

For old times sake

everybody knows the first lines of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ — or think they do — but not many other than the Scots know much more. The title may be translated literally as ‘old long since’. Perhaps it’s better to smooth it out a little . . . ‘days gone by’ isn’t far off the mark. The tune is overdone sometimes, but for all that it remains a haunting song of memory and melancholy.

Those words echo in my mind now. It's very late and outside the cold night air carries a hint of snow from the south. At my feet the old dog, who has followed me from country to country, lies asleep by the last embers of the fire. I remember a time when, up in the mountains, Saxon ran from dawn to dusk, day after day until finally his pads wore off on the rocks, and he would not quit.

He's grey now, and the muscles that were once so young and hard have grown tired. A slow, tottering walk in the fields leaves him limping and sore. The soft ears that once heard the whisper of wings coming in from far up the river are dull to sound. He runs now in the fields of memory. Few people would understand what I'd give to have just one of those days back. I regret my impatience with him, so often wrong, and hours caught up in some useless thing that would have been better spent out in the paddock or on the river.

He's fading now before my eyes and there's nothing I can do. Yet if I were to stir even a little, that grey muzzle would rise up, and he would try to be with me, to go anywhere, face anything. What happened, old friend, that it should come to this? We two were young together, but our years have come and gone so quickly. There is no sorrow like being the lone witness to something passing. Our chapter will close in these few hours.

At times he lies with one ear cocked, listening to voices I will never hear. Some of them I can guess at — birds must be found and held, and home and family must be defended. Others are more mysterious.

Sometimes he twitches in a dream. Perhaps it is of when we found all those quail up in the ranges of Central Otago — they kept coming one after another, then in dozens until I broke the gun and just watched them. Maybe it's the big swim in the Hurunui to bring back that mallard, or the cock pheasant that ran for so long through the bracken, or that black boar in the long grass.

It could be when the mountain frost came rolling down on our little hill camp and the two of us huddled in the vast dark while brittle ice settled all over us. Those times have come and gone, but that's how we were, then. Sleep your dreams by the fire, brother. There will be someone to stay and remember.

It's a long way to the dawn, but this isn't about me. I'll keep this lonely vigil — for auld lang syne.

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