

M. J. GRANT

# AULD LANG SYNE

A Song and its Culture





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# Introduction

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One more song, and I have done.—Auld lang syne—The air is but mediocre; but the following song, the old Song of the olden times, & which has never been in print, nor even in manuscript, untill I took it down from an old man's singing, is enough to recommend any air.<sup>1</sup>

The story goes that Irving Berlin, having just penned a song with the title *White Christmas*, called excitedly to his assistant with the announcement that he had just written his greatest ever song. Indeed, *White Christmas* was, for a long period, the most commercially successful recorded song of all time, and for many people in the English-speaking world it is now as much a part of Christmas as decorated trees and the man in the red-and-white suit. Given this emotional significance, the idea that Berlin immediately recognized the song's potential is attractive, suggesting as it does that the song's success had less to do with the machinations of the music industry, and more to do with the song's own particular qualities.

Compare, then, this story to the quotation above from the Scottish poet and songwriter Robert Burns, talking about this book's subject. The remark came in a letter to the publisher George Thomson, who, possibly inspired by Burns's comment, promptly ditched the tune Burns talks of and united the words to another. This new version appeared for the first time after Burns's death, in 1799, and three years after the verses had originally been published—in a volume edited by James Johnson—with the tune Burns provided.<sup>2</sup> The new tune promptly extinguished the old for close on two centuries, despite occasional philological protests to the contrary.

Now let us spring forward to January 1974, and cross the Atlantic to New York, and consult an altogether different source: a review of a concert in a series celebrating cross-cultural exchange, written for *The Village Voice* by its then regular critic for new music events, the composer Tom Johnson:

Last Tuesday the featured artist was Avery Jimerson, a Seneca Indian, who came down from the Allegany Reservation upstate to sing a few of the 1000 or so songs he has composed during the past 30 years [...] He has a strong voice with a slightly pinched sound, and he never moves his lips more than a fraction of an inch as he makes his way

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1 Robert Burns, letter to George Thomson, September 1793; *Letters*, No. 586. All references to Burns's letters are taken from the 1985, revised Clarendon Press edition, as noted below.

2 Johnson (ed.) 1796, Thomson (ed.) 1799.

through his intricate melodies, always accompanying himself on a drum. The songs are all short, some scarcely a minute long, but they are not at all repetitious and generally have lots of shifty rhythms and complex formal structures. Most of them have no words, making do simply with hi-yo-way and other non-verbal syllables common in American Indian music. I found all of this contemporary Seneca music absorbing and intellectually challenging, but for me the emotional high point of the evening was Jimerson's version of 'Auld Lang Syne.' This melody is taken directly from the white man, yet it was so thoroughly integrated into Jimerson's own Seneca style that I probably would not have recognized it if the singer had not clued us in. It sounded pretty strange, but it was somehow deeper and more communicative than any 'Auld Lang Syne' arrangement I ever heard at a New Year's Eve party.<sup>3</sup>

How did an eighteenth-century Scots song, the name of which not even most Scottish people understand, end up being sung in the late twentieth century by a Native American in a programme of songs from his own, very different, tradition? The answer has to do, first and foremost, with colonization: European settlers stole lands and the right to govern over them from the Seneca and others, and installed themselves as the dominant culture. That now dominant culture dictates, through a now dominant tradition, that at New Year *Auld Lang Syne* is sung. But given that nothing in the song's lyrics references New Year, where did this tradition come from? And what about other traditions associated with the song, such as singing it at parting, and the related tradition found across the Pacific in Japan of the tune of *Auld Lang Syne* being played to signal the close of business in department stores and clubs?

As these and countless further examples testify, *Auld Lang Syne* is one of the most well-known songs in the world. It would be easy to attribute this infamy to the international culture of commercial, recorded music and other aspects of twentieth-century globalization. But in 1892, in a pamphlet dedicated to the song, the great Burns scholar James Dick could already comment that

Perhaps it is not too much to say that 'Auld Lang Syne' is the best known and most widely diffused song in the civilised world [...] Our brethren in every quarter of the earth know it better than we do ourselves: and I have heard a mixed company of Scots, English, Germans, Italians and French Swiss sing the chorus in an upland hotel in Switzerland.<sup>4</sup>

Dick was one of the first to pursue in-depth enquiries into the origins of the song, but even he does not ask what happened next—and this, in many ways, is more interesting. Literary historians have debated continuously whether Burns merely edited an existing song, or whether his contribution was more substantial. Burns himself always denied authorship of the text of *Auld Lang Syne*; however, he often denied authorship of other lyrics now known to be by him, and we have no convincing sources to suggest that this text, with the exception of a few stock phrases, was an adaptation rather than a new composition. Only after his death did editors begin to suggest that the lyrics might

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3 Johnson 1974.

4 Dick 1892, 379.

have been his own creation. What impact did this link between Burns's name and the song have on its reception? And given that many songs by Burns became extremely popular in the years which followed, what helped raise *Auld Lang Syne* in particular to the stature it now enjoys? Moreover, there is nothing in the original publications featuring the song, nor in the song itself, to suggest that it be used at the end of social gatherings, by people standing in a circle, with their arms crossed and their hands joined, as is often the tradition; and, as already mentioned, there is nothing to suggest an implicit connection to New Year's Eve, either. Where did these traditions come from, and what impact did they have on the further spread of the song, gluing it to a ritual context which ensured its repetition, its transmission through time, up to the present day?

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The myth about music being a universal language would provide another explanation for the transcultural success of *Auld Lang Syne*. However, as Johnson's review of Jimerson's concert shows, said myth has little or no basis in fact, and does no justice at all to the complexity, multiplicity and variability of musical forms, structures, genres and practices that we humans have come up with. What is certain, however, is that "music" in the broadest sense is a universal human practice, in the sense that it is found in all known societies.<sup>5</sup> Singing, whatever form this takes, is one of the most common of all musical activities, and the singing of what may be very simple and repetitive songs—such as lullabies, or counting songs, or hymns—is possibly the most common of all types of singing. In fact, and as Burns scholars are often first to admit, Burns's enormous fame and popularity is due in no small part to the fact that so much of his output consists of songs. The last half of his active life was dedicated to collecting songs, adapting some of them and creating many new ones by writing a new lyric to accompany an existing instrumental tune. Burns understood very well how powerful song can be, and that old Scots tunes were more likely to survive if accompanied by a memorable set of words.

This book will focus on music as social practice in order to explore and explain just how *Auld Lang Syne* could become so significant, in so many ways, for so many people and communities. In addition to surveying a significant portion of the occurrences of *Auld Lang Syne* from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth and up to the present day, it will draw on the expertise which musicologists have developed in the field of song research. Since music is fundamental to human life, and since so many people have direct experience of singing, or hearing, or whistling, or trying to drown out the sound of *Auld Lang Syne*, it seems obvious that this book is not directed only, perhaps not even primarily, at musicologists. Where possible, I have tried to

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5 This "broadest sense" starts from the modern western connotations of the word "music", which covers many phenomena that in some cultures are regarded as conceptually separate. See Nettl 2001 for more details.



explain any musical terminology used, and to make it possible for those who can't read modern western music notation to follow the argument wherever the inclusion of a music example was unavoidable, for example by making corresponding sound examples available. I trust that readers who do understand musicological jargon will be patient with the explanations and, sometimes, generalizations this entails.

Chapter 1 introduces some key issues and concepts which can help us to understand the different social contexts in which songs are used, and why, and what the effects can be. Chapters 2 and 3 gather together older and newer information on the various elements which lay behind the song as it was published in the late eighteenth century, whilst Chapters 4 to 8 trace the establishment of the song and the traditions associated with it through the nineteenth and into the earlier twentieth century. Chapter 9 uses the reception of the song in Germany as a case study for its adoption into other national cultures, while Chapter 10 surveys some other aspects of its travels round the world and into a whole series of frankly incongruous contexts. Chapter 11 asks what all this information tells us, and Chapter 12 adds a coda bringing the story up to the early twenty-first century, and back to Scotland, by looking at a number of recent versions of the song from its country of origin.

It was, in fact, these many contemporary versions that inspired this study in the first place. I came upon these recordings by chance at a time when I was looking for a way to write about song in Scottish culture, and my initial reaction—mirrored by some people's responses when I tell them about this book—was one of surprise that *Auld Lang Syne* could prove so inspiring. When we are used to singing it in a tired and oftentimes inebriated circle at the end of parties, or to hearing snippets of it in Hollywood films, it is easy to wonder what a modern musician (or musicologist) could do with it, how it is possible to interpret and bring new meaning to something which is such an extensively popular cultural good—not to mention why anyone would want to do so. No wonder, therefore, that the recordings I refer to consciously provide another reading of this song, either slowing down and solemnizing the famous tune or, indeed, using a different tune. They also tend to sing all of the words published by Burns, words which are more specific in content than the verses generally sung—with the usual variations of oral tradition—at social gatherings.

A recording of a well-loved song, specifically interpreted by an established musician; a gathering of people, none of whom normally sing, but who belt out a few verses or at least the chorus of this song at New Year or at the end of parties; amateur poets and other writers who borrow the now famous phrase *Auld Lang Syne* in their own works; pedants who criticize the “wrong words” sung supposedly by most of the masses, particularly if the accuser is Scottish and the accused English or American—for all of these people, *Auld Lang Syne* means a great deal, and it is my assertion that the significance of the song, no matter how much we try to preserve or restore the “original” version, has everything to do with the social contexts in which it is most frequently sung, and most frequently sung wrongly.

The story of *Auld Lang Syne*, then, is not so much the story of its origins—although this, too, will be explored in this book—but of what came next, and as such this story is much more than the sum of its many, many parts. Put simply, it is a testimony to the force of song and of singing in human culture. It is also a history of traditions of popular music before these became worthy of official histories and the attention of musicologists, and the way in which songs so often cross genres and social classes, and borders. *Auld Lang Syne*'s story is a testament to Burns's instinct as a songwriter, and it is also a social history of how song is passed back and forth between oral and literate traditions to the extent that the categories become problematic in the extreme. It is a tale of the social, economic and aesthetic factors that make a good tune and an affective lyric become a cultural phenomenon. It is also a story with relevance for our own time: the original text of *Auld Lang Syne* is rarely sung in its entirety, but even in its most reduced form it is clear that it is about those very factors which make tradition so important in everyday life—the need for identification with a social group; the importance of the close ties of family and friends; nostalgia and the basic human need for an amount of familiarity and the stability of ritual. More specifically, it is a song about losing these ties, about the pull of the past, about the effects of emigration, about the separation of individuals from the land and people they hold dear. It is also a tale about the ties which, through this song, link music publishers with Freemasons, Ludwig van Beethoven with Frank Capra, Scotland with the rest of the world, and you yourself with just about anyone you will ever meet, who will almost certainly produce a smile of recognition when you hum the first few bars of the tune.

## Note on the Text

The bibliography to this book is divided into three parts. Bibliography I contains details of the main Burns editions used here, James Kinsley's 1968 edition—referenced in the footnotes as "Kinsley"—and the 1985, revised Clarendon Press edition of Burns's letters—referenced "*Letters*" in the footnotes.<sup>6</sup> Primary musical and poetical sources which have a date but not an identifiable author, are listed by date in Bibliography II: footnotes reference this in the style "Bib. II/[date]", with additional numbering where more than one source has the same date. Bibliography III contains all the remaining primary and secondary text sources, and is referenced in footnotes using the "Author-Date" system. An exception are newspaper sources, the details of which (publication and date) are given in the footnote only.

One of the nightmares I faced in conducting this study was incomplete or non-existent referencing to sources in some of the secondary literature I consulted: for this reason, and in an effort to ease future referencing to some of the more obscure

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<sup>6</sup> Kinsley's edition is gradually being superseded by the new Oxford Edition of Burns's works, under the general editorship of Gerard Carruthers. I had access to the relevant volumes of this Edition (Pittock (ed.) 2018/1, 2018/2; McCue (ed.) 2021) only in the final stages of editing this book.

items consulted, I have erred on the side of extensive bibliographic information where possible.

Whenever I refer to “Burns’s song”, or “Burns’s *Auld Lang Syne*”, I mean the modern song text with five verses first published in 1796 (see Chapter 3 for more on this). The epithet “Burns’s song” refers not to authorship but, if one likes, ownership of the song—the distinction is discussed in Chapter 1—and refers to his responsibility for presenting this song to the world, regardless of the actual authorship of its constituent parts (but see my concluding comments on this, in Chapters 11 and 12).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Occasional assistance has been given for Scots words and phrases cited.

References to the works of Burns are to Kinsley’s edition, and referenced with “K” and the number in that edition; thus, *Auld Lang Syne* is K240. Further information on some shorthand I have used (M-1, M1, M2, SΩ, S∞, S<sub>NY</sub>, B1–B5) is explained towards the end of Chapter 1.

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The dedication of this book indicates my continuing debt to my parents, for their unfailing support even when I did things that they really thought I shouldn't—such as studying musicology.

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7 The original photo was published by the Scots Music Group on Flickr, and can be viewed at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/8482716@N04/3791258313>.

8 The number of this tartan in the Scottish Tartan World Registry is 240, which—presumably coincidentally—is also the number of the song in the Kinsley edition of the work of Burns, <https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/tartanDetails?ref=131>

