



Remaining in Scotland



Spring has arrived in Scotland and you can tell because the snowdrops are in bloom in all of our gardens.



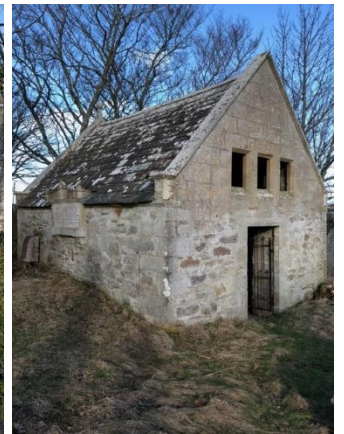
It is hard to believe that it has been a year since Scotland went into Covid Lockdown the first time and we had to decide whether to dash back to America or remain here in the isolated North Highlands. We opted to stay, and have not regretted it, as the precautions taken in Scotland, coupled with the remoteness of our location have kept things relatively quiet. There have been very few cases of Covid up here. And folks locally are following the safety guidelines and also helping each other whenever possible. All in all, it is like being in small town America a couple of generations ago, with folks doing whatever it takes to carry on, and get each other through.

In a sense, people are approaching it with a bit of a war-time mentality. We have come to understand just how hard it was on the British in the two world wars. The sacrifices were substantial and the resilience that it took to carry on, must have been amazing. So, dealing with yet another lockdown (all non-essential shops in Scotland were closed from March 2020 until mid-June, and again from December until April 2021) has gone down easier with the stoic Highlanders than I read about in American newsfeeds.

The dog and I still get out and take our walks, frequently at the local windfarm, but occasionally a bit further afield. Recently, when I took the car to a garage in a nearby small village of Reay for it's annual MOT (Ministry of Transportation) inspection (required annually for all cars more than 3 years old), we explored the local cemetery.

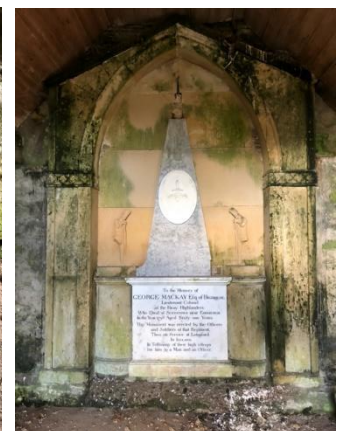


Entry was not the easiest thing in the world, as it is surrounded by a stone wall, and the steps are a bit awkward, as you can see.



Fortunately, there was also a small gate, since the dog couldn't do those steps very well. There was a small mausoleum, which I naturally had to explore.

The memorials inside crossed the ages. There was a tiny memorial to a 5 year old child who died in 1877 and a giant one that took up an entire wall, dedicated to a military officer who died in 1790.



There was one from 1691 and another one for which the date was obscured, but which the sign on the wall indicated was from the 15th century.



But the oldest memorial was a stone carved with a Pictish Cross, which would place it from about the 9th century. The stone obviously pre-dated the cemetery, but was from this location, indicating that it had been a burial ground for a very long time. It had been included in the walls of the mausoleum for safe keeping.



Like many villages around the Highlands, Reay, was devastated by losses in the world wars. Although never more than a couple hundred in population, look at the long list of names on the village's war memorial from WW1 alone.



Although we have just finished five years in Scotland, we had never been to downtown Edinburgh. That changed, even with lockdown, as Her Majesty's Immigration and Customs office requested our presence. So, we rode an empty train right to Waverley Station in the heart of old Edinburgh. Our visit afforded us an afternoon of wandering about a bit, visiting notable sights (all outdoors, since indoor venues like museums are all closed under lockdown). The memorial to Sir Walter Scott was a must. He is famous for not only his novels, but for convincing the English crown to again permit Scots to celebrate their national traditions, which had been banned for a hundred years.



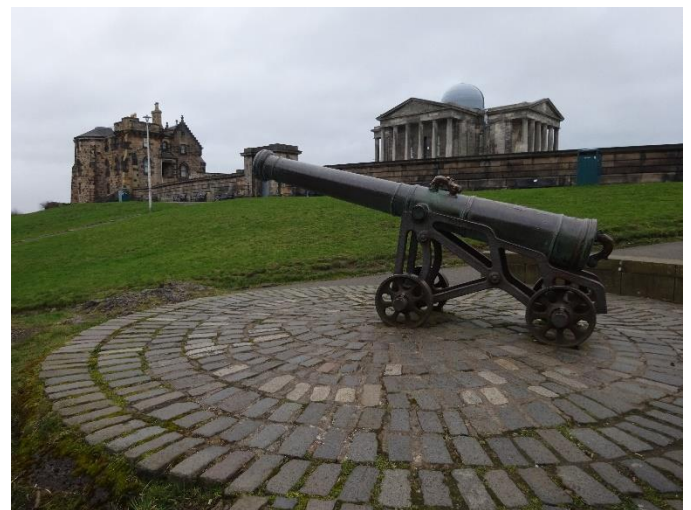
I mentioned we arrived at Waverley Station, which is the only train station in the world named after a novel – one of Scott's. The intricate carvings on the monument include 64 characters from Scott's novels.



Downtown Edinburgh, particularly around Princes Street Gardens, features many lovely old buildings, statues, and memorials.



The architecture is really quite impressive, as are the monuments and fountains.



And Edinburgh castle sits atop Castle Rock, watching over it all. The watchtower at the very right of this photo is actually only a few meters away from where I stood to take the photo, and was built to allow watchers to view the graveyard below during the nighttime hours to keep grave robbers from performing their intended thefts.



My favorites were the statue to James Maxwell (how often does one see a major city monument to a scientist and engineer) and the monument to British hero Admiral Horatio Nelson. It is designed to look like an inverted spyglass of the type that ship captains would have used to scan the horizon in Nelson's day. What appears to be a cross at the top, is actually, upon closer observation, a mast and yardarm as would be found on an old sailing ship.



I mentioned that we had to make the trip because of a customs and immigration issue. That was because we had been here long enough that we were eligible to apply for an Indefinite Leave to Remain (the

UK version of what in America would be called Permanent Residency). AND IT WAS GRANTED !!!

So now we are at liberty to remain in the UK without an ongoing string of visas. You are all welcome to enjoy a wee dram of your finest Scotch Whisky in celebration with us. We certainly did.

*"Did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I would choose to end my days in."*Benjamin Franklin

A Small Story of Hope

It was a cold and rainy day in early November when we decided to put up the Christmas Tree. We had decided "why not." The news stories were all speculating about how Covid would begin to spread again due the relaxing of restrictions over the impending Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays in America and what we in Scotland simply call the Festive Period. It was becoming obvious that our hoped-for trip to America for Christmas was going to be cancelled, just like our planned spring trip had been. Once again, our hopes for a holiday and a visit to the kids in Indiana were going to be undone by the pandemic. So "why not" decorate for Christmas.

And thus, the boxes of ornaments and decorations came in from the garage and the tree went up in the conservatory. Somewhere between setting up the tree, and hanging the tinsel, I noticed a brown splotch near the top of one of the full-height windows. I assumed it was a spot of bird poop, as the bird feeders in the front garden are kept religiously filled, so as to keep the cats entertained as they watch from the conservatory windows. So, bird poop on our windows is not an uncommon occurrence.

Once the tree was up and the shelf decorations placed about the house, I performed the task of what Scots refer to as "hoovering the carpet." I once again noticed the brown splotch and decided to clean it off the glass. So once the house was done and dusted, I stepped outside with a towel to clean the windows. Afterall, the house had just been cleaned and decorated, why not the windows too. However, upon my arrival outside, I discovered that it was not a bit of

bird residue, but rather a wee snail that had apparently climbed high up the glass during the recent rains, and had attached itself when the temperatures plummeted.



In five years living here in the far north of the Scottish Highlands, I had learned quite a bit about snails. Here in Caithness, land snails are very common. A day working in our garden usually uncovers dozens. Turn over a rock, or pull up a weed, and expect to discover a snail hiding beneath it. I have come to appreciate the wee beasties. I have spent many relaxing moments watching one explore a potted plant or examining the most recent addition to the compost pile. Observing them extrude themselves from their shell, extend their antennae, and begin their slow exploration of their surroundings is quite calming. They also have interesting and lovely shells. I have quite a collection of vacated shells that I have picked up around the garden or on my walks.

Having become enamored with our local snails and having proved to my wife that they were not eating her Hostas, I have negotiated a truce between them, and thus snails now have free roam of our property. Thus, it was only a mild surprise to find Dasher, the Christmas snail, at the top of our window. We had recently had torrential rains, and land snails can drown in very little water. So, finding them climbing to dryer ground is not unusual. And in cold weather, land snails attach themselves to a seemingly safe surface and seal

themselves against it, hibernating until warm weather returns.

I pondered removing him and relocating him to the family of snails that I knew to be hibernating attached to the back side of a bag of mulch that was leaning against the side of the garage. But I was afraid that breaking his seal from the glass, after he entered hibernation, might leave him dangerously exposed. So, we decided that Dasher could stay on the window if he wished.

From his perch he watched us have Thanksgiving dinner. And Christmas dinner. And holiday zoom calls with the kids in Indiana. He joined us in watching BBC discuss the aftermath of the US election results, and the unbelievable night of the attack on the US Capital Building. He shared our concern over the rising coronavirus numbers in both countries, and our optimism when the vaccines were released. He observed the impact of Brexit and the controversy over Prince Harry and Megan. I doubt that any snail on the planet had so much exposure to world news and current events. Wendy taught her math classes, and I taught my engineering ones, from the table in the conservatory. So, Dasher was exposed to everything from the Pythagorean Theorem to Newton's Laws of Motion. He seemed to quietly take it all in.

Dasher clung to that window as the grass turned brown in winter's cold, and green again come spring. The snowdrops bloomed beneath him in the garden. He did not move as the Caithness winter winds topped 80 miles per hour, as they usually do in the bleakest parts of the year.

As spring began to arrive, and I started to see other neighborhood snails make a reappearance, I began to think that maybe Dasher had not survived the winter, despite the warmth radiating through the glass. Then, one day I noticed that the brown splotch was gone from the glass. I went outside to see if perhaps his seal had finally broken and he had fallen to the garden below. But upon closer observation, I noticed a thin trail of slime indicating that he had made his way down the glass to seek a spring breakfast in the garden.

Life had gone on. Despite Covid. Despite lockdown. Despite governments in turmoil. Despite everything. Sometimes it is the small things that give you hope for a better tomorrow.