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For Auld Lang Syne': A Tale of Two Songs

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ABSTRACT: Besides the Royal Family and the touristic, artistic, aesthetic, and literary fruition and appraisal of Scotland and her landscapes since the mid-18th century, two distinguished English artists have paid a musical tribute to Britain's northernmost nation, offering us two "lyrical ballads" which, in a joint framework of the heritage and culture industries and the new memory studies, can be subject to some brief comments: Paul McCartney's *Mull of Kintyre* (1977) and Rod Stewart's *Every Beat of my Heart* (1986).

KEYWORDS: Paul McCartney, *Mull of Kintyre*, Rod Stewart, *Every Beat of my Heart*, British pop/rock music, Memory Studies

RESUMO: Além da Família Real e da fruição e valorização turísticas, artísticas, estéticas e literárias da Escócia e das suas paisagens desde meados do século XVIII, dois artistas ingleses consagrados prestaram um tributo musical à nação mais setentrional da Grã-Bretanha, oferecendo-nos duas "baladas líricas" que, num quadro conjunto das indústrias do património e da cultura e dos novos estudos da memória, podem ser objecto de breves comentários: *Mull of Kintyre* (1977), de Paul McCartney, e *Every Beat of my Heart* (1986), de Rod Stewart.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Paul McCartney, *Mull of Kintyre*, Rod Stewart, *Every Beat of my Heart*, Música pop/rock britânica, Estudos de Memória

As Humberto Lopes (21) once wrote, “... em matéria de identidades culturais, as fronteiras estão longe de ser adamastores invencíveis.” Indeed, ... the existence and/or the very concept of “frontiers” or “borders” ... can blind us to the fact that they can also be ways of bridging, uniting, dissolving or transcending oppositions, as they are, after all, two-edged, double-faced peripheries centrally located in some common (and therefore shared) middle ground (Alarcão 2016, 103-104).¹

These words were written for a paper presented at “Transcending Oppositions in Scottish Culture: a Symposium”, organized by the Porto branch of CETAPS in 2014. Its timing was obviously meant to coincide with, and celebrate, the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Waverley* (1814) by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), as well as the Scottish referendum on the issue of independence from the UK² opening up the possibility of “The Break-up of Britain”, to borrow Tom Nairn’s title. This referendum may actually be repeated sometime in the wake of Brexit and a new British monarch, considering the fact that, as Krishan Kumar points out,

... “Europe” for the so-called Celtic Nations of the British Isles represents a way of escaping the longstanding clutches of the imperial power in the Isles, England.... But it was always envisaged that separation from England would be accompanied by Scottish entry into the European Union as an independent unity. (2017, 76-77)

Since the Acts of Union (1707) and the Jacobite defeat at Culloden (1746), not to mention earlier examples from the Middle Ages (the Scottish wars of independence) and the 16th century (the disastrous defeat of James IV’s army at Flodden Field, 1513, and especially the political and religious conflict between Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Stuart), the relations between England and Scotland have had their ups and downs.³ Stepping back in time to the beginning of George III’s reign (1760-1820), Linda Colley has this to say:

... in official eyes, Scotland was no longer the old enemy, and ... an alien province to be left gingerly alone or viewed with unrelenting suspicion, the standard ministerial responses to it in the first half of the eighteenth century. Instead, Scotland was coming to be seen by those in

power as useful, loyal and *British* ... For ministers had no wish to destroy all of the Highlanders' ancestral values. Their obedience and bravery when their chieftains summoned them to war were entirely admirable characteristics in Whitehall's view, so long as from now on they were channelled exclusively into British military service....

Here was a *volte face* of striking proportions. Scotland – including its Highlands – was no longer an expensive nuisance. It had become the arsenal of the empire. (2009, 120-121)

Although one of the earliest proponents of (Great) Britain as a historical and political entity was, curiously, himself a Scot (John Major, or Mair, 1469-1550, author of *Historia Majoris Britanniae*, 1521), the hasty, though still frequent, usage, at colloquial level, of “Britain” and “England” as more or less synonymous has an obvious impact on conceptual and discursive definitions of (a) Scottish identity(ies), or “Scottishness(es)”, neither to be confused with “Englishness(es)” nor diluted by, or into, “Britishness(es)”..., however inclusive the latter may profess and purport to be. Stig Abell states it loud and clear:

It is striking ... that we live in a country without one uniform name: Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) vs the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man) vs The British Isles (everywhere, including the Republic of Ireland). Britain and the UK are different entities, although I blur them like everybody else. (2019, 290)

Henry W. Meikle's words, written in the mid-20th century and warning precisely against the dangers that may lurk behind such “blurrings”, are also worth quoting:

Under modern conditions of intercommunication, and the influence of the radio and the cinema, national characteristics tend to be lost in a *featureless uniformity*. Scotland, however, like other small countries tenacious of her memories of the past ... still preserves an alert national consciousness. (my emphasis; 1955, 48)

During Tony Blair's (himself a Scot) term in office, the signing of the Belfast, or “Good Friday”, agreement (1998), as well as the creation of a Scottish parliament and a National Assembly in Wales (both in 1999) and in Northern Ireland (2000), signal a clear devolutionary drift in British domestic policy, which may perhaps be correlated with the publication, towards the end of the century, of some “plural” or “decentred” histories of

Britain, like, for instance, Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles. A History of Four Nations* (1989), Jeremy Black's *A History of The British Isles* (1996), and Norman Davies' *The Isles: A History* (1999). In the context of this growing post-imperial concern with national identity(ies) – including the English – and a reinvented and renewed sense of patriotism, associated with, and openly reclaimed from the old Tories by, New Labour, Robert Crawford argues that “Scottish culture seems to have moved into a post-British phase” (qtd in Bassnett 2003, 99), whereas Susan Bassnett herself states, in her important 2003 “Afterword”, that “... as the Scots have become steadily more assertively independent, so the English have become less certain of who they are” (182; see also 183-184).⁴

If we consider the British monarchs whether in their personal or institutional capacity as Heads of State, there has certainly been no lack of examples of interaction with, and love of, Scotland, its culture, history, and landscape: suffice it to mention a tartan-clad George IV's famous visit to Edinburgh in August 1822, when he was actually greeted by Scott himself (Alarcão 2016, 107); Queen Victoria's sentimental attachment to domestic life in the Highlands from 1848 onwards, fondly reminisced upon in her Journals;⁵ the late Queen Mother's childhood and upbringing in Glamis Castle, and, more recently, Elizabeth II's own death at Balmoral (September 2022)⁶ where, twenty five years before (August 1997), the Royal Family had also been informed of Diana's tragic death *sous le ciel de Paris*.

But, as we shall see, besides the Royals and the touristic, artistic, aesthetic, and literary fruition and appraisal of Scotland and her landscapes since the mid-18th century,⁷ two distinguished English pop and rock artists have paid a musical tribute to Britain's northernmost nation, offering us two ‘lyrical ballads’ which, in a joint framework of the heritage and culture industries and the new memory studies, can be subject to some brief comments: Paul McCartney's *Mull of Kintyre* (1977)⁸ and Rod Stewart's *Every Beat of my Heart* (1986). The reader can make, of course, his/her own list, thus expanding the corpus.

With the title of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's anthology (1798) at the back of my mind, I must make clear that I will also be using the term “ballads” here in a *musical*, not just *literary*, or *poetical*, sense, even though both pieces are heavily moulded by lyrical moods and modes as can be found in poetry and literature in general. In fact, theoretically and otherwise, I believe that the contemporary connections between *musical*/ballads and

their *literary/poetical* counterparts should be explored further by qualified experts in both fields.

Secondly, I believe that if one has not received a thorough and sound musical education (sadly, my own case!), it will be virtually impossible ever to analyse and interpret songs properly, in terms of chosen instruments, octaves, notes, patterns, beats, rhythms, tempos, etc.; besides, it may not be unfair to add that, when listening to songs with lyrics, we sometimes tend to forget them and follow the music alone... Therefore, I would like to suggest that those lyrics (and the very word “lyrics” is probably more significant than we may realize at first sight...), as *verbal* primary sources *musically* and *mediatically* conveyed, *can* – and indeed *should* – also be profitably submitted to linguistic, literary, visual, and cultural assessment and evaluation. Indeed, the very title of this article was inspired by a well-known *song* and *poem* which *lyrics* were written by Scotland’s first national poet (Robert Burns, 1759-1796), besides the fact that the expression “Auld Lang Syne” actually occurs in Stewart’s song.

In Claus-Ulrich Viol’s words,

... I will try to show ... that a good deal of British pop music is, in fact, permeated with national discourse(s) ... The different musics which operate under the umbrella term of ‘pop’ are ... important sites where national identity is negotiated and (re)constructed, so that particular songs make use of symbols and myths that are nation-specific ... to which they then give a meaningful twist, shaping them into a statement about British identity. (2000, 82)

As is well known, a sample, subjective, and stereotyped list of icons and traditions of England and her culture(s) was provided in the 1940s by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)⁹ and George Orwell (1903-1950).¹⁰ Were we to do the same for Scotland (particularly the Highlands), tartans, kilts, sporrans, and bagpipes, to name but a few,¹¹ it would certainly loom large in the (inter)national and global imaginary, even though, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has convincingly argued, some Scottish traditions, widely perceived as organic and immemorial, may, in fact, have been construed and constructed in a not so dim and distant past:

This apparatus, to which they [the Scots] ascribe great antiquity, is in fact largely modern. It was developed after ... the Union with England against which it is, in a sense, a protest. Before

the Union, it did indeed exist in vestigial form; but that form was regarded by the large majority of Scotchmen as a sign of barbarism: the badge of roguish, idle, predatory, blackmailing Highlanders who were more of a nuisance than a threat to civilized, historic Scotland....

Indeed, the whole concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition is a retrospective invention. (1987, 15)

A few pages later, Trevor-Roper suggests two possible reasons for this “invention” and shift:

One is general and European and can be briefly summarized. It was the romantic movement, the cult of the noble savage whom civilization threatened to destroy. Before 1745 the Highlanders had been despised as idle predatory barbarians. In 1745 they had been feared as dangerous rebels. But after 1746, when their distinctive society crumbled ..., they combined the romance of a primitive people with the charms of an endangered species.... The second cause was ... the formation, by the British government, of the Highland regiments. (*idem*, 25)

Considering the particular nature of my primary sources, I would like to start by drawing attention to the way how, irrespective of genres, the music played by the pipers in traditional fashion¹² blends with, and into, the tunes of two original compositions by British pop artists, who, although both born in England, had Celtic ancestors, as somehow suggested by their own surnames: Paul McCartney (Irish) and Rod Stewart (Scottish).¹³ Moreover, in spite of the natural differences between their overall musical styles and careers, McCartney and Stewart are contemporary, having been born, respectively, in 1942 and 1945.

Having said that, these songs cannot, obviously, be considered as “popular” or “traditional” – at least not in the sense that Folklore Studies would define and use these labels, involving, by and large, an ancient, undatable, and anonymous authorship, and a collective cultural appropriation by the community(ies) in question –, although their commercial popularity and possible inclusion in musical anthologies or repertoires of Scotland in the decades to come may, in fact, bring about their “traditionalization” and canonization by, and into, collective memory, a process certainly worthy of further ethnomusicological research.

Speaking of memory, Astrid Erll recalls that

since the 1980s, with the emergence of the ‘new’ cultural memory studies, ‘memory’ has ... been understood as a genuinely transdisciplinary phenomenon whose functioning cannot really be understood through examination from one single perspective. Cultural memory studies is therefore *not merely a multidisciplinary field, but fundamentally an interdisciplinary project*. (2011, 38; my emphasis)

ErlI continues:

As far as the future of academia is concerned, the most promising and challenging fact about memory studies is that it is developing steadily into a true convergence field. Memory research has not only inspired new alliances between the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Slowly but palpably, it is ... bringing together the knowledge and approaches of scholars from very different parts of the world. (*idem*, 175)

Astrid ErlI’s book, useful and inspiring as it is, fails, however, to cover music *as such* – unless included, that is, in the all too broad category of art¹⁴ – even though the songs I have chosen highlight and demonstrate the role and importance of memory(ies) *per se*, but also of musical heritage, composition, and production as a *lieu de mémoire* (to borrow Pierre Nora’s celebrated expression), despite all the epistemological indefiniteness still surrounding this concept (ErlI in ErlI and Nünning 2010, 10).

These are the selected songs:

Paul McCartney and Wings, “Mull of Kintyre” (1977; 4’43”)

Rod Stewart, “Every Beat of My Heart” (1986; 5’17”)¹⁵

As the reader shall see (and hopefully hear!), Paul McCartney’s song and videoclip are located in a rural and remote spot – The Mull of Kintyre, in the southwestern tip of Scotland, spying on Northern Ireland in the distance –, a place endowed with “natural”, unspoilt scenery, with more than a hint of utopian primitivism, picturesque and sublime landscapes (viz. “Dark distant mountains with valleys of green”), somehow reflecting the presence and weight of British aesthetic sensibility, theorized and debated at length since the long 18th century, and, finally, romantic nature-worship, voiced in almost Wordsworthian terms (“... oh mist rolling in from the sea”), though without any visible

pantheist overtones. Speaking of Wordsworth, incidentally, vague “intimations of immortality” may perhaps be detected in the line “My desire is always to be here”.

It should also be stressed that McCartney’s characters, including his father Jim, his first wife Linda and their daughters Mary and Stella, are portrayed at home, thus offering peaceful images of family settlement, domesticity, union, and rest. These are biographically supported by the fact that Paul McCartney actually owned High Park Farm from 1966 onwards (apparently until 2010), and the sentimental attachment to the property is the subject of fond reminiscence: “Smiles in the sunshine and tears in the rain / Still take me back where my memories remain. / Flickering embers grow higher and higher / As they carry me back to the Mull of Kintyre”.

Contrary to Paul McCartney’s videoclip, Rod Stewart’s opts predominantly for an unidentified (and thus anonymous) urban and “civilized” cityscape, although nature is not totally discarded. Besides, Stewart’s character comes across as someone displaced/misplaced and overtly on the move; and in fact, whether dictated by war, vagrancy, exile, job opportunities, a sense of adventure, or just restlessness in general, mobility and migration have always been a strong feature of Scottish (and Irish) culture(s) and ways of life.

However, irrespective of political, economic, social, religious or any other reason or motivation, the allure of nostalgia and the desire to return shine through such lines as “Pack my bags tonight / Here’s one Jacobite / Who must leave or surely die / Put me on a train / In the pouring rain / Say farewell, don’t say goodbye”; “Seagull carry me / Over land and sea / To my old folk / That’s where I wanna be”; and, finally, “There’s my family and my country / Heaven knows where I belong”. This emotional or sentimental frame of mind is reinforced at the end of the refrain, and of the song itself, through Stewart’s acknowledgement that “Every beat of my heart / Tears me further apart / I’m lost alone in the dark / I’m going home”.

Despite the use of the word “country”, which, in the Middle Ages (just like “nation”), applied to birthplaces and/or dwelling places, rather than nationalities, as we now know them, in both these videos the local or regional dimension seems to me to prevail – *et pour cause* – over the national one, privileged by Benedict Anderson in his seminal study of the historical, ideological, and political making of nationalism. However, much to my point here, Anderson argues that



In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals ... to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other ..., it is useful to remind ourselves that *nations inspire love* The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, *music*, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. (2016, 141; my emphases)

In spite, then, of some obvious differences, both videos manage to show, through word, sound, and image, the importance of individual and collective identity; of being aware of, paying attention to, and cherishing one's roots, allegiances, and experiences in space and time. Additionally, they depict and display a clear, though perhaps idealized, sense of (imagined) communities and belonging; of the crucial role of home, family, and friends; and, last but not least, of the relevance of memory(ies) and recollection(s) for one's personal and social balance, well-being and fulfilment.

END NOTES

¹ To Peter Childs, “It is important to remember that such feelings of belonging do not cease at the border and, in England ... there is a strong sense of Scottish identity --- as any 25 January spent at thousands of English pubs will demonstrate. This is Burns Night, when the birth of Scotland’s national poet ... is celebrated with drink, song and dance in a way that Shakespeare’s very seldom is” (in Storry and Childs, 2017, 48-49).

² According to the piece “Scotland Decides”. *BBC News*. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/scotland-decides/results>; archived), in 2014 there were 2.0001.926 votes (55,30%) against the independence and 1.617.989 (44.70%) supporting it.

³ One of Linda Colley’s works, published in the year of the referendum, bears the title of *Acts of Union and Disunion*.

⁴ This is almost the title of Derek J. Taylor’s book, published in 2017.

⁵ Out of the many examples that could be provided, I will just quote the following, taken from Victoria's earliest visits: "This [Sept. 14, 1842] is our last day in *Scotland*; it is really a delightful country, and I am very sorry to leave it." (51); "As the fair shores of Scotland receded more and more from our view, we felt quite sad that this very pleasant and interesting tour was over; but we shall never forget it." [Sept 15, 1842] (53); "Every little trifle and every spot I had become attached to; our life of quiet and liberty, every thing was so pleasant, and all the Highlanders and people who went with us I had got to like so much. Oh! The dear hills, it made me very sad to leave them behind!" [Oct.1, 1844] (73); and "... I told him [Lord Aberdeen] I was so attached to the dear, dear *Highlands*, and missed the fine hills so much. There is a great peculiarity about the *Highlands* and Highlanders, and they are such a chivalrous, fine, active people. Our stay among them was so delightful. Independently of the beautiful scenery, there was a quiet, a retirement, a wildness, a liberty, and a solitude that had such a charm for us." [Oct. 3, 1844] (1868, 75).

⁶ As some readers will remember, after Queen Elizabeth was laid to rest in St. George's Chapel, Windsor, a funeral march was solemnly played by a solitary Scottish bagpiper on leaving the cloisters.

⁷ See, for instance, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26, 3 vols.) by Daniel Defoe (c.1660-1731), an early domestic travelogue in thirteen letters, the last three of which collectively entitled "Introduction to the Account and Description of Scotland"; *A Journey to The Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) by Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) by James Boswell (1740-1795); *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland, AD 1803* by Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855), etc.

⁸ Also mentioned thus by Queen Victoria: "The yacht had had a good passage round the *Mull of Cantire* [sic]. We ... went on deck; and the blaze of the numerous bonfires – the half moon, the stars, and the extreme stillness of the night – had a charming effect." [Aug.18, 1847] (1868, 90).

⁹ "It [culture] includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar" (Eliot 1983, 31).

¹⁰ "It [English culture] is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar boxes. It has a flavour of its own." (Eliot 1983, 64) and "We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also ... of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossworld-puzzle fans. All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official – the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the 'nice cup of tea'" (*idem*, 66).

¹¹ In *Notes from a Small Island*, Bill Bryson adds some items to this list: "I passed the time browsing in the windows of the many tourist shops that stand along it [Royal Mile,



Edinburgh], reflecting on what a lot of things the Scots have given to the world – kilts, bagpipes, tam-o'-shanters, tins of oatcakes, bright yellow jumpers with big diamond patterns ..., plaster casts of Greyfriars Bobby looking soulful, sacks of haggis -- and how little anyone but a Scot would want them." (1996, 303)

¹² In the case of McCartney's *Mull of Kintyre*, the Campbeltown Pipe Band; unfortunately, I was unable to identify the bands featured in Rod Stewart's videoclip.

¹³ See also *Voyage's "Scotch Machine"* (1977), an instrumental hit launched during the disco fever that took world music and the dance floor by storm in the late Seventies.

¹⁴ "Over the past two decades, the relationship between culture and memory has emerged ... as a key issue of interdisciplinary research, involving fields as diverse as history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, and the neurosciences, ... thus bringing together the humanities, social studies, and the natural sciences in a unique way." (Erlil and Nünning 2010, 1; see also the preface, V)

¹⁵ Regarding the title, could there be any intentional phonetical pun playing on "beat" vs. "bit"?

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