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AULD LANG SYNE

A Song and its Culture

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11. Preliminary Conclusions

A Song and Its Culture

> If a song, or piece of music, should call up only a faint remembrance, that we were happy the last time we heard it, nothing more would be needful to make us listen to it again with peculiar satisfaction.[1]

The song published by James Johnson at Robert Burns's request in 1796 marked, from one point of view, the latest in a long string of developments that go back to the seventeenth century at least. A set of lute variations, possibly by a German musician known only as Mr Beck, and a ballad distributed around ten years later, possibly based on the work of Robert Aytoun or Francis Sempill, are the first definite indications of a tune and song called *Old Long Syne*. Whether or not there is any connection between these artefacts and the debate on the Scottish monarchy and the Act of Union of 1707, is a moot point; the tune was certainly being distributed in a much different context, as one of Henry Playford's *Original Scotch Tunes*, in early eighteenth-century London. The later eighteenth-century reception of *Auld Lang Syne* was influenced by the song written by Allan Ramsay to the tune then known by that name, here called M-1. Ramsay was himself a Jacobite, and a leading figure in the cultural revolution that was to prove more successful than military action in retaining a sense of Scotland's nationhood and identity, and which, through figures including James Macpherson ("Ossian"), Robert Burns, and Walter Scott, was to have a fundamental impact on European romanticism. This cultural environment, in turn, would ensure the success of anything bearing the name of Scotland, and particularly the name of "Robert Burns". Even though his authorship of *Auld Lang Syne* was mooted only after his early death, its success undoubtedly owes much to this, too. And yet, the story of *Auld Lang Syne* and in particular, its success, is much more complex than that.

The connections between the Jacobite sentiment of "auld lang syne" and the tune bearing that name continue to be strong throughout the eighteenth century, as a number of contrafacta testify. The later Jacobite songs in particular reflect the development of Jacobitism into less an active revolutionary movement, and more a social movement celebrating these old affiliations and hopes. This may help to explain why early eighteenth-century songs on *Auld Lang Syne* are stories of love requited

1 Beattie 1778, 174.

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or unrequited, while the song published by Burns is a social song, maintaining the theme of reunion after a long separation, uniting two childhood friends rather than two lovers.

Where, then, did Burns get his inspiration for this song, other than the known sources mentioned above? He claimed to have taken it down from an old man's singing. There can be no sure way of knowing the extent to which this is true, or how extensive were the changes Burns made to what he termed the "glorious fragment". The most convincing evidence for attributing at least some truth to his story is the tune with which "Burns's song" was originally published in 1796, a tune for which Burns himself had little time. This tune, M1, is clearly related to M-1, but is not known from any printed or written source prior to the *Scots Musical Museum*. Burns himself believed it to be the original tune from which M-1 derived, a plausible explanation given that the first written sources for M-1 are instrumental sources, which traditionally included elaboration and variation on a basic model. However, it is also possible that M1 is a version of M-1, or of a common predecessor, which achieved its modern form through the usual processes of oral transmission. Either way, there seems to me little ground to dispute Burns's assertion that he heard an old man singing the song; we can only be disappointed that he gave no more information on who this man was.[2]

Unclear also is why George Thomson, the man Burns purists love to hate, chose the tune M2 to replace what both he and Burns felt to be the much inferior tune M1. Structural similarities between the two tunes may have provided the initial inspiration. Also, through the overture to *Rosina*, and very possibly through the influence of Niel Gow's publications, there is every chance that a tune which to all intents and purposes is M2 was well-enough known in the closing years of the eighteenth century to be a fairly safe bet for a lyric which clearly had potential. If Burns is to be believed, M2 had already been picked up for a song popular in Nithsdale, where he lived from the late 1780s onwards—a few years after its first publication in Shield's opera and Gow's collection of strathspeys. Just who was responsible for the final few tweaks which turned the tune of Burns's *Can Ye Labour Lea* into the tune now universally known as

2 It is poetic licence indeed—and complete conjecture on my part—to wonder whether there was a connection to Burns's attendance at a dinner in Edinburgh celebrating the sixty-seventh birthday of Charles Edward Stuart, which would have taken place in the year before Burns's first version in the letter to Mrs Dunlop (the birthday in question having fallen on 31 December 1787). As Crawford recounts, according to a journal entry by the Reverend James MacDonald telling of a conversation with Burns the month during Burns's final illness, Burns had attended that dinner; Burns was moved to tears when telling MacDonald of the meeting, there, of two elderly gentlemen who had fought side by side at Culloden. Burns told MacDonald this in the context of promising to send him an ode he had composed for this occasion (as opposed to after it); there is no mention of *Auld Lang Syne* being sung (Burns's version had however not been published at this point). Crawford does not suggest any connection to *Auld Lang Syne* (Crawford 2009, 284, 395). Given the emotional impact on Burns of this event, it is perhaps likely that he would have made some reference to it in his letter to Mrs Dunlop containing his first written version of the song, a letter which as discussed specifically references the fate of the Stuart cause. The main evidence in favour of this conjecture relates to the Jacobite heritage of the song, and the hypothesis, derived from sources including Burns's first and working versions, that it may have derived from a Jacobite drinking song then extant in oral tradition.

Auld Lang Syne is unclear. It may have been Thomson himself, or the composer he had employed to arrange it, Leopold Koželuch.

Thus, we have a net which even at this stage has gathered together at least two continental musicians (Beck and Koželuch), some of Scotland's most famous poets, and publishing houses in both Edinburgh and London. The initial breakthrough for the song seems to have come in Scotland, however. Early references to the song or the phrase "auld lang syne" in the Edinburgh press in the very early nineteenth century link it to benefit evenings and charitable endeavours, suggesting that this aspect of the song's sentiment led to its initial performance on the stage. The sentiment is one that Burns's song shares with many of its eighteenth-century predecessors, not to mention Blamire's exactly contemporary version, *The Nabob*. From an early period, we find the song in a number of Scottish chapbooks—almost exclusively, however, with a text which shows consistent variation to Burns's song. It is tempting to suggest a missing link for this "toom the cup" version of the song. It could be as simple as a particular printer publishing the song with this version of the lyrics, and becoming the source for others (including for the tenor John Sinclair, who, as we have seen, played a not insignificant part in establishing the song outwith Scotland). There is certainly a big difference between the more lavish publications of the song including printed music, which seem to derive closely from the version published by Thomson, and the more modest chapbooks. The more expansive publications seem quickly to have accepted M2 as being *Auld Lang Syne*, despite the long tradition associating M-1 with that name. As chapbooks do not generally contain tunes, we cannot know for certain what tune(s) their contents would have been sung to, but the structure of the lyrics suggest M-1 would have been an unlikely choice, and the balance of evidence suggests that Burns's *Auld Lang Syne* and its derivatives very quickly became associated with M2.

One reason for this could be that many of the first musicians associated with the song in the sources consulted here were not Scottish and did not have close links to its musical traditions—Mrs Ashe for example, at whose 1805 benefit the song was programmed, or the composer and harpist Elouis, whose setting was published in 1807. The speed at which the phrase "auld lang syne" becomes associated with M2 does suggest that its previous linkage with M-1 was not widespread beyond a certain sector of the population. M1, meanwhile, does not seem to have become established until the later twentieth century, as the next and final chapter will discuss in detail.

Auld Lang Syne's real breakthrough almost certainly came with the opera *Rob Roy Macgregor, or, Auld Lang Syne,* which also introduced audiences to the abiding image of men in a tavern, raising a glass to friends far away. Theatre's role in establishing songs in the popular consciousness cannot be separated from the activities of publishers and purveyors of songsheets and chapbooks; the two together demonstrate that many elements of what we now regard as the music or culture industry were already functioning in the nineteenth century and even in the eighteenth. Both these media can however only function if the people that pick up songs and tunes from such

sources proceed to carry them into new contexts, and develop relationships to them that ensure their continued existence over a longer period.

Just as Burns's *Auld Lang Syne* was published in a period marked by increasing Scottish self-confidence, and also increasing interest in Scotland from outwith its borders, and just as the initial peak in *Auld Lang Syne*'s wider reception comes in tandem with a music drama which encapsulated the Jacobite craze, so the second flush of the song, and the development of one of its most distinctive cultural usages—its use as a song of parting—comes around the time of a further cementation of the Scots' own image of themselves and others' images of them. The ascent of the tradition SΩ—the use of *Auld Lang Syne* at parting—occurs roughly in the later 1840s and especially the 1850s: the song rises, as it were, with the Victorian age itself, with its love of all things Scottish, but also with the Scots' contribution to the project of Empire.

Thus, the continued existence of *Auld Lang Syne* seems to have become guaranteed at a relatively early stage. In an 1883 edition of some of Burns's poems, it was commented that "This song is one of the best known of Burns's; and is sung with fervour at all kinds of social gatherings of Scotsmen before parting. Its characteristic melody is now also familiar in England".[3] This is radically understating the point. The melody M2 was known not only in Britain but in many other parts of the world by the 1820s. Within British society—which was approaching the height of its colonial powers—it was one of the most important British group songs of the mid- to late nineteenth century, for a time closely linked to *God Save the King/Queen* and *Rule Britannia* at national events and celebrations. Sung quite naturally as a song of tribute alongside *See The Conquering Hero Comes* and *For He's A Jolly Good Fellow*, it also became the song of parting, and this even though the song and the key phrases that make it are in a language that not even most Scots speak. It remained a song of parting for key British institutions even when it began to seem less appropriate as a British national song *per se*. And as the century wore on, it was also still used as a song of union and reunion, with these traditions coming together to form the basis, from the later nineteenth century, of the traditional use of *Auld Lang Syne* as *the* song of New Year.

What role did migration and colonization play in the spread of *Auld Lang Syne*? Undoubtedly a large one, not least because the subject matter of the song makes it so appropriate to the experience of living far from one's homeland. That *Auld Lang Syne* should become so expressive of this, is thanks to its gradually becoming freed of the tethers of the "childhood" verses which link it so explicitly to a particular context. The fact that, aside from the first verse and chorus, it is the verse beginning "And here's a hand" that is nowadays most likely to be sung, is linked to S∞ and to a tradition of singing the song in the round with joined hands which seems to go back to the 1840s at the very latest. One wonders very much how the song was performed in that tavern scene in Davy and Pocock's operatic version of *Rob Roy*: the stage directions, unfortunately, give no hint.

3 Burns 1833, 31.

The traditions S∞, SΩ and S_{NY} are the real reason for the "globalization" of the song at such an early stage. It's no good simply making a song available: there are lots of songs out there, and relatively few become highly popular, let alone reach the kind of heights that *Auld Lang Syne* has. Indeed, the reception of the song in many countries around the world, and especially in countries where the factors of migration and colonization play no direct role, are amongst the best indication of the importance of tradition and ritual for the establishment and continuous reestablishment of the song. It became a Japanese folksong most probably because it was already being used at American graduations. It became known and used in Germany via the Scouting movement. In other cases, for example Denmark, it became known because of the credentials of the man responsible for it ever getting into print at all.

Thus, all the evidence points to the social functions and significances which became attached to *Auld Lang Syne* as being of prime importance in helping the song achieve and maintain the important position it holds in world culture, a position which very few other songs enjoy. Yet these uses and associations could not have become established if the components of the song itself had not been amenable to them. We have variously seen how such diverse factors as the cult of Burns, nineteenth-century views of Scottish culture and identity, and global social networks fed into the appreciation of the song; the sentiment expressed in the song's text is both universal enough and specific enough to the trials of day-to-day life to make it an obvious candidate for a song which carries across political and social divides. Not all of these factors have been equally important in all instances of the song's use. Indeed, the multiplicity of these contexts and traditions, however interrelated their development, would seem to be at least as important as the fact that they exist at all.

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The sheer number and variety of contexts in which *Auld Lang Syne* and other songs like it crop up may seem surprising. But what happens when we turn this idea on its head? What happens when we view *Auld Lang Syne* not as the exception to a general rule about the ephemerality of songs—mere trifles, remember—and instead suggest that *Auld Lang Syne* is a prime example of an alternative set of rules? Three aspects of the story here told, three factors in particular, may be of particular importance in helping explain *Auld Lang Syne*, and much more besides:

1. Firstly, there is **the role of fraternal-type organizations**, exemplary here of the more general way in which groups and communities so often copy the successful practices of other groups and communities.[4] Fraternal-type organizations are among the most obvious examples of this simply because they are so obvious in the level of importance they give to symbolism and ritual; but other examples have been noted here as well, such as the use of *Auld Lang Syne* at graduation ceremonies, first in America and then

4 See also Grant 2011/2.

in several Asian countries. The phenomenon is almost certainly more fundamental even than this. People copy each other—from birth on. Groups of people copy other groups of people—or share their repertoires, as Charles Tilly would have put it.[5]

Fraternal-type organizations also underline the importance of the "group song" approach to song research. Fraternities may meet, in the first instance, on a local level, and they may integrate references to a common national or ethnic heritage, but people are not born members of fraternities—they subscribe to them, join them, are elected and initiated into them. Moreover, their significance in the case of *Auld Lang Syne* is also that they operate over national boundaries. Otherwise, they do much of what "tradition bearers" do in the narrower field of folksong research.

Personal relationships to songs are not necessarily formed in the context of formalized groups, or with the express intention of being "group songs". This process can take on other, more individual forms as well—forms which may still imply identification with a particular group, or the desire to adopt a particular identity, or a reflection of who one is, but the term "group song" does not necessarily carry the full implications of this.[6] *Auld Lang Syne*, however, is most emphatically, and in its modern form always has been, a group song. It is a song implicitly about human beings' connections to one another, about their mutual obligations to one another: this is one reason why it is so natural that it be picked up by fraternal-type organizations, and many others. Moreover, this example emphasizes the importance of primary groups—and the importance of singing in a group, even if it is only after a few drinks at the end of a party—for the active reception of a song, and, even more importantly, for raising this song onto a new level of significance; this, in turn increases the likelihood of the song's transmission beyond the temporal and geographical boundaries of that small local group.

2. Secondly, the rapid spread of *Auld Lang Syne* at key points in the nineteenth century is testimony to **the role of theatre and print media** in establishing songs in the public consciousness before the era of broadcasting. Indeed, *Auld Lang Syne* challenges us to revise many of our assumptions about the role of modern, audiovisual mass media. Previously it was the stage; now it is the screen, or the radio, that provides the focus and the common point of orientation for a broad public: important in all of these instances, however, is this orientation towards a central point (or rather, central points). We can refer back to Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1, and the example of fraternal-type organizations, to help explain this: gathered at a central point—the jamboree—the Scouting song is picked up; and, in the future, Scouts around the world will orientate themselves to all those other absent Scouts by singing this one song. Freemasons, likewise, pass on many of their traditions orally, and this is probably how most of their

5 See, e.g., Tilly 2006. Tilly's particular interest was political dissent and how it is expressed, but his use of the term repertoire to indicate the possibilities open to social groups to behave and express themselves, is more widely useful.

6 See also Crafts et. al. 1993.

songs are communicated nowadays. The number of Masonic songbooks in existence is testimony not only to a taste for ever more songs about the Craft, but also coordination of some elements between Lodges, as an expression of that larger network of which each Lodge is a part. The difference between picking up a song from the reservoir offered in print media, and active performance, is that only when it is performed does it become memory, and only when it is part of memory does it have the potential to be of personal significance. But there are also ways of triggering this memory—a false memory, if we like—before this happens. If, for example, we are told that a particular song is sung by people round the world to mark the end of social gatherings, we are more likely to invest the song with a sense of significance even before we have got to know it at all. The same thing applies when publishers are sly enough to publish a "famous song" or a "favourite song", possibly "as sung by Mr Sinclair/Mr Broadhurst/Mr Darley" or whoever else: this attracts attention precisely because it indicates that *this song has found favour*, ergo, it must be worthwhile.

We can cry salt tears about globalization, about the loss of local traditions, about authority and power and the culture industry and the rest, but what is happening here has been going on for centuries, and relates to some of the most basic features of human social life, which is to say: human life. People are social animals. They like to communicate with each other, they *need* to communicate with each other. They also want and need to be accepted—it's all part of the same parcel. The historical focus of this book has been the nineteenth century, because this is where the international reception of the song and its traditions have their roots, but also because of the importance of drawing attention to the recurrent mechanisms that help steer human communication through music. The chapters on the eighteenth century should also have demonstrated that what is true of the nineteenth century is to a large extent also true of the eighteenth, the only differences being that the channels of communication may have been slightly slower, or not quite so technically elaborate—or perhaps, merely different. The changes of degree that changes to these channels bring about are important, but can oftentimes be explained with reference back to the older channels and models. S_{NY}, for example, was not invented by broadcasting. It had already spread and become established in many groups and communities before this reached a new level through broadcasting. What broadcasting did was to provide a focus though which, more and more quickly, more and more people across a wider and wider area could coordinate their actions at what humans have decided is a point of great symbolic significance: the chiming of a clock, distinguishing a new stage in what is basically an artificial system of marking time.

3. So why is time so important? "*Why regard the passing year?*" Rituals are part of what it means to be human; they help us make sense of that humanity. And **group songs are not just often essential parts of ritual, they are in themselves forms of ritual**: this is the strength of inherited significance; this is why group songs are imbued with such meaning. The "old songs", in Walter Heimann's sense, are important because

we define ourselves by where we come from—auld lang syne—not just where we are going. And I dare say the evolutionary theorists will tell us one day that these kinds of memories are important because of the function they fulfil with regards to the obligations people have to one another, and without which it may be so much more difficult to survive. Auld acquaintances are quite simply not meant to be forgot. Auld songs help us remember.

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In Chapter 1, I suggested that it is better to view *Auld Lang Syne* as a phenomenon rather than a song, given in particular the very mobility of the individual elements associated with it and the fact that when we say *Auld Lang Syne* we could of course be referring to any one of at least three different tunes, or several versions of a basic text, even before we arrive at the issue of translations of that text, or the ritual significances associated with the song. But, at least in terms of the international establishment of the song, there is one element which, though not necessarily present in each rendition, recurs with by far the greatest frequency, to the extent that it is, by anyone's reckoning, absolutely synonymous with the phenomenon. That element is the tune M2.

Songs work best when they have a pleasing and memorable tune. It is recognition of the tune that leads audiences to be delighted by the introduction of it, or an improvisation on it, or to buy a set of variations on it for the piano in the parlour. This is the basic force of a well-known song, and any power it has derives from this. The well-known tune of a song will carry that song's sentiment with it even when the rest of the song is missing, at least for people who have come into contact with it. The social significance of *Auld Lang Syne* and the structure of M2 are thus closely interrelated. While M2 would almost certainly not have achieved this level of renown without becoming linked to a song of union, a song of parting, and a song of New Year, it is equally true to say that these significances of the song could not have come about with just any tune. By the simplest means of comparison, if *Auld Lang Syne* had continued to be associated with M1 alone, it would never have achieved the standing it has today.

What makes M2 so special is not only its simplicity, already commented on in Chapter 3, but also the exact form this simplicity takes. And this, in turn, is linked closely to the tune's very flexibility. M2 is an incredibly adaptable tune, by turns a Scottish dance or a military march, very conveniently pitched for clocks, as we have seen, but also for humans (and not only those struggling to learn the accordion) who would have, and have, less problem with memorising and singing this tune than with many another. It is variously played and sung fast, and slow, like a dance, like a dirge. It is universal not because of some unwritten rule of musical behaviour, but because it can be adapted so well to fit all sorts of musical behaviours.

It has already been noted that M2 has march-like and anthemic qualities. Like national anthems, military music in most states—European and post-colonial—is broadly or in some cases very similar. Secondly, M2 in its modern form—and this

is the big difference made by all those small changes between the sources from the 1780s, and the tune published by Thomson in 1799—is not only much less obviously "Scottish" in style but also, ironically, maintains just enough of a feature common to Scottish music to lend credence to some Asian countries' claims over the tune as one of their own: in other words, the tune uses only the five notes of the pentatonic scale. On the other hand, however, it does not sound particularly pentatonic, particularly when certain other markers of a "Scottish" style—"Scotch snap" rhythms, or appoggiaturas before the downbeat—are absent. More particularly, for most listeners whose habits have been trained on seven-note, Western tonality, other tonal patterns overweigh the missing fourth and seventh degrees of the scale: one of the facts that makes the structure of M2 so simple is the steady concentration on the notes of the major triad; the larger spans in this tune are crossed by triadic rather than by stepwise motion, which would make the absence of certain scale degrees much more obvious.

When people sing *Auld Lang Syne* nowadays they do not generally hold to the rhythms of the tune as published in 1799. This is in part a result of the natural process by which tunes are adapted over time, but also (and relatedly) marks the move away from specific markers of a particular culture (Scots) towards what appears to be a more general constellation (even though this generality may itself be the result of cultural and historical events rather than any "naturally" general form of expression). Similarly, the text has also been reduced to its most general elements; and it is these elements, and the traditions that have grown up around them, that so often form the basis of foreign translations. The tune on its own continues to resonate with this sentiment even when these other elements are missing. But even meanings can get tired. What happens when something is so familiar that we stop seeing or hearing it, or wanting to? What happens when the meanings we attach to something are contradicted by the meanings that other people attach to it? Whose song is it anyway?