

# Robert Burns and Scots Fiddling

By David Johnson

Robert Burns, born Alloway, 1759, died Dumfries, 1796, is widely regarded as the finest poet in Scotland's history. It's well known that a large part of his work consisted of words for songs: who has not heard of "Auld lang syne," or "My luv'e's like a red, red rose"? Less well known, however, is the working method he used to create such songs. Nearly always he would choose an already-existing tune and construct new words to fit it, an unusual and technically very tricky method in which all sorts of things could go horribly wrong; though with most of his 370 songs everything goes breathtakingly right. In his final script he would specify, at the top of the words, the tune the lyric was designed for.



Many of the tunes Burns used already had words — commercial, literary, or oral — and in such cases his work often consisted only of making additions or adjustments to these. But in a significant number, perhaps a quarter, of his songs he used tunes which had no words at all, so starting from a blank canvas. This was particularly so when he set words to fiddle tunes which had been recently composed in his own time. On the internal evidence of his songs, he knew a great deal about fiddle music.

Burns' life coincided with a glorious period in Scots fiddling. Around the time he was born, the fiddle managed to push the bagpipes and harp into the background and establish itself as Scotland's major traditional-music instrument, and though fiddling went back to the Middle Ages the re-designed Italian violin was seen as something new, fashionable, Scottish but at the same time European, an instrument alive with possibilities. Dancing had also come to the fore after a century of religious repression; this created an enormous demand for dance music, and thus for fiddling. As a result, vast quantities of new fiddle music were being written all through Burns' life — reels, strathspeys, Scots measures, hornpipes, slow airs, variations — and specialist fiddle-composers were emerging into national prominence — Marshall, Gow and his four sons, McGlashan, Mackintosh. It was inevitable that Burns, in his quest for good tunes to write words to, should have kept a keen eye on who was composing what, and had a go at playing the fiddle himself.

The evidence that Burns played the fiddle has been overlooked by many biographers. But his first *Epistle to David Sillar*, who was one of Burns' closest friends during his early adulthood, is firmly inscribed "To Davie, a Brother-Poet, Lover, Ploughman and Fiddler," and shows that he regarded fiddling as one of his finest accomplishments.

After Burns' death, his sister Isobel recalled that he was inspired

by Sillar to buy a violin for five shillings, and that he would practise when the weather was too bad for outdoor farm work. She added that his playing was never very good; however, her views may have been "coloured by excruciating memories of her brother's [first] gut-scraping attempts" (to quote James A. Mackay). Burns probably also learned music notation at this time; in later life he was fluent at it and had beautiful music handwriting.

Burns' first lyric to a fiddle tune is "O Tibbie, I hae seen the day," dating from 1777, when he was eighteen. It set to "Invercauld's Reel," a strathspey composed in honour of Invercauld Castle in Aberdeenshire (Example 1).

It's worth asking what subject matter this tune suggests. Perhaps a description of a lavish castle ball, or of the noble Deeside landscape? No, Burns' lyric is about much more homely matters, though it's sharp, satirical and urgent. It's a complaint about a girl who has dropped him, on discovering he has no money:

*O Tibbie, I hae seen the day,  
Ye wad na been sae shy;  
For laik o' gear ye lightly me,  
But trowth, I care na by.  
Yestreen I met you on the moor,  
Ye spak na, but gaed by like stoure;  
Ye geck at me because I'm poor,  
But fient a hair care I.*

[repeat the first 4 lines as chorus, then:]  
*I doubt na, lass, that ye may think,  
Because ye hae the name o' clink,  
That ye may please me at a wink  
Whene'er ye like to try.*

[repeat chorus]  
*But sorrow tak him that's sae mean,  
Altho' his pouch o' coin were clean,  
Wha follows ony saucy quean  
That looks sae proud and high.*

[repeat chorus]  
*But Tibbie lass, tak my advice,  
Your daddie's gear maks you sae nice,  
The de'il a ane wad speir your price,  
Were you as poor as I.*

[end with chorus]


...Vast quantities of new fiddle music were being written all through Burns' life... It was inevitable that Burns, in his quest for good tunes to write words to, should have kept a keen eye on who was composing what, and had a go at playing the fiddle himself.

[Glossary: gear = money; lightly = to slight; yestreen = last night; spak = spoke; stoure = cloud of dust; geck = toss one's head; fient a = not a; clink = cash; quean = girl; nice = finicky; the de'il a ane = not one; speir = enquire]

How well the words and music match! The strathspey has to be slightly adjusted for singing — the birls replaced by Scotch snaps, the repeats omitted, the whole a little slowed down — but once this is done the two bond completely. After one has absorbed Burns' words, the strathspey tune and Tibbie's mindless arrogance belong together.

Burns lived in Ayrshire, several hundred miles from Invercauld Castle. How did he learn the tune? Almost certainly from Neil Stewart's *Collection of Reels*, which had been published in Edinburgh about 1762. Burns' manuscript of the song spells the castle "Invercald" — the -ald ending reflecting local Aberdeenshire pronunciation of the place — and that spelling is also used in Stewart's book; so the inference is obvious. Burns is usually thought of as a champion of oral culture, but he probably got the strathspey out of that printed book.

In later life, certainly, published fiddle-books were important sources of tunes for Burns. A favourite one was James Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion* (12 volumes, London, c.1745-63); Burns seems to have owned several copies of it, sometimes rashly lending them out to people who didn't give them back. The collection provided him with "Hei tuti teti" (nowadays known, because of Burns, as "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled"); "John Anderson,



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my jo;" "When Sol had loos'd" (a.k.a. "The de'il's awa' wi' th'Exciseman"); "Rory Dall's Port" (a.k.a. "Ae fond kiss"); "Whistle o'er the lave o't"; and many other fine tunes.

Another invaluable source was Niel Gow's *Collection of Strathspey Reels* (Edinburgh, 1784) and its follow-up second collection (Edinburgh, 1788). In the first collection Burns found Gow's "Lamentation for Abercarney," which he set awesomely to words beginning "Where braving angry winter's storms"; "Major Graham," which became the tune for "O my luv's like a red, red rose"; and "The Miller's Daughter," on which he constructed the famous

Example 1

## Invercald's Reel – Strathspey

Anon., probably Aberdeenshire, 1750s, from Neil Stewart's *Collection of the Newest and Best Reels and Country Dances*, c. 1762



“Coming thro’ the rye.” In the second collection he found the tune “The Caledonian Hunt’s Delight,” which intrigued him for years; finally he wrote the last, greatest version of “Ye banks and braes” to it.

It seems fitting to end this article by returning once more to David Sillar, Burns’ “Brother-Fiddler.”

Sillar has entered the ranks of Scottish composers on the strength of one piece, the strathspey given as Example 2. Aficionados will immediately spot that parts of it are derived from “Johnnie Cope,” and especially from the fiddle variations on that tune which were widely played in the late 18th century; they might be tempted to give it a low mark as a composition on that account. But Burns took it seriously. He wrote an extraordinary lyric to it, in praise of a beautiful and musically-talented girl of twelve, Jeany Cruikshank, with whom he shared a household in Edinburgh for a few months in 1787:

*A rose bud by my early walk  
A-down a corn-inclosed bawk  
Sae gently bent its thorny stalk  
All on a dewy morning. [repeat these 4 lines]  
Ere twice the shades o’ dawn are fled,  
In a’ its crimson glory spread,  
And drooping rich the dewy head,  
It scents the early morning. [repeat]*

*So thou, dear bird, young Jeany fair,  
On trembling string or vocal air  
Shalt sweetly pay the tender care  
That tents thy early morning. [repeat]  
So thou, sweet Rose bud, young and gay,  
Shalt beauteous blaze upon the day,  
And bless the Parent’s evening ray  
That watch’d thy early morning. [repeat]*

...One can ask what the words and tune are doing for each other: the answer is that each miraculously improves the other one.

[Glossary: bawk = field-path; trembling string = the harpsichord (on which Jeany was a proficient player); tents = cares for]

As with Example 1, one can ask what the words and tune are doing for each other: the answer is that each miraculously improves the other one. The intellectual quality of Sillar’s strathspey removes any possibility that Burns’ words might sound mawkish or self-indulgent; at the same time, the humanity of the words rescues the tune from the suspicion that it might be just a cold, formal exercise. And this effect is not accidental; it demonstrates again how vast Burns’ knowledge of fiddling was.

For further reading:

James A. Mackay, *The Complete Letters of Robert Burns* (Ayr, 1987)

James A. Mackay, *Burns: a biography* (Edinburgh, 1992)

Donald A. Low, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (London, 1993)

[David Johnson is one of Scotland’s leading musicologists; his writings include *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland* (2nd ed. 2003), *Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century* (3rd ed. 2005), and contributions to *Grove’s Dictionary*. He is also an active composer with a catalogue of around 50 works, ranging from operas to pieces for schoolchildren.]

Example 2

## A Rose bud by my early walk

By David Sillar, Ayrshire, 1780s, from *The Scots Musical Museum*, vol. ii, 1788

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the strathspey 'A Rose bud by my early walk'. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The first staff begins with a single eighth note followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second and third staves continue the melody with more complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth-note runs and repeated eighth-note figures. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.