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# AULD LANG SYNE

## A Song and its Culture

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# 12. Auld Acquaintance

## *Auld Lang Syne* Comes Home

This is the start of a new sang.[1]

In July 1999, the Scottish Parliament reconvened in Edinburgh almost three hundred years after it had been suspended following the 1707 Act of Union. The new Parliament, set up following a referendum on devolution from Westminster in all issues affecting Scotland alone, came around a quarter century after a previous referendum on the issue had been defeated. On the day the Parliament met again, many of the speakers drew explicit links back to the dissolution of the old Parliament—done without the vote of the people—and the democratic decision to reinstate it. These sentiments came together in the singing by Sheena Wellington of Burns's *Is There For Honest Poverty* (*A Man's A Man For A' That*).

This was not the only of Burns's auld sangs to mark the new sang of the reconvened Parliament. Five years after it reconvened, the Parliament moved into its new building at Holyrood in Edinburgh. The official video of the opening ceremony effectively has *Auld Lang Syne* as its theme music: it concludes with shots of those in attendance singing the song in the now traditional manner, accompanied by musicians from the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. The video begins, however, with a very different version of the song, sung by Eddi Reader, who the previous year had released an album of songs by Burns, also accompanied by the RSNO and premiered at that year's *Celtic Connections* festival in Glasgow.[2] Reader's version differed markedly in using not M2, not even M1, but a different tune that I will here call M3. It is just one of a slew of recent recordings of the song which demonstrate a reappraisal of it in Scotland that coincides—not accidentally, I would suggest—with more general reappraisals of Scottish culture, politics, and identity.

This chapter will focus on nine versions by Scottish singers and musicians recorded from 1980 to 2004, including recordings by some of the most prominent musicians working in Scotland today; it will also briefly discuss two other, very different Scottish

1 Lord David Steele, at the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999; he is referring back to the famous phrase used by the then Lord Chancellor at the last session of the Scottish Parliament in 1707.

2 *Holyrood: The New Scottish Parliament Building. Opening Ceremony Highlights* (Scottish Parliament, 2005).


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versions as well as some recent interpretations from other countries for comparison. By placing these recordings in the wider context provided by a number of historical, literary, and sociological commentaries on Scotland published in this period, it will also ask what these developments tell us about Scottish culture and identity at the start of this new era.[3]

## 12.1 The Road to Devolution

Scottish nationalism is a relatively new phenomenon. This may seem surprising given the extensive discussion of Jacobitism in Chapter 2, above; but from well before the end of the eighteenth century until fairly late in the twentieth, there were relatively few calls for Scottish independence.[4] Why this should be the case, and why such a movement should then emerge in the later twentieth century, has been discussed in a number of studies; these became noticeable from the early to mid-1990s, when it had become abundantly clear that changes in the political relationship between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom were inevitable. Since this period coincides almost exactly with the versions of *Auld Lang Syne* discussed in this chapter, it is worthwhile making a detour into this wider context.

We have already seen that the place the Scots carved for themselves in the British Empire, coupled with the maintenance of separate legal, religious and educational systems after the 1707 Act of Union and the sense of a unique Scottish cultural identity forged from the Jacobite period onwards, helped to ensure that Scots were able to celebrate their Scottish and British identities simultaneously. When the sun finally did set on the British Empire, there were economic and political consequences for all of the United Kingdom. David McCrone has argued that, though the emergence of Scottish nationalism is linked to a number of fundamental social changes in the mid- to late twentieth century, there is little evidence to suggest that these changes were more dramatic in Scotland than in England in the same period. The real difference, he suggests, is that they were diffracted through diverging political agendas, leading to quite different social outcomes. These agendas had their roots in the specific myths—in his sense of "self-evident truths" rather than "falsehoods"—with and through which the Scots identified themselves. Scottish cultural identity had always been distinctive, but central Scottish myths—such as that Scotland was inherently a more egalitarian society than England—meant that they also reacted differently to the transformations in economic fortune that marked post-war British society.[5] And as the Empire declined, and with it Britain, so Scotland, in a sense, arose again as an alternative.[6]

3 See here also the essays in McKerrell & West (eds) 2018.

4 And, to reiterate, Jacobitism was not merely a Scottish cause.

5 McCrone 2001, especially Chapter 4. I referred to this earlier version of McCrone's work on the sociology of Scotland when writing this book; the arguments are considerably expanded in McCrone 2017, where the main discussion of class and egalitarianism in Scotland is in Chapter 9.

6 See also Scott 1996.

The key decade here was the 1970s.[7] The upsurge in the fortunes of the Scottish National Party (SNP) had begun earlier, in the 1960s, largely as a result of wider social change: the increased mobility of the workforce, the creation of new towns, and several other factors led to a lessening of traditional political, social and religious allegiances among younger voters in particular, and it was they who tended to vote for the pro-independence SNP at this point. Then, three things happened. Firstly, oil was discovered in the North Sea, and the ensuing political debate on who should benefit triggered a debate on Scotland's position within the wider Union. Secondly, in 1979 there was a referendum on Scottish devolution: a majority of the votes cast were in favour, but a hurdle of 40% of the entire electorate had been set and was not attained. And thirdly, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister. The Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party—traditionally the party most closely aligned with Scottish Unionism and Presbyterianism—had been experiencing a decline in support before then, but Thatcher's free-market politics, her attack on state intervention, and the southern-English focus of her new brand of nationalism led to a significant decline in support for the party in Scotland. The SNP, too, lost some of its ground at this time; but under Thatcherism, the question of constitutional change for Scotland became a key political issue for other parties as well. By the end of the 1980s, only the Conservative Party favoured the constitutional status quo; and after the 1997 general election, not a single Scottish Conservative MP remained. The manifesto of the Labour Party, which won that election, contained a promise to hold a referendum on devolution; this time, support for devolution was overwhelming.

The reimagining of the nation that led to devolution also found expression in a number of polemics and debates on Scottish culture and national identity. Most of these focussed on the two elements that were seen to present exactly the kind of romanticized, backward-looking view of Scottish culture that had little relevance for contemporary Scottish life: "kailyard" literature and "tartanry". Yet critiques of these two elements were often still partial to what had been called the "Caledonian antisyzygy", a term established in the earlier twentieth century describing a perceived dichotomy at the heart of Scottish culture: a belief that Scottish culture was essentially paradoxical, torn, caught between its romantic heart and its rational head, between its own heritage and culture and that of its dominant southern neighbour.[8] Whatever Scottish culture was, the diagnosis—so it seemed—was not healthy.[9]

Cultural and artistic movements tend to anticipate and precipitate social and political changes, and so it is in this case: the reaction against kailyard and tartanry,

7 The discussion in this paragraph draws in particular on McCrone 2001, Chapter 5; in McCrone 2017, these issues form part of Chapter 19. A lot has happened in Scottish politics since 2001 (to put it mildly), and this is reflected in this more recent discussion by McCrone.

8 The term was introduced by Gregory Smith in 1919; Hugh MacDiarmid used it as the title of an essay published in the early 1930s. The term is so influential that it features in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*: https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/sndns677

9 See also Daiches 1964.

and the continued instrumentalization of the "antisyzygy" idea, began much earlier than serious calls for constitutional change. In an essay on Scottish literature in the twentieth century published two years before the 1998 referendum, Douglas Gifford traced three key stages leading to a point where, perhaps for the first time in a long time, the Scots' image of themselves is no longer concerned with looking backwards to a mythical past or downwards, into their own navel, but with looking forward, around, abroad, and into the realm of an imagination in which Scotland can be, quite possibly, anything it wants to be. According to Gifford, the first stage in this process is what is known as the Scottish Renaissance, a term used to characterize the work of a number of quite different writers who shared an interest in readdressing "Scotland" and its relationship to its past, generally with nationalist and Marxist leanings. Gifford suggests that one of the most significant unifying aspects of literature in this period—the 1920s and 1930s—was the way in which its main characters were portrayed as actors in a much longer and more significant history. These characters had archaic and archetypical qualities: not only the past, but also the future of Scotland rested heavy on their shoulders. This type of writing fell out of favour after World War II, however, possibly because its use of symbolism and national mythology were felt to be much too close to the ideology of National Socialism. Instead, Scottish literature became realist and urban; characters now had to fight with the accepted ideas of their culture. The highpoint in this stage of the development came in the starkly prosaic works of James Kelman.

And then, Gifford suggests, something changed. Taking Edwin Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984) as a starting point, Gifford argues that these mark a decided move away from the cynicism of much post-war literature. Instead, they demonstrate

> a rediscovered sense of the limitless imaginative possibilities of the *idea* of Scotland, or Scotlands, a matrix of myths, attitudes, possibilities, histories [... Morgan creates] new attitudes, new mythologies. The new myths don't, however, pretend to any other source of authority than the human imagination; identity is not perceived as an almost magical creation of past communities and their dreams handed on through collective unconscious, nurtured by a presiding Mother Scotland, but a web of rational and irrational meanings consciously constructed and acknowledged as such, delicately balancing the claims of Scottish and international cultures, and insisting gently on an ultimately more than rational basis for living relationships.[10]

Several aspects of this new stage have been picked up in other commentaries as well.[11] Firstly, there is the idea that "Scotland" has been replaced by "Scotlands", marking both a more inclusive attitude to Scottish identity and a sense of its limitless possibilities. Thus, while mythology is *en vogue* again, this is no longer or not merely the mythology of a glorious past, but the possibility of strange parallel universes, futuristic scenarios, and the like. Secondly, and simultaneously, Scottish writers have

10 Gifford 1996, 32.
11 See, e.g., Crawford 1997, Motz 2000.

become more consciously international in their ideas, inspirations, and aspirations. Gifford also notes that this period saw an upsurge in the publication of older and previously marginal Scottish literature, which enabled a broader view of "Scotland" to emerge but also boosted confidence by "reasserting the validity of Scottish fictional and literary tradition" (a process which can also be observed with regard to Scottish musical traditions).[12] As he continues,

> the underlying forces of insistent Scottish identity-making were moving, and are moving, inexorably in the direction of synthesis, but a synthesis which is permissive of multiple perspectives and a plurality of approaches through different genres.

The crucial point, however, is that

> there is a desire to retain amidst the plethora of possible Scotlands a unifying sense of a force-field or web of connections which hold together what would otherwise deconstruct into meaningless regional variants, each of them susceptible to further reconstruction, so that as "authenticity" is lost, so also is any awareness of identity or permanence.[13]

Thus, there is a "desire to hold together 'Scotlands' in a net of deliberate casting", redefining what community is, and pushing the idea of "Scottishness" as far as it will go.

Cultural commentaries and research on Scottish themes seem now to be catching up with this altogether less neurotic approach to Scotland's past, present, and future. In his study of Scottish music hall, for example, Paul Maloney has argued that music hall "offered a more rounded and varied interpretation of Scottish culture than the predominance of Scottish comic caricature has led us to expect", and that the standard images of the tartan-clad Highlander contributed as much to Scots' understanding of their role in the Empire as it did to encapsulating this image for the outsider (as we have seen in the case of *Jessie's Dream*).[14] The suggestion is that the importance of these stereotypes for Scots was simply that they were identifiable *as Scots*. Understanding, and accepting, that Scots embraced the opportunities of Union and Empire—and its crimes—would seem the first step towards a mature idea of what to do *next*.

What is striking about the commentaries listed here, and many more besides, is that their analyses of Scottish cultural and political life in the later twentieth century often converge on a single point: namely, that Scottish society is moving towards a reassertion of its autonomy within, or possibly even apart from, the Union. This trend accelerated around the time of the referendum on Scottish independence held in 2014, not least because of the mobilization of previously quiet voices in the electorate in the form of numerous grassroots organizations, and ensuing debates both public and private about what Scotland is, and what her future might be. Those discussions lie a

12 Significant institutional markers of this include the establishment of an undergraduate degree in traditional and folk music at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. The past decades have also witnessed a significant increase in academic studies relating to music in Scotland.

13 Gifford 1996, 37.

14 Maloney 2007, 163. On *Jessie's Dream*, see Chapter 7, above, and Grant 2010.

stage ahead of the recordings to be discussed below, but help situate and contextualize Scottish musicians' reappraisals of that most ubiquitous of Scottish songs.

## 12.2 The Return of M1 and the Rise of M3

In Chapter 10, it was noted that foreign-language versions of *Auld Lang Syne* can be broadly divided into two groups: translations based on the text of Burns's song, and versions that translate the inherited significance of the song, particularly as a song of parting. This division between what we could call "lyrical" and "social", or between "solo" and "collective" approaches to the song, also applies in the case of recent Scottish recordings. "Social" and "collective" approaches continue to make up the lion's share of contemporary recordings, and can be taken to cover everything from sing-along karaoke versions to two more interesting takes on the song which will be discussed later. Generally, these versions can be recognized by the use of only the most commonly sung verses (if they are vocal versions at all), and they use M2. These contrast with "lyric-oriented" versions which will be the main focus here: their homage is to the text of Burns's song, and almost all use not M2, but M1 or a completely new tune, M3.

M3 (see Fig. 1.6 in Chapter 1), was introduced by the group the Tannahill Weavers, and appeared on their album *The Tannahill Weavers IV* which was recorded in 1980–1981. According to the note that accompanied that recording,

> It is sad to say that the beauty and sadness of the lyric [of *Auld Lang Syne*] is usually forgotten, glossed over or, at best, never conveyed by the popular melody. It is to be hoped that this version carries the story line to the listener as much as it does to us.[15]

In order to further sharpen the focus on the long version of the text, the Tannahill Weavers' version begins not with the usual first verse, but with the two childhood verses, then proceeding to what in B4 are the fourth and fifth verses. Only then is the chorus introduced; the first verse is not sung at all.

At the time when this quite different version of *Auld Lang Syne* was recorded, the Tannahill Weavers were not aware that Burns's song had originally been published to a different tune. Though many sources attribute M3 to the band itself, band member Roy Gullane has stated that another Scots song, *May Colvin*, provided the melody, one they felt to be much better suited to the lyrics. When they later discovered M1, they were, as Gullane puts it, "relieved" to find it was so similar to the one they had chosen.[16]

*May Colvin* is related to the fourth group of Child Ballads, "Lady Isobel and the Fause Knight"; the earliest known version in print of the Scottish version also cited by Child is David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Ballads*. Though the tune often given for English versions of this ballad is not related to M3, Betrand Harris Bronson's *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* includes a tune for *May Colvin* the second half of which matches M3. According to Bronson,

15 Source: Tannahill Weavers, 'Auld Lang Syne', *Bandcamp*, https://tannahillweavers.bandcamp.com/track/auld-lang-syne

16 Personal communication; I am grateful to Roy Gullane for his quick response to my enquiry.

> The tune appears in *The Scots Musical Museum* with a version of "Cowdenknowes" (Child 217) called "Bonnie May" (No. 110). It is also virtually the same as "The Bonny Mermaid" in Motherwell, 1827, App'x. p. xxx, as Barry has observed in a MS. note. The tune is given by G. P. Jackson, *Spiritual Folk Songs of Early America*, 1937, p. 100, as from *Missouri Harmony*, 1820, with a text attributed to Isaac Watts, and with half a dozen other references, of which the most interesting is that to a copy of "Little Musgrave" (Child 81) collected by Sharp [...].[17]

The Tannahill Weavers came across this tune in a music session.

That M3 became associated with *Auld Lang Syne* at all is very much a matter of timing: it came only a short while before the musical resurrection of the tune M1, formerly described as "mediocre" (Robert Burns) and "meagre" (George Thomson). The majority of the recordings of *Auld Lang Syne* discussed in this chapter use M1, which had circulated only briefly to accompany Burns's text in the *Scots Musical Museum*, and was published with a different text in Thomson's volumes (Figure 12.1 lists all the recordings discussed here). Contemporary singers using this tune seem to share with the singers of M3 an interest in rediscovering the original character of Burns's *Auld Lang Syne*; and they share with the philologist and the antiquarian an interest in the tune to which Burns wrote his own version of the song. Both Burns and Thomson were very musical men who were well acquainted with some of the more unusual characteristics of Scottish tunes. The question then, is this: what has changed in the course of two hundred years that M1 could now become so successful, so well interpreted, so well loved?

Fig. 12.1 The thirteen recorded versions of *Auld Lang Syne* by Scottish musicians discussed in this chapter. Further details of the recordings can be found in the Discography.

| **Artist** | **Album** | **Date of recording or release** | **Tune** |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Tannahill Weavers | *The Tannahill Weavers IV* | 1980/81 | M3 |
| Jean Redpath | *The Song of Robert Burns*, vol. II | 1986 | M1 |
| Gill Bowman | *Toasting the Lassies* | 1995 | M1 |
| Dougie MacLean | *Tribute* | 1995 | M2 |
| The Cast | *The Winnowing* | 1996 | M1 |
| Rod Paterson | *Songs From My Bottom Drawer* | 1996 | M1 |
| Ronnie Browne | *The Complete Songs of Robert Burns*, vol. 3 | 1997 | M1 |
| Ian Bruce | *Alloway Tales* | 1999 | M1 |
| North Sea Gas | *Dark Island* | 2003 | M1/M2 |
| Salsa Celtica | *El Agua de la Vida* | 2003 | M2 |
| Martin Treacher | *Burn It Up! Red Hot Rabbie Burns Dance Tracks* | 2003 | M2 |
| Eddi Reader | *Eddi Reader Sings the Songs of Robert Burns* | 2003 | M3 |

17 Bronson 1959, 73.

After the Tannahill Weavers' version, the earliest of the recordings discussed here is by Jean Redpath (1986). Redpath was one of the most successful and well-known singers of Scottish traditional music in the recent past. This recording by Redpath comes in the context of a larger appraisal of the songs of Burns in the edition created by the American composer Serge Hovey. Hovey, who had studied with Hanns Eisler and Arnold Schoenberg, created new arrangements for the songs, using in each case the tune to which they had originally been set. His chamber-style arrangements work best with those tunes most clearly relatable to the classical tradition in which he himself was trained. Significantly, however, in this edition Redpath sings *Auld Lang Syne* unaccompanied, as if to draw particular attention to the old tune.

Redpath's is the only unaccompanied version to be discussed here, but apart from the use of M1 her rendition shares another feature with many of these versions: they tend towards using the verse order of B2 or B3 rather than B4, which had dominated in the nineteenth century. In so doing, they are adopting the approach taken by most recent and standard editions of Burns's works, including Kinsley's edition of the collected works, and Donald Low's complete edition of the songs, which—not insignificantly—was also published in this period (1993); two years before, a modern facsimile edition of the complete *Scots Musical Museum* had also been published. Redpath follows the text published in the *Scots Musical Museum* exactly, with the exception of a single word: "seas atween us" rather than "between us". Indeed, this one line seems to present something of an issue for many of the singers discussed here. Gill Bowman also sings the text B2 with the tune M1, and like Redpath, she follows the text almost exactly—until it comes to this line, which is given as "But **the** sea between us". Similarly, the recordings by Ian Bruce, North Sea Gas, and The Cast all sing "But **the** seas between us". Ian Bruce's version was released on an album containing those recordings he had contributed to the edition along with some other Burns songs; the album is suggestively titled *Alloway Tales*; the recordings by The Cast and North Sea Gas will be discussed further below. Though few of these versions follow the text slavishly, the fact that four of the nine alter this same line in the same way is interesting. The reason is probably that when sung to M1, the word "But" must be stretched over two syllables. Introducing the definite article solves the problem.

Bowman's version is one of the earliest discussed here, the context being a show she premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1994. Called "Toasting the Lassies", its subject was Burns's women.[18] The album taken from the show, released in 1995, places *Auld Lang Syne* about half-way through. Relatively few of the original albums on which these recordings appear place it at or towards the end—The Cast, for example, place it first.

Exactly contemporary with Bowman's CD is Dougie MacLean's rendition, the only one of the nine to use the tune M2 the whole way through. MacLean's version comes on an album entitled *Tribute*, in which he also pays homage to Robert Tannahill

18 It must have been a long show.

and Niel Gow. While *Auld Lang Syne* is the last song on *Tribute*, it is not the last track, being followed by a well-known fiddle piece, *Niel Gow's Farewell To Whisky* (MacLean is an accomplished fiddler as well as singer-songwriter). And although he uses M2, MacLean's interpretation of *Auld Lang Syne* is as slow and reflective as most of the others discussed here. He sings the two childhood verses together immediately after the first chorus; then, after a second chorus, he takes the final two verses together, but places them in the reverse order to B4, so that the verse "here's a hand" comes at the end.

This kind of flexibility—for example, deciding when and where to sing the chorus—is a general feature of the nine recordings. Though many show deference to the "original" tune, and though there is a tendency towards B2 rather B4, none of the singers slavishly follow the detail of the text. Some even slip up at the end of the first verse, creating a sequence of words which makes rather less sense than the original: "Should auld acquaintance be forgot for auld lang syne" in the case of The Cast, for example, or "Should auld acquaintance be forgot sin' auld lang syne" in the case of North Sea Gas, a statement that brings to mind Harry's confusion about the meaning of the song in *When Harry Met Sally*. The Cast's own version would become famous through inclusion in another film: in *Sex and the City* (dir. by Michael Patrick King, 2008), a film continuation of the successful American TV series of the same name, the recording appears as the soundtrack to a reflective sequence showing the four central protagonists on New Year's Eve. According to David Francis, who with singer Mairi Campbell is The Cast, *Sex and the City* star Sarah Jessica Parker asked for this version to be used in the film after hearing it in concert.[19]

The most relaxed of all the versions, textually and otherwise, is that by Rod Paterson. Paterson is another leading singer of Scottish traditional music. His *Auld Lang Syne*, again with M1, appears on an album called *Songs from My Bottom Drawer*. The picture on the album cover shows this bottom drawer, into which he seems to have shoved quite a few things he wants to keep but perhaps not openly display—including a portrait of Burns. Of all the versions discussed, Paterson's is the one which comes closest to what we may presume to have been the spirit of the eighteenth-century song which formed the model. Though still reflective, it has much more movement and slightly less pathos than the other versions; this, we feel, is a social song, even a group song. North Sea Gas's version also nods to this part of *Auld Lang Syne*'s inheritance: although they use M1 for the main body of the song, their rendition ends with two rousing, unaccompanied choruses of M2. It is tempting to suggest that this version, one of the most recent of those discussed here to be released (in 2003), marks a new stage in which singers are more relaxed about referring back to the social significance of the song with M2.

Just a little over a decade after Redpath and Hovey's edition of Burns's songs, a new complete edition was published under the curatorship of Fred Freeman. This

19 Personal communication.

edition, which stretches to thirteen CDs, is significant in bringing together many of the most established singers and musicians working in Scottish traditional music at present. The recording of *Auld Lang Syne* is not set off from the rest as is Redpath's version in her edition with Hovey, but the choice of musician is perhaps significant: Ronnie Browne, one half of The Corries, possibly the most important and most famous Scottish folk group of the later twentieth century. Browne's Corries partner, the late Roy Williamson, wrote *Flower of Scotland,* one of the most important Scottish national songs of the present day.

The recordings of the songs by Redpath and Hovey, and the edition coordinated by Freeman, can be understood in the more general context of republishing and reassessing lesser-known aspects of Scotland's literary and musical heritage, in this case drawing attention to the full range of Burns's song output. They also make it slightly easier to contextualize M1 itself, and possibly to begin to understand why neither Burns nor Thomson thought much of it. If Burns thought of this *Auld Lang Syne* as a fragment, then perhaps because he instinctively felt that this tune, as simple as many a children's rhyme, belonged to a longer ballad; and what makes Redpath's solo version so convincing is that she was herself an accomplished singer of ballads. Burns's preference as a songwriter was for shorter, lyric songs, however. He also shared Thomson and Clarke's interest in the quality of the tunes as such—this was a prime motivation for Thomson's collections, in contrast to James Johnson's more documentary approach. Listening to the full range of the songs Burns edited or wrote as displayed by these recent recorded editions, I am also struck by the number that would not be out of place in the European classical music of the day, tunes at which a composer like Koželuch most certainly would not have turned up their noses.[20] Many of the tunes of Burns's songs are from instrumental collections, and thus also in the main longer and more elaborate than the short strains of M1. Seen from this point of view, the verdict reached on M1 begins to make more sense; indeed, in a way it is surprising that Thomson published it at all, albeit with a different set of words.

The musical contexts of the later twentieth century are different, however, not least because of the richness of styles, techniques (including recording techniques) and genres on which musicians can draw, weaving a melody like M1 into as rich a tapestry as desired—and doing so with an understanding of Scottish tonality which few if any continental composers would have had. With the exception of Redpath's solo version, all these recordings show a striking similarity in the instrumentation used. The guitar—one of the defining instruments of contemporary popular and folk song—is everywhere in evidence. None of the eight recordings discussed above feature fiddle, but many have some sort of flutes or whistles. Dougie MacLean and the Tannahill Weavers prove themselves musical children of the 1980s by introducing electronic

20 This is, of course, the essence of the point made by David Johnson (1972) and others, including Gelbart (2007): the divide between "art" and "folk" or "popular" music is to a large extent a creation of later historians with a particular ideological axe to grind.

keyboards, and both Ian Bruce and Gill Bowman's recordings include an accordion. These are some of the main instruments of Scottish traditional and folk music in the present day (fiddles and pipes being the others); this is just one of the ways in which these versions situate themselves quite specifically within a local, Scottish, tradition.

These new and creative takes on *Auld Lang Syne* also reflect a new and wider imagining of Scottish music and its relationship to other traditions, as two recordings released in 2003 show. Salsa Celtica, for example, are known for merging elements of Scottish traditional music with Latin American traditions.[21] Their instrumental version of *Auld Lang Syne*—with M2—comes at the end of a CD called *El Agua de la Vida* (water of life = in Gaelic *uisge beatha* = whisky). Martin Treacher's version, on the decidedly tongue-in-cheek *Burn It Up: Red Hot Rabbie Burns Dance Tracks*, offers a direct contrast to the more serious renditions discussed above: *Auld Lang Syne* (*Highland Belushi*) uses M2 and the two most commonly sung verses; there is a brief intro on the bagpipes, but this quickly gives way to saxophone and an interpretation in the style of *The Blues Brothers*. As different as this version and the album on which it appears are from the approaches taken in the recordings discussed above, Treacher's liner notes indicate that he, too, was motivated by respect for Burns's achievement and legacy:

> To me, Rabbie's sentiments and observations feel just as contemporary as those of the great modern songwriters such as Lennon & McCartney or Elton John, so I wanted to try and create an album to show that Burns is as relevant at the start of the 21st Century as he was at the end of the 18th Century.

The last recording to be discussed here is by Eddi Reader, whose version brings us full circle in the context of these thirteen recordings since it uses M3. While the musicians previously discussed above identify more or less directly with the "traditional" or "folk" music scene in Scotland,[22] Reader's background is slightly different. She came to prominence with the band Fairground Attraction, and has pursued a successful solo career for several years. Her version appears on an album called simply *Eddi Reader Sings the Songs of Robert Burns*, released in 2003 to coincide with a concert at the annual *Celtic Connections* festival in Glasgow. On this album Reader is accompanied by a number of musicians from quite different traditions, including—as on *Auld Lang Syne*—the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

Reader's version is by far the slowest of all those discussed here. It starts as a solo, with the orchestra entering at the second verse. Reader sings *Auld Lang Syne* in the verse order B4, and is the only singer of those discussed here to commit what many would regard as the fatal *faux pas* of singing "for the sake of auld lang syne". Introducing *Auld Lang Syne* in the liner notes, she says

> I was informed by a friend that her mother knows, that this old tune came from a dance that was brought over to Scotland by Hebrew dancers. I will investigate further... I love

21 See Alexander 2018 for a detailed discussion of the band.

22 On these terms and for a modern Scottish take on the controversies surrounding them, see several of the essays in McKerrell & West (eds) 2018.

> singing this old tune and I will never forget the amazing sight of two thousand linking arms and singing with me in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall [...] What a wonderful thing that man did...to write a song that makes everyone sing together and hold each other at the dawning of a new year, in ALL languages...

With the RSNO accompanying, and a debut at one of Scotland's largest concert halls during one of its most important music festivals, this version is clearly on a larger scale than most of the others discussed here. Its significance goes further than this, though. When the Scottish Parliament reconvened, initially in the chambers of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland until the new parliament building was built, Sheena Wellington's solo rendition of *A Man's A Man For A' That* (*Is There For Honest Poverty*) marked the occasion in song. It was Reader, however, whose rendition of *Auld Lang Syne* marked the opening of the new Parliament building at Holyrood in Edinburgh in 2004. She initially sang the song with the tune M3 much as she had recorded it—again, the RSNO was on hand to accompany her. At the end, though, the orchestra signalled the transition into the more familiar version of the song, while Reader asked those present, "Will you sing it with me?" They would.

The singing of *Auld Lang Syne* with M3 at the opening of the Parliament building ensured that this version of the song reached a much wider public than had heard the song in Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, or on Reader's album. Once again, M1 was absent. And this brings us to the final question which needs be posed in relation to contemporary versions of the song, and the song's history in general.

## 12.3 What Does *Auld Lang Syne* Have to Do with Burns?

> [...] remember this, never blow my songs amo[ng] the millions, as I would abhor to hear every Prentice mouthing my poor performances in the streets.—Every one of [my] Maybole friends are welcome to a Copy, if they chuse; but [I w]ish them to go no farther.[23]

Many of the arguments for the use of M1 rather than M2 focus on the fact that this is the tune Burns intended for the song—the "original" tune. As Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrated, however, all the evidence suggests that M1 (as opposed to M-1) only became established in the later twentieth century, for the reasons detailed previously. The song would not have risen to international prominence with the tune M1, and the textual elements of the song which are most widely used in English-speaking countries, particularly the first verse and the chorus, are those parts of Burns's *Auld Lang Syne* that are clearly not his invention. Moreover, many international versions refer only tangentially to his text, building instead on a tradition that arose around the song several decades after his death. So what are we left with? When we talk of it as Burns's song, do we mean only those five verses that he was, at the very least, responsible for publishing? And aside from the assistance that the Burns cult gave to

23 Robert Burns, letter to William Niven, 30 August 1786; *Letters*, no. 42.

the song's establishment and use, what did Burns himself really have to do with the phenomenon of *Auld Lang Syne*?

There is certainly more than a small dose of irony in the fact that those elements of Burns's song that have slipped into most widespread use, and into the common consciousness, are also the oldest and most original of the textual elements, dating from long before Burns—the opening line "Should auld acquaintance be forgot" and the refrain, with its reiteration of the sentiment "for auld lang syne". This process does owe a lot to Burns, however. On the basis of the available evidence, particularly the difference between M1 and the tune once commonly known as "Auld Lang Syne", M-1, it is reasonable to conjecture that Burns may indeed have based his song on elements from oral tradition. We should note, however, that he gives absolutely no details as regards the "old man" he cites as bearer of this tradition: we immediately presume, like the artist of one representation of Burns taking it down, that this is an old man from a simple and rural background; but for all we know it could have been a member of one of Burns's clubs, or one of the gentry he mixed with in Edinburgh. It is also possible that the song whose elements he notated was derived from the many later Jacobite versions, since these specifically introduce the important element of drinking a toast which is missing from earlier eighteenth-century versions.

Bearing all this in mind, however, let us look again at the opening verse of Burns's *Auld Lang Syne* in, firstly, the form Burns originally sent to Mrs Dunlop:

> Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
> And never thought upon?
> Let's hae a waught o' Malaga,
> For auld lang syne.—

and the form he then published:

> Should auld acquaintance be forgot
> And never brought to mind?
> Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
> And auld lang syne!

Burns may have changed nothing of the chorus other than bringing it into line with the new verse, but this new, published first verse differs from all previous versions of the song in its internal repetition, and in its repetition of one of the two key phrases of the song: "Should ... be forgot" is one of the standard elements of almost all the eighteenth-century versions. It is a simple enough change, but one that is nevertheless testimony to Burns's natural skill as a songwriter; it grants the song a generality and longevity that a reference to a now largely unknown fortified wine is unlikely to have garnered.

*Auld Lang Syne* has more to do with Burns than this, however. The song and the poet cannot be anything but entangled, one in the other, like a veritable Celtic knot, for the simple reason that both have been, since the nineteenth century, two of the

strongest signifiers for Scottish culture and identity. To this extent, modern Scottish reappraisals of *Auld Lang Syne* are modern Scottish reappraisals of Burns and are thus modern Scottish reappraisals of what "Scottish" means at all. That the author of this book is as much implicated in this process as her subjects goes without saying.

The case of Eddi Reader is an interesting one in this regard. Reader's approach to Burns is by force of circumstance different to the approach taken by other singers. While Jean Redpath, for example, grew up in Fife and derived much of her initial knowledge of Scots song from the living traditions she was brought up with there, Reader's childhood began in a deprived area of Glasgow before her family was rehoused in Irvine, Ayrshire, one of the designated "new towns" set up in Scotland in the 1950s and '60s as an overspill from the crowded slum areas of Glasgow. Reader thus spent her formative years living close to where Burns was born and raised, but this geographical proximity did nothing to bridge the social and cultural differences which she felt existed between her and the National Bard. As she notes in the introduction to her recording of Burns's songs,

> [...] at school I learned some of his poetry but I often thought Robert Burns was for the highbrow and not the likes of me, the hardly educated, council estate, overspill girl...now I see that I was wrong and that I am precisely the person Burns wrote for. As I read more and more about him, I get the sense that he was the same as the rest of us, a spokesman for the glorious in the ordinary, the sublime in the mundane. I have met many, I guess, who might be like him, in that county of Ayrshire, and in the rest of Scotland. We are all Robert's babies.[24]

Reader's description of her childhood distance to Burns is somewhat ironic considering how many Immortal Memories and other eulogies have been dedicated to presenting Burns as the man of the people. On the other hand, her view of affairs says a lot about the effective canonization of Burns and how this took the "heav'n taught ploughman" and put him firmly back in heav'n where he belonged (Presbyterian protests notwithstanding). This problem also extends to how Burns's songs in particular are used (and abused, some would say). He had a talent for taking and remoulding elements of vernacular tradition, reactivating them for a much wider community, thus ensuring their continued use; but this has also meant that they often end up back in vernacular tradition in a very different state to the one he left them in. This applies to *Auld Lang Syne* more than any other song he touched. Yet Scottish commentators, who in general are quick to recognize the role that Burns's songs have in ensuring his worldwide popularity, are oftentimes equally quick to find fault with many renditions of the songs, criticizing the "wrong words", the "wrong accent" or—with a sideswipe at George Thomson—the "wrong tune". In the case of *Auld Lang Syne*, there is even the charge of people appealing to the "wrong sentiment". In actual fact, however, the persistence of its sentiment—of "auld acquaintance" and "auld lang syne"—is, as I

24 From the liner notes to *Eddi Reader Sings the Songs of Robert Burns*.

hope this history has shown, one of the most stable elements of all, and the one which most clearly unites Burns's song to all those other songs of "auld lang syne" discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. It prevails even where people claim not to be sure what they are actually singing about—their actions, as it were, speak louder than their words.

So what of those "wrong" words, that "wrong" tune? We can hardly be surprised if people who speak English with little or no knowledge of Scots do not use or pronounce the words as the lexicographers would have them; nor is it surprising, from a musicological perspective, that the "wrong" tune they sing is easily adaptable (and adoptable) in a way that M1 is not. There are reasons, however, why critiques and claims such as these are made: they are not simply an attempt to bring the song back home, to shield it against the "ways of the world" in that peculiarly aggressive-defensive manner that can sometimes be a Scottish character trait. As Walter Heimann described—correcting John Meier's assertion that songs cease to be folksongs when people try to sing them "correctly" or exactly as they used to be—arguing over the "right" version is an essential part of the relationships people have to their songs. Like other customs and rituals, people hold on to a specific way of doing things "because this particular version is linked to particular emotions or values which are connected to experiences in the past (staying true to the *value*) or because someone wants to fulfil the rules of behaviour of a group to which they want to belong (staying true to the *norms*)".[25] He concludes that the very fact that people hold on to certain things with such persistence is an important clue as to what is significant about the songs concerned, and the culture in which they are embedded.

What, then, are the most significant aspects of *Auld Lang Syne* as seen from the perspective of these debates? They are Burns, and they are Scotland itself. The distinguishing lines between the two can be fuzzy. What continues to make Burns such a powerful cultural figurehead for Scotland is the way in which his biography (real and fabricated) and his work encapsulate the essential myths of Scotland identified by McCrone: that Scotland is essentially egalitarian, an open society, one which allows mobility through education to a "lad o' pairts" like Burns. Add to this that Burns has been variously called a Radical, a Jacobite, a Unionist, and several other things besides, and we begin to see how the mythologies surrounding Burns can be adapted to suit whatever particular Scottish identity is required. He was the rural poet with international literary aspirations, assisted by his father's belief in the importance of education. He criticized the twisted morality of some parts of the Kirk, he criticized pretension and frippery. He wrote in Scots mostly, and brilliantly. And last but not least: he wrote songs.

Music was for a long time the elephant in the room as far as discussions of Scottish identity and Scottish nationalism are concerned. Even Christopher Harvie, who makes frequent reference to balladry in his important study of Scottish nationalism,

25 Heimann 1982, 42.

goes little beyond discussing these ballads as literature, or metaphor.[26] Yet music, not only song, was one of the areas in which Scotland presented its unique face to the world even before the Act of Union, as Playford's publications make abundantly clear. That the recordings discussed in this chapter coincide with such a critical period in Scotland's political history—from just after the first, failed referendum on devolution to the opening of the new Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh—is clearly no coincidence.

There is a strong philological urge in attempts to find out what Burns originally intended or meant, or what tune he wanted; but not only this. Underlying such endeavours is not least the need to clear away the Ossianic mist from the binoculars through which Scotland views itself. The only question remaining is: what direction are the binoculars pointed in—to the past, or to the future? I ask the question pointedly, and I do so because it has long been recognized that Scotland has had an almost fatalistic interest in her past, in that auld lang syne that continued to exist, or possibly only ever existed, in the memory of a nation whose cultural identity was for so long dependent on that memory alone. As Douglas Dunn put it,

> There is something about Scotland which insists on living in the past, a species of national selfishness; it is the opposite of the spirit of Burns and his poetry: he was progressive and, in using the verse materials of tradition, experimental and courageous, given the tenor of his times.[27]

To what extent this latter claim is true, is open to debate given the wider context of romanticism, which fed so voraciously on ideas of Scotland with Burns, Scott, and others only too happy to keep the food coming. Dunn's main point of contention is the modern attitude to Burns and his work however:

> Burns 'cults', Burns Suppers, and other phenomena of a like nature, are of very little consequence. What does it matter if those who otherwise do not read or care for poetry meet once a year to eat and drink in honour of Burns's memory? Is it even worth mentioning that Robert Burns's is the only poetry that they care to read or listen to? In this bicentenary year of Burns's death, the Scottish literati have once again raised their voices in complaint at the spectacle of celebrations deemed false or Philistine, and the sound is as disagreeable as that of a dimwit trying to recite Burns after a dram too many (or one too few). To rescue Burns for poetry means paying attention to the significance of how he wrote as well as what he said.[28]

And yet, one wonders whether rescuing Burns for poetry is sufficient: the more remarkable feature of the Burns cult, as this study has shown, is that through it a number of traditions from his own time and the period after his death continue to be practised regularly, even ritually.

26 Harvie 1998.
27 Dunn 1997, 83.
28 Dunn 1997, 83–84.

The question remains of whether recent versions of *Auld Lang Syne* can be seen as a signal of Scotland's coming-of-age; and, as the title of this chapter indicates, of *Auld Lang Syne* itself coming home. There is an element of truth in this, but it is not the whole truth, for reappraisals and reassessments of *Auld Lang Syne* have not been limited to Scotland. The American singer Kate Taylor recorded the song in 1999. Taylor, herself the descendant of Scots who emigrated to North Carolina around the time that Burns's song was first published, sings it to M2, with four of the five verses (as in so many cases, the "pint stowp" verse is missing); she transposes them into American English at points. It is rare to find recent renditions of the song outwith Scotland that use more than a couple of verses, and Taylor herself did not know these other verses until she decided to record the song. On finding them and discovering in them a song "about reconciliation, forgiveness, and recognizing what's important", she also decided to give the proceeds of the sale of the single to charity—without, it would seem, realising that here too there is significant historical precedenct.[29] Taylor's arrangement is suitably reflective, but with unusual harmonic turns; the idiom here is American rather than Scottish. The backing vocals in the chorus are sung by her brother, James Taylor, who went on to record his own version of this arrangement for an album of Christmas songs first released in 2004. Another American interpretation, made by a band then called Wild Mountain Thyme (and now called 3 Pints Gone), is a fairly direct interpretation of the Tannahill Weaver's recording, using not only M3, but also beginning with the two childhood verses. Unlike the Tannahill Weavers' recording, this one also includes the first verse, but at the end. This recording was made in 1995 and released in 2001; the arrangement is again dominated by guitars and flutes.

A very different type of tribute to *Auld Lang Syne* appeared in time for New Year's Eve 2006. Released online by the now defunct net label Comfort Stand, the compilation *Auld Lang Syne* invited twenty-five artists to offer their own reflection on the song itself, or the celebration of New Year. The label's own wish, it states, is that

> as you play this compilation, you will take the time to reflect on the world that we live in, and what your role is in that world. As you ponder these things, we hope that you will make the decision to join us in living well, taking care of others as well as yourself, and enjoying all of the happiness that is there for the taking in 2006.[30]

The style of most of the tracks compiled is what could be most loosely termed electronica, and the use of sampling makes for some very interesting conjunctions indeed: in some ways, this compilation presents a potted history of everything that has been said in this longer history. What is most interesting is that two of the tracks—that

29 Kate Taylor, as quoted by Chuck Taylor in *Billboard* magazine, as quoted in turn by Laura Hightower in 'Kate Taylor Biography', *Musician Guide*, http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608002761/Kate-Taylor.html

30 'Auld Lang Syne', *Comfort Stand*, http://www.comfortstand.com/catalog/071/index.html

by JR, and that by Kaffeinik—include M1. The former includes it as a tinny keyboard sample, which makes me surmise that it was taken from one of the many websites offering midi files containing the "original" tune; the other sample mainly used on this track is the version of *Auld Lang Syne* recorded in the 1960s by the Beach Boys (M2). Kaffeinik's version also includes samples of M2 and an excerpt from a recording of M1 which is not among those discussed here and which I have not been able to trace. And M3 is also represented, as a sample taken from Eddi Reader's recording in the track provided by Chenard Walcker. This compilation thus typifies new methods of production and new channels of distribution, and with them the first signs that both M1 and M3 are also, perhaps, on their way back out into the wider world again. What impact digitalization will have on the future course of the song and its traditions remains to be seen; but the very different takes on the song in this compilation—also including references to Guy Lombardo, to *Nehmt Abschied, Brüder*, and to the eternally recurring question of what the words actually mean—is a testimony to the layers of meaning and significance which the song already has, and will no doubt continue to have, and to accrue, in the years to come.

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*Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired Poet who composed this glorious fragment*.[31] We have a great, great deal to be thankful to Robert Burns for: it was he, after all, who set in motion the events, the renditions, the traditions, and the sentiments which this study has attempted to partially reconstruct. Clearly, though, we also owe a vote of thanks to George Thomson; and not only to these gentlemen, and the ladies they wrote for, and whatever other poets and musicians and women and men lay behind the versions of the song that they published. For without the actions and the singing of a whole host of individuals and groups, only some of whom have been introduced here, *Auld Lang Syne* would never have reached the kinds of levels of significance for so many individuals that result, in turn, in the individuals introduced in this chapter feeling the need to turn the old song back into *their* song, and then to push it back out into the world with new wind in its sails. Our individual worlds are casting their nets wider, and drawing us all closer in the process. The more this happens, the more pressing the need to find a common level between us on which to communicate, one identity in common of the many we possess. And perhaps this identity, too, can be expressed and emphasized, established or remembered, in the act of interaction with and through a song held in common by us all.

31 Burns, letter to Mrs Dunlop, 7 December 1788, *Letters*, no. 290.

# Appendix 1

## Eight Jacobite Songs Related to *Auld Lang Syne*

### 1. "The true Scots Mens Lament for the Loss of the Rights of their Ancient Kingdom", published by John Read of Pearson's Close Edinburgh, 1718.[1]

Shall Monarchy be quite forgot,
and of it no more heard?
Antiquity be razed out,
and Slav'ry put in Stead?
Is *Scots* Mens Blood now grown so cold
the Valour of their Mind,
That they can never once reflect
on old long sine, &c?

What shall become now of our Crown
we have so long possest?
Is it no more fashonable,
that we Should have it dress'd?
Shall we it for Tobacco sell,
and never once repine?
Ah! then it's late for to reflect
on old long sine, &c.

How oft have our Fore-fathers spent
their Blood in its Defence;
Shall we than have it stol'n away
by *English* Influence?
We'll curie the Acters of the Deed,
when under Yoke we pine:
Why will ye not again reflect
on old long sine?

Old *Albion*, what will become of thee
when *England* sits thy Judge?
May thou not only then expect,

1 Source: NLS, shelfmark Ry.III.a.10(117), also available at https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=15827&transcript=1


https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0231.13

Oppression but Refuge?
It's their Design to ruine thee,
as clearly may be seen:
Why wilt thou not again reflect
on old long sine &c.

How shall our crazy Shoulders bear,
the Burden of their Tax;
Tho' they be rich, and we but poor
they will not us relax;
Unless some skilful one ov'rturn
the Ground of their Design;
But then it's late for to reflect
on old long sine, &c.

The Name of *Britain* shortly will
thy Body hence possess.
*England* thy Head will flourish great
thy Body will decrease,
The Union will thy Ruine be,
thou'll know in future Time;
Yet still you seem for to forget
good old long sine &c.

Was not our Nation sometime brave,
invincible and stout;
Conquering *Cesar* that great King,
could not put it to Rout;
Nor not to much as Tribute get,
for all his great Design:
These Men I think thought to maintain
good old long sine, &c.

Did not *Romish* Ambassadors,
before our King kneel down?
I mean *Carbredus Claudius* great,
most valiant of Renown;
And the Proposals of a Peace,
unto him did resign;
These Actions may make us reflect
on old long sine, &c.

The Royal *Bruce*, if now alive,
he surely would regrate,
And blame our Grandees irefully
of *Scotland*'s wretched State;
And tell them he priz'd Monarchy,
while he was in his Prime,
And bid them look right speedily
to old long sine, &c.