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"O My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose": Does Burns's Melody Really Matter

Cover Page Footnote

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“O my Luve’s like a red, red rose”: does Burns’s melody really matter?

Kirsteen McCue

When Donald A. Low supplied the notes to his new *Songs of Robert Burns* in the early nineteen-nineties, he confidently described “O my Luve’s like a red, red rose” as “Scotland’s most famous love-song.”¹ One of Burns’s top-ten songs, it is frequently anthologised, most recently in Stewart Conn’s edition of *Scotland’s 100 Favourite Love Poems* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2008), and it is just as commonly heard on disc or in live performance. All the greats of the Scottish vocal industry throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first have made it their own, from the sweet tones of Joseph Hislop in the early nineteen-twenties, through those famous renditions by Kenneth McKellar and his peers, to the new interpretation of Eddi Reader now introducing it to a whole new generation.

Burns’s songs frequently have complex histories all of their own. Henley and Henderson and the major Burns song editors of the twentieth century have noted in the case of ‘Red, red rose’ that there is a rich array of broadsides and chapbooks in existence before Burns’s lyric, and certainly at around the time of its composition.² Their detailed

¹ Donald A. Low, ed., *The Songs of Robert Burns* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.658-9 (no. 258).

² W.E. Henley & T. F. Henderson, eds., *The Poetry of Robert Burns* (London: T.C.& E.C. Jack, 1897), III: 402-6. The three key editions of Burns’s songs are: *The Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James C. Dick (London: Henry Frowde, 1903), *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) and *The Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London: Routledge, 1993).

comparisons of these sources have shown that the images which mean so much to readers and listeners alike may not be those of Burns. Indeed James Kinsley goes so far as to suggest that we might "be doing an injustice to oral tradition in regarding [the song] even as a reconstruction by Burns" (Kinsley III: 1455). The evidence shows that the images of the narrator's love being like a red rose, like a melody played in tune, that the rocks will melt before his love runs out, or that he's happy to traverse ten thousand miles for his lover, are all found somewhere else. This is really disappointing for Burns lovers, if they take it at face value. But as many critics before me have stated, it's not what Burns borrows but how he refashions it which makes this the masterpiece that it is. As Franklin B. Snyder so aptly states: "The electric magnet is not more unerring in selecting iron from a pile of trash than was Burns in culling the inevitable phrase or haunting cadence from the thousands of mediocre possibilities."³ But songs rely on another major ingredient – melody – and in the case of this particular song, the mastery of the final product has a great deal to do with Burns's initial choice of tune.

It was normal practice at the time of Burns's work on James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum* and George Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* to write sets of lyrics to match tunes, often to preserve a tune for future generations.⁴ Moreover, though Thomson in particular received vicious criticism for setting Burns's lyrics to different tunes (not chosen by Burns himself) especially after the poet's death in 1796, the practice of mixing and matching songs and tunes was also far from irregular. Burns himself, in his correspondence, might mention one tune for a

³ F.B. Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), p. 470.

⁴ *The Scots Musical Museum* appeared in 6 volumes between 1787 and 1803. Thomson's collections appeared from 1793 in a variety of issues till the mid eighties: see Kirsteen McCue, "The most intricate bibliographical enigma': understanding George Thomson (1757-1851) and his collections of National airs," in Richard Turbet, ed. *Music Librarianship in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 99-120.

song he sent to Johnson, Thomson or any number of his good friends, but he just as often mentions other tunes which might easily be used instead. Some songs sit nicely with a number of tunes of similar sentiment – provided the overall structure, the rhythms and general ‘feel’ of the tune match those of the song lyric. But sometimes they require something more than this, and it cannot be denied that the finest of Burns’s lyrics (e.g. “Red, red rose,” “Ae fond kiss,” “Of a’ the airts,” “Ca’ the yowes,” etc.) sit best with the tunes he originally chose. His method of composing songs, given in such detail in his letter to Thomson in September 1793 (Roy II: 242), and mentioned in different contexts in his *Commonplace Book*, illustrates that his emotional connection with the moods of a melody, not to mention his detailed understanding of its structures, rhythms and chiming cadences, are crucial to the quality of the lyric he then created to match it. And in the case of his ‘Red, red rose’ there is a strong match indeed. The tune Burns chose was a new tune by Niel Gow called “Major Graham’s Strathspey” which had recently appeared in Gow’s *Collection of Strathspeys and Reels with a Bass for the violoncello or Harpsichord*, published c.1784.

While the song made its first appearance with Burns’s choice of the Gow tune in Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum*, it only did so after Burns’s untimely death in 1796, and sadly we have no correspondence between Burns and Johnson concerning this particular song. In fact Burns’s lyric is found before this in a rival music collection edited by one of several important Italian musicians living and working in Edinburgh. Hans Hecht believes that Burns made the acquaintance of Pietro Urbani (1749-1816) in the summer of 1793 when the Italian singer visited Dumfries.⁵ This social event was described by Burns in his letter to Alexander Cunningham of November that year, when the poet explained that he and Urbani, “lived together three or four days in this town, & had a great deal of converse about our Scots Songs” (Roy II: 258). Urbani’s sophisticated

⁵ Hans Hecht, *Robert Burns* (London/Edinburgh/Glasgow: William Hodge & Co., 1936/1950), p. 201. But it seems likely that Burns had met Urbani in Edinburgh in 1786-7.

16 *The red, red Rose* The Music by P. Urbani.

Violini *pp.* *rf.*

Viola *rf.*

Canto

Harp.^d

Largo con molta Espressione

O my love's like the red, red rose, That's new-ly sprung in June O my love's like the

me-lo-dy, That's sweet-ly play'd in tune. As fair art thou my bonie lass, So

Selection of Scots Songs, harmonized and improved, which he published in six volumes between 1792 and 1804, was clearly in his thoughts when he spent time with Burns. He persuaded the poet to translate a verse of an Italian song for him: Burns wrote that he “rather made an English verse to suit his rythm [sic] & added two verses which had already been published in Johnson’s Museum,” and Burns also “gave him a simple old Scots song which I had pickt up in this

country, which he promised to set in a suitable manner”—that is, his “Red, red rose” (Roy II:258-9). So here Burns suggests the song’s oral roots, which, when added to the printed sources in existence at this time, show just how popular this song was across both oral and literate communities. Burns described the song as one of “the simple & the wild” and he had reservations that his editor George Thomson would think it “the ludicrous & the absurd.”⁶ Burns asked that Urbani publish this song anonymously and explained that he could not give more songs to Urbani, as he was writing songs for Thomson’s collection. Burns was particularly peeved at Urbani, who was apparently bragging unjustifiably about his collaboration with the poet.

Urbani’s tasteful musical setting is unlike any of the other settings that have made this song famous. It is a highly stylised piece, very much created for drawing room entertainment with accompanying parts for forte-piano, violin and, most unusually, viola and not violoncello. Unlike all other settings this one has three beats in the bar, giving Urbani’s melody a waltz-like feel, with its accompanying quaver pulses in the violin and right hand of the piano. But its unusual choice of metre often places the emphasis on the ‘wrong’ words, particularly in the penultimate line of the second stanza. Where Burns writes “I will love thee still, my Dear” Urbani changes this to “And I can love thee still, my Dear.” His tightly sectionalised melody, and possibly a lack of understanding of the text, places the emphasis on “can” which would seem misplaced, when there are many other words in that line which would benefit from some kind of melodic foregrounding. Rarely known and hardly ever performed, it has only recently appeared in its first recording by Jamie MacDougall with Concerto Caledonia.⁷ Beautiful as this is, Urbani’s musical matching of Burns’s lyric certainly does not move the heart.

⁶ There is much discussion about the categorisation of songs at this time, particularly in John Aikin’s *Essays on Song Writing* published in London c.1772, which Burns knew well.

⁷ Concerto Caledonia, *Red, Red Rose*, Delphian Records DCD34014 (2004).

In contrast, when the fifth volume of the *Museum* appeared in 1796 it presented Burns's lyric with his chosen melody, 'Major Graham's Strathspey'. Apparently, if we are to believe the Hastie Manuscript copy of the lyric, this was not necessarily Burns's first melodic possibility. The manuscript has a Gaelic tune title - *Ceud soraidh uam* [misprint for *nam* [?]] do'n Ailleagan - given beside the lyric. This tune was published as the first of the Perthshire Airs (no.87) included in Patrick McDonald's *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs*, published in Edinburgh in 1784:⁸

PERTHSHIRE AIRS. 13

Ceud foraidh uam do'n Ailleagan. — A thousand blessings to the lovely youth.

87 Slow tender

The translation of the Gaelic given alongside is "A thousand blessings to the lovely youth," though a literal translation is appropriately "A hundred farewells from me to the little jewel." Burns knew this collection as he mentions it to Mrs Dunlop in his letter of 17th [Dec.] 1791 (Roy II: 124-5). The melody is slow and beautiful, characterised by highly dotted rhythms, shown here, but Burns had clearly decided against it, for this title is scored and replaced by Gow's 'Major Graham's Strathspey'.

⁸ Patrick McDonald, *A Collection of Highland Vocal Airs* (Edinburgh: Corri & Sutherland, 1784).

415

A red red Rofe.

402

The musical score is written in a single system with two staves, a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo marking 'Slow' is placed below the first staff. The lyrics are written below the notes. The score consists of seven systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are: '* O my Luv'e's like a red, red rofe, That's new - ly sprung in June; O My Luv'e's like the me - lo - die. That's sweet - ly play'd in tune. As fair art thou, my bon - ie lafs, So deep in luv'e am I; And I will luv'e thee ftill, my dear, Till a the feas gang dry. Till a' the feas gang dry, my Dear, And the rocks melt wi' the fun: O I will love thee

Slow

* O my Luv'e's like a red, red rofe, That's new - ly sprung in June; O My Luv'e's like the me - lo - die. That's sweet - ly play'd in tune. As fair art thou, my bon - ie lafs, So deep in luv'e am I; And I will luv'e thee ftill, my dear, Till a the feas gang dry. Till a' the feas gang dry, my Dear, And the rocks melt wi' the fun: O I will love thee

Unlike the pretty, self-contained Urbani melody, this one

clearly matches Burns's idea of this 'species' of song, in that it has a certain "wild irregularity"⁹. It is slow yet spikey in its rhythms and wide and expansive in its musical range. As Francis Collinson explains in his definition of the strathspey, this was a "Scottish dance, a reel of slower tempo" which "allowed the use of more elaborate steps both in the setting step and in the travelling figure."¹⁰ It is characterised "by its dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythm and the inversion of this, the Scotch snap." And, moreover, Collinson states that the term "strathspey" doesn't really begin to appear in print until the mid-eighteenth century, giving James Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion* (1743-1759) and Robert Bremner's *Scots Reels* (1757) as the sources of the first tunes with this title. Both of these collections were well known to Burns, and provided him with many tunes for his songs. Created to showcase a fiddler's prowess with the bow, and a dancer's most elaborate steps, the strathspey was therefore a newly developed variant of a traditional Scottish musical form, which was as stylish as it was stylised. Moreover the strathspey also often covers an extended musical range, and thus has the capacity for wide expression. This characteristic therefore allows stylised or sentimental emotional effusion in lyrical terms, much sought after in the salons of Enlightened Scotland, and something which Burns did supremely well.

A closer examination of his "Red, red rose," as published in 1796 in the *Scots Musical Museum* (no. 402), illustrates this. When matched with the spikey yet stately "Major Graham," the lyrics take on a certain emphasis not shared by the later, and more popular, choice of tune to which the lyric is normally sung. The words in bold are those upon which the emphasis is placed when sung to "Major Graham's Strathspey," and the lyrics are those printed in the *Museum*:

O **my** Luve's like a **red, red** rose,
That's **newly** sprung in **June**;

⁹ Robert Burns's *Commonplace Book 1783-1785*, ed. David Daiches (Sussex: Centaur Press, 1965), p.38.

¹⁰ Francis Collinson, s.v. "Strathspey," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), vol.18, p. 202.

O **My** Luve's like the **melodie**
That's **sweetly** play'd in **tune**. –

As **fair** art thou, my **bonie** lass,
So **deep** in luve am **I**;
And **I** will love thee **still**, my **dear**[*],
Till **a'** the seas gang **dry**. –

Till **a'** the seas gang **dry**, my **Dear**,
And the **rocks** melt wi' the **sun**:
O **I** will love thee **still**, my **Dear**,
While the **sands** o' life shall **run**. –

Then **fare** thee weel, my **only** Luve!
And **fare** thee weel, a **while**!
And **I** will come **again**, my **Luve**[*],
Tho' it **ware** [sic] ten thousand **mile**! –

[* There is a pause marked above these words, which thus encourages a musical emphasis.]

Like many fiddle tunes found in the *Museum* and other contemporary collections, this is a tune with a wide range – from middle C to top G – and the narrator draws attention to himself ('my') in the first stanza most often on the lowest note of the piece, which appears at the beginning of the first strain of the melody. The emphasis is then placed on himself ('I') in the second half of the melody where the *tessitura* is higher and very expressive. There is little doubt then who is the most important figure in this song, if you're hearing it sung to "Major Graham." The first person in the form of 'I' and 'my' is emphasised at regular intervals across the four verses. The depth of his love (deep) and its longevity (still) are also brought out by the melody. And the focus of his ardent love is also, naturally, frequently emphasised, but with a number of different images which simply articulate how important she is to him – from the physical immediacy of the colour of the rose and the sound of the melody to the expanses of time and space reflected in the choice of seas, rocks and miles.

While melodies of this period are often thought of as providing the perfect line of descent from ancient to modern, they are often newly forged using some older materials. The

fact that collections by Oswald, Bremner and Gow, to name but three, are so popular at this time is not because they are presenting old materials alone, but that they are able to recreate this older material for the contemporary audience. Steve Newman has suggested that it is "the very lack of sophistication in Scottish tunes" that "makes them ideal catalysts of sociability, for by not demanding the connoisseur's ear, they encourage the audience" to sing along.¹¹ This is supported by the popularity of many of the simple folk-like tunes, but it is not the case with all Scots tunes of the time. A melody like "Major Graham" is far from "simple" or lacking in sophistication. The "wild irregularity" of this tune allows space for highly stylised expression. Burns's lyric, rooted firstly in an oral performance, but also connected to the contemporary printed demotic song tradition of Scotland, becomes a personal and stylised expression of love, which is very much part of what Newman describes as a "laboratory for the exercise of sympathy" so important to the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment (p. 298). Into the nineteenth century, the strathspey, not surprisingly, becomes the standard "exhibition recital piece" for fiddlers, as is still the case today. For Burns it allowed the perfect exhibition of his finest sentimental lyrical writing, and while very much of its moment, it has continued to retain this popularity. As Iain Crichton Smith has stated, "No poet could write like this now, for the statements are far too large: but this is not to say that certain people do not feel like this."¹²

When Johnson did publish "Major Graham," he rather confused matters by adding a second, older melody (no. 403) as an alternative for "Red, red rose." This 'old set'—a tune called 'Mary Queen of Scots'¹³—is very simple, with a much

¹¹ "Transformation, Popular Culture and the Boundaries of the Scottish Enlightenment," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 63:3 (2002): 293-4.

¹² Iain Crichton Smith, "The Lyrics of Robert Burns," in *The Art of Robert Burns*, ed. R.D.S. Jack & Andrew Noble (London & Totowa, NJ: Vision & Barnes Noble, 1982), p. 34.

¹³ To confuse matters further, no 404 in this volume of the *Museum* was "Mary Queen of Scots Lament"—the same tune as

smaller range and only a few dotted rhythms. It includes just two short musical phrases each of which is repeated. There is a little problem with this, as the *Museum* prints the second half of the first stanza under the music for part two of the tune, which is wrong! But no one seems to have noticed this. In fact the major complaint about “Red, red rose” is made in William Stenhouse’s note on the song.¹⁴ He blames the *Museum*’s principal musician Stephen Clarke for causing a performance problem with “Major Graham.” Normally tunes in Scots song collections of the period follow the same format – the melody is in two halves (A and B) or four sections (AABB), for each half is repeated, as is the case with

Old Set, _Red red Rose.

403 * The musical score is for the song 'Red, red rose' (no. 403). It is written in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). The tempo is marked 'Slow'. The score consists of three systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are: 'O my Luv'e's like a red, red rose, That's new - ly sprung in June. O my Luv'e's like the me - lo - die That's sweet - ly play'd in tune.' The first system ends with a repeat sign. The second system also ends with a repeat sign. The third system ends with a final cadence.

Slow

new - ly sprung in June. O my Luv'e's like the

me - lo - die That's sweet - ly play'd in tune.

“Mary Queen of Scots.” Clarke’s version of “Major Graham” uses only three of these four melodic strains. The opening strain of the tune (A) appears in the *Museum* without a repeat sign and this means that only the first stanza is sung

‘Mary Queen of Scots’ (no. 403) with another Burns lyric ‘Now nature hangs her mantle green’.

¹⁴ William Stenhouse, *Illustrations of the Lyric Poetry and Music of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1853): amended by David Laing, p. 362.

to this opening part of the tune. It should have repeat marks so that stanza two ("As fair art thou, my bonie lass") should also be matched to this first part of the melody (A). Instead, without the repeat mark, the words for stanza two are then underlaid to the second part of the melody (B). Clarke's setting then presents the second strain again, with stanza three (B). But at this point the melody finishes, leaving the final 'farewell' stanza left without any musical accompaniment. This has always caused great confusion for the performer, who then has to choose either the opening strain (A) or the high second strain (B) one more time for the final stanza. Stenhouse blames Clarke for this, but in fact it seems to have been a simple error. Comparison with Gow's original strathspey shows that it should have a regular 4-part structure. It is quite clear that stanzas one and two should be sung to the opening strain of the melody and stanzas three and four to the second, higher and infinitely more expressive strain, and insertion of the simple repetition marking would have avoided any confusion. This point was subsequently recognized by the twentieth-century American composer Serge Hovey. His setting of "Major Graham's Strathspey" was included in his *Robert Burns Song Book* project, in which he worked on 324 of Burns's songs between the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-seventies. When the song appeared in print in 2001 his notes state clearly: "here, for the first time, 'A Red, red Rose' is presented as Burns intended it to be sung."¹⁵

Johnson's alternative melody, "Mary Queen of Scots," never became popular with Burns's "Red, red rose," and neither did George Thomson's choice of a William Marshall fiddle tune called "Wishaw's Favourite," published in his *Select Collection* in 1799.¹⁶ Both tunes are perfectly pleasant, but both are self-contained and even restricted in terms of

¹⁵ See Serge Hovey, *The Robert Burns Song Book*, Volume II, (California, Mel Bay, 2001), p. 174. The song is presented on pp. 171-4. Jean Redpath's famous recording of this setting is found on *The Songs of Robert Burns Volumes 1 & 2* (Greentrax, CDTRAX 114).

¹⁶ George Thomson, *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*, Third Set, 1799, no.89.

displaying the emotional expression of Burns's lyric. Moreover, at least in Thomson's case, the tune didn't quite fit the lyric as presented by Burns,¹⁷ and consequently Thomson amended it, most notably changing Burns's "So deep in love am I" to "So deep, so deep in love am I." While neither of these choices grabbed the popular imagination, amazingly neither did "Major Graham."

The tune most commonly combined with Burns's lyric for

MY LOVE IS LIKE A RED RED ROSE.



O, my love is like a red, red rose, That's newly sprung in June! O, my
love is like a me-lo-die That sweet-ly play'd in tune! As fair art thou, my
bon-nie lass: So deep in love am I; And I will love thee still, my dear, 'Till
a' the seas gang dry. 'Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, 'Till a' the seas gang
dry, And I will love thee still, my dear, 'Till a' the seas gang dry.

"Red, red rose" is another popular eighteenth-century melody, "Low down in the Broom." Burns drew Thomson's attention to this tune, but he created no lyric for it himself

¹⁷ Thomson presented it as "from an old Ms. in the Editor's possession." Thomson may well have been disillusioned that it had already been published by Urbani and Johnson. His decision to present the lyric as 'anonymous' possibly also reflects the song's popularity by this time both orally and across a range of printed sources.

(Roy II: 240). It is, however, found in a number of contemporary collections known to Burns, including Oswald's *Companion* (where it is called "My love's in the Broom") and Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, where it is matched with the unattributed lyrics "My daddy is a canker'd carle" (vol. 3, no. 90). Any general search illustrates that it is one of those melodies with wide circulation across the British Isles. Davidson Cook states that Burns's lyric is first matched with "Low down in the Broom" in Robert Archibald Smith's *The Scottish Minstrel*, which appeared between 1821 and 1824 (vol. 3, p. 81).¹⁸

Certainly by the Burns centenary in 1896, "Low down in the broom" was the first choice for editors and performers alike. There are several similarities with "Major Graham," but there are two notable differences. "Low down in the broom" is a much smoother melody than "Major Graham," so it certainly doesn't inspire Burns's categorisation of "the simple & the wild." But it does have a similar first melodic strain, or section, with a beautiful low note also at the very beginning. In "Low down in the broom" this low note combines with the word "luve," rather than with the "my" as in "Major Graham." Moreover, the second strain of "Low down in the broom," high and expressive like Burns's original choice of tune, is usually performed with an elaborate pause on the word "And," stressing nicely the continuation of the narrator's love. A fine combination, and undoubtedly easier to sing than "Major Graham," it is this melody that is now far better known than all the others. Interestingly, "Low down in the broom" appears in Smith's collection, as it does earlier in the *Museum*, as a three-part melody. Smith copes with this by extending Burns's lyric. He supplies stanza one with the opening low part of the tune, and stanza two then sits with the second higher strain. The third part of the melody (which is a repetition of the opening first strain) then sits with the following four-line creation:

Till a' the seas gang dry my dear,
'Till a' the seas gang dry,

¹⁸ Davidson Cook, "'The Red, red rose' and its tunes," *Burns Chronicle*, 9 (1934): 63-67.

And I will love thee still my dear,
 'Till a' the seas gang dry.

He then presents the third stanza with the opening strain, the fourth with the higher second strain, and again creates a new final verse to match the third and closing strain of the song:

Tho' 'twere ten thousand mile, my love,
 Tho' 'twere ten thousand mile;
 And I will come again, my love,
 Tho' 'twere ten thousand mile.

So does Burns's original choice of melody really matter? In terms of general enjoyment probably not. And personal taste undoubtedly plays its very important part. But I would argue that within Burns's contemporary context it most certainly does. "Major Graham's Strathspey" is a piece rooted in tradition, but elaborating an older form, and is thus a perfect match for Burns's lyric, which is doing exactly the same thing. The sentimental attributes of Burns's words are beautifully foregrounded by Gow's statuesque melody with its dotted rhythms and by that expressive second strain of the tune. No other choice accentuates these elements as impressively, and this tune doesn't demand any lyrical manipulation to make its point. It is this original tune-lyric combination – coming from the same species—which best presents what David Daiches calls "that combination of swagger and tender protectiveness" which is Burns's "red, red rose."¹⁹

¹⁹ David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Spurbrooks, 1981), p. 312.