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Classic Book Notes #36

December 2022

Originally December 2020

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Happy New Year!

*‘Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot, And
Auld Lang Syne!’*

Admit it, at least once, but probably more often, on New Year’s Eve, with a glass of bubbly or some other strong libation in one hand, your other arm ’round your spouse, your best squeeze, or whomever might be at hand, you have raised that glass and sung (or at least hummed) the tune, “Should auld acquaintance be forgot/And auld lang syne!” And admit it, you may have done so without the faintest idea what you were saying.

OK, maybe the faintest, since “auld” sounds like “old,” you know what “acquaintance” means, and you kind of intuit it has something to do with remembering old friends and the days long ago.

But what does the rest of it mean?

And why are you singing it?

And where did it come from?

It came from Scotland in 1788 when Robert Burns “sent the poem, ‘Auld Lang Syne’ to the Scots Musical Museum, indicating that it was an ancient song but that he’d been the first to record it on paper.” [1] Almost immediately, it became a Scottish tradition to sing on *Hogmanay*, the Scots’ word for the last day of the year – New Year’s Eve.

The Scots, however, did not invent New Year’s Eve.

New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day, obviously, are global celebrations that begin and end on different sides of the International Date Line. For *Jeopardy!* aficionados and patrons of *Trivia Night* at the Plymouth Tavern on State Street in Erie, Pennsylvania, where do New Year’s celebrations begin and end? Located in the central Pacific on the eastern side of the dateline, the Line Islands and Tonga are among the first places to celebrate the New Year and American Samoa, on its western side, among the last. [2]

Although observance is a fading tradition, throughout Europe the last day of the year was called *Old Year’s Day* or *Saint Sylvester’s Day* celebrating the feast of St. Sylvester with a late-night church service, fireworks, partying, and feasting. Saint Sylvester was Pope Sylvester I from 314 to 335. During his reign, the Nicene Creed was adopted, settling the question of Christ’s divinity for the Catholic faith. According to legend, he cured the Emperor Constantine the Great of leprosy. [3] It was Constantine, you’ll recall, who converted the Roman Empire to Christianity after his victory at the Milvan Bridge when he saw in his sword the Sign of the Cross.

But if the Scots didn’t invent celebrating New Year’s Eve, it could be argued that in celebrating Hogmanay they honed it to a fine edge.

And what is it about “a tall dark-haired stranger” being the most welcome visitor after midnight?

As we’ve been discovering these past several weeks while examining the [history of Christmas](#), many of our holidays have ancient, pagan roots. This is particularly true regarding Christmas and New Year’s (Hogmanay) since they coincide almost perfectly with the winter solstice, which was a major pagan holy day. In the [“’Twas the night before Christmas” Book Notes](#), we saw how the Roman festival of Saturnalia and certain Nordic traditions influenced how Christmas is celebrated. One of those Nordic traditions overlaps with New Year’s celebrations.

Have you ever wondered about the origins of the words “Yule” and “Yuletide”? Why does Nat King Cole in “The Christmas Song” sing of ‘chestnuts roasting on an

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Linking the Yule log to New Year's Eve, Ben Johnson in *Historic UK* notes, "In Shetland, where the Viking influence remains strongest, New Year is still called *Yules*, deriving from the Scandinavian word for the midwinter festival of Yule." [5] And it was those self-same Viking invaders of the 8th and 9th centuries, again according to Ben Johnson, who brought to Scotland their Hogmanay celebrations of the winter solstice which overtime morphed into New Year's Eve celebrations. [6]

How? Well, you will recall from that earlier *Book Notes* that, after the Protestant Reformation, some strict reformers banned the celebrating of Christmas as a pagan or, even worse, a Catholic feast, first in England in 1647 and Massachusetts in 1659. Although both of those bans were lifted by 1681, it might surprise you to know they persisted in some forms in Scotland until the 1950s.

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Those traditions included *first-footing*, being the first to enter a friend or neighbor's house in the New Year, exchanging gifts and then sharing food and drink. In short: a New Year's party.

Oh, about that the preference for a tall, dark stranger I mentioned earlier? Recall that the Vikings brought Hogmanay to Scotland, but they came as invading marauders. They were blond or at least fair of hair and complexion. So, a tall dark stranger was no Viking and thus a welcome guest!

Other Hogmanay traditions that will sound very familiar to American ears, or at least have echoes in American customs, include the ringing of bells to ring in the

New Year, fireworks, and torchlight parades. [8] The parades link back to that ancient Celtic and Nordic custom of the Yule log and the burning of bonfires across the countryside to signal the sun's return and the rekindling of the life-force.

And did I mention the Hogmanay tradition of drinking a nip of *uisge* to take the chill off the evening? *Uisge* is the ancient Celtic word for whiskey and *uisge beatha* means "water of life." [9]

And, most importantly for our concerns, "immediately after midnight it is traditional to sing Robert Burns' *"Auld Lang Syne."* [10]



A pioneer of the Romantic movement, Burns is the national poet of Scotland and a Scottish cultural icon. Like his father, Burns was a farmer, but all his life Burns was also a practicing poet. [11] We encountered him in an earlier [Book Notes](#) on J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, for Salinger took his title from Burns' *"Comin thro' the Rye."*

Writing of everyday occurrences, Burns celebrated the Scots' vernacular to do it. He can be racy, not mincing words, as in "How can I keep my maidenhead" in which a young lass asks,

from "How can I keep my maidenhead"

How can I keep my maidenhead,
My maidenhead, my maidenhead;
How can I keep my maidenhead,
Among sae mony men, O. [12]

He can be sentimental, as in “*Ae Fond Kiss*.”

from Ae Fond Kiss

I’ll ne’er blame my partial fancy,
Naething could resist my Nancy;
But to see her was to love her;
Love but her, and love forever. [13]

Among his most famous works are “*A Red, Red Rose*,” in which he exalts, “*O my luvie is like a red, red rose/That’s newly sprung in June*”; “*To a Louse*”; “*To a Mouse*” in which he sympathizes “*Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim’rous beastie/O, what a panic’s in thy breastie*”; and “*Tam O’Shanter*” his poignant evocation of the chaos old “*John Barleycorn*” can set loose:

from Tom O’Shanter

When chapman billies leave the street,
And drouthy neebors meet,
As market-days are wearing late,
And folk begin to tak the gate;
While we sit bousin, at the nappy,
And gettin fou and unco happy,
We think na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps, and stiles,
That lie between us and our hame,
Whare sits our sulky, sullen dame,
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm. [14]

Preceding them by a hundred years, much like the Irish revivalists in the late 19th century, Burns sought to preserve the ancient Scottish language from being subsumed in a sea of English. Although variations of the song “*Auld Lang Syne*” had circulated in Scotland before Burns’ version, he told the Scots Musical Museum, when he submitted his version in 1788, that “The following song, an old song, of the olden times, and which has never been in print, nor even in manuscript until I took it down from an old man.” [15] Borrowing a bit from James Watson’s 1711 “*Old Long Syne*” and other sources, Burns recast the old folk tune into a new work of art. Watson wrote in English; Burns wrote in Scottish vernacular. After the opening stanza, the language and the imagery is all Burns.

Having answered two of my three opening questions, now that you know where it came from and why you are singing it, what does it mean?

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And for the complete 20th century American version of the experience, have playing in the background Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians orchestral version of “Auld Lang Syne.” And with a fond – well, maybe not all that fond – farewell to 2020 and a fervent hope for a better 2021, let me wish a ***Happy New Year to All!***

Auld Lang Syne

Glossary from [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)

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

auld: old

auld lang syne: times gone by

Chorus:

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne.
We'll tak 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.*

tak: take

be: = pay for; *stowp* = cup or tankard

Chorus

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

twa: two; *braes*: a slope; hillside *pou'd*: pulled; *gowans*: flowers; *mony*: many; *fit*: foot

Chorus

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.

paidl'd: paddled; *burn*: stream

braid: broad

Chorus

And there's a hand, my trusty fere!
And gie's a hand o' thine!
And we'll tak a right gudewillie waught,
For auld lang syne.

fere: friend

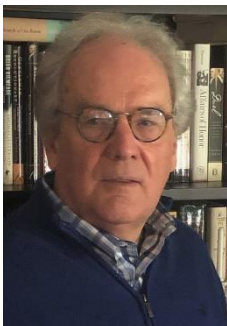
gude-willie: goodwill; *waught*: drink

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A wonderful reading of Auld Lang Syne in proper Scots dialect can be found [here](#).

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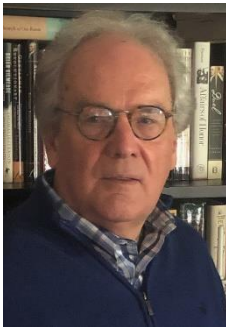
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