

There's mair nor a roch wind blawin
Through the great glen o' the warld the day
(H. Henderson, *Freedom come all ye*, 1960)

The connection between history and song, whether popular, radical, or both, is long and well established in many countries, as tradition, politics and chronicle have often blended in an expressive form capable of eliciting powerful emotional response on a collective scale.

In Scotland, many very important instances may be singled out, and other contributions in this issue are going to shed light on their political and historical value. Here I intend to focus on the main linguistic traits of a few interesting cases, in order to highlight the relationship existing between Scots, English and the expression of political stance and/or social identity in texts ranging from Modern times to the twentieth century. Lexical choices, especially when their connotation as identity markers becomes well-established, such as in the case of overt Scotticisms like *bonnie* or *wae*, may function as the most obvious signals of a certain socio historical affiliation. Syntax, instead, is not always and not necessarily as clear an indicator of a specific relationship existing (or supposed to exist) among the parties – in this case the singers and their audiences, or indeed the singers themselves, if the audience is expected to join in.

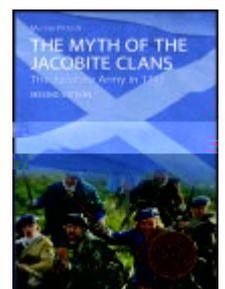
In what follows I intend to outline a few interesting traits in a range of cases which we may assume to be emblematic in the history of Scottish song, in an attempt to identify the linguistic features which make them particularly valuable as identity flagships, and assess how they relate to the history of Scots and English in Scotland. Gaelic, which nonetheless has contributed greatly to Scottish song lore, is beyond the scope of this contribution.

It is fascinating to investigate the relationship between music, lyrics, history and popular culture at different points in time. While change is of course inevitable, though often unpredictable, certain constant features may prove intriguing. In this contribution I will focus on Jacobite songs, on Kailyard nostalgia, on songs of emigration, and on radical song, as four key areas in which tradition and identity have found specific expressive tones in popular music, in order to investigate what their linguistic traits may tell us about the way in which perceptions of Scots and English may have changed over time.

It would be difficult to overstate the contribution of song to the popularization of history, especially when oral history is concerned: though centuries may have elapsed, certain figures become eternal in popular song, such as in the case of *Bonnie Dundee*: though the ballad concerns John Graham of Claverhouse, 1st Viscount Dundee (1648-1689), it is still in the repertoire of present day folk singers. Indeed, in the so called age of feeling, an edulcorated view of Jacobitism and its dramatic aftermath were among the most appealing topics. Especially in the nineteenth century, the romanticized story of Charles Edward Stuart's escape as Betty Burke was immensely popular.

The idealization of the Jacobite legend was epitomized in what is perhaps the best known tune to have been associated with the Young Chevalier's escape, [The Skye Boat Song](#), based on a Gaelic air, but first published in 1884 (and actually re-written by Robert Louis Stevenson in his *Songs of Travel*, of 1895), long after the events to which the lyrics refer.

What has long been accepted as a traditional Jacobite song is in fact a literary artefact in which the contribution of popular culture is restricted to the tune, while the lyrics are the product of highly educated authors. A similar phenomenon is seen in other Jacobite songs (see, among others, Donaldson 1988 and Pittock 2009), such as *Charlie's my darling*, or *Will ye no come back again*, authored respectively by James Hogg and Lady Nairne.



The creation of these songs, many of which sounded like ordinary love songs, but which (often barely) hid a political message, helped that invention of tradition, in which the Jacobite cause was reinterpreted as a Highlands vs. Lowlands, Scotland vs. England, opposition, while in fact loyalties were much less clear-cut. Indeed, the popularity of Jacobite airs has always been such that it has not been uncommon for Scottish country dance steps to be set to them,¹ as the relationship between music, song and dance has always been a feature of Scottish popular culture as expressed in ceilidhs throughout the country.

Though it may seem paradoxical, dance has also been an expression of the Scots relationship with emigration. In the late twentieth century Runrig wrote *A Dance Called America* (1984), recalling the reel described by James Boswell in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*

Lochaber No
More, 1883 (oil
on canvas) by
Nicol, John
Watson
(1856-1926) ©
The Fleming-
Wyfold Art
Foundation

In other, much older cases, emigration is seen in a completely different light. For instance, one of the most famous representations of nineteenth-century emigrants is in a painting by John Watson Nicol, *Lochaber No More* (1883). It is somewhat striking that the title of the painting is the same as that of a song which Allan Ramsay had included in his *Tea Table Miscellany* (1724); the song then became popular at the time of the second Jacobite rising (1745) and, even later, at the

quite considerably on Robert Burns' most sentimental compositions, such as *Ae Fond Kiss* (1791), *O Whistle, an' I'll come to ye, my lad* (1793), *A Red, Red Rose* (1794), *O Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast*, *My Heart's in the Highlands* (1789), and most notably *Auld Lang Syne* (1788). In these pieces love and a sentimental attitude to the singer's country, often idealized as a prototypical romantic wilderness, take centre stage. Over time, not only have popular performers of traditional Scottish song normally included them in their programmes: they have also become the source of popular phrases.

An idea of Kailyard nostalgia mixed with quaint humour was then to become the hallmark of early twentieth-century music hall pieces, such as Harry Lauder's hugely successful tunes: *Roamin' in the Gloamin'* and *Stop yer tickling Jock* are perhaps the best-known cases. But the early twentieth century was also the time of *Red Clydesiders*, and of the *Proletarian Song Book* (1923), virtually a counterpart of the *Little Red Songbook* (1909) that *Wobblies*, i.e. the Industrial Workers of the World, shared across the Atlantic.

Radical song in twentieth-century Scotland is in fact a very interesting case, with its well-known and well-established connection with traditional folk music and its ability to reinvent lyrics borrowed from canonical, literary models. Within this framework, Hamish Henderson has arguably given the most significant contribution: not only did he write the hugely popular *Freedom come all ye* for the anti-Polaris campaign of 1960,⁴ an adaptation of the pipe march *The Bloody Fields of Flanders*; he also wrote John MacLean's *March* (first performed in 1948) to celebrate one of the leading figures in Scottish Socialism, the fighting dominie John MacLean and his triumphal return to Glasgow after the spell in prison that would ruin his health forever. While the latter echoes the traditional tune which so many people nowadays know as *Scotland the Brave*, the former, possibly evoking Woody Guthrie, displays the same egalitarian approach as Robert Burns' *A man's a man for a' that*: the song that Sheena Wellington would sing at the opening of the Scottish Parliament on 1 July 1999, and that even contemporary young rockers like Paolo Nutini render with appropriate gusto as a militant march. In fact, Burns' works have often been read in diametrically opposing keys. On the one hand, they have become icons of tradition; on the other, their often rebellious quality is neither forgotten nor completely silenced,

and enables them to become manifestos of identity.

skilful ways in which their author could use language, and his acute awareness of the linguistic models of his time.

When we get to Henderson's compositions, however, the picture is quite different. In them, Scots syntax, morphology and vocabulary are used consistently, thus acknowledging Scots as a fully-fledged language: not only as the language of the heart, but also as the language of the people. Political activism thus seems to manage both form and content. It would be entirely inappropriate to describe the language of these songs as dialect, because in this case Scots is the only linguistic choice if the message is to be credible, coherent and consistent. Bonnie boats may still carry lads over the sea, but the wish is for everybody to be at hame wi freedom.

More or less overt language policies, political views and social engagement thus seem to blend very naturally in the language of music, and history finds a new representation in every singer's voice.

¹ For examples of two other very popular tunes, see [Hey, Johnnie Cope](#) and [The Bonnie House of Airlie](#).

² As we said above, songs about history have often been written as late as several decades after the events: this is the case, for instance, also of *The Massacre of Glencoe*, written by Jim McLean in 1963, i.e. almost three centuries later.

³ Even Robert Burns is known to have shared this view: see McIlvanney (2010).

⁴ For the same campaign another very popular song was written in Scots, *Ding Dong Dollar*.

References

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(c) *The Bottle Imp*