"Auld Lang Syne"

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Publication Info
2018, pages 77-83.
A good case can be made that “Auld Lang Syne” is the best known “English” song in the world, & perhaps the best known in any language if we except national anthems. The song is certainly known throughout the English-speaking world, including countries which were formerly part of the British Empire. It is also known in most European countries, including Russia, as well as in China and Japan.

Before and during the lifetime of Robert Burns the traditional Scottish song of parting was “Gude Night and Joy be wi’ You a’,” and there is evidence that despite “Auld Lang Syne” Burns continued to think of the older song as such. He wrote to James Johnson, for whom he was writing and collecting Scottish songs to be published in The Scots Musical Museum (6 vols. Edinburgh, 1787-1803) about “Gude Night” in 1795, “let this be your last song of all the Collection,” and this more than six years after he had written “Auld Lang Syne.” When Johnson published Burns’s song it enjoyed no special place in the Museum, but he followed the poet’s counsel with respect to “Gude Night,” placing it at the end of the sixth volume. Burns did add his own touch to the old song, however: in its original form it contained only eight lines, but he had Johnson publish an additional four eight-line stanzas which were the text of Burns’s “The Farewell. To the Brethren of St. James’s Lodge, Tarbolton,” a work which he had first published in his Kilmarnock volume in 1786.

Johnson allowed Burns a free hand in ordering the music to which his songs were to be set, but the collaboration with George Thomson, for whose Select Collection of Original Scotish Airs (5 vols in 8 parts. Edinburgh, 1793-1818) Burns also wrote and collected songs, was not so harmonious. Burns threw himself eagerly into the work for Thomson when the latter wrote to him in September 1792 asking if the poet would
lend his “poetical assistance” to produce a work “acceptable to all persons of taste.” To assure the quality of his publication Thomson told Burns he would “spare neither pains nor expense.” Burns replied that his songs would be “either above, or below price” and apart from a few gifts, and the loan of £5 when the poet was on his deathbed, Thomson paid nothing for the priceless collection of songs he received. Unfortunately Thomson was something of a dilettante who liked to think that he could improve on work from his contributors, both on the textual and the musical side—there is an amusing letter from Beethoven complaining because Thomson had touched up one of the compositions he had written for the *Select Collection*. On a few occasions Thomson, by forcing Burns to justify his writing, did cause the poet to reconsider a song and improve it. More often, though, Burns’s instinct was right, as a comparison of the texts as Burns wrote them with the way Thomson published them shows. Unfortunately only one of the eight parts of the *Select Collection* was published before the poet died, and so Burns was unable to exercise much control over the text of his songs.

Turning to “Auld Lang Syne,” we find the first recorded mention of the expression by the poet in a letter from him to Mrs Frances Dunlop written on 7 December 1788; after transcribing the text of the song for his friend he added, “Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired Poet who composed this glorious Fragment! There is more of the fire of native genius in it, than in half a dozen modern English Bacchanalians….” This passage has given rise to much speculation that Burns was not the author of the song, but had merely collected it from an oral source, something he did for both Johnson and Thomson. He was somewhat vague, not to say misleading, to Thomson also when he sent him the words in September 1793: “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 [sic] I took it down from an old man’s singing; is enough to recommend any air.” *(Letters, II: 246)*.

What is to be made of such a statement? We know that Burns refurbished many of the songs he sent to Johnson and Thomson, sometimes taking only the title of an old song, sometimes using a line or two, sometimes a stanza or two. Following the lead of Allan Ramsay who in his *Tea-Table Miscellany* (4 vols. Edinburgh, 1723-1737) had

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signed Z to “old songs” and Q to “old songs with additions,” we find Johnson, perhaps as suggested by Burns, using Z for “Old verses, with corrections and additions,” and when “Auld Lang Syne” was published as No. 413 in Volume 5 of the *Scots Musical Museum*, after the poet’s death, the song was signed with a Z. Unfortunately we do not have the letter in which Burns transmitted the song to Johnson, if one was written. Johnson did not always know which of the songs Burns sent him were original and which were “Old songs with corrections and additions”; we can tell this when we see that Johnson’s statement, that songs signed B, R or X are originals whereas those signed Z are traditional, is later altered to read that those signed B, R, X and Z are by contemporary writers. When Johnson reissued Volumes 1-5 to accompany the publication of Volume 6 in 1803, “Auld Lang Syne” is still signed Z instead of bearing Burns’s name, even though Johnson did, in Volume 6, identify as Burns’s all songs signed with the letters R and B. This strongly suggests that Johnson was not certain of Burns’s authorship of “Auld Lang Syne.”

T. F. Henderson in his notes to the Centenary Edition of Burns’s poems and songs (1896, Vol. III, p. 408) plausibly suggests that Burns may have been too modest to admit to Thomson that he was the author of almost the entire song, and it will be recalled that we have no communication from Burns to Johnson about it. We do know that the germ of the song is to be found in James Watson’s *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems* (Part III. Edinburgh, 1711):

*Old-Long Syne*, First Part.
Should old Acquaintance be forgot,
And never thought upon,
The Flames of Love extinguished,
And freely past and gone?
Is thy kind Heart now grown so cold
In that Loving Breast of thine,
That thou canst never once reflect
On Old-long-syne?
The song continues for nine additional stanzas.

Allan Ramsay gave the world another version of the song in the first volume of his *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1723) which was little better. The only thing in its forty lines which resembles the song Burns wrote is the title and the first line:

*Auld lang syne.*
SHOULD auld acquaintance be forgot,
Tho’ they return with scars?
Henderson also mentions two anti-Union ballads of 1707, one of them a parody of the Watson song quoted above. It goes:

Shall Monarchy be quite forgot,
And of it no more heard?
Antiquity be razed out
And slav’ry put in stead?
Is Scotsmen’s blood now grown so cold,
The valour of their mind,
That they can never once reflect
On old long since?²

Obviously Burns can have found in these songs but a phrase here and there; most of what we have is surely his own.

*Ould lang syne.
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And auld lang syne!

For auld lang syne my jo,
For auld lang syne,
We’ll take a cup o’ kindness yet
For auld lang syne.

And surely ye’ll be your pint stowp!
And surely I’ll be mine!
And we’ll tak a cup o’ kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

For auld Etc.

We twa hae run about the braes,
And pou’d the gowans fine;
But we’ve wander’d mony a weary fitt,
Sin auld lang syne.

For auld Etc.

We twa hae paidl’d in the burn,
Frae morning sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar’d,
Sin auld lang syne.

For auld &c.

And there’s a hand, my trusty fire!
And gie’s a hand o’ thine.

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And we’ll tak a right gude willie-
For auld lang syne. [waught,
For auld &c. 3

The air to the song is somewhat perplexing too. 4 Song 25 in the Scots Musical Museum has Ramsay’s words; the air “Auld Lang Syne” is based on a tune which was first published in Henry Playford’s Collection of Original Scotch Tunes (1700), and was again published with Ramsay’s words in William Thomson’s Orpheus Caledonius (London, 1725), and once again in Alexander Stuart’s Musick for Allan Ramsay’s Collection of Scots Songs (Edinburgh: Ramsay, 1726), and yet again with music only

Air from Johnson’s Scots Musical Museum, part 1 (1788), song 25

3 Text from James Johnson, Scots Musical Museum, 5 (Edinburgh, 1796), song 413, which has a footnote to “cup o’ kindness”: “Some sing, Kiss, in place of Cup.” There are several manuscript copies of the song, none of which differs significantly from the way it was first published in Johnson.

4 The music transcriptions used here from Johnson and Thomson were made for this essay’s original publication by Laurel and Jonathan Ensiminger.
In James Oswald’s *Caledonian Pocket Companion* (Part III. London, 1751), a work which Burns used extensively.

When Johnson published Burns’s song in 1796 he did so to a somewhat altered air, although the two bear a considerable similarity. Thomson, to whom, it will be recalled, Burns sent the text of *Auld Lang Syne* in 1793, did not publish it until 1799, but he would doubtless have seen it in Volume V of Johnson’s *Museum*, in 1796, which Burns did not live to see. The song’s publication in the *Museum* may have been the reason for Thomson publishing the song, to which he gave the title “Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot,” retaining “Auld Lang Syne” as the title to the air only, set to a different tune than that published by Johnson. Thomson was rather contemptuous of the other editor’s work, seeing his own as a far more distinguished collection; in his use of the word ‘select’ in the title he may have implied a second meaning. In any case he was misleading in his statement about the air to which he set Burns’s words, leading readers to believe that William Shield had composed the air for his opera *Rosina* (1783). The fact is that the air Thomson used had been published in Angus Cumming’s *Collection of Strathspeys or Old Highland Reels* (Edinburgh, 1780). The air, with just a couple of notes different, had also appeared in Johnson in 1788.
In any case, Thomson published the work with a “new” air. Although he probably knew by that time that “Auld Lang Syne” was almost completely the work of Burns, he nevertheless added to the title “from an Old MS. in the Editor’s Possession” which leads one to suspect that he was deliberately being evasive about the song. Whatever the tune Burns wanted the words to be sung to, we have confirmation that shortly after “Auld Lang Syne” appeared in the Select Collection the air he set the words to was almost universally accepted as preferable to Johnson’s. As is so often the case with folksongs and songs which become part of the public repertoire, it is the singers, passers-on of the tradition, who ultimately make the decision as to those songs or versions of songs, together with their tunes, which will survive.

That then is the story of this great world song. Burns knew instinctively that he had created a masterpiece and he has been proven right. At every New Year’s Eve much of the world sings Burns’s greatest song, even those who have never heard his name or who cannot read the immortal words they sing, with a mixture of nostalgia and hope for their own futures and that of a world united in brotherhood.