁵⁸ In 1888, when the Gladstones stopped briefly in Dover on their way back from France, "a portion of the crowd sang the refrain of 'Auld Lang Syne'" as the train was leaving

54 The practice of singing *Auld Lang Syne* on confirmation of election candidates was still in evidence in 1875, as demonstrated by a Conservative meeting in the Free Trade Hall in Manchester in December of that year. See *The Times*, 7 December 1875.

55 *New-York Daily Times*, 9 June 1856.

56 *The Times*, 19 December 1883 (Lancashire), 28 July 1884 (Manchester), 5 August 1884, 30 January 1885 (both Birmingham).

57 *The Times* 19 October 1887, 8 November 1888, 11 November 1888.

58 *The Scotsman* 30 December 1880. The report specifically comments that *one* verse of *Auld Lang Syne* was sung, suggesting that this was not standard practice in Scotland, but may already have been normal in England.

the station.⁵⁹ On the other hand, a meeting of Non-Conformists in London in the same year did as the Liberals did and sang *Auld Lang Syne* to greet Gladstone.⁶⁰ And when Gladstone was unable to attend the 1893 National Liberal Federation, it sent him the following telegram:

We, the members of the National Liberal Federation, in annual meeting at Leicester assembled, desire to greet you on your return home, and to assure you that now, as in Auld Lang Syne, you hold the supreme place in our confidence and affection.⁶¹

What makes this Liberal tradition so interesting is that it demonstrates how a song as widely adopted and significant as *Auld Lang Syne* can still generate another, and possibly deeper level of significance for individual groups of people within the larger conglomeration we call “society”. The remainder of this chapter will introduce some more individual manifestations which contribute to that larger tradition of SΩ.

As the previous chapter indicated, it is difficult to pinpoint the emergence of SΩ, particularly when we realise that the positioning of *Auld Lang Syne* towards the end of public events and, in Thomson’s case, select collections of airs, could well have been a nod to the general status of the song by that time. Such incidences become more common in the 1840s, however. The 1844 Burns Festival held in honour of the sons of Burns at his birthplace, Alloway, was probably the single most important Burns celebration before the centenary of 1859: some reports said that the procession was three-deep and a mile long.⁶² According to the official report of the event, when the procession finally reached its destination, “A large circle was then formed round the platform for the musicians in the field, and the whole company, led by professional vocalists, joined in singing ‘Ye banks and braes o’ bonnie Doon,’ and ‘Auld Langsyne.’”⁶³ *Ye Banks And Braes* was sung in the pavilion as well, after the toast to the memory of Burns, but there is no mention of *Auld Lang Syne* among the toasts or at the end of the evening. Whether the use of *Auld Lang Syne* at the close of the open part of the proceedings is related to its being used as a song of parting, or simply because, even by that point, it was probably the most well-known Burns song and one of the most-loved of all Scots songs, is therefore a moot point.

In America, early occurrences of *Auld Lang Syne* at the end of social gatherings are not limited to college commencements and fraternities.⁶⁴ In 1846, for example, a

59 *The Times*, 9 February 1888.

60 *The Times* 10 May 1888.

61 *The Times*, 23 March 1893.

62 Reports of the event include Anon. 1844/1, Anon. 1844/2, and a clipping entitled “Full report of proceedings at the Burns Festival” held in the Mitchell Library collection, shelfmark 209646.

63 *The Scotsman*, 19 August 1844. The report in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* waxes much more lyrical: “Descending from the Platform, we entered the meadow-ground beyond, where the multitude was now assembled. One of the bands struck up the beautiful air—‘Ye banks and braes o’ bonny Doon,’ and immediately the People, as if actuated by one common impulse, took up the strain, and a loftier swell of music never rose beneath the cope of heaven [...] Few could abstain from tears as the last glorious note died solemnly away into the skies”. Anon. 1844/2, 375.

64 See Chapter 5, above.

benefit held in Boston for the composer Anthony Philip Heinrich concluded with the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*. The music critic Cornelia Walter, who was also a personal friend of Heinrich, noted that the company announced their intention “to express their regard for the beneficiary by singing a song together, and, in accordance with this announcement ... united in making the welkin ring with the touching and appropriate strains of ‘Auld Lang Syne’”; this she regarded as “a hearty compliment and a most suitable finale”. (Heinrich himself was not so enthralled: he wrote to Walter that “‘Auld Lang Syne’ can hardly atone for the incongruous manner, with which my ‘Ouverture to the Pilgrims’ was performed”).⁶⁵ This example again brings together some by now common tropes: firstly, the tradition of using the song as a tribute to a colleague or former colleague; and secondly, *Auld Lang Syne* is marked off as a communal song, and it may be this that leads to it being sung at the end of the evening’s entertainment.

Two other early references to Ω come from Milwaukee. In 1848, a supper held for a Mr Tillotson on 22 January ended with the singing of the song, and in 1850, a supper attended by descendants of the Pilgrims featured the singing of *Auld Lang Syne* before the party broke up.⁶⁶ It was also sung at a Pilgrim celebration banquet held at Plymouth in Massachusetts on 31 July 1853, not at the end but following the toast to “The embarkation of 1620, and its results”.⁶⁷ This could suggest that the tradition of playing the song when ships left port was already familiar. There are, however, some contradictory indications. In 1852, at the sixth annual dinner of the St Nicholas Society of Nassau Island, celebrating the memory of the original Dutch emigrants to the US, *Auld Lang Syne* was sung not at the end but following a toast to “Our Sister Societies”, the St Jonathan and the St Patrick Societies (incidentally, the next song on the programme, following a toast to “The Sword and the Sickle”, is *Coming Through The Rye*).⁶⁸ In 1858, American residents in Liverpool celebrated Independence Day with a banquet at which *Auld Lang Syne* was certainly sung, but not at end.⁶⁹ In both 1858 and 1860, the first toast at the annual dinner of the St Andrew’s Society in New York was accompanied by *Auld Lang Syne*; in 1858, the last item on the programme was *Sae Will We Yet*, a Scottish version of the Irish nationalist song *The Wearing Of The Green*.⁷⁰ By contrast, at the 1859 St Andrew’s celebration at Oxford, the last toast was followed by *Auld Lang Syne*.⁷¹ When Sir James Outram, who as a general had played a prominent role in quashing the First War of Indian Independence in 1857, visited Brechin in 1861, he was greeted with *See The Conquering Hero Comes* and *Auld Lang Syne*;⁷² when Gladstone made a brief stop in Hawick in 1886 en route to Edinburgh,

65 Both quoted in Lawers 1964, 209.

66 *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel and Gazette*, 26 January 1848, 25 December 1850.

67 *New-York Daily Times*, 3 August 1853.

68 *New-York Daily Times*, 8 December 1852.

69 *New York Times* 22 July 1858.

70 *Sae Will We Yet*, a British patriotic song, was written by Walter Watson (1780–1854). Murray 2001 notes its popularity amongst soldiers and its use in Scottish military contexts.

71 *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1859.

72 *The Scotsman*, 23 August 1861.

the band played the former on his arrival and the latter on his departure.⁷³ There are also references to Union troops leaving to the strains of the song at the beginning of the American Civil War.⁷⁴ However, it was also played when the 93rd Highlanders arrived back in Aberdeen in 1870, and when the 21st Fusiliers disembarked at Burntisland in 1872.⁷⁵

Collections of newspaper clippings relating to Burns held by the Mitchell Library, and dating from the later 1870s and early 1880s, confirm that by this point it was established practice to sing *Auld Lang Syne* at the end of Burns Suppers.⁷⁶ Tracing the more private, informal or local uses of *Auld Lang Syne* in this period is another issue. Literary sources offer some material, though this must be treated with caution: we can never be sure if the author is representing actual practice, or if they are projecting onto their characters or personal memories what in the meantime they or their audience would hold to be appropriate behaviour in the context. That being said, such accounts can themselves contribute to the development of traditions, which often arise through a haphazard mix of authority, selective memory, and inclination.

The later nineteenth century saw the publication of a number of books of “reminiscences” on Scots rural life, which have been generally subsumed into what is known as the “kailyard” tradition almost universally lambasted by twentieth century commentators. William Donaldson has argued that these books were intended for a southern or emigré market, a point which is perhaps not entirely irrelevant when it comes to the fact that they often had the phrase “Auld Lang Syne”, or a variant thereof, in either the title or the subtitle. Donaldson suggests that readers in Scotland itself were more likely to satisfy their inner bookworm by reading journals, which purveyed a slightly different view of Scottish culture.⁷⁷ Both aspects should be borne in mind in the case of *The Chimney Corner, or Auld Langsyne* by “A. T. B.”, published in 1866, since the book was made up of sketches which had previously appeared in the Edinburgh-based magazine *Hogg’s Instructor*. The first sketch, “Settlin’ for Crummie”, includes a description of the sing-song that inevitably results whenever neighbours gather for a bowl of punch. After a while, the women present start to get anxious about the state of intoxication of their menfolk, but the host continually thwarts their attempts to leave:

The bowl has been drained again; but the instant he lays his hand on the bottle to fill it anew, the storm, which had only been lulled before, threatens to break out with increasing violence. Men and women now start to their feet; they can stay “nae langer; they can stand nae mair; the roads are lang, an’ dirty, an’ dreich,” etc. Against all this, he argues, commands, begs, and beseeches. “Honour him, honour him; please him, only please him, for ance; half a bowl, then, if it mauna be a haill ane; surely they canna leave

⁷³ *The Scotsman*, 23 August 1861, 4 April 1872.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, 27 August 1861, 22 December 1861.

⁷⁵ *The Scotsman*, 6 September 1872.

⁷⁶ See, for example, cuttings relating to Burns celebrations in Dundee, Cumnock, Hamilton, Sheffield, Madison, Otago, Kilmarnock and others, in Mitchell Library Burns Collection cat. no. 52942.

⁷⁷ Donaldson 1986.

him without singing ‘Auld Langsyne,’ an’ that canna be done wi’ a toom bowl.” This staggers them, and ere they can recover themselves, Blackmyres, with great tact, comes up to his friend’s rescue, by striking up in a spirit that the late lamented John Wilson or Templeton would have admired, a lilt of the merry old drinking-song of “One bottle more.” The shock is electrifying; every man and woman joins in the chorus, and bawls out “One bottle more; one bottle more.”⁷⁸

It is difficult to interpret the exact significance of *Auld Lang Syne’s* use here—whether the host is insinuating that no party is complete without it, or that they must in any case sing it before parting. Another sketch tells of a different sing-song, which takes place at the end of the normal working day in a farmhouse. “Grannie” is asked repeatedly to sing, and repeatedly refuses, but would tell a story once she had thought of one—they should carry on singing until she does: “Well do we remember the songs which were then sung, and the singers. When it had come to ‘Auld Langsyne,’ ‘Grannie’ indicated that she was prepared to tell a story, as desired [...]”⁷⁹

Another source—an English one this time—comes from a children’s novel called *Auld Lang Syne: Our Home in the Marsh Land* whose author is named only as “E. L. F.” Told from the perspective of one of the elder children in the family, the relevant passage comes towards the end of the novel. It is the narrator’s birthday, and after a celebratory picnic, the mother of the family suggests it is time to return home:

“Wait one moment,” I exclaimed, springing from my throne; and Mr. Helmore [the narrator’s godfather] at the same time said—

“Yes, indeed, you must allow us five minutes more, Mrs. Elfindale. We cannot neglect old customs on the last night, of all others. Join hands all of you.”

It was an odd habit of ours, perhaps, but it had been our habit ever since I could remember. No family or friendly gathering had been ended without this joining of hands and singing in concert of *Auld Lang Syne*—that old sweet song which so many, and I among them, can never hear without a responsive thrill at heart.

Auld Lang Syne!

We have sung it with merry voices, breaking off now and then into irrepressible laughter. We have sung it carelessly, wandering in the old home garden before we went to bed. We have sung it with husky voices, trying to keep from tears. We have sung it—Margie and I, when we were in Switzerland together—under one breath to each other when we came back with large excursion parties in the twilight; or when we cared not who heard us, with full voices up between the towering pines to the silent heaven and the stars. We have sung it, as we sang it now, with joined hands standing on the charmed circle, in the still forest temple, where the dusk was gathering beneath its golden domes and spires; singing with a deep thrill of remembrance in every tone. The very little ones seemed awed as the circle broke up with loosening hands, here and there two or three grasping tighter as they went off into low-toned memories of *Auld Lang Syne*; and they stole away to the dying fire, where Frank, sending showers of sparks from a smouldering log, soon roused them again into noisy merriment.⁸⁰

78 “A. T. B.” 1866, 32–33.

79 “A. T. B.” 1866, 80–81.

80 “E. L. F.” 1876, 140–141.

A fitting description of how the old songs become old, and why.

As the next chapter will discuss in more detail, the nineteenth century iconography of the song tends for the most part to refer to some part or all of the wider theme suggested by the “childhood” verses, which, with the exception of the score and libretto of *Rob Roy Macgregor, or, Auld Lang Syne*, are included in most printings of the song in this period. Again, such sources are of a very different nature to informal renditions of the song. At Burns’ Suppers and other formal events, *Auld Lang Syne*, like the other musical offerings, was often sung by professional singers, with the audience generally joining in at the chorus. What happened on other occasions is anyone’s guess,⁸¹ but one of the earliest ever recordings of the song suggests that, by the late nineteenth century, the common tradition outside Scotland of singing only the first verse and chorus was already established. This recording emanates, somewhat ironically, from one of the earliest ethnographic projects to use this very new technology; it is now available via the digital collections of British Library Sounds.⁸² Recorded by A. C. Haddon and C. S. Meyers on 15 February 1898 in England, it comes at the start of the Torres Strait Cylinders, a collection documenting the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the islands lying between Papua New Guinea and northern Australia. At the beginning of the recordings, however, there is a slightly stylised farewell to “Mr Ray” (Sidney Herbert Ray) before he leaves on the expedition, and those present sing *Auld Lang Syne*. A piano is just audible in the background, one voice dominates slightly, and just as we might expect or have oftentimes experienced, some people sing “for the sake of auld lang syne”, some people don’t, and there is some hesitancy when, at the end of the first verse and chorus, some launch into a repeat of the chorus.

By the end of the nineteenth century, then, SΩ was firmly established—not necessarily at the expense of other traditions associated with the song, but it was certainly beginning to supersede them in evocative power. The next stage in the development of the song as a song of parting comes when it is translated for use in foreign countries: many of these versions are translations not of Burns’s text, but of the tradition SΩ with which it became intimately linked. This topic will be treated in more detail in Chapters 9 and 10.

81 Mackay 1877 refers to people joining hands “as they sing the chorus”, suggesting a slightly different practice to nowadays. He also claims M2 is an old Roman Catholic cathedral chant, but does not give any further source or evidence.

82 British Library Sounds, shelfmark C80/1485, recording available at ‘Ethnographic Wax Cylinders’ (2013), *British Library Sounds*, <https://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Ethnographic-wax-cylinders/025M-C0080X1485XX-0100V0>