

## Union Glen

## Retreat air



**Union Glen:** I switched on the television a year or two back to catch the news and saw a great rally of striking workers headed by a pipe band, and they were playing this tune. It was first published in Ian and Gordon Duncan's collection *A Few Tunes for the Highland Bagpipe*. So there it was. It had passed the test of transmission. There are obvious echoes of John MacLellan of Dunoon, who virtually invented the modern retreat air as a form (and whose status as a composer has never been adequately acknowledged); it was just something he had somehow omitted to say, although my intention was slightly ironic, a wee send up of the typically over-sentimental Scottish song-tune, maybe prompted by the slight oxymoron in the title. I suppose I wanted to indulge it and hold it at arms length at the same time. I even set some spoof Jacobite words to it.

The lovely name concealed a very urban scene, although it would have been very beautiful once, verdant and wooded with the How Burn winding through it to the sea. Its northern flank formed the brae up which the Covenanting army charged before the sack of Aberdeen in 1644. There was a pub at the head of it we used to drink in, pipers and drummers, and argue the toss and reform Scottish music; hence the name.