

Understanding Auld Lang Syne

By Dr. George Birrell

Auld Lang Syne by Robert Burns

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*Should auld (1) acquaintance be
forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang-syne (2)?*

Chorus

*For auld lang-syne, my jo (3),
For auld lang-syne:
We'll tak (4) a cup o' (5) kindness
yet,
For auld lang-syne.*

*And surely ye'll (6) be your pint
stowp (7)!
And surely I'll be mine !
And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang-syne.*

*We twa (8) hae (9) ran about the
braes (10)
And pou'd (11) the gowans (12)
fine;
But we've wandered mony (13) a
weary fitt (14)
Sin' (15) auld lang-syne.*

*We twa hae paidl't (16) in the
burn (17),
Frae morning sun till dine (18);
But seas between us braid (19) hae
roar'd,
Sin' auld lang-syne.*

*And there's a hand my trusty fiere
(20)!
And gie's (21) a hand o' thine!
And we'll tak a right guid willy-
waught (22),
For auld lang-syne.*

(1) old

(2) long ago

(3) friend,

(4) take (5) of

(6) you will

(7) large drink

(8) two (9) have

(10) hillsides

(11) pulled (12) daisies

(13) many

(14) foot

(15) since

(16) paddled

(17) stream

(18) noon

(19) broad

(20) friend

(21) give me

(22) goodwill drink

Auld Lang Syne is the song that is sung probably by more people around the world than any other. However, most people just mumble what they think are the words of the chorus and a couple of verses. This creates an enigma: most singers do not know the words, much less what the words mean or what the song means for Scots.

Robert Burns wrote his version of this song late in his life after hearing a phrase or two of an earlier version sung in a pub somewhere. Earlier versions of the song existed since at least the 15th century, including a poor version by another famous Scottish poet, Allan Ramsey, and an even earlier version that has been attributed to either a Sir John Ayton or a Francis Semphill. Ayton was a scholarly advisor of King James VI of Scotland who went with the king to London when he accepted the additional title of King James I of England.

Scots around the world usually close a good and enjoyable gathering of friends by singing Auld Lang Syne as they think of their origins, heritage and native Caledonia. For Scots it expresses continuity of future life for the Scottish spirit, with its roots of emotional and intellectual independent thinking, its trunk of national accomplishment and its foliage of pride in goodness and help to others around the world.

The song is about two Scots people who were friends as young folks, meeting again in old age after being

far apart for most of their lives handling their tribulations of adulthood. The intervening years disappear in a flash, and again they are youthful, spirited, unbound and carefree with the energy to tackle anything in life. They vow to “tak a cup o’ kindness” to honor — and never forget — those good times of old long ago (“auld lang-syne”) in their youth because these are the feelings which give continuity to allegiance, friendship, happiness, pride and culture. Symbolically, the verses mean that each has come through life and has enough “siller” (money) to buy their own drink to toast the occasion of meeting again...and they go on to remind each other of how in their youth they played together on the hillsides and fields, freely and happily. Their conversation can go on to remind each other of past times when together they did this or that, when a mutual acquaintance was in a scrape or each had situations of success and what they did to celebrate. These happy memories are

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interspersed with asking each other what they have done in the intervening years when they have been separated by stormy oceans and at times traveled life with “a weary foot.” They conclude with warmly and strongly shaking hands and agreeing, forever, to remember these auld times which have generated good feelings and a willingness to face the oncoming future with confidence.

There is even symbolism in the way in which the song should be sung. To begin, all should be

standing in a circle and thus each equidistant from the center with hands by ones side, willing to be together but apart. Then, as the song progresses, people hold the hands of their neighbors on each side to express some friendliness. Towards the end of the song, each person crosses their own arms over their hearts and holds their neighbors’ hands to show friendliness and trust. As the song closes, all move towards the center of the circle to show we are all of one Scottish family, together in this ever changing world.

Now you are in a knowing minority, because you know so much more than the vast numbers of people around the world who try to sing *Auld Lang Syne*. So now you will be able to lead others at Hogmanay and other Scottish and more general celebrations. ❧

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AULD LANG SYNE.

Words by BURNS.

The musical score is written for piano and voice. It consists of three systems of music. The first system is the main melody, with lyrics: "Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And ne ver brought to mind: Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And". The second system is a chorus, with lyrics: "days o' lang syne For auld lang syne, my dear, For auld lang". The third system continues the melody, with lyrics: "syne We'll tak a cup of kindness yet For auld lang syne". To the right of the music is a black and white illustration of three people in 19th-century attire. A man in a tuxedo stands in the center, flanked by two women in long dresses. They are all looking towards the left.