

## The “True” Meaning of “Auld Lang Syne (蛍の光)”

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### Welcoming in the New Year

At midnight on New Year’s Eve, it is a common custom in the US to link arms with friends and start to sing “Auld Lang Syne.” I say start to sing, because although everyone recognizes the tune, the words are known by few. In fact, to write this essay, I had to look them up myself. They are:

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

When I read these words, I can hear the tune in my head and feel the memories of sharing good times with friends. It is a very powerful song known all over the world.

In fact, “Auld Lang Syne” was originally written in 1788 as a Scottish poem and set to a traditional folk song. It became a tradition to sing on New Year’s Eve in Scotland and later spread to most English speaking countries.

I have no idea how the song came to Japan but I do remember how shocked I was the first time I heard it here. It seemed so out of place to me. I was standing in a freezing cold gymnasium watching my first group of junior high school students graduate. Suddenly I heard a familiar tune but the words had changed to Japanese lyrics about the lights of fireflies. There certainly were no fireflies around that March, and I couldn’t understand why the students were singing a New Year’s song. But somehow over the years that I have taught in Japan, the old Scottish poem now seems to me to truly belong to Japanese graduation ceremonies.

### Graduation American Style

In the US, compulsory education is until one’s 16th birthday. So this means that all students move on from junior high school to high school as they are not yet 16. Also, as we don’t have entrance exams for high school, most everyone continues with the

same classmates. Often to save money for sports facilities, such as football or baseball fields, junior and senior high schools are located very close to one another and sometimes even in the same building.

A graduation ceremony from junior high school is not so popular. I remember my first graduation ceremony was when I finished high school. Many people have seen movies of students throwing their special hats in the air for graduation. But between junior and senior high school we don’t really celebrate so much.

### Graduation Japanese Style

How surprised I was at what a beautiful and formal ceremony we had for our junior high school graduation in Japan! And what I also learned at that time was that many students didn’t know yet which high school they would attend the following month. So for the students it really was a time to say goodbye to the only life they have known so far and even more to the friends who shared it with them.

When I look at the old Scottish poem, it sounds like the original author might have been feeling something like that. The words auld lang syne mean something like “long, long ago” and so the poet is asking if he will remember his friends of long, long ago. The tune makes me think he hopes he will but he isn’t exactly sure.

Now whenever I hear that song, I think of junior high school students unsure of their future, yet celebrating in song the hope that they will keep their friendships for a lifetime. When next they meet their junior high school friends of “long, long ago”, I hope they will share many happy memories together. Maybe it will even be in the summer under the lights of the fireflies. Wishing you all a blessed New Year and congratulations to the graduating class of 2010!