

TO A MOUSE

In my later years in Battlefield Band it was suggested by the band's manager, Robin Morton, that I try to put a melody to this poem. It's a poem that every child of my generation in Scotland was taught and is one that I love, not least for its confident and vibrant use of Lowland Scots. I was highly dubious about fitting a melody to this metre. It's one that was a favourite of Robert Ferguson, a poet who influenced the young Burns, and it first appeared in the 17th century in a poem called "The Life and Death of the Piper of Kibarchan," written by Robert Sempill.

To my mild astonishment I managed to come up with this (to my mind Breton sounding melody) in less than five minutes.

For children the poem is comprehensible as a mouse's world turned upside down by the farmer's plough (coulter). To an adult the theme of our lives being subject to forces beyond our control (whether fate or whatever) and, like the mouse, feeling insignificant in terms of the endless universe we live in is one that taps into our human feelings of vulnerability. From the line that John Steinbeck borrowed ("the best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley") to the last couplet ("and forwards though I cannae see, I guess and fear") we are reminded of our human frailty.

But the poem also reinforces the idea that we humans are part of a chain of being and that we coexist with other creatures. "I'm truly sorry man's dominion has broken Nature's social union."

Unlike other species we also have the capacity to tamper with the physical world we inhabit. With that comes great responsibility. From ploughing fields to genetic agriculture, from drilling underground and undersea to atomic energy, in a host of other activities the human race has now the power to drastically alter the landscape of our lives and potentially even destroy our world. And that, I feel, is a message we can take from this Burns poem today. In these troubled times we should respect our planet and never forget the responsibility or the obligation we have to the generations that follow us.

--Alan Reid
January 2017