

Auld Lang Syne

I have sung this song many times (who hasn't?) on New Year's Eve (which the Scots call *Hogmanay*) and other sentimental occasions. Until recently, I had no idea what the lyrics meant. All I knew was that it was an old Scottish song.

Scotland occupies the rugged, mountainous country at the northern tip of the British Isles. Its long history and mythology are closely intertwined with its language and terrain: its lochs and bens and glens. It has spawned many literary minds, one of which, the poet Robert Burns, was born in Ayrshire, on the west coast, in 1759. Burns grew up in poverty, working on his father's hardscrabble farm. He was educated sporadically and started writing poems at an early age. When he was in his late twenties, very hard up and about to travel to Jamaica to take employment in a sugar plantation, his first volume of poems was published and made him an overnight success. He went on to become Scotland's greatest poet, a world-famous writer who influenced the likes of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. Like many other creative lights, he burned brightly but didn't last long. His heart gave out and he was dead at 37. Several years before he died, he wrote the poem that would become *Auld Lang Syne*, one of the most sentimental songs in the English language:

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

Burns wrote the lyrics in the Scots language of the lowlands. The key phrase—which literally means “Old Long Since”—has been translated in various ways; the more widely quoted versions have a different last line: “and days of auld lang syne” or “for the sake of auld lang syne”. Either way, it means roughly “for old times’ sake”. The words and the structure of the poem evoke a gathering of nostalgic friends, toasting each other and remembering “the good old days”. There is also a chorus:

For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
We'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.

These words were sung with heartfelt enthusiasm on New Year's Eve at the Montevideo Cricket Club when we all lifted our glasses and hugged and kissed and life seemed endless. At that point, I not only did not know what the Scots words meant, I didn't grasp the full meaning of the poem, what Burns is talking about, which is friendship, especially long-term friendship. At that age, I didn't realise how lucky I was to be surrounded by such a warm cocoon of friends and family. When I was twenty, young and restless, I set off to see the world, chasing my lucky star and looking forward, not back.

Then one day, my brother died, and I turned around and wondered, where *is* everybody? I had lost contact with almost all of my extended family and friends from the good old days and suddenly felt a void in my life. I contacted the handful of friends with whom I was still in touch and got some addresses from them. Bit by bit, I re-established contact with kids who were at the British Schools with me many years ago.

By this time, we had email, which made it possible to get a conversation going. We were soon talking about organizing a class reunion back in Montevideo; working together, we made it happen and all met a few years ago for what we called the *Gran Reencuentro de la Barra Querida* [Grand Reunion of our Beloved Gang]. We've all made other friends since our school days, of course, but childhood friends remain part of us in a very special way. When talking to old classmates, we are reconnecting with a youthful version of ourselves, with who we were when we were teenagers. At the reunion, each one of those friends had mirrors for eyes, and when I looked at them, I saw myself. On the final night of the *Gran Reencuentro*, we had our farewell party and when we sang *Auld Lang Syne*, I think I fully understood it for the first time.