

# Story of Scotland's unlikely secret agent... a stout, merry little monk who helped in fight against Napoleon

By **Ross Crae**

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James Robertson.

He was described as a “short, stout, merry little monk” who was always jesting and poking fun, but James Robertson was truly extraordinary.

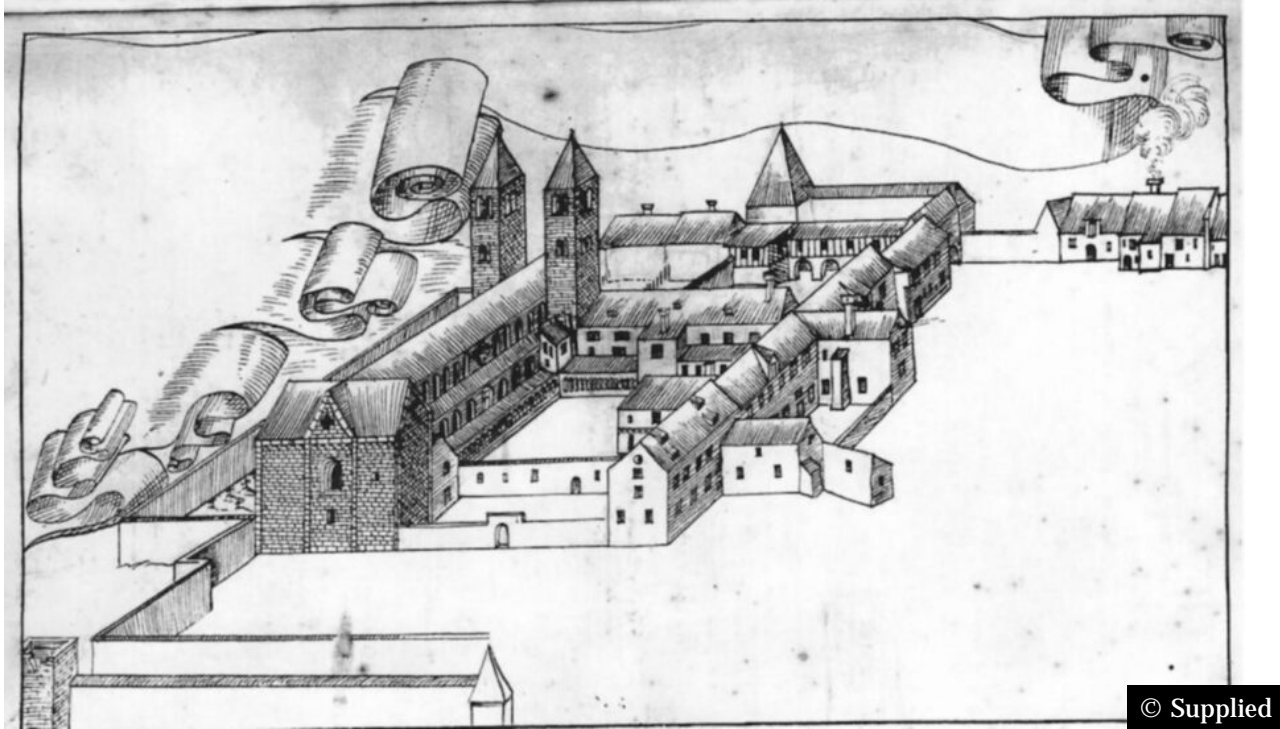
In 1808, as Napoleon neared the peak of his power, it was this middle-aged and overweight Scottish monk to whom the British government turned for a special mission.

The unlikely secret agent's task? Travel to Germany to persuade a Spanish general and

his troops to betray the French emperor and switch sides.

It may sound like something straight out of a war novel, but this is a true story that author [Roger Hunt](#) stumbled on and has been enthralled by for nearly 30 years.

Robertson was born in 1758 but spent much of his life at a monastery in Regensburg, Germany, at the time known as Ratisbon.



Schottenkirche abbey, Ratisbon.

While reading a biography of the Duke of Wellington, Roger found references to a meeting between the monk and a pre-dukedom Arthur Wellesley in London in the spring of 1808.

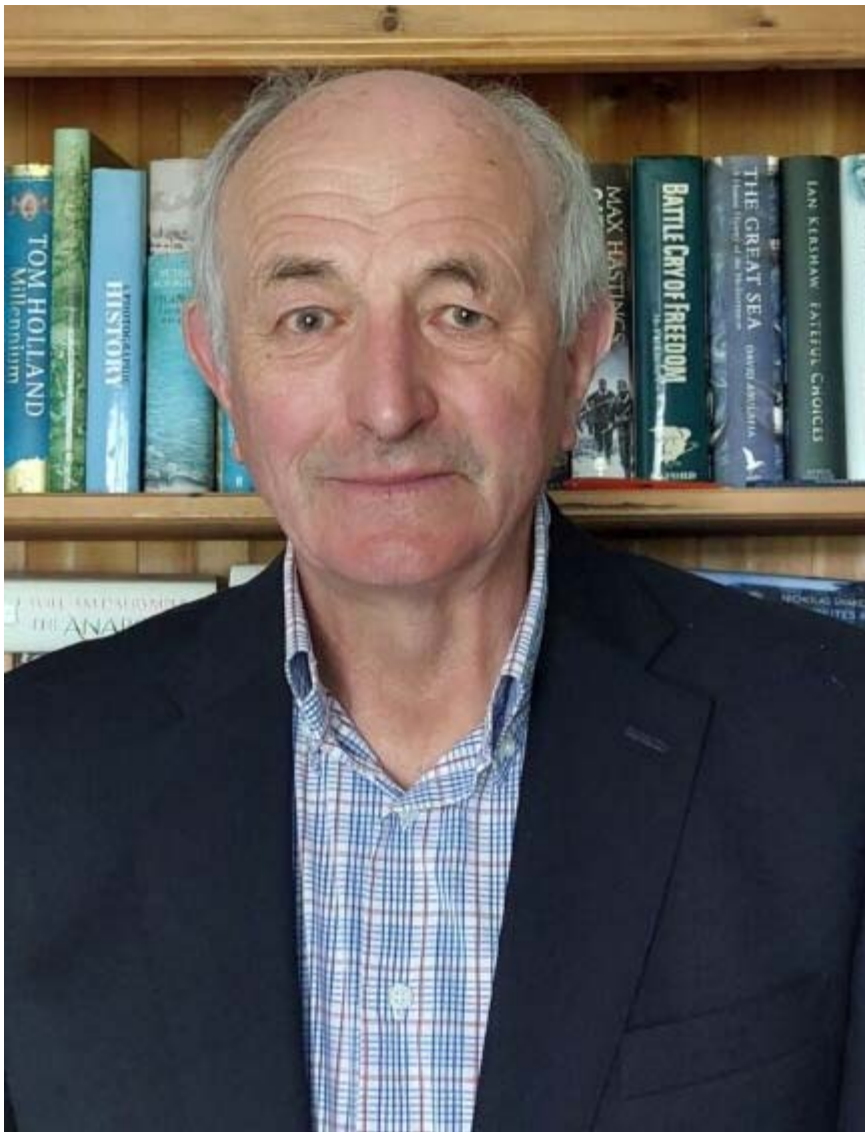
Robertson was, at that point, a tutor to an aristocratic family in England, and noted that he was willing to aid the British government's struggles against Napoleon. "I was thinking, what on Earth is a Scottish Benedictine monk whose parents were almost certainly Jacobites doing going on a spying mission for the British Government?" Roger said. "It was completely bizarre.

“I started digging and in the British Library is a copy of Robertson’s memoir, written by his nephew, about his mission to extricate the Spanish Division, commanded by Pedro Caro, Marquis of La Romana.

“When I retired, I started really properly having a look and also made contact with the Robertson clan, who had some records as well. It was an extraordinary story that turned out to be true.”

Roger’s aim was to put together a history book but, realising that details were scant, he decided to write a work of fiction based on the monk’s extraordinary life and sticking closely to actual reported events.

He was so fascinated by the story that, as well as hours in libraries and archives, he and his wife travelled to Europe and retraced Robertson’s steps through northern Germany into Denmark and visited some of the sites of the action.



Roger Hunt.

The result is *Vindicta*, which introduces French spy-hunter Jacques Marquet as a nemesis to Robertson.

A game of cat and mouse unfolds in the book as Robertson tries to find and persuade the Spanish general to defect, while all the time avoiding capture by Marquet, a real-life figure whose portrait hangs in the National Gallery in London.

“Robertson is described as very intelligent,” Roger said. “He had a superb education at the Scottish Seminary, first in Douai in northern France and then in Dinant in Belgium, until that was closed down by the French.

“He was fluent in German, French, Latin, Greek. He took his religious vows, where he was called Gallus after a Scottish Irish saint, and used that as his religious name.

“Wellesley at that stage was secretary to the Viceroy of Ireland, the Duke of Richmond, who while touring round Europe had stayed in the Scottish monastery in Ratisbon. He probably introduced Robertson to Wellesley, and hence set up the meeting with George Canning, the foreign secretary, who then employed Robertson on the mission. It’s amazing all the different connections.”

While Robertson may have been a surprise choice for such a daring mission, he had previous.

Indeed, he had already met Napoleon, having been sent on a visit to the then consul to try to save the monastery in Ratisbon.

“Napoleon had closed a whole load of others, but Robertson was successful in persuading him not to order the closure of this monastery,” Roger said.

“Obviously, as well as being a ‘merry little monk’, he was incredibly persuasive and brave. Maybe that’s why Wellesley and then Canning accepted that this man was going to be able to persuade La Romana to change sides. And so he did.

“He was extraordinarily courageous. I think his motivation was that he wanted revenge on Napoleon for what he’d done to the Catholic Church in Europe, as well as to help the British who were on the back foot in the wars.”

Just being able to meet the Spanish in the first place had involved a few Mission Impossible-style tricks.

Robertson arrived in Germany only to discover that the troops had moved on to Denmark, where they were part of the forces set to take part in an invasion of Sweden.

He needed a cover story to make it across the border and earn an audience with La Romana.

“He took the name Adam Rorauer, a Bavarian he knew in London and disguised himself as a chocolate and cigar salesman, which is absolutely brilliant,” Roger said.

“The Spaniards were running out of supplies. That was the way he wangled his way to see La Romana.”



The new book.

The fact that Napoleon had overthrown King Charles IV and Prince Ferdinand and placed his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne helped convince La Romana's division to discard their loyalty to Imperial France.

Robertson's work paved the way for a crucial military operation in which most of the troops were successfully evacuated from Denmark by the British navy and shipped to Spain to fight against France in the Peninsular War.

Roger was assisted in piecing together the story by descendants in the clan Robertson, who provided him with some of their records. The monk's will is held in Downside Abbey in Somerset.

"I went there as well to have a look," Roger said. "It doesn't say a lot, but again it was helpful in proving that a) he existed and b) what I'd read was reasonably true, hence the determination that the novel would be based as close as I could on true events."

With so many extra pieces of information jumping out to Roger throughout his research, the job isn't yet complete and he hopes to write a prequel to *Vindicta* telling of Robertson's early life.

"I enjoyed the writing process," he said. "I discovered that Robertson actually taught German to Lord Palmerston, later the British Prime Minister.

"The research never finishes. You think you've learned all you can, and that's not the case at all.

"Before he was sent on this mission, Robertson was in Ireland teaching French at Maynooth University, so that will form some idea as to a prequel.

"He's an absolutely amazing character and the story is quite extraordinary. A very, very brave Scotsman."

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*Vindicta by Roger Hunt is available now from Troubador Publishing*