

THE BEST OF 25
YEARS OF
**THE SCOTTISH
REVIEW**
ISSUE 3

CRIME AND
PUNISHMENT
DEVOLUTION
TRAVEL



ICS BOOKS

The Best of 25 Years of the Scottish Review

Issue 3

Crime and Punishment
Devolution
Travel

Edited by
Islay McLeod

ICS Books

To

*Kenneth Roy, founder of the Scottish Review, mentor and friend,
and to all the other contributors who are no longer with us.*

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CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Dancing with a stranger

Magnus Linklater

1996

For a girl out on the town, those nights at the Barrowland were unforgettable – the thumping rhythm of the band, music you could really dance to, the feeling of letting yourself go, the sweat running down the back of your dress, the excitement of not quite knowing how the evening would end. And the innocence of it all, a carefree atmosphere you don't find these days, with all the talk of drugs and violence. You could saunter from the pub to the dance hall, spend the evening with someone new, leave on your own if a man didn't take your fancy, or together, if you liked the look of him. To dance with a stranger, to set off with him in a taxi, to go alone with him, arm in arm up a deserted close, was that danger? Or was it just delight?

Jeannie Williams is in no doubt. Those Glasgow nights of 30 years ago are memories to be treasured. She and her friends went dancing most weeks, to the Barrowland near Glasgow Cross, or to the Plaza, the Albert, the Locarno, or the Majestic, where bands like Dr Crock and his Crackpots would belt out the current hits like *Yellow River*, *Butterfingers* or that new one by Marmalade, *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da*. Glasgow was dancing-mad in those days. The Barrowland was a bit down-market of course, a bit scruffier than the others, but still good fun, and Thursday was over-25s night – 'winching night' some folk called it – when the music was just that bit softer and the men were just that bit more sophisticated, and you were maybe on the lookout for something more than dancing. So what if some of them were married; everyone knew the score, you didn't ask too many questions, and not everyone was there just for a 'lumber' as the Glasgow slang has it. You went to let your hair down.

There was talk, of course, about the dance hall murders, the two poor girls, Pat Docker and Jemima McDonald, who had been found dead, both of them strangled after a night at the Barrowland, Jemima less than three months ago, Pat just last year. There was a police notice pinned to the board, with a drawing of the man they were looking for, but Jeannie and her younger sister Helen scarcely glanced at it as they headed for the dance floor that Thursday night, 30 October 1969.

Helen Puttock was 29, slim, brunette, 'a lovely girl' as Jeannie remembers her, popular with her friends, fun to be with, but strong-willed and used to having her own way. Born Helen Gowans and brought up in Partick, she was one of four children whose parents had separated and whose mother now lived in Scotstoun.

A Forces wife, her husband George Puttock was in the REME and stationed in Germany. That night, however, he was back on leave. When Helen suggested that she and Jeannie should go to the Barrowland he objected strongly, and the result was what

he calls 'a tremendous fight'. In the end, however, Helen had her own way and George stayed behind to babysit for their two children. Jeannie says there was nothing unusual about that in those days. 'It wasn't odd behaviour to us,' she says. 'When I was with my husband, I went out my night, he went out his night. He knew where I went. Maybe you'd call it trust, I don't know.'

Only one other person expressed doubts about the two girls going to the Barrowland that night. Their mother, Jean, reminded them of the two murders and suggested they should stay at home. But Helen was unimpressed. 'Can you imagine anyone trying anything on me?' she said, and she showed her mother her fine, long nails. 'She had a temper,' remembers Jeannie. 'We used to fight as children, and she always used her nails.' George agrees: 'She was strong physically. She always said that no-one could get the better of her'.

And so Helen and Jeannie went out together. Helen wore a little black dress with short sleeves, black shoes and an imitation ocelot fur. Jeannie chose a skirt, a blouse and a dark green coat with a sheepskin collar. They left Helen's flat at 129 Earl Street at 8.30pm, caught a bus in Dumbarton Road and headed for a drink or two before things livened up at the Barrowland. They got off at Glasgow Cross at about 9pm and went into the Trader's Tavern in Kent Street which was doing a roaring trade. Glasgow pubs in those days tended to be grim places. They were for serious drinkers – 'connoisseurs of the morose' as Hugh MacDiarmid put it – mainly men, standing at the bar trying to get as much alcohol into them before closing time at 10pm sharp. But that night the Trader's Tavern had its fair share of Barrowland customers getting into the mood, since the dance hall itself had no licence. Helen and Jeannie, with their two friends, were able to have a few whiskies and a bit of 'crack' – swapping gossip and the odd risqué joke – before walking around the corner for the dancing.

Entry to the Barrowland cost them four shillings each. Inside, the noise and the heat were already intense. Round the walls of the main ballroom stood the hopeful and the unattached. On the floor were the dancers, loosening up. It did not take Jeannie long to join in. A man calling himself John asked her onto the floor, and though she quickly decided that he wasn't exactly her type, he was an excellent ballroom dancer and they made a good couple, concentrating on the foxtrots and waltzes they both enjoyed. He came from Castlemilk, he said – probably married, thought Jeannie – and they enjoyed each other's company enough to stick to each other for the rest of the night.

Jeannie first noticed Helen's partner when she saw a tall, neatly dressed man, with well-cut hair, leaning against a pillar eyeing the talent. He was, she thought, definitely a cut above the usual Barrowland crowd. As she watched he went up to Helen and asked her to dance. Soon they too were in the thick of it, and though he didn't show much skill on the dance floor – more of a shuffler than a proper mover – he seemed to suit Helen who was clearly enjoying herself. As soon as there was a break in the music, she brought him over and introduced him. 'This is John,' she said. Another John. Only this time, a

John that Jeannie would remember and think about again and again in the years to come.

It is not surprising that detectives later set great store by Jeannie's evidence. Her memory is clear, her eye for detail sharp, her ability to recall it direct and to the point. Joe Beattie, the superintendent assigned to the Puttock case, called her 'a wee sharp Glesca woman' and it's a fair description. These days, sitting back in her neat house in Ayrshire, immaculately turned out in black leggings, polo-neck sweater and scarlet knitted waistcoat, she is just as precise as Joe Beattie remembers her. Her recollections of Helen's dancing partner were to fix the image of 'Bible John' in the minds of Glaswegians for a generation, and they have not varied to this day.

She can still see him, tall, about five feet 10 inches, aged between 25 and 35, with sandy hair, cropped and rounded at the back. He had a fresh complexion, and – a vital detail – two front teeth which overlapped, with one back tooth missing. She remembers this particularly because her eyes only came up to the level of his mouth, so when he talked it was his teeth she noticed. He was dressed in a well-cut brown suit, a blue shirt and a dark tie with thin red stripes, which could have been something military. On his feet he wore short suede boots, and he had a badge on one of his lapels. Jeannie noticed that he kept fingering it.

His manners impressed her. Unlike the rough types who tended to hog the dance floor at the Barrowland, Helen's John was courteous and attentive. He stood up and held her chair when she took a break from dancing: he was 'well-spoken', with a West of Scotland accent, and a marked absence of swear words. Jeannie guessed he wasn't married. There was something about his well-turned-out appearance, the ironed shirt, the care with which his tie was knotted, which suggested, in her words, 'a mummy's boy'. She has since begun to wonder if he might have been homosexual, but in those days people were not as worldly-wise as they are now, and the thought never even occurred to her at the time.

It was something else, however, that stayed fixed in her mind, an incident so unusual that she still remembers it vividly years later. After the dancing had ended, as it always did, at 11.30pm, she and Helen paid a last visit to the cloakroom, then joined their two Johns in the foyer. Once there, Jeannie decided to get some cigarettes from the machine, but when she tried to use it, her money stuck; nothing would shake it loose. Helen's John suddenly became angry. 'Where's the manager?' he demanded. 'I'll get this sorted out.'

What was unnerving, says Jeannie, was the intensity with which he said it. Nobody ever chose to pick a quarrel with the manager of the Barrowland, whose broken nose and scarred cheek indicated that he was not the kind to put up with trouble. But John was not intimidated. He proceeded to berate him, demanding the money back. His manner was cold, imperious, authoritative, the kind adopted by a man who expects to be obeyed. Finally, as the argument grew more heated, the manager angrily suggested that he should take the matter up with his assistant who was in charge of the cigarette machines. John agreed abruptly, and set off downstairs.

As he did so, he turned and said something that Jeannie was also to remember: 'My father says these places are dens of iniquity. They once set fire to this place to get the insurance money and then they did it up with the money they got'. Dens of iniquity was a funny phrase to use, she thought. It was not the last one, however, which would carry with it a whiff of religion and the vague sense that this man called John carried within him some deeper impulse, one that could transform irritation into something more sinister.

Jeannie remembers one other detail before they left the dance hall. She noticed him reach into his side pocket and produce a piece of paper to show to Helen. She never saw it properly, but later thought it had been pink in colour and looked somehow official. A military pass perhaps? An identity card? She tried to get a proper look but he tucked it away, warning her not to be a nosey parker. The cigarettes forgotten, for the time being, they set off for the taxi rank at Glasgow Cross, a few minutes' walk away. At this stage, Jeannie's partner left them to catch a bus from George Square, leaving the threesome standing in a taxi queue. It was the last anyone saw of a man who would have been a vital witness. 'Castlemilk John' as he was later referred to – probably married, probably concealing his night life from his family – has never been traced.

The journey from Glasgow Cross to Scotstoun took about 20 minutes. Inside the taxi the conversation was stilted. John seemed withdrawn, irritated perhaps that Jeannie was still with them. The two girls chatted away, plying him with questions that he answered tersely. He mentioned that he played golf, that he had a cousin who had just got a hole in one. He said he disapproved of married folk who went to the Barrowland and talked about 'adulterous' women. He seemed to have enough local knowledge to know about the bus fares and the Blue Train services to the north of the Clyde. He recognised the high flats in Kingsway, and said his father had once worked there. And he was mean with money. When Helen asked for a cigarette, he reluctantly produced some which he had all along, despite Jeannie's attempts to extract a packet from the machine at the Barrowland. When she asked for one, he thrust the packet at her, then put it away without taking one himself. Clues, clues, clues, all of them half-noted at the time by Jeannie, who was beginning to take against this rude and arrogant man.

It was just one other throwaway remark which suggested the nickname by which he would be forever known. Jeannie remembers it still: 'We were talking about some conversation we'd had, and I asked him which team do you support, Celtic or Rangers? And he said, "I'm agnostic". I was embarrassed. "What does agnostic mean?" I said to myself, so I asked, "Does that mean you're an atheist?" And that's when he came away with something, a reference to the Bible. I canna remember the exact words but it was something from the Bible. That was the only time – it was the papers that gave him that name'.

Later, as detectives took her over every detail of her conversation with Bible John, they narrowed the quotation down. They thought it was probably the story of Moses hidden

in the bulrushes from Exodus, chapter two, and Jeannie concedes that it might well have been that:

And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him.

The taxi pulled into Earl Street. By rights, Helen and John should have got out first, since Jeannie lived further on at Kelso Street. But John insisted it should be the other way round. So Jeannie left them, calling goodnight. She guessed that Helen wanted to spend more time with her stranger-friend. The driver was ordered to carry on. The taxi slid into the night.

Could Jeannie, should she, have done something more? She thinks for a long time. 'Not really,' she says. 'In those days there wasn't a lot of money for taxis, so you shared them. I never even thought about it at the time. He could have been going the same way really. And don't get me wrong, he was an attractive man, not the usual Barrowland type...' Her voice trails away.

At 2am on Friday 31 October, a late-night bus picked up a man described by passengers as dishevelled, with a red mark under one eye, not far from the Earl Street area. It dropped him off at the junction of Dumbarton Road and Gray Street. It was the last positive sighting anyone has ever had of the man who must have been Bible John.

Helen's body, half-undressed, but still with her fur coat on, was found at 7am that Friday by an Earl Street resident called Archie McIntyre, out walking his black labrador dog behind the tenement block. He saw it huddled against a drainpipe in one of the back courts, just a few hundred yards from the Puttocks' home at number 129.

She had been knocked unconscious and strangled with one of her stockings. Her face was bruised and from the grass and broken dock leaves stuck to her feet and her neck it was clear that she had put up a fierce struggle. There were signs that she had tried to escape from her killer by scrambling up the railway embankment that ran along the back of the gardens behind the close. She had been caught, struck with some heavy instrument on the head, and dragged back along the grass, before she had succumbed. The killer had left with some of her clothing. Her husband George, alerted by the arrival of police and ambulance men, came forward to identify the body.

To some detectives, and to most of the newspapers, as soon as they had learned the details, it seemed clear that Glasgow had a serial killer on its hands. All three women had been to the Barrowland on the night they were murdered; all three were young mothers; all three had been sexually assaulted; all three had had clothes removed from the scene. *THE DANCE HALL DON JUAN WITH MURDER ON HIS MIND* screamed one headline. *HUNT FOR THE LADY KILLER* ran another.

There was speculation that the killer was a sexual deviant who had turned against the women when he discovered that they were menstruating. 'In some men who are sexually immature, or have been rejected by women in the past, the menstrual period can trigger

deep-seated feelings of disgust,' said a forensic psychologist. 'It can give rise to a sense that a woman is somehow unclean.' Just as Jack the Ripper and other killers had inflicted terrible revenge on women for psychological reasons that lay hidden in some unfathomable past, it was felt that Bible John must be a man similarly flawed.

For Superintendent Joe Beattie, Glasgow's most experienced detective, such theories were less important than the business of finding the murderer of Helen Puttock. Within days of discovering her body, he had launched the largest murder hunt that Scotland had ever seen. Witnesses were tracked down and questioned, police began door-to-door inquiries, nearby military establishments and naval ships were checked, officers were sent to join the dancers at the Barrowland every night in case Bible John returned to the scene of the crime.

And Joe Beattie took Jeannie in painstaking detail through her story. From the start he was impressed by the sharpness of her memory, and by the clues which she revealed in the course of many days' investigation. Her description of Bible John's teeth, for instance, was so precise that Beattie had a special cast made, which he carried around with him. On many of the subsequent identity parades, the first thing he looked at were the suspect's teeth.

It was Jeannie's evidence about Bible John's appearance that gave police their best lead. On the day after the killing she had walked into the murder headquarters at Glasgow's Marine Police Office and been shown the drawing of the man wanted in connection with the murder of Jemima MacDonald. It was a colour version of the one she had glanced at that night in the Barrowland. This time she reacted with shock. 'My whole inside just churned,' she says today. 'To me the resemblance was there. When I looked at it – it's a funny feeling, it's like something turns in your guts, you know, like a wee kind of shiver or something. When I saw that, I thought, God, that's a terrific resemblance. Whether he's done the rest of them, I don't know, or is it just coincidence, I just don't know.'

The artist who had drawn it from the descriptions of witnesses, Lennox Paterson from the Glasgow School of Art, was called back and started afresh from Jeannie's description – the short haircut, the sandy-colour hair, the chiselled, handsome features. When he had finished, even Jeannie was impressed. 'That man should get a medal,' she said. 'That's *him*.' Later, she would help compile an Identikit image, using the latest techniques just then being developed. There is a remarkable similarity between all impressions of the wanted man. George Puttock remembers Jeannie's certainty about her recollections of Bible John. 'She told me that no matter where or when she saw that guy, she would recognise him,' he says. 'I will get him, George', she used to tell me.'

Within hours of the new pictures being issued, the calls flooded in. It seemed that half of Glasgow knew Bible John. He'd been seen getting off a bus, sitting in a cafe, dancing at the Palais. Often it was the same, innocent man – one suspect was 'identified' so often that police finally gave him a pass to prevent him having to report to the station each time he was spotted. Every sighting was checked out. Jeannie attended over 300 identity

parades as well as being taken to factory gates, pubs and cinemas to take a surreptitious look at some possible suspect. 'I would have been so sure if I'd seen him,' she says now, 'but I never did'.

The veteran Glasgow solicitor Joe Beltrami, who attended some of these ID parades at the time, usually to represent the interests of a worried client, was impressed by Joe Beattie's technique – and by his confidence in Jeannie. 'Each of them was asked by Joe to show him their teeth beforehand. As soon as he'd look, he'd shake his head and say no, it's not him. The ID parade would go ahead, but he'd be pretty certain in advance that it wouldn't lead to anything. In those days the parade was done face-to-face with the witness. Both he and Jeannie are certain they never got the right man.'

There were some who bore more than a passing resemblance, of course, and Jeannie began to give them percentage marks. A 'good' suspect would get 70%. A few even reached 90%. But none scored the 100% that would have convinced her. She is as certain today as she was then that none of the men she saw was Bible John. At no point did her stomach churn in the way it did when she saw Lennox Paterson's first drawing. As well as the ID parades and the pursuit of every conceivable clue, police psychologists drew up a profile of a loner, possibly living with his mother, probably inadequate sexually, with no steady girlfriend.

But gradually the leads petered out, the calls died away. The file stayed open, but the Puttock investigation was called off. Joe Beattie, now in his 70s and far from well, with a perforated ulcer which condemns him to repeated hospital visits, still cannot quite believe that he failed to get his man. 'We should have picked him up in those first few weeks,' he says now. 'We knew so much about him...'

Joe is an old-style Glasgow cop, full of wry humour despite his illness, a mine of stories about the bad old days in gangland Glasgow. He remembers all the murders he solved, particularly the one where he insisted on going back to the scene of the crime one last time, searching it under the sceptical eyes of his detectives in the best Hollywood style, and uncovering a toe print which nailed the killer. 'The only case solved by a toe print,' he grins. But he's still mad with himself that he never found Bible John.

'Sometimes,' he says, 'you get the ones you shouldn't get and you don't get the ones you should. This was one we should have got. We knew so much about him. There he was, with his short haircut, his meticulous dress style, the patronising manner he had towards women. I guess he lived west of a line from Stirling to Lanark. He was either a serviceman or an ex-serviceman. That document that Jeannie never got to see – it could have been a military pass. Looking back, I would say we should have done more in following up the military connections, going to all the defence establishments. We just didn't have the manpower'.

Now, 27 years on, the Bible John murders are back in the news. Acting on new information, or perhaps more accurately, reassessing old information, Strathclyde Police made a new attempt to identify the killer. He was, they claimed, John Irvine McInnes, a former private in the Scots Guards, a sometime furniture salesman, who committed

suicide in 1980 at the age of 41. The name of McInnes is not a new one in the Bible John annals. He was in fact an early suspect who fitted the description given by Jeannie and who was actually in the Barrowland dance hall on the night of the murder. He was picked up and brought in for questioning within days of the murder hunt being launched. Although he was eliminated from inquiries, some detectives were left with a strong feeling he could be Helen's killer.

The product of a broken home, McInnes joined the Army soon after the death of his father, but left after only a year, returning to Glasgow where he married and had two children. For a time he seems to have held down a job and led a settled life, but he split up with his wife soon after the birth of the second child, a son. Although he came from a family with a religious background, he was also a gambler and a drinker who used to frequent the Barrowland dance hall regularly. His eventual suicide suggested a man who perhaps never came to terms with his unstable family background.

On the surface, then, he seemed a possible suspect. But there was a problem. When he attended an identity parade Jeannie simply didn't pick him out. What is more, she remains convinced to this day that he was not Bible John. She has now been shown the pictures of McInnes three times by police, some doctored to increase his age. She admits there is a strong resemblance, but that's all. The ears are too big, she says, and she simply does not get that shock of recognition she experienced when she first saw the drawing of the Barrowland suspect. There are other things that do not add up. As a married man, McInnes didn't fit the psychological profile of a loner. None of the clothes in his possession matched the distinctive suit, tie and suede boots which Bible John had worn. And he lived nowhere near Gray Street where the dishevelled man had got off his bus.

However, to some detectives, McInnes was still in the frame, and his name stayed on police files as a possible suspect; down the years local gossip linked him from time to time with the Bible John killings. Last year, the case was reviewed, along with others, when the police began transferring their files onto a computer database. The development of DNA tests had given them a new weapon in the forensic armoury, one that had simply not been around in Joe Beattie's time, and last year a debate began over whether Scotland should have a national DNA databank. The Bible John case, should it be solved, seemed to offer the chance, not just of clearing up one of Scotland's most intriguing murder mysteries, but of making the strongest possible case for Strathclyde to house a national DNA centre for Scotland.

The vital evidence is contained within a small stain of semen found on the stockings recovered from Helen Puttock's body. It was preserved, frozen and held by Joe Beattie's team in case fresh evidence ever turned up. It yielded a clear enough DNA pattern to suggest to a new generation of police officers that it might be worth looking again at the evidence against McInnes. They approached his family and asked if they would agree to tests. They found a close enough match to justify exhuming McInnes's body and taking samples from it to see if there were any similarities.

On 1 February this year, they went to the cemetery where he is buried, and reopened his grave, digging into the frozen turf with pneumatic drills and pickaxes. Carefully removing first the body of his mother who was buried above him, they took away the corpse for detailed examination. Two leading pathologists, Professor Anthony Busuttill of Edinburgh University and Dr Marie Cassidy, a consultant attached to Glasgow University, were present as the body was brought to the surface. Since then, exhaustive tests have been carried out to establish whether this was indeed the man who murdered Helen Puttock. If that could be proved, his links to the other murders might also be established.

One problem which emerged almost immediately was McInnes's teeth – or rather his lack of them. Detectives had hoped that they might be able to carry out dental tests. But when they examined his body they found that he had been fitted with dentures; so far they have not managed to trace any dental records. More seriously, the DNA tests have proved anything but straightforward. There was no immediate match. The testing procedure, it seems, is neither as clear cut nor as conclusive as it is sometimes portrayed. After unsuccessful tests in Scotland, the samples were sent down to Cambridge for detailed laboratory analysis. Five months after the exhumation, the tests have proven negative. Following private protests from McInnes's family, the bodies of McInnes and his mother have been reburied – and with them the latest, though perhaps not the last, attempt to solve the enduring mystery.

Meanwhile, Joe Beattie is trying to stay neutral on the McInnes affair. 'They havnae been to see me,' he says. 'Once you're yesterday's people, you tend to be left out. I don't mind. Good luck to them.'

Both he and Jeannie Williams say they would like the case to be cleared up once and for all. But both were always sceptical about McInnes. For one thing it would mean that Jeannie was not as reliable a witness as Beattie believes. Some police sources go so far as to suggest she had drunk too much that night to remember details about the man who went off with her sister. This she denies angrily. 'It's rubbish,' she says succinctly. The Barrowland, she points out, was not licensed, and two hours dancing is enough to work through the effect of the two or three whiskies she may have had before. 'They think it's him, I don't. That's all there is to it,' she says.

So does she believe that Bible John is still alive, still nursing memories of those nights at the Barrowland, those nights when some warped instinct turned adventure and delight into a frenzied attack and murder – those nights that put an end to the time of innocence?

'I don't think he's dead,' she says carefully. 'But I don't think he's here. I think he was just visiting Glasgow. I think he lives well away from here. I think there's a wife or mother who says, well he wasn't in Glasgow that night. But he must have been scratched by those long nails of Helen's. He must have been well marked, that's why I know somebody's covering for him.'

She shrugs and lights another cigarette. 'We'll just have to see...'

Insider

George Chalmers

1999

Arrested earlier this year by what looked like genetically modified cops, I realised that another prison term was inevitable. Disposal: 12 months for possession of half a kilo of cannabis. Prior to this, to complete a potty history, I had served two lengthy stretches for bank robberies – six years in the 70s and a 12-year sentence in 1987, eventually liberated on parole in September 1994. Stepping through that revolving door seems like you've never been away.

That old saw – the more things change the more they stay the same – is apposite when applied to life within the confines. Monotony is the thread holding together the fabric of an unravelling system. A good thing too. If every day were different – a 'fresh challenge' as unhappily reshuffled government ministers are wont to say – there would be no numbing routine to drift on. Every night, week, month, year would be spent wondering what came next rather than wondering where the past had gone. That's the way to handle time – looking back.

Sociopathy is a broad church and when pressed reluctantly into the role of 'Father Confessor' (I'm crowding 50) by culture-shocked first offenders, my advice is: not to think of 'outside' too much; emphasise the first year is the worst; and after that, it's one year at a time (sweet Jesus!). Many go on to find solace in religion. Unlike Frank the Crank.

Frank sprang to mind last week when a young guy jumped onto the anti-suicide net, arms outstretched, bouncing lightly with knees slightly bent.

'What are you doing, dafty?' a screw asked.

'Ah'm surfin' the net, boss, just surfin' the net.'

A mad grin split his face. That's progress for you.

Hawaii Five-0 was Frank's favourite programme. All day he Da-Da-Da-Da-Da'ed its theme, pausing only to say, 'Book him, Danno – murder one,' then laugh like a drain. Prison is the place for madmen, not legitimate lunatics.

Before prison, suffering from 'winter of discontent' redundancy, it's said that Frank brooded indoors for almost two years. One day he got dressed as if for work, made sandwiches for dinner break, poured petrol over his steel toe-capped boots, then stuck them in the fire, feet firmly laced inside. Arriving by chance on the scene, his wife doused the flames with the contents of a teapot and goldfish bowl. When police and ambulance arrived, he ate one of the fish, then punched a copper. At least he got it the right way round.

Found 'sane and fit to plead', Frank received three years for wilful fire-raising and nine months for police assault. Within months, he was admitted to Carstairs. Two years later

he ricocheted back to the nick. In those days, no psychiatric loopholes allowed disordered personalities an escape into an unsuspecting community. Released to incarceration, his fragile mental health deteriorated. Soon after, he did a flier off the top landing. A giant leap for mankind, Frank's crispy feet one jump ahead of progress. Years later, it struck me that his continuous theme-tune delivery resembled a musical SOS.

All human life is here, no it's not all doom and gloom. And in the midst of life, there are deadbeats and real characters. When Elvis died in the 70s, Big Razor McGrath emerged from his 'crypt' draped in a sheet singing 'A Dont'cha – Step On – Ma Big White Goon' with accompanying leg movements. Elvis devotees spent many days behind their doors, faced turned to the wall or buried in pillows with the unforgiving rigidity of an infant's headstone. Back then, no immediate counselling was available to distraught fans of the hamburger kind, no Coke cans or ice cream wrappers enshrining a solitary copy of *Heartbreak Hotel*. That particular form of mass hysteria hadn't been invented.

Unsurprisingly, it's impossible to swing a pisspot without hitting an innocent – typified by a solicitor captured in possession of 40,000 hardcore porn videos. Through his four-year sentence, he insisted they weren't his. 'I was only watching them!' he protested ad nauseam. Considering his feverish foraging for copies of *Hustler*, it seemed churlish to demur.

Middle-class professionals are a rarity in mainstream prison populations. They are usually chauffeured off to open conditions then released at the first suggestion of degenerative disease to further careers in naked duplicity. (What happened to Saunders? Is he better now?)

Labelled a 'professional criminal', I, and men like me, accept prison as an occupational hazard. There is no whinging or special pleading (and certainly no informing) as is the case with felonious fat cats or fulminating MPs impaling themselves on trusty swords of bullshit. Establishment striped shirts are great levellers. We all look the same until some open their mouths just wide enough to insert the other foot.

Foot in mouth disease is commonplace. Many a prisoner has been convicted on the testimony of a 'trusted' cellmate. Too often prisoners think sharing a cell means sharing a brain cell. The urge to confess can be seductive; resisting that urge stratifies criminals into an unwritten hierarchy of lowly cardboard gangsters and those equipped to carry a cerebral burden. If knowledge is power, the latter are undeniably powerful. The former, with inexpert folds and tucks, seek to fashion themselves into three-dimensional characters, but rarely surpass caricature. Bogus Cagneys strut the landings sporting 180-degree swaggers you could dry washing with, but are eventually considered nothing more than objects of ridicule with nicknames like The Godblether, Don Cornflakes or whatever else surfaces from the sobriquet reservoir.

My five-year hiatus found me ill-prepared to comprehend the extent of opiate abuse now rife throughout the system, brought about by prisoners' fears of losing remission for failing a drug test. Cannabinoids remain detectable in people's systems for up to, and

beyond, 30 days while opiates, especially heroin, can be flushed from the system in two or three days. And, as the vast majority of offenders are drug users outside, they either stop using benign soft drugs or make the step up (or more accurately, down) to heroin. So, when the Scottish Office heralds a 'downward trend in drug use in prisons', it really means a decrease in cannabis, not opiates. Many leave prison with a heroin habit whereas prior to incarceration they had been hash smokers or occasional stimulant users, i.e. cocaine or ecstasy.

The upsurge of poly-opiate abuse engendered by an ill-informed, arbitrary drug-testing programme has its roots in external attitudes. Significant shifts away from socially benign cannabis use to more addictive substances, mainly heroin, have had degenerative consequences on individuals and prison atmosphere. Cannabis was the most effective 'babysitter' known to prison staff. While acknowledging the illegality of hashish it surely cannot be prison policy to knowingly create heroin addicts in a meaningless campaign to extinguish cannabis. Hash-barons had a mellow attitude to debt collection and I've yet to see an angry prisoner on hash.

Not so with smack-dealers who must violently ensure collection to feed their own increasing habit. If authorities cannot stifle influxes of drugs to a closed community, how can a 'war on drugs' hope to eradicate introduction to an open society? Increased seizures only advertise increasing quantities finding a way into both communities.

One interesting statistic recently divulged that more people are killed every year in high-speed police car pursuits than of ecstasy consumption. If agencies of social control can't be relied on to respond safely, there's an argument for relevant educative training for police drivers and occasional space cadets alike. Apropos statistics – twice as many people die in chip pan fires than of ecstasy use, so perhaps we'll have the oven chip police crashing the door in to confiscate the *Crisp 'n Dry*.

Quality incarceration time depends on who shares your space. Not the easiest person to live with, the majority of my years have been spent blessedly alone. Your radio becomes your friend. And of course, books, those 'friends that never let you down' as I read somewhere. Occasional Feng shui desires soon dissipate when confronted with screwed-down furniture. Eventually you settle for what you have and personalise the cave as far as regulations allow.

One person I did enjoy sharing the eight by six space with was an ex-public school Oxbridge bohemian doing six years for manufacturing cosmic quantities of LSD. Unimaginatively titled The Prof, he equipped laboratories and masterminded distribution of enough acid to intimidate Timothy Leary. He introduced me to the intricacies of chess; the beauty of Vaughan Williams' *Lark Ascending*; subliminal imagery in dark Victorian novels; and a hilarious psychedelic justification for the existence of cricket. Toothless, as a 'consequence of a bit of a fracas with a second cousin over croquet', he had ample room for additional plums. He possessed an accent to cut industrial diamonds to shreds.

He prefaced the most ordinary questions with 'I say, George old sport' and used 'spiffing' without a trace of irony or self-consciousness. He was a hoot! And also one of the most dangerous men I'd ever met. His violence, similar to his merchandise, was synthetically manufactured to fit the occasion. Understanding its ridiculousness enhances the lethal consequences. Public schools must operate on certain individuals to eradicate all semblance of compassion, effectively implanting snobbery with violence as an alternative. An example may illustrate his psychology more vividly.

We were next-door neighbours occupying single cells a year or so after we'd been two-ed up together. Single cells were a privilege and mark of time served. On a weekly basis, prisoners purchase 'luxuries' from the canteen which The Prof called 'the tuck shop'. Items such as civilian soap, shampoo, tobacco, biscuits and – his favourite – cocoa. 'It reminds me of plumped-up pillows and Nanny Catherine,' he once recalled, regressing to infancy in a twinkling. 'Peterhead Revisted,' I could have countered if I'd been aware of all that 'trouble with Sebastian' in an unfamiliar novel. He was an odd fish. Soon to mutate into a hammerhead.

'Peter' thieves are lowlifes who steal from other prisoners' cells. Carefully they select a victim and approach an unguarded cell. They had mistakenly labelled The Prof a 'bam' due to his accent. Their relative newness to the prison left them ill-informed. They tend to advertise themselves if you know what to look for, but The Prof's head was full of other things. Today it was Pink Floyd and a kaleidoscope. Discovering his stuff had gone west, he asked if I could 'detect the culprits' and suggest what to do. 'What's the usual form?'

Counter-measures are legion. One involves snapping a couple of razor blades, then pushing the pieces beneath the surface of civilian soap. (Toiletries and soap are prime targets.) Once it's disappeared from your cell, you just wait until screams are heard from the showers or blood starts to drip from offending mitts at the communal sinks. There they are, red-handed.

'The quickest way is to slam the door on their hands,' I advised.

'Capital,' he said. 'Capital idea.'

And that's what we did. We walked in on these two bandits lid-deep in cocoa and McVitie's chocolate biscuits (plain chocolate, mind), a feat they'd never experienced outside, never mind inside. The Prof left them more traumatised than England cricketers.

A few of us chipped in some goodies to replenish his stocks. He was visibly moved by this gesture, referring to it periodically in his stream of consciousness letters for some years. The last I heard he had re-established himself in London, providing internet services no-one considered feasible. This guy is an anorak with attitude.

Re-reading this offering only highlights what's been left unsaid. Maybe just as well. Observing the constant ebb and flow of 'loyalty card' recidivists washing up like mutant waves on Dounreay shores isn't any kind of life. I'm no better, only different I think. For

those constructed of irregular grain, the outside world resembles a journey through an art gallery without knowing what you're like. Prison, for many, is an escape to a place where living portraits really do follow you everywhere, then tap you for a roll-up. In essence, it's akin to dropping through a trapdoor. You're fine as long as you keep falling.

Alice's year

Fiona MacDonald

1999

Alice is 23. At the age of 22, she pled guilty to a charge of serious assault with endangerment to life following an incident in which she stabbed her husband. Her baby son was four months old when she was sentenced to two years in prison. She served 12 months and is now back living in her Castle Douglas home. I asked her what had happened after she was taken down...

One of the Dumfries Prison vans came and all of the relevant paperwork was signed. You're cuffed, put in the van and transported to the prison and put through reception. You are asked: You are so and so? Your date of birth? Your address? Does anybody know you are here? Is there anybody you want contacted? Do you need to see a social worker about any problems – children or anything to do with your house? Then they fill in their questionnaire. Have you had any mental problems? Have you had any depression? Do you have any drink or drug problems? Do you have any self-mutilation problems? Then they ask you very bluntly: did you expect to get the jail? (If you expected to get the jail maybe you've got drugs hidden on you.) Have you been in before? Are you scared? Is there anybody you need to be protected from in here? Do you feel suicidal? (As if you are going to admit it if you did.) If you cry or look very distressed when you are in reception, you're usually put straight into the suicide cell which is just called the sui cell – which is absolute torture because there is nothing in it.

At Cornton Vale you get your strip search in reception in a special booth. Dumfries is different because it's a male prison with a female unit, so in Dumfries you're taken into the female unit for your strip search.

I think I wasn't scared because I'm a very laid back person and I was trying to be very rational, and I had probably watched far too much *Prisoner Cell Block H*. I knew that there are tens of thousands of people in prison and they live in there for years and they come out alive. I knew that people couldn't really touch me with the officers around me. I had my protection in a way. And I thought *this* will be an experience... We'll see what *this* is like...

Obviously, everybody was expecting an admission on the first night of my sentence. They'd heard it on the radio and they were all expecting this old woman to come in. The description on the radio was 'a Castle Douglas woman has been sentenced to two years for stabbing her husband...'. You naturally assume from that that they must be a reasonable age.

So I was brought in, and it was lock up time. All the girls were locked up and I was put into cell two which had one girl – or woman, she was 26 or something – in it. She was a

pretty heavy woman. Big. You know? And she was what they would call on *Prisoner Cell Block H* 'top dog' at that time. I remember they opened the door and she was sitting on the bed reading a book and she just looked up and she had quite a tough face and half of her head was shaved completely and the other half was in a bob of about the same length as mine.

So I went 'Hiya' and I jumped up onto the top bunk and she just went 'Mmm...'.

About 10 minutes later, after a brief chat about what I was in for, there were shouts from next door: 'That woman in yet?' 'Aye.' 'Whit's she like?' 'Eh, she's a'right. She's no daft anyway.' So when they saw me they said, 'God, we thought you were going to be an old lady'.

I got on pretty well with them. There were a couple who were real troublemakers and caused nasty trouble in the unit. But because the Dumfries unit is so small there was only ever one fight between the girls while I was there. Any other fights were between the girls and the staff. There were certain girls that were known to fly off the handle quite easily with the staff. It would start with maybe just a disagreement and the officer would say: 'Right, get behind your door'. They wouldn't go and eventually the staff would have to press the riot bell. Usually when things go that far you get carted straight to Cornton Vale. Cornton Vale is used in Dumfries as a scare tactic. Most of the females in Dumfries are local so they have never been to Cornton Vale, but they've heard the stories. They've heard about the suicides, and it's a scary sounding place because it's *big*. So they're very, very wary of it. Most of the stories are just talk, but nasty things do go on up there.

Because it's just a wee unit, the female prisoners in Dumfries have a very easy time. We had to go and pick up our meals from the cookhouse and because they were cold by the time we came back, we had a little kind of open plan kitchen as part of the TV area. We would keep things like bread in there, and the girls were always sneaking bread and tubs of margarine back to their rooms. Once or twice the staff brought in cake mixes and let us make cakes. It's just a lot nicer [than Cornton Vale]. The bad side is that there are no jobs for females so they get a cell wage of around £3 a week, which is basically just for keeping the unit clean. Now, tobacco is £2, and they all smoke and they've got to get their skins [cigarette papers]. They want sweets and toiletries, and things are just as expensive as they are on the outside, but they've only got their cell wage. A lot don't have families visiting and putting in PPC, which is personal money – you are only allowed £2.50 of that.

So there are no jobs, there is no money, and there are no educational facilities. Nothing at all. There was a report in the paper and it said that Dumfries female unit offered absolutely nothing; the females sit around and watch TV all day. And that's exactly what we did. But because I was doing a longer sentence, I did do a course [and, unusually, she was eventually allowed to work in the office].

There is an education unit for the males, but they are not funded for the females. If there is a female doing a substantial sentence though, they will try to offer something. It took me six months of my sentence – six months of chasing them – to get started. The

people in charge of education have to make sure that if a female takes it up, she is going to stick to it because they have to find the money for her out of their budget.

Visits are brilliant in Dumfries. Weekends are reserved for young offenders and people who have families far away. So as a rule you have weekday visits, and you can have a visit every weekday for about three-quarters of an hour. In Cornton Vale, you're allowed two a month.

I was sent to Cornton Vale [where she spent a brief period] as a punishment. I was sentenced at the end of July and in October my appeal was heard and they rejected it. They said no – my sentence stood. The following day I was worried about my son and I said to my mother please do not hand him back to my husband. It wasn't a fair situation to put my mother in. I had been checking with my lawyers about what would happen if she wouldn't hand him back. My mum said the police would turn up. And I said, the police cannot make you hand him over, they can only advise you. But she said no, she would have to hand him back. I said right, fine! And she said 'You *are* going to hand him back to me at the end of this visit, aren't you?' 'We're not discussing this, mum.'

I refused to hand him over and one of the female officers came up and said 'Right, come on Alice'. She had seen that I was backing away from my mum. I was practically sitting on the lap of a young offender.

I told them I didn't want to cause a scene, I just wanted them to take me out of there. They took me into a room with the baby because I wouldn't let anybody near me, and the unit manager eventually was called in. And supervising officers. And nobody could get near me. I said I had checked with my lawyer and they could not remove my child from me by force and they were saying yes they could. I just kept stepping away from them until I was standing in the corner of the room with my back to them. My son eventually fell asleep. This went on for about an hour.

My mum was so distressed she had to leave and the social worker was called in. They said, 'You're obviously very upset about this. Just hand over the baby and we'll all talk about it'. But when they got the baby, I was grabbed. The baby was taken by the social worker, back to my mum. And I was cuffed straight away to my escort whilst they sent staff through to the female unit and told the girl I was sharing with, 'Get Alice's stuff. She's going to Cornton Vale'. And the whole unit was in an uproar because they knew what I was going through and one of them knew horrific stuff that had happened to her in Cornton Vale and she didn't know if I would cope.

I sat in the van and I thought what a pathetic mother I was because I had let them take my son from me so easily. And I thought that I'd fight in Cornton Vale to get him in with me. They had a mother and baby unit in there. They have one in Dumfries but now they won't let babies in because they have constantly changing prisoners of different stabilities. But when I did my week's remand they had a baby of four months and there was no trouble. The girls' morale was boosted. I said I would even stay in my cell 24 hours. But they said no, they just don't allow babies any more.

A lot of families are shocked when they phone Cornton Vale to speak to staff, or to try to find out what's going on, or how to do things. They just can't find anything out. My mum was phoning to ask where I was, and how I was coping, and how I could get my son in, and everyone she spoke to said they didn't know and that she should speak to this person, or speak to that person.

Obviously, there are a lot more people at Cornton Vale and everything is much more fast moving. They have separate 'houses' – Younger house, and Bravo house, and a remand house. Fortunately, I have never been in the remand house because apparently it is absolutely insane. It is full of very young girls who are very stupid. There is a lot of violence, a lot of bullying going on, and a lot of drugs. Part of the system there is to keep you moving around to cut down on this, but it doesn't really work because eventually you have to end up somewhere.

Younger house, or Yankie house as some call it, is usually where you are sent and you go through an introduction week. You learn about the 'listeners' – they are prisoners who have done a brief training and they come round and if you're getting bullied, or you feel suicidal, or have any problems at all, you can speak to them. A listener will come and sit down and listen to your problem and it is absolutely confidential.

The first thing they [the listeners] said was, 'Right, how long does it take to kill yourself? Okay, stop guessing. Three minutes. So if any of you ever think about it and you're doing it as a cry for help, and you think "I'll press my buzzer and dangle", do remember how many times you've pressed your buzzer and as a member of staff has come along the corridor, someone has come to her hatch and said, 'Miss, Miss, want to give me a light?' You're dead by the time they get to you, so don't bother'.

The other thing they said is, 'It's completely confidential. If you say to us that you're going to kill yourself, don't think we are going to say to anyone, "Keep your eye on her", because we won't. We don't discuss what you tell us with *anyone*'.

They said they'd had a couple of girls who they thought weren't telling the truth about that, and they're dead now.

It's a lot easier for girls to get their medication up there [in Cornton Vale]. They are brought down a bit more softly. I think there are groups as well where they can talk about things. They've got their work placements and they've got their TVs in their cells up there, so time goes a lot faster for them.

There is a lot of lesbian activity, and there is forced lesbian activity. A lot of the girls are just 'jail bent', they are not really lesbians.

Bullying is not supposed to be accepted – obviously that's what they say, but it does go on and you have to be strong to turn round and tell an officer that you are being bullied. The idea is then that the bully will be put into the bully unit which has no TV and they have no recreation. They go in for a set period of time and if they do it again they go back in for twice as long.

A lot of girls don't see prison as punishment. It's part of their lifestyle. I have said to

girls, 'This isn't a punishment. I have not lost my life because I did not live life. I looked after my child, I ran around after my husband. I didn't do anything productive. I didn't work. I was living on benefit. I was getting money for nothing. I just sat and watched TV – that's not really living'.

Prison didn't teach me anything. I would have been better doing community service – something that made me go out and do something for nothing. I said this to some of the girls and this girl turned round and said, 'Sod that. I'm happier getting a sentence. That way when I go out they haven't got a hold on me'. Another girl, and her friend agreed, said, 'Jail's my life. If I didn't get the jail I'd be dead'. She said, 'I go out, I do my drugs, I steal so I can get more drugs, get caught, get the jail. When I get the jail, I'm clean and I get good food. I build my body back up so that when I go back out I'm ready to start again'.

I asked her why she went back on [drugs]. She said, 'I've nothing else to do. I *can't* do anything else – I've got a criminal record'.

These girls get stuck in a system of life which they find acceptable and doing anything else is going to be far too hard. There is no help for them. Apart from me and one other girl, everyone I met in prison was in for drug-related offences. Shoplifting for drugs, selling drugs, caught with drugs – whatever it was, it was drug-related. Most of them had been in children's homes throughout their lives and they all had health problems – the biggest seemed to be asthma and bad backs. They were all from dysfunctional families. It was only me and one other girl that came from backgrounds that would be thought of as good – we didn't have any smoking, drink or drug problems.

Drugs are really bad everywhere and you don't know how bad they are unless you are involved with people who move in those kind of circles. My mum and her friends will have no idea how bad drugs are at all. They're everywhere. In this area they are bad here in Castle Douglas. Stranraer is horrendous for heroin. Heroin is the big one just now that everybody has got, but Stranraer is the worst obviously because of the ferries. Dumfries is bad for it as well – there are kids going round robbing people on the street. Yeah, heroin is the worst drug out just now. Then it would be cocaine, but heroin is the nasty one and it's grabbing hold of all the drug users just now.

There was some bullying for medication going on in Dumfries. Dumfries doesn't like handing out lots of medication and the girls are always trying to get things like sleeping pills because of their drug problems. They are taken down very quickly on methadone, which is a substitute for heroin. They whinge incessantly about this but at the end of the day, they inflicted it on themselves. They don't like it when people say, 'Face up to it. It's your problem. It might not be very nice coming off it, but you shouldn't have taken it in the first place'.

They always want medication so anybody who is on medication and who isn't a drug addict, gets bullied to hand over their medication. And just being asked for it is enough to scare some girls into handing it over, because they'll ask again. 'Did you not get it?

Why did you not get it?' If you get asked, you feel very, very threatened. What are they doing to do? If they've got the guts to ask, they've got the guts to do more. A girl I knew in there was a very nice girl but the stress of the prison meant she didn't know how to respond around people any more. She didn't know how to cope with things and a girl who was a bit of a nasty case went in to her and said, 'Right, save your med for me tonight'. She said, 'Oh I can't. I really need it'. And she did really need it to sleep because of the stress she was under. This girl said to her, 'Aye, well, ah'm rattlin'. Ah need it'. Rattlin' is coming off heroin.

I happened to walk into her cell after the girl left and she was sitting shaking and her eyes were full like she was going to cry. She wouldn't tell me at first what had been said.

'Did she hit you?'

'No.'

'What did she say? Does she want something?'

'Yes. She wants my medication.'

'Well, you're not going to give it to her.'

'I have to.'

'You do not have to. The staff stand beside you when you take it.'

'Yes, but they [other prisoners] will do something. They'll create a diversion.'

Which is exactly what happened. You get taken up for your med and you will have to open your mouth so that a member of staff can check there is nothing left in it. But it's easy to hide pills in your mouth – or some girls hold them in their throats and cough them back up once they get back down to the unit.

On this particular night, just as she was about to take her med, the girls started shouting as if there was a fight. The staff got distracted so she just had to hide it and give it to them. Whether it's soggy or not, they don't care.

This girl had been broken down to such an extent that she was unable to say no. She was probably 10-plus years older than these girls. They were just young girls, she was an adult woman but she was completely falling apart. It was the terror of the unknown.

I wasn't on medication. I don't even take paracetamol, really.

Stamps, tea bags, sugar. If you didn't hand them over all hell broke loose. You have to hide everything because unless you are willing to go out and punch somebody in, and get sent to Cornton Vale where it's all on a bigger, nastier scale, whatever you have is going to get nicked. The bizarre hiding places you find for chocolate and stuff... The best one is to pull out the bottom drawer of your chest of drawers and there's a wee gap where you can stick it all on the floor.

Because I'm quite laid back, it was okay. What's really bad is when you are panicking and freaking out about things and you feel you really can't cope. It took me three months to accept my sentence. In my first three weeks I did get very, very worked up and the only way I felt I could control it and not cry hysterically was by biting on my hand or my arm. My arms were going black and blue and the staff were keeping an eye on this. I

didn't eat much, but I don't eat that much anyway. The meals were not always that great, and the guys [male prisoners in the kitchen] don't know how to beat any air into a sponge, that's for sure.

There was one female prisoner in there who never ate one meal – not one – because she had seen another prisoner spitting in the food, and that prisoner had hepatitis. So she thought the male prisoners could be spitting in the food, and they might have anything. She lived on sandwiches and yogurt and fruit for a year and a half.

Anne Frank and the prisoners

Paula Cowan

2009

Anne Frank? Wher's that going on?

Shed One, starts Thursday, are you gone?

A thinks a will, but whit's it about?

It's a wee Jewish lassie who wrote in a book.

Extract from *Ode to Six Million* by Gary Friels

Last month HMP Kilmarnock, the first prison in Scotland to be built under the private finance initiative, became the first Scottish prison to participate in the Anne Frank Prison Project. Organised by the Anne Frank Trust UK, this project was founded in 2002 and aims to educate prisoners and young offenders about the Holocaust and the life of Anne Frank, alongside encouraging them to respect themselves and others.

This combination of knowledge and skills is at the heart of lifelong learning and poses many challenges for individuals who have spent a large part of their lives opting out of education. In partnership with the Workers' Educational Association, prison education staff integrated the Anne Frank Exhibition into its literacy project. They wanted to reach out to prisoners who did not normally engage in education and hoped that the Anne Frank exhibition would stimulate interest and develop literacy skills in a less obvious way than traditional approaches.

One requirement of participation in the Anne Frank Prison Project is that a group of prisoners is trained by the Anne Frank Trust as guides to explain the exhibition's panels to visitors and answer their questions. This presented additional challenges. Firstly, the Anne Frank Trust refers to this group as a 'team', a concept which is difficult for individuals who are likely to have little or no experience of communicating in a close-knit group, and of helping each other to achieve a common goal.

Secondly, showing people round an exhibition requires confidence as well as an ability to speak and respond to visitors. Would volunteers be able to communicate what they had learned in an engaging way to an audience? And finally, as volunteers, they could drop out from the group and the project, and at any time. Would there be enough volunteers to sustain the exhibition until it ended?

Once the exhibition was booked, volunteer guides had to be identified. These consisted of individuals whose ages ranged between 21 and 60, and who were either interested in education and/or this subject, wanted a challenge, or did it 'just for something to do'. While some were well-informed of the Holocaust, others did not know

anything about it or Anne Frank. They soon began to research the Holocaust and the Second World War, and to write their reflective journals.

Research conducted by the volunteers revealed an unusual close link. They found that methadone originated in Germany during the Second World War as the war had necessitated an alternative painkiller to morphine be found. They read that scientists at the I G Farben Company had synthesised this opiate (later called methadone) in the late 1930s, and that it was never used to treat pain during the war as its analgesic benefits were not realised until a few years later. They found this of particular interest because many of them had experienced drug dependency and methadone. One volunteer took up a staff member's suggestion of collating music to accompany visitors while they went round the exhibition. This involved research into the music of the Third Reich, songs that came out of the camps and klezmer music.

Guest speakers Henry and Ingrid Wuga spoke to the volunteers to assist with their research. German-born Henry and Ingrid had come to Britain on the Kindertransport just before the war had broken out. They spoke to the newly formed group of 11 volunteers about their experiences as child refugees, and about their families, many of whom had not survived the Holocaust. They listened while Henry told them why he was sent over by his parents to Britain when he was 14 years old and why he was interned in the Isle of Man (although under the statutory age of internment), as a Category 'A' enemy alien during the war. Volunteers carefully read Henry's old German passport with the 'J' stamped on it in purple and 'Israel' printed as his middle name – the 'name' assigned to all Jewish males.

Volunteers' questions were wide-ranging and searching. One asked if Henry had a German and a British passport. Henry replied 'No' as he did not want to have dual nationality. Another asked if he felt hatred towards Germans after the war. Henry replied: 'You cannot carry hatred with you as it will destroy you'. Ingrid added that she had not forgiven the Nazis as her aunts and uncles were honest people who were murdered in the camps. Further questions focused on their views on Jewish prisoners who helped the Nazis, and on why the Nazis picked on the Jews. In expressing his gratitude of thanks to Henry at the end of the talk, one volunteer announced: 'I'd nearly come to jail just to meet you sir.'

For two weeks these volunteers took more than 100 fellow prisoners and their families, prison staff and students from Cumnock College round the exhibition. Visiting an exhibition is not a normal activity for most prisoners and this project, organised by the Scottish branch of the Anne Frank Trust UK, gave them a chance to experience information in a way they could easily relate to.

Working in pairs, the guides helped each other, and each interpreted Anne Frank's experiences in a way that was meaningful to them. Some underlined key words on prompt cards to assist them in their remit. Others added a personal perspective. For example, one guide began by focusing on the year of Anne Frank's birth, 1929, as that

was the year that his mother was born. This personal approach had a powerful impact on visitors. Visitors commented that guides were articulate, enthusiastic, well-informed and interesting. Additional creative talents that emerged from the volunteers were the choice of music that played to set the atmosphere for the exhibition, and the writing of the poem from which the extract at the start was taken.

The Anne Frank Prison Project surpassed everyone's expectations in the quality of knowledge that was consumed and demonstrated by the volunteer guides and in their commitment and interest. Every volunteer who signed up to be a guide stayed the course which is not normal practice in this environment. As the exhibition fades into the past, these volunteers may now decide to finish writing their reflective diaries. Many would have shared Anne Frank's feelings that 'writing in a diary was a strange experience for someone who has never written anything before'. Yet some are continuing to write and a culture group that aims to bring educational activities to the whole prison community is now being planned.

She took her last breath handcuffed to a guard

Kenneth Roy

2013

There is even a doubt about her name. She was convicted as Sharon Harkins, she appealed against her conviction as Sharon Harkins, but in death she become Sharon Harkin. Of this, however, there is no doubt: when she died of cancer in ward 26 of Stirling Royal Infirmary, she took her last breath handcuffed to a prison guard.

I have been unable to find a precedent. It is possible that Sharon Harkin – I will go with the last version – is the only woman in the history of modern Scotland who has died in hospital in handcuffs. It happened on 11 January 2010, but was not reported at the time. It is only being reported now, and only in this magazine. She was 47 years old and had been an inmate of Cornton Vale women's prison in Stirling for just over four years. She was a lifer serving a minimum of 12 years for murder.

Before her imprisonment, Sharon was a familiar figure in a sub-culture of alcoholics and drug abusers who frequented the lanes and underpasses of Glasgow city centre. She was known to the group as Vodka Sharon. She was attracted to younger men and it seems that at least one, James Carslaw, was attracted to her. Another in her circle, a neighbour in a grim block of flats in the Gorbals, was nicknamed Old John. His real name, according to the judicial records, was 'John Diver or Divers'; there was the same curious indifference to identity.

Sharon was platonically fond of Old John, who was no more than 60 years of age. One night she and Carslaw went to his flat for a late-night drinking session. All three eventually collapsed into sleep. Sharon awoke to find Old John making a sexual advance. It was the Crown's case that both the visitors then set about the predator, repeatedly striking him on the head and body before fleeing the scene with some of his possessions. Doctors testified that he may not have died immediately.

A few days later, as the body of John Diver or Divers lay undiscovered in Norfolk Court, Sharon Harkin met another of the group, a heroin addict named Ann O'Brian, in a lane close to Central Station. Ann was looking for drugs, her body was rattling, and she was in no mood to hear Sharon's halting admission that she and Carslaw had gone to Old John's flat, that the night had ended in violence, and that she was afraid to return to his flat. O'Brian told the police that Sharon had 'always been part of the toon centre drinkin' mob, and as such gets into some states'. Sharon allegedly volunteered to Ann O'Brian that 'me and ma boyfriend done John in'.

This confession, noted by a police officer, was essential to the securing of a conviction. In the absence of much else against her apart from the undisputed fact of her presence in Old John's flat, it was evidence that Carslaw had not been the sole assailant; that the pair

had acted in concert. But by the time the case came to trial four months later, O'Brian was no longer in a position to repeat the confession to a jury: she was dead. Sharon's defence submitted unsuccessfully that there was no case to answer. Three years later, when the appeal court had a second look, counsel again argued that a confession based on hearsay, from a heroin addict desperate for a fix, should have been inadmissible. The judges disagreed; the conviction stood.

By November 2009, Sharon Harkin was losing weight and, according to her cellmate, a fellow lifer named Hilda Robertson, was vomiting so persistently that a bucket was put in the cell and the door had to be kept open. It was thought she might be suffering from an abdominal infection. Her condition continued to deteriorate and, in December, she was admitted as an emergency to Stirling Royal Infirmary. She had an advanced tumour which had spread from the colon to the liver, but which had still not been conclusively diagnosed when she died a month later.

Earlier this year, at a fatal accident inquiry into her death, an expert medical witness, Dr Nat Wright, criticised the delay in referring her for a surgical opinion. He agreed that earlier intervention would not have saved her life, but maintained that it might have alleviated the symptoms and spared her physical distress. The inquiry rejected these criticisms and exonerated the prison medical staff. The sheriff, Fiona Tait, did concede, however, that her level of pain was 'arguably greater than that recorded in the medical records' and that she had been 'gravely ill'.

It was this gravely ill woman who continued to be handcuffed in hospital until the moment of her death. The relevant questions are: did she present any danger to herself or to anyone else?; did she present a risk of flight? Considering her terminal condition, who would argue that she did? But there would have been a way of disposing of these questions and, in the light of the answers, judging whether the authorities acted responsibly or lawfully. The questions could have been put to the private security company employed by the Scottish Prison Service. They could have been addressed directly to the guard or guards responsible for handcuffing her.

Neither the company (Reliance) nor its unidentified employee or employees on ward duty on 11 January 2010 was called to give evidence at the fatal accident inquiry. They were simply not cited to attend. As a result, the inquiry was denied any opportunity to examine the person to whom Sharon Harkin was handcuffed when she died or to investigate the company's risk assessment of the patient. More astonishing still, Sheriff Tait did not regard it as her duty to challenge the inexplicable failure to call these witnesses. Instead, she was content to declare in her judgement that 'it would be unwise and inappropriate to comment on or make recommendations on such operational matters in the absence of evidence. Accordingly I decline to do so'.

The sheriff should have been aware that the death of Sharon Harkin in handcuffs was more than a mere 'operational matter'. She should have been aware of the near-certainty that the treatment of Sharon Harkin breached the European Convention on Human

Rights. She should have been aware, too, of Sir John Mitting's recent judgement on this matter in the High Court in England. Here is his uncompromising conclusion:

There is a point at which a prisoner's risk of escape or of danger to the public were he [sic] to escape must be considered in the light of his medical condition. Where it is impossible for a prisoner to pose any risk due to ill-health or debilitating treatment, handcuffing will breach article 3 because it is inhumane, degrading and disproportionate to the needs of security.

As he wrote that gender-specific passage, perhaps it did not occur to a wise judge that the prisoner might be a woman. Perhaps it would have strained Sir John Mitting's credulity to imagine a case in which a woman who was 'gravely ill' and confined to a hospital bed would be handcuffed at the point of death.

But it happened in Scotland – without so much as a paragraph in a newspaper recording the fact, far less a thorough investigation by a court of law.

If it is true that a society should expect to be judged by the manner in which it treats its prisoners, what does the manner of Sharon Harkin's death say about Scotland? What does the subsequent inquiry say about Scotland? The state has a moral imperative, to say nothing of a formal legal obligation, to account satisfactorily for the death of people in its care or custody. It has failed to do so in this case. It has left important questions unanswered. It has neglected to summon vital witnesses. Did Sharon Harkin count for so little?

Sharon Harkin: born 8 June 1962; died handcuffed, 8.23am, 11 January 2010

The last man to be hanged in Scotland returns to haunt us

Kenneth Roy

2014

A substantial doubt has always existed about the conviction of the last man to be hanged in Scotland, 21-year-old Harry Burnett. Documents in the possession of the *Scottish Review* increase that doubt. It is now clear that a vital witness was not called.

Here, briefly, is the background. Thomas and Margaret Guyan were married in 1957. Five years later, Margaret met a new admirer – Burnett – and went to live with him in Aberdeen. Emotionally immature, obsessively jealous, Burnett took to locking Margaret in the house. On one of the rare occasions she was allowed out alone, she met her estranged husband, a merchant seaman, and agreed to go back to him.

'Margaret, Margaret, you are not going to leave me,' cried Burnett when she announced her intentions. Later that day, he burst into the house of Margaret's grandmother and when Guyan opened the door Burnett shouted, 'I've got you now,' and shot him. He then reloaded the gun.

To stop him shooting others in the house, Margaret said she would go with him wherever he wanted to go. He stole a car from a nearby garage and drove off at high speed towards Peterhead with Margaret in the passenger seat. Burnett asked her to marry him. She agreed. When they were stopped by the police, 'he did not look right in the head,' according to Margaret. 'His eyes were staring out of his head.'

The Crown gave a one-dimensional view of the case with its 'sordid background of a sailor's wife being unfaithful to her husband when he was at sea', and of 'the lover with whom she consorted being unable to bear seeing his mistress's favours being given elsewhere'. But the case was more complex, and more troubling. There was no doubt that Burnett killed Guyan. But what was his state of mind at the time? A special defence of insanity was lodged.

Burnett's mother testified that her son had tried to commit suicide some years earlier when his then girlfriend deserted him, and that her brother and father were both in mental hospitals. It was left to Ian Lowit, a consultant psychiatrist who had first treated Burnett after his attempted suicide, to provide expert evidence in support of this devastating family history.

Lowit believed that Burnett fell into the category of a psychopathic personality as defined in recent mental health legislation and that he should be detained for compulsory treatment in a secure hospital. But Lowit was unfamiliar with the adversarial nature of a High Court trial. 'I was completely torn to bits by the prosecution,' he said. 'I wasn't at all prepared in the onslaught I was subjected to. I felt they were trying to ridicule and minimise my evidence.'

In an interview with the BBC many years later, Bob Middleton, a senior local councillor who attended the trial, recalled having been disturbed by the attitude in court to Lowit's evidence. Middleton said the body language of court officials suggested they were pooh-poohing the psychiatric testimony. It seems the trial judge, Lord Wheatley, did nothing to discourage this behaviour. Wheatley's low opinion of psychiatrists was frankly expressed in his subsequent autobiography.

The jury returned after only 25 minutes, convicting Burnett of capital murder by 13 votes to two. Wheatley promptly donned the black cap for what would turn out to be the last time in Scotland, pronouncing the death sentence 'for doom', and Burnett entered the condemned cell in Craiginches Prison to await execution.

In the immediate aftermath of the trial there was a flurry of official activity. The Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Noble, called for the court papers and Wheatley prepared his own report on the case. He said he doubted if all the facts about Burnett had been presented to the court. Most unusually, the family of the condemned man and the family of his victim both appealed for clemency. But any hope of a reprieve was quashed by the disgraceful intervention of the Lord Advocate, Avonside, who urged Noble to stand firm for a political reason: he argued that a reprieve would play into the hands of the abolitionists.

On 15 August 1963, Harry Burnett was hanged. The event generated so little public interest that not all the Scottish newspapers troubled themselves to report it. Burnett was buried in the grounds of Craiginches Prison – and there his body has rested for more than half a century.

But the case itself will not rest. It now emerges that the psychiatric testimony of Ian Lowit – which, had it been accepted, might well have saved Harry Burnett's life – could have been corroborated by a more senior doctor.

We have obtained copies of psychiatric reports by Dr Andrew M Wyllie, physician superintendent of the Royal Mental Hospital, Aberdeen, who examined Burnett on two occasions after his arrest for the murder of Thomas Guyan. The first meeting took place in Aberdeen police headquarters on 1 June 1963, at the request of the Procurator Fiscal. It lasted an hour. Nine days later, Wyllie had a further hour-long meeting with Burnett, this time in Craiginches Prison before the trial.

Both reports came to the same conclusion. After the first, Wyllie wrote: 'The history of psychopathic behaviour might have to be taken into account in assessing his degree of responsibility'. After the second: 'From my examinations of Burnett I am of the opinion that he is a psychopathic personality'. Lowit, who was then working in the Royal Aberdeen Hospital for Sick Children, compiled a separate report based on a meeting with Burnett in prison in early June. Lowit concluded that Burnett 'may be regarded as not fully responsible for his behaviour'.

Remarkably, however, only Lowit testified at Burnett's trial. And when he did testify, he was thrown to the prosecution's dogs.

Andrew Wyllie had been physician superintendent of the Aberdeen Royal Mental Hospital for 20 years; he had been a major in the Royal Army Medical Corps, specialising in mental disease; he had lectured on the subject; he had written books about it. He was a physician of far greater experience and authority than Lowit. It is no insult to the other man to say that Wyllie's testimony would have counted for more and would have been harder for the Crown to attack.

Yet he was not among the witnesses. Why? We may never know. The defence papers are not available and most of the central figures in the case are dead. But the absence of so vital a witness does nothing to dispel the long unease about the conduct of this trial.

A few weeks ago, the journalist John Forsyth, who investigated the Burnett case for the BBC and continues to take an interest in it, asked the Scottish Prison Service if they had finally resolved the question of what to do with Burnett's remains now that Craiginches Prison has closed. He received this reply: 'At present, Mr Burnett's remains are still within the grounds of HMP Aberdeen and a final decision is still to be reached as to where he will be laid to rest'.

Fifty-one years have passed since the last man was hanged in Scotland. How much longer do they need?

Inside the Vale

Prisoner 65595

2016

The gate closes, the key turns; you are separated from everyone and everything you have ever cared about. This is reality. This is prison. You are alone, you are scared and no matter who you are... you have no idea what is in front of you. My name is 65595. That's my prison number but for me that is who I was and in some ways who I still am. I was a prisoner in HMP Cornton Vale, known as the vale of death, from 2000 until 2002, when I was released on parole.

In 2012, the Angiolini Commission on Women Offenders concluded that 'Cornton Vale is not fit for purpose' and recommended that '[it] is replaced with a smaller specialist prison for those women offenders serving a statutory defined long-term sentence and those who present a significant risk to the public'. The commission was formed after a report by the Inspector of Prisons in 2009 concluded that the prison was in a state of crisis. A follow-on report in 2011 noted there had been little change. So, seven years from the original report and four from the Angiolini report, the changes have begun and women prisoners are being moved from Cornton Vale to other units throughout the country.

If I am hopeful, this is a bid to improve the conditions and treatment of women prisoners, and if I'm a little cynical (which I tend to be), it's more likely that it allows the Scottish Government to say it is acting when really the situation will not change. I am not sure that the issues which have been highlighted will be resolved simply by changing the landscape.

Women in prison have a number of issues: addiction and mental ill-health are prevalent, their social circumstances make a return to a 'normal' life impossible, and they often have a history of abuse. This abuse may have stemmed from childhood and is repeated over and over again or it may have been a one-off incidence. None of these issues are resolved with a short stay in prison and in most cases they are not resolved with a long-term sentence. The reason is that prison is just that... prison. It is not a mental health ward and it is not equipped to deal with the situations that arise. That will not change with the landscape or the size of the cell or the number of prisoners. The Angiolini report made a lot of recommendations which, if all successfully implemented at the same time, *may* help, *may* make a difference, but let me tell you a little secret, something that only someone who has been there will know...

You will not change your life until *you* are ready to change it...

And that is the problem. Women don't know how to change it. They cannot walk away from the little family they have, the friends they have are like family, they know

that it's hard, they know it's what they are supposed to do but I have lived that life. I have been there. There is an inherent mistrust of all things, especially if things start to look too positive. When you have lived real life, you learn quickly not to dream and sometimes good things just look like that: they look like dreams.

The majority of the women I met in prison have had a difficult time, they have been in violent and challenging relationships, they have learned that even those they love the most can hurt them the deepest, from the mother who drank to the father who sold their body to his friends. They don't trust anyone – least of all someone who is there to lock them up every night, when there's a risk of something being 'written up' in medical notes or prisoner notes. They will not tell them their secrets, their fears... because 'fear is weakness' and 'no-one likes a grass'.

You may think I am being dramatic but in reality I am being pragmatic. Talking can get you killed, your family hurt, or make you live in more fear than you have ever felt; and fear can drive you crazy and can lead to crime. Alternatively, women prisoners will tell you absolutely everything... well, everything they want you to know. That can work to their advantage. They have learned from an early age to use their tears, their bodies, their minds to get out of situations. Even those with severe mental health issues will do what they can not to take responsibility, and it's not just authority figures.

At the time of my incarceration, the vale of death had a listening service of which I was part. This allowed other prisoners to talk to those who were 'at risk'. It was a valuable service and was needed but it was not a simple task... it could take many visits for someone to be really, truly honest about what was happening with them and that was only after they were certain that what they had told you wasn't going anywhere else. Trust is a massive issue. I have talked many times about how I still do not trust and despite my life changing so dramatically, I do not believe that I will ever have a 'normal' life, able to trust and believe in others.

The other issue I have with these reports, and indeed with my writing to you, is that when we talk about women prisoners we talk about 'them' and 'they'. The reality is that not every case is the same, not every prisoner has a drug problem or a mental health problem. There are those who just 'made a mistake' and there are those that in truth are fully aware of what they are doing... they want to get the most money the quickest way, they have limited skills and don't want to work for the minimum wage, long hours with no money, when they could be selling drugs or themselves and earning more than your average MP, so why would they? Because it's the right thing to do... well, right for who?

When I heard the doors were closing on Cornton Vale can you imagine my relief... my sense of freedom... my happiness that it was to close. Well, if you can, you would be doing just that – imagining. Because I felt none of those things. Instead, I felt just one thing. I felt incredibly sad. So sad that I sat for the best part of 20 minutes and stared at a wall. The other thing that can't be captured in reports is that, for those two years, Cornton Vale was my home and the home of other prisoners – in some way we were a

very large and very dysfunctional family. The vale was overcrowded, we were locked in our cells sometimes for 23 hours when it was short-staffed and, yes, we had to pee in the sink... even when the cells were shared! But....

When I was in prison I experienced life, not life as many people see it, not the reality that is shown on TV (the Kardashians wouldn't last a day), no – this is life in its rawest form, this is life as many will never see, life at its hardest with people just trying to keep their head above water and not drown in despair. It's hard to explain but I will do my best to...

In prison, you are surrounded by people who don't judge. They don't brand you – with the exception of women who hurt children (but that is a subject I'm best not writing about). In prison, people take you as they find you and often because your offence is written on the card on your door, you're just another person, someone else who's mucked up. I have received more judgement since my release than I ever did inside.

Yes, there are issues. Not everyone gets along, we don't sit around holding hands and clapping, but there is a bond, an understanding. One of my clearest memories is the day that a woman, dubbed one of the most dangerous women in Scotland, committed suicide. The woman in question was a LTP (long-term prisoner) and was known by almost everyone in the block, not because they were scared of her or because she was notorious. It was because when a new LTP came in she'd talk to them, she'd say hello, ask if they were okay and help them out. On the day she died, she was found by a young LTP (who later committed suicide). The block was so silent that day that, even when we went for dinner, the food hall was silent. Not a single noise... people weren't talking and the queue moved silently... some of those serving had tears in their eyes. The prison officers were watchful but respectful – they seemed to get it, everyone did, we had lost one of our own, someone had given up the fight and realistically there probably wasn't a person in there who hadn't felt like that at some point.

Cornton Vale may be filled with the most dangerous women in Scotland, but prison is alluring – it makes you feel safe, there are no bills, no responsibilities, you live simply as you have no real money, and there is no expectation for you to have more. Women return time and time again because when you get out you have to deal with life, people, responsibilities and sometimes it's easier to return to 'family' and a roof over your head.

The key turned, the gate closed, and I learned many lessons. Some good – never judge a book by its cover. Some bad – trust no-one. But I learned because I decided I wanted to change my life and I didn't want to go back to where I was. Do I think this would have been achieved with all the current proposals? If I didn't want to do it, the answer is no, because what these proposals will take is time and money and that's not something that is in abundance either at Scottish Government or Scottish Prison Service level.

The mentors, the additional support workers, the benefits helpers, the additional training for staff – it all costs money. Asking prison officers whose starting salary is £17,521, rising to a maximum of £28,891, to train and deal with the various mental

health issues prevalent in prison is unfair to both staff and prisoners. Just now I only see a change in scenery. What I don't see is a real change in attitude.

Soon the gate will close and the key will turn for the final time. Only then will we understand whether Cornton Vale was the problem or whether in reality the issues which have been highlighted are just diluted in quantity, spread over a wider area and of less notice because the reports will be on smaller units.

The truth about knife crime

Kenneth Roy

2016

A few weeks ago, two 10-year-old pupils of Dalmarnock Primary School in Glasgow – both from the same class – were caught carrying knives in the playground. The incident drew blood when one of the children, a boy, cut his hand to prove to other children that his knife was real.

Although we should not have to be reminded, it has become necessary in Scotland to state that possession of a knife is a criminal offence and not something to be brushed off as a minor misdemeanour. More explicitly, it is against the law to have with you in a public place, or a school, or a prison, an offensive weapon. In 2006, the maximum sentence for possession was increased to 12 months in cases heard before a sheriff and four years in cases brought on indictment.

Although both children in the Dalmarnock incident were over the age of criminal responsibility – in Scotland it is eight years – they were under the age at which they could be prosecuted (12). They could, however, have been reported to the social work department and referred to a children's hearing.

Instead, the matter was dealt with internally. Both children were sent home, but allowed to return to school the following day, accompanied by their parents, for a meeting with the headteacher. Other parents, shocked that the police were not called to the school, got in touch with the *Daily Record*, which asked Glasgow City Council (the local education authority) for an explanation. A spokesman for the council stated baldly: 'The pupils have been severely reprimanded'. End of story, it seems.

Only five months earlier, at Cults Academy in Aberdeen, a trivial argument between two 16-year-old boys had escalated into the fatal stabbing of Bailey Gwynne. At the High Court trial of his assailant, it emerged that in first year or early second year the accused had been reported to the headteacher for carrying a knife and received a warning. For reasons that are far from clear, the school was unaware that he went on carrying a knife – to the extent, according to some reports, that he was seen with knives 'maybe 25 times' before he used one on Bailey Gwynne.

There is a disturbing parallel between the Glasgow and Aberdeen cases: the apparent belief of two education authorities in different parts of the country that a criminal offence – the possession of a knife – is something that the school itself is entitled to deal with and that the schools in question felt no obligation to involve the police or the social work department. If these are more than random aberrations – if they amount to a policy sanctioned by education authorities – they effectively place schools above the law.

The failure to report such incidents has a second important result. It means that the

incidents are never recorded and thus fall outside the radar of official statistics, allowing the Scottish Government to perpetuate a myth about the incidence of knife crime. The SNP administration has repeatedly claimed, and taken the credit for, a dramatic reduction in such crime, boasting recently that the number of people under the age of 19 convicted of handling an offensive weapon has fallen from 812 in 2006-7 to 146 in 2014-5.

A sense of purposeful activity, accompanied by the familiar air of self-congratulation, was conveyed in an exchange in the Scottish Parliament in January, before the Gwynne case came to trial, between two nationalist MPs, Stewart Maxwell and Paul Wheelhouse, on the apparently remarkable decline in knife crime in the west of Scotland:

Maxwell: I welcome the progress that has been made so far... Does the minister agree about the importance of educating young people through initiatives such as the No Knives, Better Lives programme to ensure that that welcome reduction in crime continues? Will he reassure me that there will be no let-up in tackling the scourge of knife crime?

Wheelhouse: Absolutely. On the latter point, I reassure the member that we will not let up our efforts to tackle knife crime.

Nowhere in the matey duologue between the former Minister for Communities (Maxwell) and the current Minister for Community Safety was there any suggestion that the much-heralded 'progress' might be illusory and that the statistics might be grossly misleading; or that the administration's unrelenting efforts inexplicably do not include the placing of a duty on schools to report all breaches of the criminal law, including and especially the carrying of offensive weapons, not only to ensure that these incidents are properly recorded but to protect the children whose safety should be paramount.

A few weeks later, in the wake of the Aberdeen trial, there was an extraordinary statement from Jim Thewliss, general secretary of the body formerly known as the Headteachers' Association of Scotland, now ludicrously rebranded School Leaders Scotland. 'Schools,' said Mr Thewliss, 'exist within a society where there is a bit of a culture of carrying weapons. It would be wrong to say it's part of normal school life. But it is part of school life, and it does happen'.

If it is indeed 'part of school life', and the Scottish Government is as committed to 'tackling the scourge of knife crime' as it says it is, why is so little known about the incidence of knife crime in Scottish schools? Why do we have to rely on vague generalisations?

In a small country almost obsessional in its desire to monitor the behaviour of children and young people (as we see with the notorious Named Guardian scheme), it is odd that, among the many fact-finding exercises of dubious worth, there is such a paucity of information about the carrying of knives.

It is some years since the Scottish Government commissioned the last academic survey on the subject (the *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime*) and it was confined to a single city. The research was conducted so long ago that its results should

be treated with caution. Nevertheless, its findings continue to make enlightening reading.

Among 4,300 children of secondary school age in Edinburgh who took part in the survey, 12% said they had carried some kind of weapon by the age of 12; almost a quarter had done so by the age of 14. Four out of 10 children had carried a weapon between the ages of 12 and 17. Over the six years of the study, it was estimated that the children who took part in it committed 10,200 offences. 'It seems likely that very few of these incidents ended up in the official statistics,' concluded the study's authors. 'This highlights the hidden nature of this problem and raises questions about the quality of available data on which policymakers must rely.'

What has changed? The Scottish Government uses its own dodgy statistics to propagandise its message that young people no longer regard knife-carrying as 'cool' and that its preventative initiatives in schools are working. These assertions lack a credible evidence base. On the other hand, we have Mr Thewliss's statement that knife-carrying remains 'part of school life'; and the recent examples from Aberdeen and Glasgow of how warnings and reprimands, stopping far short of reporting breaches of the criminal law, are somehow considered sufficient to deal with a potentially lethal problem.

The former head of Police Scotland's violence reduction unit has voiced doubts about the value of the independent inquiry into the Cults Academy tragedy which has been set up by Aberdeen City Council. 'My heart sinks...' he is quoted as saying. 'It won't make a blind bit of difference.' The appointment of an experienced and well-respected social worker, Andrew Lowe, to conduct the inquiry and the broad scope of his remit suggests otherwise. We must hope that his report proves of deeper value, and gets closer to the truth of what is happening in our schools, than the suspect official narrative being peddled at Holyrood.

Crack central

Maxwell MacLeod

2016

I'm writing this essay lying in a four-poster bed next door to a drug dealer. Give me a ring if you want anything. Crack cocaine (we call it white), heroin (brown), marijuana lite or the more pernicious skunk. I run a tourist flat on Edinburgh's Royal Mile and I'm in it now. The bed's near the window. The dealer is outside, on the pavement.

How do I know that he's a drug dealer? Well I don't, but it's highly likely. Am I trying to glamourise my own and indeed his existence with these boasts? Not a bit of it. I can think of little less glamorous than the life of a drug dealer on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. It often involves lying under a greasy blanket on his own, or more often other people's urine, in the freezing cold and waking up in a panic every half an hour to make sure he hasn't been robbed.

I know. I have tried living on the street in three of the world's capitals and it's always been a hideous experience. Forget all that stuff about 'lifestyle choice', or 'they make a fortune from selling drugs' and 'they are only there because they want to be'. It's rubbish. I've met hundreds of street dwellers in America, Britain and Japan, and after their initial bombast they invariably reveal that they would rather be doing something, anything, else. Nobody wants to be on the street. It's not any mother's dream for their children.

The man by my bed will be having an awful life. Drunks will kick him, louts berate him, many will urinate in the doorway in which he tries to slumber. Others will do worse. I have reported on the homeless in New York and they had a phrase there that still haunts: 'A blow for some blow, a grope for some dope'. Dear God, there's more romance in a warm pile of dog mess than in the life of the homeless drug dealer on the Royal Mile. An exotic place to be? Aye. Like Hell. Literally.

This drug dealing on the Royal Mile has gone on for a long time. Researching this article, I came across a similar one by an *Observer* correspondent who, 14 years ago, was given the brief of finding out where in Britain he could buy drugs. On arriving in Edinburgh's Waverley Station he was told by his taxi driver: 'Oh go to the homeless on the Royal Mile, you'll have no problem...'.

Other than what I witness, which isn't much, I don't know how the drugs are distributed on the Mile but I know a man who thinks he does, and I trust him. Here's his description. And it's probably accurate.

According to my informant, who was brought up on a rough estate and who knows the Mile well, there is a senior dealer who hardly ever actually touches the stuff. He lives down by the parliament. He's the bully, the fixer, the enforcer. I know this man he

describes. I've seen him often. He would be a difficult man to love. In my less impressive moments, I am inclined to think that he has a face I would never tire of punching. But I'm not proud of that. I'm sure he has his own demons. Every day he gives his messengers small packets to distribute to the homeless. Sometimes they will take a quick hit early in the day to distance themselves from their lives. During the rest of the day, their begging cups will often be raided by the messengers who will leave them just enough to ensure they are back again the next day.

This is no harum scarum business. After so many years a sort of uncivil service has evolved, a system whereby few are at risk and the police know that any effort they make will almost certainly only catch one sorry soul with a minute amount. The fixer himself keeps himself high above all the nastiness. Other than that of his own private dispensing.

Any fool can diagnose a cold. Curing it is harder.

Having been witnessing this theatre of pain for over 20 years, allow me to recommend some medicine. Anything I recommend will be NIMBYism. I don't like people dealing drugs outside my window and am primarily anxious that they go away. For my own sake. But there is also surely a broader issue. This Royal Mile is one of the significantly iconic places in Scotland, a country that relies on its tourist trade to a very large extent. Plus, we would be doing no harm if we break that uncivil service. So what have I witnessed during those 20-plus years?

At the risk of hyperbole, let me say that I have seen a gradual collapse in good and a rise in the bad, and that this has created an environment in which evil is more likely to prosper. Gone from the Mile are the smart shops and the paternalistic policemen. Instead, we have over 30 tartan tat emporia and an overstretched centralised police force who will tell you, with some justification, that they have little time or inclination to lock up the poor wretches who only just manage to keep themselves alive by selling the odd handful of drugs so that they can grab a mouthful themselves and so escape the horror of their lives for a few hours. Let me briefly add that I know more than most that not every beggar is a drug dealer, that hundreds who have fallen through the ever-widening holes in our welfare system are being forced to beg for a few quid just to see them through. But that's not my story today. Walking down the Mile this morning before writing this piece I was drawn to the conclusion that the council have now let things become so out of control that there is an atmosphere that borders on the evil, and evil begets evil.

It's not just the wall-to-wall tartan tat shops. It's the buskers whose songs are now allowed to be amplified to over 140db so that hundreds who are trying to either work or sleep in their offices and flats hear them whether they want to or not. Bagpipers have been known to play here for up to eight hours in a single day. I'm amazed the SNP haven't stopped them. I sometimes dream of waking up English.

The shops whose unlicensed A-boards (I counted 21 this morning) clutter the pavements, the hideous street furniture and gaudy advertisements whose most blasphemous zenith is surely the one tacked onto a previously exquisite baroque church

that advertises, without irony, that money changing is now available inside the former temple. Jesus. Come back.

Dear Heaven, this is the Royal Mile. Our iconic masterpiece, our Eiffel Tower, our Empire State Building, our Taj Mahal, and we have let it become a living hell of shoddy shops, unsatisfactory copulations down side closes and unfettered commercialism. Isn't it time we cleaned up the Mile?

So here are changes I would like to see.

1) Let's give our police better rights to move vagrants on, and encourage them so to do. Mayor Giuliani's New York campaign against the homeless was far too strict but at least he had a vision, and it improved the lives of countless New Yorkers. It would dismantle the drugs chain on the Royal Mile in an instant.

2) Let's not have any nightclubs being allowed to be open after midnight if they are located within 50 yards of residential properties.

We were here first and the argument that we chose to live in the city centre doesn't hold water. Hundreds of people were already trying to live and work in the Mile when the council decided to allow nightclubs that remained open till 3am (one of the main reasons for the drugs trade) and to take away their rule that amplified music was illegal. Let's follow the example of so many other cities around the world and reintroduce that rule. Now.

Oh, and one other thing. If I finally lose my temper and get murdered in a fight with a busker, I don't want any bagpipers at my funeral.

Rape, and the men who get away with it

Kenneth Roy

2017

On a summer evening in 2015, a 12-year-old girl and her friend, a year older, went to the city centre of Edinburgh to meet up with mates. They succeeded in buying vodka and around 11.30pm descended on a fast food outlet in the West End.

Four hours later, the mother of one of the girls reported her child missing and the police, presumably aware of roughly where the group could be found, arrived on the scene. They spoke first to the 12-year-old, who directed them to the missing girl. They were unconcerned about the age of the witness. To these experienced officers, she looked a lot older.

Around 4am, the 12-year-old and her friend got chatting in the taxi queue to a young man, Daniel Clesiak, who was 19, and a friend of his. The four agreed to go to an impromptu party in the flat of Clesiak's friend. Clesiak understood from the conversation in the queue that the 12-year-old was 16. The taxi driver thought she might be as old as 20.

Clesiak and the girl paired off and had sex. She left the flat later in the morning without complaint and there was no suggestion that she was distressed in any way. Clesiak's life as a student continued normally. But then the girl confided in her sister that she feared she was pregnant. As a result of this confession, the girl consulted her GP, who encouraged her to inform the police. Clesiak was arrested and charged with rape.

The law of Scotland is clear: where a victim is under the age of 13, she is deemed to be incapable of giving consent. The law exists not only to protect young people from adult predators, but to protect them from themselves – whether they enjoyed the experience or not. The fact that, in this case, the victim willingly had sex is beside the point. It is no defence to say that you had grounds to believe that the person in bed with you was above the age of consent.

Clesiak could be considered unlucky: the girl was 12 years and seven months. Had she been five months older, the law would have allowed him a defence based on his 'reasonable belief' that his victim was 16 or over. Clearly this fact weighed heavily in the mind of the judge, Lady Scott, who heard the case in the High Court last week. Having viewed the CCTV footage from the scene, she too concluded that the victim looked older than she was. In the judge's opinion, the circumstances of the case were wholly exceptional and, although Clesiak had pleaded guilty to rape, she made the extraordinary decision to give him an absolute discharge. This means that, although his offence will be recorded as a conviction, it is a conviction without a penalty.

The outcome points to the need for a clarification of official guidance on sexual

offences. The Scottish Government's Sexual Health Scotland website is unequivocal: '...anyone having sex with someone under 13 could be sentenced to life imprisonment'. Logically, this should be amended to make it clear that if the person over 16 genuinely believes that the other party is 13 or over, the offence is mitigated by the precedent that has just been set.

There is, however, another issue in the Clesiak case that has not received enough attention: if, after a long evening of socialising, the girl was drunk, then she was incapable of giving consent regardless of her age. Two months ago, a young woman left 'devastated' by the Crown Office's decision not to prosecute two Scottish footballers, who had sex with her in a flat in West Lothian after a night out, sued them. In that case, the woman maintained that she was incapable of giving consent to sex because of her drunken state.

A judge in the Court of Session, Lord Armstrong, said he found her evidence 'cogent, persuasive and compelling' and awarded her damages of £100,000. But the footballers, though judicially condemned as rapists, remain at liberty. There are no criminal sanctions in a civil action of this sort.

Clesiak too is a free man. It is much too early to say whether the remarkable leniency he has been shown will send the wrong message to men in taxi queues in Scottish cities in the early hours of the morning. But the result should be viewed within a larger context: the rise in the incidence of sexual crime in Scotland and the disgracefully low conviction rate in the most serious cases.

While the figures for almost all categories of crimes are going down, sexual crime has been steadily increasing in the last half-century and is now at its highest level since category statistics first became available in 1971.

In 2015-16, 1,809 cases of alleged rape were reported to the Scottish police, yet there were only 216 prosecutions of which 104 – one in 18 of the original complaints and less than half of the cases brought – resulted in convictions. In England, the conviction rate is 57% of cases brought: also low, though not quite so deplorable.

Rape Crisis Scotland says: 'Rape is a crime which can take a great deal of courage to report. It is worrying that such a small proportion of reported rapes are ever prosecuted'. Perhaps we should not be surprised: it seems little has been learned from the landmark case of Carol X, whose brutal rape in the East End of Glasgow in 1982 went unprosecuted for two strongly suspected reasons: she was a prostitute and she was drunk at the time. Ultimately, the scandal of the Carol X case led to a successful private prosecution and the imprisonment of one of her assailants.

Had Carol X been 'asking for it'? Had the woman raped by the footballers in West Lothian been 'asking for it'? Had the 12-year-old in the taxi queue been 'asking for it'? Somewhere in the atavistic recesses of the public imagination, this irrelevant question continues to lurk. A quarter of a century after Carol X, the criminal justice system goes on betraying the victims of rape.

Polmont boys

Kenneth Roy

2017

I

Two inmates of Polmont young offenders institution have died within a few days of each other. They were Liam Kerr, 19, after an 'incident' of an undisclosed nature, and Robert Wagstaff, 18. Both were sentenced last year in the same sheriff court (Paisley).

Did they know each other? Were their deaths connected in some way? We can do no more than speculate. How did they die? Again we have not been told. What crimes had they committed? The authorities aren't saying and neither case crops up on an internet trawl.

The details are not so much sketchy as almost non-existent. The official statement from the Scottish Prison Service retreats behind the familiar mantra of 'no suspicious circumstances' (usually a euphemism for suicide), adding that next-of-kin have been informed and that 'fatal accident inquiries may take place in due course'.

May? Unless there has been an unobserved change in the law, they *must* take place. In cases of death in custody, there is no discretion. It is odd that the press office of the Scottish Prison Service seems to believe there is.

The story surfaced briefly on BBC Scotland's news website yesterday afternoon but by the evening it had gone. The newspapers have little to add. We shall hear no more of Liam Kerr and Robert Wagstaff until the obligatory inquiries, and we shall probably hear no more of them even then. Deaths in custody rarely excite much public curiosity.

I have a personal reason for mentioning these ones.

II

Many years ago, I went to Polmont as a visitor and hanger-on. I was about 10 years old. My father's company of strolling players believed in taking theatre to the people, and one night they took theatre to the borstal (as it was known in those days). I have long forgotten which of their repertoire of homespun comedies they inflicted on this captive audience, but I have never forgotten the unique quality of the experience as I watched it unfold from the wings.

In the packed recreation hall, the atmosphere was raucous even before the curtain went up. A loud cheer greeted the first appearance of the actors, whose every exchange of dialogue provoked uncontrolled hilarity. Struggling to be heard above the din, they were soon competing with an irreverent commentary on the implausibility of the plot from some wag in the stalls. It was chaos. It was anarchy.

The company, sweat pouring off their faces, battled on until the blessed respite of the

interval, when my father gave them a pep talk and propelled them back on stage for Act II. At the end of the ordeal, a roar erupted with thunderous stamping of feet. The ovation lasted several minutes until finally officers cleared the hall and the boys returned to their cells.

But the most remarkable part of the evening was still to come. Before the exhausted visitors boarded the company bus, they turned back to have a last look at Polmont borstal and saw hundreds of small faces behind barred windows waving them goodbye. It is one of the few outstanding memories of my childhood, and it has never ceased to fill me with pity.

I knew nothing then of what went on in borstals. The institutions were named after a town in Kent where the Victorians converted part of an adult prison into an experimental unit for young offenders between the ages of 16 and 21. In theory at least, it was enlightened penal reform. The children and young people were kept apart from the other prisoners and introduced to an improving regime of physical exercise, school lessons (a minimum of six hours a week of evening classes) and vocational training in such trades as sewing, bricklaying and hedge-trimming.

But it was a harsh regime: excessively so by modern standards. The day began at 6am with a brisk two-mile run followed by a breakfast of cold porridge, bread and jam and then a busy day of compulsory chores.

Photographs in the National Archives depict ferocious looking PE instructors yelling orders at boys in shorts. The strict discipline included the ultimate sanction of the birch, and among the inmates bullying was rife. No doubt it was also the perfect environment for sexual abuse.

In 1988, borstals were deemed to have outlived their usefulness and were replaced by young offenders institutions, many on the same sites. I wouldn't recognise Polmont if I went back. It has been rebuilt. It is now the largest institution of its kind in Britain, with accommodation for 760 inmates.

III

They don't birch them any longer. They don't march them on early morning hikes in the bleak midwinter or expect them to eat cold porridge or bark insults at them in exercise yards. A new block has been created with every modern facility, the degrading practice of slopping out ceased some years ago, and inmates are addressed by their first names.

Nevertheless the most recent report by HM Inspector of Prisons makes depressing reading. The chief inspector concluded that many of the staff regard Polmont as 'just another prison' rather than as a place of special needs. He noted the high turnover of senior management.

He found that too often offenders were 'still in their beds in the afternoon, having been up late the previous night watching TV in their cells,' that there was a lack of

incentive to take part in education or vocational training ('The regime appears to do little to encourage aspiration') and that younger offenders were offered even less access to purposeful activity than their older counterparts.

Of the 11 external work placements, only two were being taken up at the time of the inspection; training workshops were often closed; there was no opportunity to obtain the advanced-level vocational qualifications that would equip offenders for a useful life on release; and inmates were locked in their cells for long periods of the day and night.

It is extraordinary that the Scottish Government, with its many claims to running a humane society, should have allowed young offenders to fester in this way. For all that borstal was brutal, there was a kernel of good in it: the insistence on learning and work. Unaccountably that ethic seems to have gone. It may be time to rediscover and nurture it.

Meanwhile, two young men are dead and we don't know how – or, much more important, why.

Spouses who kill

Kenneth Roy

2018

The judicial decision to free a woman in Ayr who killed her spouse has been greeted with an outburst of sympathy on social media – for the killer. Susanne Wilson smothered her husband of 50 years, Henry, 'by placing a cushion over his face and holding it there with some degree of force, restricting his breathing until he died'. Disposal by Lady Rae at the High Court in Glasgow: a mere admonition.

In the public discussion of this exceptional leniency, no connection was made with another case of spousal smothering in Ayrshire, in the neighbouring town of Troon, the same year (2016). But the similarities are remarkable enough – and the outcomes different enough – to justify close examination.

In April that year, when Gail Whyte arrived at the house of her parents, Ian and Patricia Gordon, Mrs Gordon was in a state of distress, 'screaming and moaning'. Mrs Gordon had a history of anxiety and depression and a deep-rooted fear of hospitals. She also had a pulmonary problem caused by smoking, which she chose to believe had developed into lung cancer, although no doctor had ever confirmed the self-diagnosis.

For some reason – perhaps out of a misplaced regard for her feelings – there was no attempt by the family to seek professional help for her condition that day. By the time Gail Whyte left, there were signs of improvement: her mother was now 'settled and had stopped crying out'. At 4.30 the following morning, however, her father telephoned to say that she was 'away'. Then or later he told Gail that he was 'sorry' but that he 'couldn't see her in that pain'. A paramedic found him lying on the bed stroking his dead wife's face. The court heard that the act of smothering her with a pillow had taken about a minute.

Mr Gordon was originally charged with murdering his wife. His trial at the High Court in Glasgow had entered its third day when the Crown decided that he had not murdered her and accepted a plea of culpable homicide on the grounds of diminished responsibility – the defence's position from the outset.

Crown counsel explained that the trial would have continued had it not been for the evidence of Gail Whyte, who had spoken movingly of her father's devotion to his sick wife and of her mother's wretched health. It is far from clear why, during its extensive preparations for the trial, the Crown remained unaware of what the daughter was proposing to say in her testimony – and went to the expense of empanelling a jury.

When Ian Gordon appeared in court for sentence, the judge, Lord Arthurson, said that he had carefully considered 'the many supportive letters and character references' tendered on his behalf as well as a favourable social inquiry report. But he had decided

that 'in the public interest' a custodial sentence was unavoidable and jailed Mr Gordon for three years and four months. Despite its transparent leniency, the sentence was condemned by the popular press, the *Daily Record* splashing across its front page the headline 'Jailed for a final act of love'.

While Ian Gordon was smothering his wife with a pillow in the spring of 2016, a few miles away in Ayr another dedicated carer of a sick spouse, Susanne Wilson, was 'struggling to come to terms' with allegations of sexual abuse against her husband. Although she believed the allegations, which had surfaced the previous year, she went on caring for him. He was 70, suffering from chronic heart disease, and housebound.

In September 2016, Henry Wilson suddenly asked his wife to contact one of his accusers. After the call, Mrs Wilson was 'very angry' and hit him with a plastic jug severely enough to cause bleeding. Later, she went to visit a neighbour, deliberately leaving medication she had been prescribed in a place where it would be spotted by her husband. When she got back, she noticed that he had taken some of the medication and was struggling to breathe. She helped him to bed and as his breathing worsened, he said to her: 'Help me'. Mrs Wilson interpreted this as a request that she should help him to die. As Crown counsel put it: 'She describes feeling only compassion for him and thinking that this had to stop'. After smothering him, she dialled 999 and confessed to the police.

In this case too, the accused was initially charged with murder. But in this case the prosecution accepted the plea of guilty to the lesser charge of culpable homicide, again on the grounds of diminished responsibility, at an earlier stage. There was thus no need for a trial.

In July last year, Lady Rae deferred sentence on Susanne Wilson but made it clear that she intended to show mercy. She said that Mrs Wilson had been confronted with distressing information about her husband, that it was impossible to imagine the torment she had been going through, and that her mental state had 'clearly disturbed her decision making'. When the accused re-appeared for sentencing a week ago, the judge had little to add. Her sentencing statement ran to only 150 words – extremely brief in a case of such gravity, the taking of a human life.

What are the distinguishing features of these cases? Their differences are fairly minor: a pillow in Troon in April, a cushion in Ayr in September, a sick wife in Troon, a sick husband in Ayr, two devoted carers, each so mentally disturbed that they were judged to be not wholly responsible for their actions. Yet, one accused went to jail for three years and four months, while the other walked free with the best wishes of the judge.

Given the near-identical circumstances, the only logical explanation for the disparity in sentencing is that, while the wife in Troon had led a blameless life, the husband in Ayr was – or suspected to be – a child abuser.

Apart from the lack of consistency, there is the question of deterrence as a factor in sentencing. There was no indication that it played any part in the judge's reasoning in

the Wilson case. Lady Rae said that Susanne Wilson posed no danger to the public, presumably meaning that she is unlikely to re-offend. Fair enough – but the same could be said of many offenders, including some serving long prison sentences. It is reasonable that courts sometimes impose deterrent sentences, not to deter the accused from committing a similar crime after their release, but to deter others from doing so.

And what of the 'public interest' that weighed so heavily in Lord Arthurson's consideration of the Gordon case that it convinced him of the need for a custodial sentence? Are we to conclude that there was no 'public interest' in the Wilson case, despite its many similarities?

Seeking clarification of judicial guidelines in these matters, I visited the website of the Scottish Sentencing Council (an expert body chaired by Lady Dorrian, Lord Justice Clerk) but found it less than enlightening. Except in one important regard: from the uninformative minutes of its last meeting, no fewer than seven papers had been redacted – no doubt the really interesting stuff. Perhaps the Scottish Sentencing Council should initiate a debate – an open, unredacted one – on the new leniency being shown to domestic killers – before the next devoted spouse in Ayrshire decides that enough is enough.

Still banging them up

Kenneth Roy

2018

The political commentator Ian Birrell writes well, though not often about Scottish affairs. But last week he was all over us, lauding our penal policies and comparing them favourably with the 'shocking chaos of a broken system' south of the border. 'Scotland is showing a profound stance on criminal justice: politicians displaying genuine leadership and standing firm against synthetic outrage to improve society,' he wrote. 'Sadly, it is so rare it seems almost hallucinatory.'

I have news for Mr Birrell. He has indeed been hallucinating. Yet his misguided song of praise was promptly picked up by *The Week*, a digest of the 'best' of the British and international press, without any obvious sign that it had been independently fact-checked. In such casual ways, wisdom becomes received.

The basis of Mr Birrell's original article is the 'presumption' against short prison sentences introduced by the SNP administration in its Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act of 2010, which requires the court to (1) only pass a sentence of three months or less if no other appropriate disposal is available; and (2) record the reason for this view.

There seemed to be no doubt in Mr Birrell's mind that the 'presumption' had been duly observed by the courts, and he went on to commend the Scottish Government for its plan 'to go much further' by extending the provisions of the legislation to sentences of 12 months or less. He quoted with approval a statement of Nicola Sturgeon that 'we must be even bolder in our efforts to keep people out of prison' – again no suggestion that the 'presumption' had been other than an unqualified triumph.

Well, that's politics. But then there's the reality: what is going on, day after day, in the criminal courts of Scotland. Here we find a rather different picture.

The briefest trawl of the internet was sufficient to reveal that the 'presumption' against short prison sentences is routinely ignored by sheriffs. Recent court records are full of stories of offenders going down for three months or less. Here are just a few examples plucked at random from a variety of courts around the country:

Luke Walker, 24, jailed for two months for assaulting his girlfriend and behaving in a racially aggravated manner towards a police officer.

James Cassidy, 34, jailed for three months for stealing some clothes from a department store.

William Heron, 48, jailed for three months for breaking into a Victorian market. He told the court he had done it because he had no money and wished to be arrested: 'Committing an offence to get back inside was my only option.' (Was there no better reason for sending this offender to prison than that he wanted to go?)

Craig Paxton, 34, jailed for two months after being caught with 12,000 counterfeit cigarettes branded 'Mayfair' and a large quantity of tobacco.

Derek Carroll, 40, jailed for three months for stealing pens worth £100 from a newsagent's. He explained that he had 'missed his foodbank' and needed to sell the pens to raise cash.

I could name others from the recent past. But perhaps these examples are enough to show that it is one thing to introduce a presumption against short prison sentences and quite another to persuade the courts to implement it.

And where is the evidence that the courts are abiding by the second stipulation of the 2010 law and publicly recording their reasons? Local court reporting is a disgrace and no great reliance should be placed on it – but I could find no explanation of why these five men had gone to prison in preference to the politically approved non-custodial alternative.

Having looked at individual cases, I went to the official statistics in an attempt to discover how many offenders are serving short sentences on an average day in Scotland's penal establishments. But here I encountered two unexpected difficulties. First, the statistics are not set out in a way that allows interested parties like myself to make any sense of them. There is a category for sentences of less than three months; there is a category for sentences of between three months and six months. But there is no category for sentences of three months or less: the period actually defined by the law.

Regrettably, then, I can't give you the figures. But I couldn't have given you them anyway – because the data from 2014 onwards 'has been affected by a technical issue' and isn't available.

I am, however, able to provide more general information in support of the progressive penal policy theory keenly espoused by Ms Sturgeon, Mr Birrell, and such passive conduits of intelligence as *The Week*. In 2000, the average daily prison population in Scotland was 5,869; 16 years later, it was 7,611. Sorry if this isn't exactly helping the progressive penal policy theory. It's just how it is.

Next I sought the assistance of that impeccable source, *World Prison Brief*, to see how Scotland compares with other countries in Western Europe. How many people are they – and we – locking up per 100,000 of the population?

Here are the results of that study:

Finland, 57 (out of every 100,000)

Sweden, 57

Denmark, 59

The Netherlands, 59

Norway, 74

Northern Ireland, 76

Germany, 77

Ireland, 78

Switzerland, 82

Greece, 93

Austria, 94

Belgium, 94

Italy, 96

France, 101

Spain, 128

Iceland, 131

Portugal, 132

Scotland, 135

England and Wales, 143

Nicola Sturgeon thinks we're doing a grand job keeping people out of prison and is so effective a propagandist that she has persuaded a leading member of the English commentariat that she knows what she's talking about. And it's true: 18th out of a league table of 19 could be worse. England's worse. Though not by much. But the idea that we are some beacon of penal enlightenment is pure myth-making. After eight years, we have succeeded in increasing the number of non-custodial sentences to the point where our jails are not officially overcrowded (only 97% occupancy at the last count). It has left the Scottish taste for banging people up only slightly diluted.

The Scottish Sentencing Council – I'm looking at you, Lady Dorrian – has a role here. It could inquire into the statistical aberrations which impede public knowledge of an important aspect of sentencing. It could tell us why courts are still sending people to prison for three months or less despite a law which presumes that they aren't. It could seek a public account from the presiding sheriffs of why they did not consider an alternative sanction appropriate in the five recent cases I have highlighted for illustrative purposes. And it could give a frank assessment of the practicability (to say nothing of the desirability) of extending the scheme to sentences of 12 months or less when the original scheme clearly isn't working properly.

Meanwhile, I hope that Ian Birrell makes a full recovery from his hallucinatory fantasy about Scotland.

The death in prison of Katie Allan

Kenneth Roy

2018

The Scottish Prison Service's use of 'passed away' to record the death of Katie Allan, 21, in Polmont Prison is grotesque. If the euphemism is of any service at all, it might have been excusable if Ms Allan had died peacefully at home, surrounded by the people who loved her. Instead, a lonely, tortured soul, she killed herself in a cell – by what means has not been divulged. According to her friends, she was bullied to death.

In August last year, she downed four pints in a pub and then made the fatal mistake of driving. She knocked down a 15-year-old boy who was out jogging, failed to stop, and was charged with causing serious injury to the victim and driving while unfit. Easily traced, she showed immediate remorse and wrote a letter of apology to the boy, who suffered a broken ankle and a damaged eye socket and was off school for a couple of weeks.

Ms Allan was a student of geography at a Glasgow university, financed herself through part-time work as a chef, and hoped to become a teacher. By all accounts she was a good person. As her solicitor put it in court: 'It was one night and one stupid, impulsive decision which will stay with her for the rest of her life'.

The rest of her life didn't amount to much. Sentenced in early March to 16 months' imprisonment by Sheriff David Pender, she was initially placed in a young offenders' institution before being transferred to an adult prison as soon as she turned 21. The 'rest of her life' – from the day of sentencing to the day of her death – amounted to almost exactly three months.

What was Katie Allan doing in prison? The sheriff's statement that there was no other appropriate sanction is surely mistaken (tragically so in the light of what has now happened). For an offender of previously impeccable character, there were alternatives. A community service order with a long period of supervision would have enabled her to resume her studies, contribute to society, and rebuild her life. If, however, the court felt that custody was inescapable, a shorter sentence might have enabled her to complete the custodial part of it in a young offenders' institution and avoid the abrupt transfer to an adult prison.

Ms Allan is one of the youngest people to die in a Scottish prison in the present decade and the second youngest woman. The youngest was Dione Kayleigh Kennedy, who killed herself in Cornton Vale Prison in February 2014 at the age of 19. But the bad old days were hopefully assumed to be over when the Justice Secretary, Michael Matheson, introduced a move to smaller units for women prisoners.

In line with Mr Matheson's thinking, the unit at Polmont where Katie Allan died has

only 66 inmates. Yet, even with so small a number to care for, it appears to have been beyond the ability of the staff to protect a traumatised young woman from severe bullying. It has not taken long for a supposedly therapeutic regime to break down.

For that reason among others, it is important that the facts of this case are known and understood. All the principal characters – the sentencing sheriff, the justice secretary, the Scottish Prison Service, the governor of Polmont Prison and the editor of Ms Allan's local newspaper which reported with lip-smacking satisfaction that she had been 'caged' – may have something to learn from the needless waste of a promising young life.

Nevertheless, you can be sure that the ventilation of awkward truths will be postponed as long as possible. There is a legal obligation to hold a fatal accident inquiry in cases of deaths in custody, but there is no obligation to hold it within a reasonable timescale. There has been no FAI into 24 prison deaths last year. There has been no FAI into 18 prison deaths in 2016. There has been no FAI into six prison deaths in 2015. And, quite intolerably, there has been no FAI into six prison deaths as long ago as 2014. Total number of deaths in custody in Scotland, 2014-17, in which the cause of death is still to be determined: 54.

Every one of these is a story that needs to be told, a life that needs to be accounted for, a family whose suffering needs to end. The disgraceful catalogue of delays reflects very poorly on the Lord Advocate, James Wolffe, and the lack of political accountability or vigilance is equally disturbing.

When Dione Kayleigh Kennedy committed suicide four years and four months ago, so long ago that Alex Salmond was still First Minister, a spokesman for the Scottish Prison Service issued a public statement that a fatal accident inquiry would be held 'in due course'. We are still waiting. In Scotland, the concept of 'due course' appears to be elastic.

In the case of Katie Allan, it may prove to be more elastic still. Her suicide poses several difficult and urgent questions, yet by the time our flawed judicial system finally stirs itself into some examination of her death, memories will have faded and the extremely limited public interest in the case will have long evaporated. How convenient for all concerned.

Fear and loathing in the gym

Kenneth Roy

2018

I

Last week, SR raised serious questions about the death in custody of a young student, Katie Allan, of previously unimpeachable character, who had received a 16-month sentence for motoring offences. Her friends claim that Ms Allan was 'bullied to death' in Polmont Prison – an allegation that will not be judicially examined for many months, if not years, such are the intolerable delays in calling fatal accident inquiries.

Meanwhile, however, we have obtained proof that the Scottish Government, despite frequent assurances that it maintains a zero tolerance approach to bullying, takes a disturbingly light view of bullying in prison. It comes in the form of a recent – and highly incriminating – Court of Session judgement from Scotland's most senior judge. We summarise the case here, before drawing our own inescapable conclusions.

II

In the gym at Craiginches Prison, Aberdeen, a remand prisoner, Daniel Kaizer, was approached by two men who demanded access to the machine that Kaizer was using. Kaizer offered to hand it over in two or three minutes, but this failed to satisfy them. One of the men, Keith Porter, swore at Kaizer and said that he would 'smash your fucking Polish face in,' addressing him as a 'Polish bastard'.

Kaizer went to the prison officer on duty in the adjoining office, Gary Lumsden, and told him 'exactly' what had been said. Lumsden replied that he would 'sort it out,' but, beyond asking Kaizer's Polish friend, LR, to look after him, did nothing.

Shortly afterwards, Porter was transferred to Barlinnie Prison in Glasgow to await an appearance at the High Court, where he pleaded guilty to the attempted murder of another Polish national (in an unrelated case) and was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. He was promptly returned to Craiginches.

The day after his arrival back in Aberdeen, it was possible for Porter once more to be in the gym at the same time as Kaizer. LR was also there and exchanged words with a co-accused of Porter. Three men then assaulted LR. At about the same time, Porter attacked Kaizer with a steel barbell, 'smashing me like he promised' according to Kaizer, who received extensive head injuries as a result.

A prison officer, Kenneth Murray, who was on duty in the gym, had gone to the office to answer the phone. From a window, he witnessed the start of the incident and returned at once to the weights room, where Porter was standing with a barbell above his head. Murray shouted at Porter, who stepped back and put the bar down – but the damage had

been done. Murray told the court that when he first saw Porter after the assault Porter was 'glazed over' – but then seemed to 'refocus'.

Daniel Kaizer raised a legal action against the Scottish ministers, suing for the injury that he sustained in the attack. When the case came to court, Kenneth Murray testified that it was part of his job to escort prisoners for gym sessions. If there had been an altercation between prisoners involving threats or bullying, there should have been an intelligence report and he would not have expected the prisoners involved to be allowed in the gym together later. He had, however, known nothing of the initial threat.

Two expert witnesses – one for each of the parties – agreed that this threat should have been reported by Gary Lumsden. One of them, John McCaig, emphasised the importance of keeping bullies and victims apart. The risk would always be there, but the prison's responsibility was to minimise it.

The judge, Lord Ericht, concluded:

Mr Porter made a specific threat to smash the prisoner's face in. The pursuer [Kaizer] informed Mr Lumsden of the threat. Mr Lumsden should have reported the threat, but he failed to do so. Mr Lumsden did not take reasonable care to prevent the implementation of the threat by reporting it. It was reasonably foreseeable that the pursuer was likely to sustain damage to his person if such reasonable care was not taken. Had Mr Lumsden reported the threat, on the balance of probabilities the attempted murder would not have taken place.

The judge found that the Scottish ministers had failed in their duty of care to Kaizer and that they were liable to make reparation.

On any reasonable view of the case, that should have been the end of it. Instead the Scottish ministers, far from holding their hands up, insisted on mounting an appeal. They suggested as part of its basis that, even if Kenneth Murray had known of the threat, he might not have 'organised matters any differently' – a bizarre deduction from a conscientious officer's own testimony.

The appeal by the Scottish ministers came before Lord Carloway (Lord President) and his judicial colleagues Lords Brodie and Drummond Young in the Court of Session. They listened – perhaps with a growing sense of disbelief – to a feeble defence by the legal representatives of Scotland's government, including this expression of extreme complacency:

Many threats are made in prisons by persons with violent records. Yet they do not carry out these threats, nor are they separated from the general prison population. Mr Porter had no record of violence in prison.

Lord Carloway's written judgement, issued a few weeks ago, was about as withering as it gets judicially:

The defenders' [the Scottish Ministers'] position, stripped to its essentials, is that notwithstanding the fact that a prisoner in their custody was exposed to the risk of injury as a result of the failure to report a threat of serious violence with racist overtones, nothing effective would have been done about this by the prison authorities and thus the attack would have happened in any event. The court is unable to accept this unattractive proposition.

The appeal was thrown out and the case has been referred back to Lord Ericht, who will decide what compensation Daniel Kaizer should receive.

III

The Scottish Ministers have consistently maintained a zero tolerance approach to bullying. Judging by the number of times she alludes to the subject, it appears to be part of the first minister's political and ethical credo. Yet clearly there are limits. When the bullying spills over into explicit threat, violence and attempted murder, the principle of zero tolerance somehow breaks down.

The case of Daniel Kaizer, which saw Ms Sturgeon's Government pursue a risible defence, suggests that, inside the gates of Scottish prisons, zero tolerance counts for little in the collective mind of the ministers. They were prepared to argue publicly that it is acceptable for prisoners who utter threats against other prisoners not to be separated, apparently on the grounds that in most cases such threats are not carried out. They were then prepared to go on propagating this deeply irresponsible message at substantial public expense – until Scotland's most senior judge finally exposed their folly.

What the Kaizer case tells us about the mindset of the Scottish ministers, and the sham of their zero tolerance policy on bullying, should inform a proper investigation into the treatment of Katie Allan – 'bullied to death' at the age of 21.

In defence of 'not proven' verdicts

Alistair R Brownlie

2018

I usually avoid taking a stand on legal controversies, but for two rather personal reasons I do have a clear view about the 'not proven' verdict. As a student member of the Home Guard, prior to my five-plus years of active national service, in 1941 I served under Sergeant John G Wilson practising rifle drill, marching and counter-marching, and polishing boots and buttons as my early and vital military contribution to defence of the realm.

After my national service in the Second World War, I became a family solicitor and appeared almost daily in Edinburgh Sheriff Court before my former sergeant, now *Sheriff* John G Wilson. By this time, he had written a fascinating book detailing and discussing some of the classic criminal cases such as Monson and Madeleine Smith, which had resulted in controversial verdicts of 'not proven'. To a young lawyer this was impressive enough, but I inherited a criminal appeal which, thanks to judicial rumination, raised these very questions in an acute form.

In a murder trial in Glasgow before Lord Cameron, with which I had not been involved, the accused, one McNicol, was alleged to have assaulted another man, knocked him down, and kicked him to death. In the course of the trial the charge was reduced to one of culpable homicide. When Lord Cameron, the trial judge, came to charge the jury he began by setting out the three options of guilty, not guilty and not proven, but then surprised everyone by adding: 'I confess to you quite openly and publicly that I do not ever feel happy about verdicts of not proven, because, although they are, strictly speaking, acquittals and can be logically justified, it seems to me the honest and proper thing to do is either to find a person guilty or, if the Crown has failed, to acquit them with a verdict of not guilty. But that verdict lies open to you, and you can use it if you so wish'.

The jury unanimously found the accused guilty of culpable homicide and he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. At this point, his appeal was transferred to the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh, where I became involved on his behalf, instructing counsel to represent him in the appeal.

Understandably, on appeal the Lord Justice General (Lord Clyde) made it known that judges must not air their personal preferences when indicating a verdict and must restrict themselves to offering the three options. In this case, he felt the jury were strongly discouraged from bringing in a verdict of 'not proven'. For well over 200 years that verdict has been available in Scotland and no convincing argument had been advanced to justify its elimination from our law. The fact that English law differed was

no reason for change. In consequence of judicial misdirection, he ruled, the conviction would be quashed and the accused acquitted.

Rivers of judicial ink and untold hours of earnest legal debate have been expended on questioning the appropriateness of the 'not proven' verdict since McNicol received his welcome release from the Scottish Court of Criminal Appeal, but none of it has parted me from my attachment to what Sir Walter Scott called 'the bastard verdict.' For me, the trigger in Lord Clyde's judgement was his use of the word 'humane' – a word I would never have associated with that particular judge.

As I see it, our law is a human construct, unlike for example, the inexorable laws of mathematics which are of a different kind altogether – in fact they are part of what makes me a believer. For me, nine times 20 is 180 as certainly in Oban as it is in a space ship in orbit around the earth, or heading to possible destruction on Mars. It has to be recognised that in man-made law there can never be absolute certainty. This explains why there is no substantive finding of innocence in Scots law.

An accused person found to be not guilty is not whitewashed for ever, but is returned to the status which we all enjoy of presumed innocence. If a jury, having heard all the evidence, is left with lingering, but not substantial, doubt, the humane remedy permits the option of 'not proven' rather than reluctantly pressing for a finding that the accused person is guilty. In so doing, the law is giving recognition to the frailty of the human condition, and making the business of judgement that bit more tolerable.

DEVOLUTION

This sequence on Devolution opens with three articles from the November 1997 edition. It had been a momentous late summer/early autumn. Diana, Princess of Wales, had died in a car accident in a French underpass on the bank holiday weekend at the end of August, unleashing a tsunami of public grief. Less than two weeks later, Scotland went to the polls to decide on whether a Scottish Parliament with devolved powers should be created.

This is an extract from the editorial, by Kenneth Roy, introducing the theme of the November issue: *Despite my abject failure to make any sense of what happened in Scotland on Thursday 11 September, I can't help thinking that it was the climax of an ultimate fortnight which began with three deaths in a Paris tunnel. Could these events by any chance be related? Did they amount together to the passing of one order and the start of another? I put this difficult question to several trusted contributors and told them to get on with it. The result is a sequence of articles entitled provocatively The End of Britain?*

End of Britain? 1: Eleutheria

Christopher Small

1997

It is the utmost height of human prudence to see and embrace every favourable opportunity: and if a word spoken in season does for the most part produce wonderful effects; of what consequence and advantage must it be to a nation in deliberation of the highest moment, in occasions when passed for ever irretrievable, to enter into the right path and take hold of the golden opportunity, which makes the most arduous things easy, and without which the most inconsiderable may put a stop to all our affairs? – Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun

Clearly it is easy to overestimate the potential for social change in Scotland today – but it is dangerous to underestimate the demand for it. – Gordon Brown

The nationalist does not go on the principle of simply ganging up with the strongest side. On the contrary, having picked his side, he persuades himself that it is strongest, and is able to stick to his belief even when the facts are overwhelmingly against him. – George Orwell

O, wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being. – P B Shelley

The last of these texts is far too romantic a greeting, you'll say, to fit the events that came in with last September. The weather, for one thing, was almost uniformly mild. The large numbers of people involved were going about their business, unusual though it was, in T-shirts and summer clothes, and their demeanour – more solemn in one case, more briskly matter-of-fact in the other – was generally to match. No storm clouds, not even – if it is the funeral we're thinking about – storms of grief; nor, if it's the other phenomenon that followed hard after, much excited rejoicing. Did this sobriety arise from prudence? Incredulity? Mere fatigue, after 300 years of waiting? Or something else, that hasn't yet been measured?

There is certainly one thing that linked these public events, unconnected in most respects as they were. They were, though not tempestuous, excessive: they exceeded well-informed calculation, and the bounds of pre-arrangement. The ground was prepared, but the crop was hardly looked for, even by those who'd done the cultivation.

In the case of the royal funeral especially, everything was in a manner predisposed. For a generation at least – for much longer, if the full elaboration of the royal fairytale is considered – a special atmosphere, a gasbubble of sentiment, curiosity and pretence

enveloped the persons and personal relations formally placed at the top of the social pyramid. It was pricked, and for a while, as all the gas generators of publicity went to work, it seemed to expand, to smother all activity and thought in its rose-tinted cloud. It became, in a word, a bit too much; and then – it didn't exactly burst, perhaps it condensed. Anyway, and not according to the rules of manipulative chemistry, it changed its nature.

The other event, overlapping with and even temporarily elbowed aside by the first, also exceeded all calculations. It also, in however different a way, had a long story behind it, as much as 700 years according to one not wholly accidental coincidence of date. Actual events punctuate that history as well as shifts of sentiment and attitude, and they have a logical look about them hardly to be found in the growth of a cult. (You can call it idolatry or Diolatry by switching one letter.) Politicians have been obliged to take the matter of Scotland seriously, the point arrived at on 11 September was deliberately set, the product of long argument and manoeuvre and much longer aspiration. As much as possible, things were planned in advance. Then it was 12 September, and the headline writers were gravelled for the right words. The New Dawn was the best they could manage.

It's the surprise that counts. Public reaction to Princess Diana's death permitted a glimpse of reality, if only the fact that a human being wrapped in fantasy is mortal like everyone else. And the Yes-Yes vote, set up by the politicians and (if briefly and somewhat perfunctorily) promoted by them, caught some quite on the wrong foot and others, promoters and participants alike (this voter must confess he was among them) all unprepared for hope so realised. By joy or chagrin, we were surprised. More exactly, we surprised ourselves.

Such an effect isn't unfamiliar, often detected by historians, but it's one that by definition can only be seen backwards – the moments when popular feeling runs ahead of those who consider themselves its leaders. It can run, the leaders now labouring behind, into territory not clearly foreseen by anybody, except a few poets and other such unreliable informants. But each time it makes new opportunities, which will not come again in the same form, although they stem in part from a memory of previous opportunities lost.

Fletcher of Saltoun in 1603 was desperately trying to push his fellow-members of the last Scottish Parliament to take the last chance, then, of settling relations between Scotland and England with equity and stability. We know what happened, and what incorporation (fine word, incorporation, or swallowing up) has meant since. Nearly 300 years later, there seems to be the chance of reversing the process, and though it will be the other way round, not a back-to-the-wall defence of an existing state of affairs but the making of something new, there is a good deal of the same feel about it. Donald Dewar, in different circumstances and a different style, laid it similarly on the line as 'Scotland's last chance'; and quite a lot of hesitant referendum voters were induced, I believe, to put

down their double Yes because 'there'd never be another chance' to do it. (There is an interesting implication of this apparently lukewarm decision which should be pondered by any who deplore it: namely that 'the chance' of our own government is one we ought to have sooner or later, and even if later might be preferred, better now than never. So the negative persuasions of three centuries of 'incorporation' worked upon even the doubtful and faint-hearted.)

So now, with the chance of rewriting, perhaps crossing out, the Treaty of Union, the debate which ended then can begin again, back to front. The debaters won't be wearing periwigs and swords (and often then, so we're told, with hands on the hilts of them), but it's evident already that many of the chief headings will be unchanged.

Money and trade, and who's to control how much of it; the working rules of our own government, so that (as one hopeful commentator has lately said) we'll be 'making the Parliament of Scotland a model for democracy'; the deployment and command of force, a sinister question which even the smartest technology and the blandest talk can't keep submerged forever; relations with the rest of the world, on whatsoever footing: these are the realities of the case, now as then on the table. There is now, as then, a certain reluctance to look at them, but on this side of the table at least far less excuse. Surely it won't happen again, this time round, that (Andrew Fletcher's foreboding) 'we have been for a long time so poor, so miserable and depending, that we have neither the heart nor courage, though we want not the means, to free ourselves'.

The question arises, of course, who are 'we'? There aren't many, just at the moment, inclined to question John Smith's lapidary description, 'the settled will of the Scottish people'. The double affirmation won't easily be rubbed out. Attempts to do so are, however, made. The most comprehensive and perhaps the bravest is to cry down the very idea of a popular will. Allan Massie proposes not so much that 'the people' be abolished as that they don't exist unless they are to be called a mob. And it is perfectly true that mobbing and rioting have often enough, with variously ugly consequences, expressed a rudimentary collective will. It can come from below, as in the yelling crowd which hurried the unfortunate Captain Green and his crew to the gallows or which later on lynched Porteous; or from above, in the volunteer troopers who rode down the peaceable men and women at Peterloo.

None of such is a good or likely example for today, of course. But even now, when 'the mob' is far more often the victim than the perpetrator of murderous violence, there are many who fear large assemblies of human beings so much that they recoil from any notion of a gathered will. No-one, it is said, can genuinely decide or choose for another; anyone who pretends to do so is a deceiver, a manipulator, in the worst sense a sophist. This case against 'persuasion' and all its arts, from advertising to mob-oratory, is itself persuasive, but it ignores the power of fellow feeling, the sympathy which holds human beings together. Why did Socrates go round engaging folk in searching conversation? Why not like Diogenes take a permanent huff, since no-one else was worth talking to?

(He did exchange words with Alexander, it's true, but those who entertain the greatest general contempt for humankind often make an exception for the Best People.) It is possible, on the other hand, to believe that others may hold mistaken opinions, and that one may be mistaken oneself; that, therefore, mutual inquiry may reveal what really is meant by the words we use, and what we really desire. This is politics as much as philosophy. It is not a game of one-upmanship, it is a shared benefit, and a way to mutual accommodation. It is the essence of democracy. The practice of it is not easy: with open and continued inquiry into hopes, needs, wishes, different interests and motives will come to light. Perhaps the first thing is to be clear about them, as they emerge with intermittent force in the crowded and jostling human world.

Once again (to return from abstracts to actualities), who do we think 'we' are? Obviously it's a pronoun that changes according to context; all that's certain is that it's plural and never the same as 'I' except in those peculiar circumstances, now wholly anachronistic, in which an individual assumes, or incorporates, the being of many. Nor is 'one nation' much better; it has a pleasing sound from time to time, but usually it's papering over the cracks. Unity of purpose is achieved more often not despite, but because, of them.

The death Princess Diana and its shocking circumstances, the very stuff of headlines and their mass-consumption, permitted an orgy of factitious and exhibitionist emotion – the ulcerations and self-lacerations of the media surpassing the most frenzied of ancient funerary rites – that did truly, for a time, seem to show 'people' and 'populism' at one, in an unseemly double-act. But something else began to appear, of possibly more lasting effect. The funeral wasn't a political demonstration, but observers agree that it had political implications, and that these were strongly if vaguely hostile to 'the old order'. As a public show or dramatic production, which it certainly was, it was like a new interpretation of an old text – almost, as a performance with huge audience participation, a bit of Brechtian alienation-effect. Everybody, especially those with the pomp and military rigidities of royal obsequies, agreed that there had 'never been anything like it'. As it turned established forms upside down, it encouraged a quite different set of ideas to come uppermost. Many, it seems, found the emotions so lavishly aroused a liberating experience.

As more than one witness noticed, there was a touch of 1789 about. And there was, maybe, an even stronger hint of another royal funeral, of Caroline of Brunswick in 1821, also an era of high tensions between and within nations. But though the crowd then turned violent and showed open contempt for royal authority, it may be that the gentle, handclapping mourners who watched Diana's cortege will prove to have undermined more effectively and permanently the whole edifice of ideas, sentiments and constitutional arrangements built around 'the Crown'.

The Crown hasn't had much of a part in the devolution debate so far, even as a symbol. Defenders of the Union prefer the Union flag itself as rallying point – though

even so, in the charged atmosphere of the funeral and after an antique little heraldic tiff, if assumed, half-mast, a rather different function. It remains flying all over the place, and politicians, including the Labour promoters of Scottish home rule, regularly wrap themselves in it. It stands for Britishness; when, as in most places here these days, it flies alongside the Saltire, it stands for North Britishness. A fine and prominent example is provided by the twin flagstaffs above the North Athenian pediment of the Royal Scottish Academy, in itself an ancient monument, in now slightly shabby grandeur, of all that those odd geographical expressions were once held proudly to imply.

At the time of the Referendum, the RSA housed the large collection of Raeburn portraits which was probably the most imposing exhibition of work by a Scottish painter to have had an official place, so far, in the Edinburgh Festival. It was thronged, and not only by tourists; it may well be that the many Edinburgh citizens and other Scots not ordinarily frequenters of picture galleries paid to view what was felt to be a national show. So indeed it was: from the walls of every room there looked down a collective portrait of Scottish Society with a capital S, a Who Was Who of persons of importance in these parts some two centuries ago. Vigorous, well-nourished, expensively and in some cases extravagantly clothed, they were on display, with all the confident individuality and fleshly presence the artist could impart: dukes and duchesses, marquises and baronets, burgesses, East India merchants, gallant officers who had made their name and fortune, and manufacturers their pile out of the Napoleonic wars, law-lords and politicians, the receivers and dispensers of patronage, some men of learning and science, even some who practised the arts – Sir Henry himself, as well as the young dandy and scoundrel of a Guards officer who never paid for his portrait – Sir Walter, of course, together with samples of the sartorial fantasies – bales of tartan and animal skins with a man somewhere inside – promoted by his own fashioning of history.

There is no self-doubt visible in these faces: even the most endearing and best known to posterity of them all, the reverend and athletic Dr Robert Walker, is not skating on thin ice.

Those who found in the exhibition timely encouragement for national self-esteem are doubtless justified. But I think they should recognise that the Scotland of Raeburn's sitters was pre-eminently and consciously the Scotland of the Union and those who had done well out of it. It was the Scotland of improvers and entrepreneurs, 'creators of wealth' and holders on to it; not of those cleared out of their homes and livelihood but improvement and the march of mind, nor of those whose minds were searching in a different direction; not of those who hoped to plant the Tree of Liberty and who lost their liberty and sometimes their lives in the attempt. There was no portrait there of Muir of Huntershill.

The men and women who sang:
A fig for those by law protected,
Liberty's a glorious feast!

do, however, have their spiritual descendants close at hand not inside but under the very eaves of our Princes Street Parthenon, where they take as much ease as they may, sturdily begging, laughing and sometimes jeering at respectable passers-by. It is a scandal, of course.

Juxtapositions such as this are still, probably, more common, despite the segregation of the schemes, in Scottish life than in the South, and a good thing it is for us. Beggary, and all the gradations of poverty behind it, 'honest' or not, are a scandal we can't forget. We can dare to say so. We have, furthermore, a dogged notion – held by a steady majority of us, confirmed by successive votes and most decisively this autumn – that we must do something about it, that we can do something ourselves, and that we're willing, collectively, to pay for it. If the payment means more than a strictly limited rise in taxes, we must be ready for that too. So, at any rate, the present Chancellor of the Exchequer thought once, and what he said in the heady days of *The Red Paper on Scotland* is still, if unrepeatable recently, worth attention. The 'potential for radical change' that he was talking about 20-odd years ago is not perhaps much diminished. It seems as good a source as any for a dram of national pride.

What direction it will take, with what catchwords, under which flag, are yet open to questions. It's fine to remember Stirling Brig, but less so the Battle of Falkirk a year later, and even defiance in defeat can only last so long. It seems rational eventually to say that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em and settle for the modified self-esteem of 'Britannia's hardy sons'. (Para Handy took it for granted, but then, in his day, a referendum – see the anecdote of the parliamentary canvassers, circa 1910 – meant something different.) For George Orwell, the refusal to join the stronger side was, perversely, another sign of the irrationality of nationalism, but his ideas on the subject, though penetrating, were hardly self-consistent. (He learned a bit more before he died about Scotland and its 'case' against the English Establishment.)

It was the lust for power he abhorred; yet all political life appears to require it, or be futile. (The knock-down argument with which New Labour has, so far, silenced all doubters.) Power to order our own affairs is what we want, isn't it? What other term is there which is not either pernicious or vacuous, and with which we can keep our courage up? How about Freedom? Freedom is a word of which neither nationalists nor socialists nor professors of any ideology have the monopoly.

'Ah! Freedom is a noble thing!' said John Barbour. 'Freedom is a bourgeois dream,' said Lenin. It is a dream, maybe, but not just (or least of all, perhaps) of the bourgeoisie, those tied down to a stake in the country. As a dream it takes many shapes, and changes them from the dream's beginning to its end. Very often its outline becomes visible only as the opposite of slavery, foul thirldom, as Barbour said. But whoever has tasted it:

... suld think freedom mair to prize

Than all the gold in warld that is.

My most telling memories of the brief interval between funeral and referendum are

twofold. (Both, as it happens, from Edinburgh, but let no-one make capital out of that.) One is of young children on a housing estate, kids of eight or nine, laughing with delight as they snatched yet another leaflet ('Kin ah hiv wan tae?' 'Kin ah hiv wan fer ma mum?') and shouting 'Yes-Yes! Free Scotland!' The other, from the same evening, is of a learned theologian, of singularly unworldly aspect, who took a leaflet and said, 'Ah yes. What did the Greeks call it? Eleutheria'. He pronounced the word with precise accent and a smile of equal irony and sweetness. He didn't bother to explain that Eleutherian is just one of the attributes of deity, Zeus, as god of political freedom. He just said again, 'I dream and long for Eleutheria'.

Neither of these affirmations could be described as calculated political opinion. They represent something as old, possibly, as the human race and as widespread; something, possibly, that caused human beings to spread. It isn't confined to one place or time or situation. It is strong in Scotland now, strong enough, maybe, to carry through many setbacks, compromises, hardships. It can accommodate other terms if you like, Independence, Republic, and not be frightened; or it can leave these fleas to stick on the wall for the moment. ('If we may live free,' Andrew Fletcher said, 'I little value who is king'.) Some of the same sentiment was perhaps making its early infant gestures, amid the cotton-wool, in the applause for the dead princess.

For reasons of this kind, and feeling (with all prudence, and reservation, and qualification) a stir of past enthusiasms, a corner may be found for Shelley. He didn't know much about Scotland except as a place for elopements and as the home of his enemies of the *Review*: Mary knew more. But he knew about the succession of the seasons, and it revived him. Winter comes, it's almost on us now, and there may be a long hard winter-time ahead. But spring comes after and, in defiance of geography and climatology, shan't we see it first in the North?

End of Britain? 2: True Brits

Ian Jack

1997

One of Tony Blair's greatest tricks has been to make his party seem like the natural home of British patriotism: New Labour equals New Britain (equals the late Princess of Wales equals the Spice Girls equals a devolved parliament in Edinburgh). During his speech to the Labour conference in September, Blair used the word 'Britain' 53 times, 'country' 31 times and 'nation' 19 times ('new' got only 33 mentions). Britain, he told the conference, could be 'a beacon' [eight mentions] 'to the world'. In the next month, at the Commonwealth meeting in Edinburgh, he spoke of a 'new young Britain' that was modern, enterprising, outward-looking and compassionate: 'a meritocracy where we break down the barriers of class, religion, race and culture'. In these two speeches and in others, he has spoken of Britain as a 'great' country and a 'pivotal' nation. In Manchester, during his election campaign in April, I heard him tell an audience of diplomats who had been flown from London for the occasion that Britain had a history of greatness, deserved to 'lead' Europe and had the best-trained armed forces in the world. I was surprised to hear him speak like this; I don't think many of us understood, even only a couple of weeks before his victory, just how completely he had ditched old Labour attitudes and (such as they were) beliefs.

Of course, this 'new Britain' is a rhetorical device, a piece of marketing, complete with slogans, videos and electronic versions of the national anthem. But it would be a mistake to think of it as only cosmetic, an idea as meaningless as the words 'new and improved' on a box of soap powder. It reflects a certain reality. Britain has changed in many fundamental ways over the past two decades. Blair has simply recognised social, cultural and economic facts which Conservative regimes, though they helped bring these facts about, couldn't easily celebrate because 'newness' has not in this century been included in their vocabulary of praise. When Margaret Thatcher or John Major wanted to evoke the British ideal, which in their case was usually an English ideal, they turned backwards to Churchill and the Second World War or Orwell and his warm beer and bicycling nuns. It was an appeal which demographically (see the *Daily Telegraph's* obituary page) was bound to shrink, and for a party with a profound belief in the free market it was also paradoxical. The restlessness and turbulence of unfettered capitalism is the greatest enemy of 'tradition' and its sacred objects. How many bicycling nuns do you see on the M62? Does Liam Gallagher drink warm beer? Does Zoe Ball? Do you? Nonetheless, a deceptive crust developed over the surface of British life – the same men in pinstripe suits refusing to answer the same questions by Jeremy Paxman – which disguised the mess and change below.

And so – the crust suddenly punctured, the lava of cappuccino spilling out – New Britain. The trick seems to be working. Here it is in the *New Yorker* – Blair is hailed as the first 'post-imperial' Prime Minister, freed from the baggage of the past. Here it is on the cover of *Time* – 'Renewed Britannia: with a fresh government, a sturdy economy and confident mood, Britain bounces back'. Sightings of New Britons, however, are harder to discover. What kind of people feel they are British, would define themselves as such rather than English, Welsh or Scottish? Here they are in a survey as reported by *The Economist* – 'barely half of the British themselves see Britishness as an important part of their identity... those who do tend to be aged over 55, male and under-educated... their image of Britishness is white imperialist and Protestant'. Here they come again in *Red Pepper* in a piece by the Scottish writer Tom Nairn – 'I suspect the proletariats of West Scotland and South Wales (alongside that of Ulster) played a greater part in constructing... Britishness than any other social class... to this day the most braying of Britoid voices sound from the left, notably in Wales'.

It's hard to feel flattered by this. 'Proletariats' is such an unfriendly word: 'the lowest class of the community, esp. when considered as uncultured' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). I feel rather like a man in an H M Bateman cartoon (the man who threw a snowball at San Moritz). I confess to the following: at various times and to varying extents I have felt British as well as Scottish. I know that national identities are slippery things once they are devolved to the individual and removed from the realms of nationalist politics, Olympic stadiums, wars, football games and newspaper headlines, and that large parts of life can be got through without thinking about them at all. Still – to me – Britishness is not a cause for shame. I believe it is a useful description for a way of being which permeates the separate identities and small differences of England, Wales and Scotland – that it is (though perhaps I mean should be) something more than Greater England.

This, among Scots, can be a lonely position. A few episodes of personal history may help explain it.

1951

We live in Lancashire. I am six. My father and mother have come south from Fife in 1930, my father to take a job as a fitter in a textile mill. Perhaps I am a young member of Tom Nairn's 'proletariat'. My father certainly leant towards the Independent Labour Party and the Workers' Educational Association (both 'Britoid' organisations). But I understand nothing of this. All I know – a small mark of difference – is that other boys ask me to say 'four' and 'fire' so that they can hear the Scottish 'r' at the end. We know a few other Scottish migrants, and avoid one or two of them. Scottishness per se, is not a badge of worth. Most of our friends are Lancashire people. A worker at the mill, on hearing that we will go as usual to Scotland for our holidays, asks my father where the boat leaves from. He is entirely serious. Englishness, per se is not a badge of worth either.

But despite this, my father refuses to attend meetings of the local Caledonian Society, which he describes as a lot of damned fools dressed in kilts. I am given a children's book of Scottish history as a birthday present. It contains a picture of Robert the Bruce unhorsing an English knight at Bannockburn. My father tells me that Bruce was in fact a Norman aristocrat (though he could not have used that word) and that William Wallace was the far greater man. Forty-five years later I go to see the most influential film in Scotland's political history. It is rubbish, but I remember my father and think of him as prescient.

1952

My parents want to go back to Scotland. My father finds a job in a Dundee jute mill and takes lodgings in that city. If the family are to move with him, he will need to arrange a council house exchange and find somebody in Dundee who wants to move to Bolton. He advertises in the *The Courier*. The only reply is from Kinneff, dozens of miles up the coast, almost at Stonehaven. My father reaches the house by bus, where the woman asks him: 'You'll be having English people as your neighbours then?' My father replies that, the house being in Bolton, this is naturally the case. Still, the woman seems keen enough; her daughters cannot find work in Kinneff. My father, however, discovers that the only way to reach Dundee from Kinneff in time to start work on jute machinery is by the early morning fish-van. My father finds another job in his old home town, Dunfermline, and we swap houses with a family in North Queensferry. My father wishes English council house building materials and methods had spread north of the border. Scottish brickwork is deemed inferior. Fife seems very different to Lancashire: the weather, the houses, the shops, the sweets (just off the ration), the things folk talk about. Later many of these differences, apart from the weather, will vanish. New private housing estates will look just like those in Reading. North Queensferry will shop at Tesco and read about Posh Spice, and fall asleep to the sound of traffic on the motorway, just like Reading does.

1956

A puzzle: where does Lord Snooty live? It could be in England – certainly no top hats and Eton collars can be seen in Queensferry – but there again it might well be some other part of Scotland. Desperate Dan seems to live in America. Might Snooty and his pals live in Dundee? One of them looks a bit like Soapy Soutar in *Our Wullie*. Naturally: they are drawn by the same man, in Dundee. Another puzzle: where does the BBC come from? Sometimes from Glasgow, sometimes Manchester, sometimes London. I listen to *The Boys of Glenmorroch* and Norman and Henry Bones, boy detectives. Do the first, being Scottish, mean more to me than the second? (I cannot remember.) Later, I listen to Hancock and the Goons. Later still, I watch mind-expanding, mind-altering programmes on BBCs 1 and 2. Much, much later – i.e. now – I wonder why it is that in

their 'deconstruction of British identity' almost every analyst and historian ignores a popular culture which has roared through most of this century and can best be described as British. Including the newspapers: my father has given up the *Daily Record* in favour of the *Daily Mirror*, on the grounds that the *Mirror* has better writers and fewer parochial reports of tenement-plunges. Also he likes the *Garth* cartoon.

1959–62

I enter my third year at Dunfermline High School in long trousers. A few boys wear kilts. They are mainly the sons of English naval officers who are based at Rosyth. One who is not is my friend, Norval Macphail, the first Scottish nationalist I ever met, though not the only one in the school. The other is James Halliday, who teaches us history with impeccable secularity. He tells us that when the Orange King William won the Battle of the Boyne, the Pope rang the bells in the Vatican. Identities and alliances are more complicated than we think. Of all he taught us, this is the one thing I remember (I hope it is true). In English, we get Wordsworth and Shakespeare and also, because the English teacher is a Burns fiend from Ayrshire, a lot about the national bard. The national bard is said to be more or less a teetotalter ('Boys, I ask you, how could this man be a drunkard on seven pounds a year?'). But this may be wish-fulfilment on the teacher's part. He is a Rechabite. Later, we get Dunbar, Henryson, Border ballads, Stevenson and Buchan, as well as Jane Austen and Dickens. It is all English literature, though not all from England. The difference seems unimportant. In the Highers, I answer a question by describing the stone circle in Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*. I write for the school magazine. I want to be Grassic Gibbon, or James Thurber or Alan Sillitoe. I don't feel (and have never since felt) that Scotland is neglected in my education. But perhaps I am lucky. More luck comes when I ignore headmasterly advice about sitting the Dockyard Examination – the headmaster thinks I might make a decent draughtsman. Little does he know that one day the dockyard will be empty of Her Majesty's Navy, save for a few rusting atomic submarines.

1966

The World Cup final. I am watching England v Germany in a Glasgow flat with my girlfriend, Arlene, and my flatmate, Gordon. Arlene is from Wishaw, from where her father commutes as the secretary of the Lesmahagow Co-operative Society. She has been named after Arlene Dahl, the Hollywood actress. She is also the captain of the Glasgow University Women's Golf Team. She's a blonde who glows with health. John Betjeman would have loved her. Gordon comes from somewhere near Oban and works in a dry-cleaners in the Byres Road. Outside his hearing, some people refer to him as 'the big teuchter'. England are winning. The Germans equalise! Arlene and Gordon shriek and jump up and down. I realise I am the only one of the three who might want England to win. Not badly – football hardly matters at this time – but enough to make me feel I am

an emotional minority. I'm puzzled. When I go to Hampden, I want Scotland to win. Now I come across the logic of my enemy's enemy for the first time. My friends want England beaten. Still, it has nothing (it seems) to do with politics. Arlene is a great supporter of Mr Wilson, who is about to appear on our screen looking joyful. But perhaps it is beginning to have something to do with politics. Later, in 1978, when Scotland are ejected from another World Cup, I write a piece for the *Sunday Times* which includes the phrase 'the great Caledonian bubble has burst'. A history professor at Glasgow University writes to the paper to say that the great Caledonian bubble will float on; nationalism has more complicated causes than football. But he is proved wrong, at least until Mrs Thatcher arrives.

1992

I've lived in London now for 22 years. We've had 11 years of Mrs Thatcher and nearly two of John Major. I'm editing a newspaper, the *Independent on Sunday*. Major has called an election. Michael Heseltine comes to our office lunch. I wonder, very gently, why the Tories are so set against devolution, given that Scotland is obviously so alienated and devolution might take the sap out of separatism. Heseltine looks grave and thunderous. He raises his voice: 'I did not come into politics to preside over the destruction of the United Kingdom'. As it turns out, he has come into politics to preside over something else – the Board of Trade – but (not for the first time) I'm struck by how little so many English people seem to have understood about Britain as something larger than England – as an idea that needs cultivation, tending and watering.

1997

In Scotland, for the start of the Referendum campaign I notice that 10 out of every dozen wedding pictures in *The Courier* show the groom in kilt and a dickie bow. The back garden outside my old home now has a solid piece of concrete built to contain barbecue fires, and a table and chairs arranged for barbecue parties. A neighbour who watches *Neighbours*, perhaps. I go to lunch in Leith with two old journalist friends: George Rosie and Bobby Campbell. They remember that boys who wore kilts would be mocked in the streets of their old localities, Granton and Partick. I ask them if they feel British. No, they say. George says that the identity has pretty well died out, apart from people old enough to remember the war and its aftermath. Bobby says it went down the river with the class who made steel and ships – who believed in the 'workers of the world' on the left hand and anti-Irish Unionism on the right. Who am I to disbelieve them? They are both clever men, they live in Scotland and I don't.

The next day, I have a drink with Ian Bell, who writes a fine, angry nationalist column for *The Scotsman*. I ask him if, setting politics aside, he doesn't feel more kinship to English writers – Dickens, Orwell – than to those further away or in other languages. And again the answer is no, he feels closer to the French and Americans, and again who

am I to disbelieve him? I suppose I simply find it difficult; is it another case of my enemy's enemy? Walking down the steps to Waverley, I think of those fanciful history lessons at school, where the origin of a few words such as 'ashet' and 'marmalade' was evoked to display Scotland's special relationship with France; and of James Kelman, who, if I have got him right, thinks English literature can be principally represented by a class enemy, Evelyn Waugh.

A few weeks later, Bobby Campbell is suddenly dead. An obituarist on his paper, *The Scotsman*, rings to ask about him. I'm struck by a question: when he worked in London, how did he seem to the English? I've never thought about it. Two of his wives were Englishwomen, his house was often filled with all sorts – Londoners, Cumbrians, Welsh, Irish, British-Indian, black-British. 'The English' (top hats, Lord Snooty?) doesn't seem to be the right category somehow. The enlargement to 'British' fits better. It may carry a similar freight-car of cliché and generalisation, but it also allows greater differences of class and race. At the Edinburgh Book Fair, in a session on Scottish culture in schools, I heard an academic say that the Scottish identity had to be 'inclusive' – you could 'even' have Pakistani-Scots. He was speaking off the cuff and I don't think he meant anything bad by the 'even'. But it did seem to indicate that the Scottish identity question was in need of a little development.

And now

I live in London with a woman who was born in Newcastle. Our children were born in London hospitals and go to London schools. When I think of their national identity – which isn't often – I think of them as British, as heirs to the variety of the island. It is always dangerous, of course, to make personal disclosure part of an impersonal argument, but I also think it is honest, and I cannot believe my own experience has been so singular. Tides of people have flown both ways between England and Scotland over at least two centuries. The new intellectual orthodoxy sees British identity as built from above, the consequence of Protestant monarchs, industry and empire. This makes it seem temporary and unnatural; the word 'construction', with its suggestion of deliberation and artifice, has helped in this effect. Scottish (and English) identities, by implication, are more organic and 'natural' and more permanent. But can it be so simple? Can three centuries of political union and human exchange be washed so easily away? Can it be that the greater monuments in our minds are to Bannockburn and James IV rather than to James Watt and the Somme? I can only say: not in mine.

These aren't questions raised against Scottish nationalism, which can claim civic credentials and deplore the crude (perhaps increasing) ethnic boasts and grievances which swirl around within it. Rather, they're raised against the currency of an idea – the apparent failure of a British identity – which helps separatism along. It will take more than the rebranding exercise of 'New Britain' to contradict it, but unless it can be successfully contradicted, it is difficult to see any point in the United Kingdom. Or much

future for it. Nation states need common cultures to cement the differences inside them. Scotland, England and Wales, I would say, need to remember their commonality, the society and culture that they, and the people who have come to them from continental Europe, Asia and Africa, have together produced. It is not negligible. And it has shaped us rather more than the centuries before 1707.

End of Britain? 3: The last freedom

Ian Mackenzie

1997

Our friend in her 16-valve Megane drives my wife to work and drops me off at Hyndland. Hyndland platform is busy not with soaring seagulls but pigeons plodding, home-going hospital cleaners, late pupils, early students, anonymous workers, and a tired, unhappy man – I suppose it is me – setting out to spend a half hour face-to-face with the wee thing that sprouted into a big thing and has now suddenly shrunk to a crushed thing. The train seems sad, after Partick plunging underground to cry in the dark.

Central Station has a very high roof. I wish I was the kind of singer who could belt out *Don't Cry for Me, Argentina* or, in this case, I shall cry for you my daughter, and it would echo round and round with full orchestra. There is an abandon in the kind of big ballad which would rip the roof off the coffin known this morning as my heart.

The Carlisle train is two sprinting carriages. Happily, they are sprinting the same way. Also happily, one can walk from one to the other via a rubber sort of wobbly thing, which is just as well, as there is a toilet in only one of them.

I import into the train a plastic tea, and a chalk and margarine scone. Also a sandwich containing an egg which has served a custodial sentence.

Between Barrhead and somewhere else, we pass a graveyard on a hill. It is so enormous that if the resurrection from the dead took place suddenly, the people under these stones could march into Glasgow and take over the City Chambers.

The train goes doomy-doomy-da-da to Kilmarnock, de-doom-de-da over the hills and diddle-diddle-diddle-diddle down arboreal curves to Dumfries. The nearer we get, the more my shoes expand to hold my spirit and the lower my stomach sinks under the aerodynamic effect of a thousand butterflies. I may exaggerate there. Perhaps it is only one behemoth.

So far rain and mist have enshrouded us. At Dumfries, the mist retreats to give the rain a free hand. It thuds off tubs of flowers on the platform and drips off my cloth hat I bought on Iona in 1990. Outside the station are many cab ranks, normally filled by cabs, when there is no train due for an hour. Two trains having just arrived and it being wet, there are, of course, no cabs at all. A quarter of an hour later, I squelch through Thin's Bookshop, this being a shortcut to the Doonhamer Cafe.

I drink soup.

The next leg of the odyssey isn't so bad. The rain is merely as steady as the mechanical operation of my legs. I'm not sure where my feet are; probably swimming around in my brown shoes, bought in Helensburgh in 1993.

Everything passes. Just when I think this horrible journey is going to pass into legend in a film marked, *Never Solved: the Man Who Walked Into Nowhere*, the building rears up before me. It is, in its own way, majestic.

Under a Walt Disney battlementy turret, a wide curved external staircase sweeps up to a sort of glass captain's bridge. Feeling insect small, I creep upwards and ring a bell (push a button). I then move to the right to be ready to wield a large handle. Crackling ensues near the button. By the time I get back there it has ceased. I move back to the handle. It doesn't move. More crackling to my left. By the time I get back there again, it has ceased again. Inspired into dialogue, I move my mouth to the slatted bit of steel above the button and say 'Sorry'. A weary voice crackles back, 'Open the door with the handle and enter'.

Stifling an inclination to say 'Oh, really?', I go back to the handle. The voice and I now play a game. When he releases his button, I grasp the handle. When I release the handle, he presses the button.

At last I stand before him, through a glass, darkly. I take off my Iona hat. A notice says that the staff will take care of mobile phones. 'Here is my mobile phone,' I say. Other people are handing over clean underpants. He then finds things out about me, like that I am visiting my daughter.

Helpfully, I shout, 'She's in the ladies wing'. He winces. Apparently I should have said, if anything, 'the female hall'. But 'ladies in waiting' is surely a perfectly accurate way of describing females on remand.

Everything thereafter works by electric buttons. The waiting room is accessed by a moving glass wall. We wait inside. Of those waiting, some look familiar with the territory. Others, like me, are subdued. Finally, names are called. Many are called, says the Good Book, but not all get there. Eventually I find myself alone. A prison officer opens the door and surveys me. I give the name. Through the door I go.

The visiting hall is full of a surprisingly large number of tables. Each table has three or four people. It looks like a whist drive.

One person stands out because she is solitary. A slender young figure hunched over a table. I haven't turned up.

I have, though.

The origin of that Dumfries journey lay in a pre-dawn phone call one morning at 3.45. It was therefore a little edgily that 48 hours later I answered the phone at 4.45am. But it was not the polis this time. It was the Beeb's Johnston McKay telling me that Princess Diana had died during the night. Would I do a live five-minute piece around nine? There was one redeeming feature about the next hour. I can't do it with my brain. Crosswords and Scrabble and washing machine cycles baffle me. I have friends who actually think with their brains. I can see that this is admirable, but it's not a process with which I'm existentially acquainted.

Some people think with their knees. The theologian Tom Torrance used to tell his

students that theology, though the queen of the sciences, can only be conducted in a posture of worship. Nowadays, of course, journalists and broadcasters think with their word processors. But me, I think only with my wrist. On that Diana Sunday there was no time to use one's brains or knees, so my right wrist, finger and thumb came into their own as they raced the coffee and toast to the car. And then an unexpected thing happened. The sky and the sun thought for me. Not Rupert Murdoch's *Sky* and *Sun*, but those of a lesser God. The back road from Helensburgh into Glasgow was framed by a complex skyscape with the early sun tunnelling through black clouds: light shafting darkness. The effect was calming, and reminded me that while I had chomped toast, my wife had said something so clear, I'd let it slip by me. 'It's very simple. She was beautiful: that was her gift.'

I wasn't swept up by the subsequent flower experience, because I wasn't in London; but that morning on the wee road between Cross Keys and the A82 I had a fleeting intimation of mortality, and was reconciled to it. The way that Diana's human beauty had come to an end in a dark tunnel was not a metaphor or a symbol, but an expression of the situation of each of us: not because we are beautiful, but because just by being born one inherits beauty by the cosmic bucketful. I already knew, as Sir Colin Davis said around his 40th birthday, that death was the next important thing to happen. But unlike Gustav Mahler, who was hunted by the thought, I saw the sky and the loch, and Ben Lomond, and all I could feel was what Robert Kee once said to me in an interview: 'I'm lucky to have been here. It's been a party and I was invited'.

Later that week, I spoke to people who smelled the flowers in London, and, among the crowds, felt something similar: identification with the endless human puzzle; liberated to join a huge human party; given courage to cry a little without being thought eccentric; and comforted.

A week later I got flu. At least, I think so – I try not to go to the doctor until I am well again, so that I can check with him what it was without the hassle of treatment. Ten days of misery was introduced by a fanfare of backache so violent that, driving at 20 mph on flat roads without potholes, electric shocks were zapped on a blitzkrieg basis to every nerve-end in the vertebrae. Painkillers were useless. At home, two things worked: whisky – but nothing is more temperance-inducing than alcohol used as medicine – and Radio 3: not least the New College Choir, Oxford, singing Mendelssohn. You curl your lip too soon. If the wind changes it'll get stuck like that, specially if I go on to tell you that they sang *Hear My Prayer* (*Oh for the Wings of a Dove* to you). Yes, I too was brought up to think of that pigeon melody in terms of parody, with all the intellectual content of *The Lost Chord*. But from the pits of my flu, I was vulnerable enough to listen. And what do you know? It was achingly beautiful. The New College trebles had been trained to produce their voices not in the flutey impersonal tones of the English Cathedral tradition, but with a full-blooded almost operatic brightness; and Mendelssohn is a genius. In my condition, invaded by 30,000 tiny aliens posing as germs, this music

opened up my mind like these tiny balloons inserted into heart arteries. For a moment, released from stereotyped values, I was reminded that before kitsch was, beauty is.

It may seem a bit of a jump, but bungee with me. Why did Blair curl his lip over bagpipes at the Edinburgh Commonwealth summit and, bypassing the entire orchestra of Doric, Gaelic, or for that matter Welsh oratory, summon *Inspector Morse* to tingle the eardrums? Why was Donald Dewar, despite his intelligence, underwhelmed by Calton Hill as the obvious venue for the Scottish Parliament? Why, almost as soon as Diana's funeral was over, did columnists react against 'hysteria'? Why is everything being done to de-romanticise devolution? Why does one almost miss Michael Forsyth? Why does clinical New Labour begin to chill one's stomach? Can one be romantic when sober? Is this *all* due to flu?

I suspect not, because I was still mopping up aliens when the following Sunday night I boarded the Fort William sleeper for London. Remember the Fort William sleeper? You must do. At one time, you were ready to die for it. That ultimate sacrifice was not required because Scottish sleepers were craftily reconstructed with such labyrinthine cunning that, while in one way a shadow of their former selves, in another they have achieved glory through federal union. When the current Fort William sleeper glides from the wild dark into the outpost of Helensburgh Upper (not to be confused with the electric train plaza known as Helensburgh Lower), it is a modest train with a couple of coaches for the horizontal, a couple of sitting coaches, and a buffet about to die at Dalmuir.

After rumbling 60 miles east to Edinburgh Waverley, the train leans against a wall for an hour, submitting to unseemly jerks as engines couple and uncouple. More seismic movements suggest that union is being consummated with whole trains until at length a new beast is born. One senses its power. Bevvying in one lounge car, staccato Doric and international oil-speak. In the other lounge car, dark-suited Gaels and kilted English. As I wander back to my berth, I hear from one cabin the squeak of a pyjamed mobile phone. We of the north are still in touch with the world. What a cauldron of civilisation. But what is there not one of? A Central Belter. Not one. Mr Dewar, take note.

At about 1am, our Trojan Horse shudders into action and begins to trundle past a sleeping Jenners, beneath an unvigilant castle, and through the Haymarket tunnel, up past South Gyle (fourth possible site for Parliament – convenient shops) and shoogles 40 miles west again to Carstairs (fifth possible venue for Parliament – rail links to Labour heartland). Then, while we sleep, Beattock, Shap, The Lakes, Wigan Pier and Rugby slip by. A misty dawn reveals English trees rushing past like Birnam Wood on speed. My breakfast tray arrives. I sip tea and munch. Near Watford, we slow. On a parallel track an early commuter train accelerates. We attain trajectorial synthesis. That's to say, English commuters are virtually locked onto a Scottish gentleman, haggard with flu, pyjama top unbuttoned, propped up by a pillow, croissant and butter smeared all over his mouth. One by one, eight newspapers are lowered. They can wait. This must be savoured. I grab my paperback. I am now trapped into reading a book upside down.

Soon we draw away. Picking croissant flakes out of my hair, I realise something. I have more in common with those Hertfordshire commuters than I have with any group of Scottish lowlanders in Airdrie, Portobello, Morningside or Motherwell. I have never been a Scottish lowlander. But I did spend my early married years in Herts, and working in London. I was one of those commuters. And I loved it. I still love London. I'm sorry. I apologise. If you insist, I grovel.

At Euston, it is a brisk sunny morning. The 20-minute cab drive triggers adrenaline. Every street scene is vivid. Everyone seems happy. Is this still the flu? Or are we Scots so endemically pessimistic that we're quite surprised to come across a culture of enjoyment?

I was not in London for a holiday, but to be one of a panel of judges in Church House, Westminster, deciding awards for religious television programmes from all over the UK. It wasn't a bed of roses, sitting in a broom cupboard for a couple of days, goggling up at a screen big enough for a modest cinema. We were crushed together crotch to armpit round a mini-table, so I was glad I'd pre-ordered a cushion for my back. This was too much for the mighty church of Henry VIII, but the first aid room came up with a pillow. Fine, but it vanished overnight. I looked in the *Evening Standard* for a headline, but I suppose 'Theft of Pillow' didn't carry the resonance of 'Scots Marauders Carry Off Stone of Destiny'.

Opposite the broom cupboard was the circular assembly hall of the Established Church of England. Every seat had a microphone. Efficient, but I'm old-fashioned enough to love the way speakers at the Kirk's General Assembly have to rant and rave to be heard above the shouting, giggling, jeering and stamping of feet. I fear Donald Dewar plans to make his Scottish Parliament efficient: a sort of secular version of the Church of England Synod, with himself as archbishop, and new Labour bishops from Millbank to lay hands on all the latest gadgets. Well, in that case I prefer the eccentric old madhouse of the House of Commons. Go on, curl your lip again.

I realise that I'm sounding like an idiot, full of flu and mixed metaphors, signifying nothing. But my flu has gone now, actually, and what's a mixed metaphor or two among friends? Let me try to make out of a melange a loop.

The journeys I've described happened within a month in which I journeyed through mental and physical pain, amusement and delight. The road to both heaven and hell is a crazy pavement of no intentions at all. Life is a journey which happens to you, and the freedom to explore the parameters of uncertainty to the limit is what I can imagine dying for. To that extent, I've always been a little conservative, but I cannot vote Conservative because it leads to cruelty. Having voted Labour since 1964, in 1997 I swapped to SNP; not only because independence in Europe seemed a coherent idea, but because I was uneasy about the cancer of a control culture I saw taking hold of New Labour. Now, month by month, I see it grow.

There are good people in this government, some worthwhile ideas, and a couple of

profound reforms in the pipeline. I understand the driving passion to obtain two terms and thus undergird serious structural change. But a road of increasing intention can lead to a journey of increased tension. One intention too far leads to one means to an end too far. Life as a party gives way to the Life of the Party; and then there is no room for craziness at all. The freedom to laugh will be the last freedom to go, but it can go, it can.

I'm not saying this will happen, but the first signs are not hopeful. The result of the Scottish Referendum was a shout for freedom, a cry for Scotland to begin to have a ball. But what we're getting back are echoes of a grey practicality to be controlled at any cost – well, any cost under £40 million – by New Labour. Did we fling our hat in the air for this?

In the misery of my flu, I was liberated to hear, as if for the first time, churchy Mendelssohn sung operatically. *Oh for the Wings of a Dove!* Oh, for any bird's wings, any eagle's eyes, oh, for Donald Dewar to see. To think of a parliament in Edinburgh anywhere but on its operatic centre stage is to have a deeper myopia than flu. To authorise those pylons across Ayrshire suggests he needs new specs.

New Labour came up with one really interesting constitutional idea – but, of course, it's been the first one to be shelved: English regional assemblies. My interest in Alex Salmond's agenda would escalate to excitement if not only he, but the party he leads, convinced me of a commitment to regionalisation within Scotland. My parents came from Wester Ross and I went to school in Inverness-shire for a year, I was born and brought up in Aberdeenshire. I spent 15 years in Edinburgh. London was my home for five years, when it was still a city state under King Ken. And, for 25 years, living on the Clyde, my family has benefited from that amazingly benign giant, the surviving Strathclyde Passenger Transport system. But why a Stirling Kingdom no more? Why a Kingdom of Fife no more? Why an Aberdeen Kingdom no more? Why an Ayrshire Kingdom no more? And, yes, why not an Athens of the North, the stagiest set in a fun federal opera? I could live with all that, and with Newcastle and Bristol and Carlisle and Cardiff and York and Belfast and, yes, London complete with its loopy Commons and Lords.

Why not cherish them all? Let commuters and sleepers and travellers in rural postal buses and doves with wings all take off from the ark of a new covenant, and let a rainbow of all the colours arc the sky. 'The Union' is a busted flush. But so is the Rule of the Party. Let it go. What the world needs is a sense of celebration that, like Diana's funeral, goes a bit deeper than steel bands and presentational videos. The evolving cosmos is about difference: and some of us believe it is also about love.

Loving the *different* is our future. The high ground of moral conflict remains on the battlefields of injustice, disease and poverty. The fatherless, the widowed, and those in prison still have to be visited. But at the level of how we organise ourselves politically, there is another war: not between old and new but between concentric and eccentric. No reader of this magazine can be in much doubt which side to be on.

6.5.99: a day in the life of Scotland

1999

Introduction

Kenneth Roy

This is a *Scottish Review* unlike any other. It is devoted exclusively to the story of one day in the life of Scotland, as experienced, thought and felt by a few dozen people. It is a diary of 6 May 1999.

History was made that day, as the media never tired of reminding us: we elected a parliament, the first for 292 years, and we did so by proportional representation. A Green won a seat, as well as someone bold enough to call himself a socialist. My home town lived up to its motto ('Wha daur meddle wi' the Bairns o' Falkirk') by telling New Labour where to go – not Denny, by the way.

It was a bad day for romantics. Ian Hamilton and Neal Ascherson, who would have graced the parliament with their intellect and wit, failed to gain a seat. Kenyon Wright, pretty much the architect of the whole idea, stood as an independent and suffered the public's ingratitude. The real victors were lots and lots of party hacks that no-one had heard of, including not a few rejected by the electorate but who nevertheless qualified for a salary, and whatever prestige the office of MSP confers, by virtue of the iniquitous 'top-up' system. Four out of every 10 electors were so excited by the prospect of the parliament that they failed to vote.

For most people – even those who did vote – the politics was a sub-text, if not a footnote, to the ordinary activities of the day, the breathing, eating, talking, working, sleeping and dreaming. Faced with the awful editorial imperative of doing *something* about 6 May 1999, I decided perversely that it might be more interesting to look at the mundane reality than at the historic significance. In other words, what was it like to be alive in Scotland on that day of days?

I gave two of our regulars – Fiona MacDonald and Ian Mackenzie – a specific remit to go to the front and send back despatches. Fiona interpreted this literally and did go to the front. At Largs. But most of the contributors enjoyed a free hand. They were simply asked to keep a diary of their day – to write down anything that occurred to them, no matter how inconsequential.

The diarists included a bishop, a retired bank robber, two hospital consultants, a university principal, three school pupils, a local newspaper editor, a monk, two Church of Scotland ministers, an MP, a scientist, a poet or two, a radio presenter, a shepherd, an architect, a company director and a lawyer, as well as miscellaneous others. Geographically they encompassed Bressay and Broughty Ferry, Furnace and Fortrose,

Golspie and Glasgow. They took in a few places that may be unfamiliar to *Scottish Review* readers, such as Southwick in deepest Galloway. One of our diarists, Tam Dalyell, was even allowed to be in London for part of the day.

Politically they were diverse, though socially they were deplorably unrepresentative. They did not include any *Sun* readers and, so far as I could tell, only one subscriber to *The Guardian* (the retired bank robber). Too bad.

I took all the diaries and edited them, not ruthlessly I hope, into a chronological sequence – no fewer than 300 entries in all – starting at midnight, ending 24 hours later. Thus, as you read on, diarists pop up from time to time with the latest episodes of continuing personal sagas. You will, I think, quickly adapt to the unusual presentation and rhythm, and become familiar with the large cast of characters, though to avoid confusion I recommend that you acquaint yourself with the following brief biographies before setting out on your long night's journey into day.

My thanks to all the diarists, and to such incidental stars as Otis the cat. At the risk of making too grand a claim, I hope what emerges is itself a small bit of history, though not the sort you tend to read about in the newspapers.

Notes on the diarists

James Aitchison is a writer and poet. He was formerly a senior lecturer at Napier University, Edinburgh. **Dr Charles Allison** is a consultant anaesthetist at Stracathro Hospital, Brechin. **Iain Anderson** is a music presenter and sports commentator with BBC Scotland. **Lucy Anderson**, aged 15, is a third year pupil at Marr College, Troon. **Sir John P Arbuthnott** is principal and vice-chancellor of Strathclyde University and former professor of microbiology at Trinity College, Dublin. **John Blanche** is a former chairman of Allied Distillers and of William Teacher & Sons. **Professor Steve Bruce** is a professor of sociology at Aberdeen University and has written extensively on the Northern Ireland conflict. **Muir Campbell**, aged 13, is a first year pupil at Marr College, Troon. **George Chalmers** has served a total of 12 years in prison for bank robberies. **Rt Rev Mario Conti** is Roman Catholic bishop of Aberdeen and a member of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. **Tam Dalyell** is Labour MP for Linlithgow and introduced the West Lothian Question into the language. **Hannah Downie**, aged 14, is a third year pupil at Marr College, Troon. **Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith** is chairman of the Scottish Civic Trust, vice-president of Europa Nostra, and a partner in a firm of Edinburgh architects. **Eileen Dunlop** is a writer of books for children. **Rose Galt** taught in Glasgow and Cumbernauld for 30 years and is a former depute registrar of the General Teaching Council for Scotland. **Norman Gillies** is director of Sabhal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic college on Skye. **Rev David Graham** is minister of Rosemount Parish Church, Aberdeen. **James Halliday** is chairman of Scots Independent Newspapers, the company responsible for the SNP's monthly paper. **James Gunn Henderson** is a former editor of the *Northern Times*. **Professor Hamish Keir** is a scientist. He is former professor of biochemistry at Aberdeen

University and a past chairman of the Biochemical Society. **R D Kernohan** is a writer and journalist, a former director-general of Scottish Conservative central office, and a former editor of *Life and Work*. **Kevin McCarra** is a sports journalist with *The Times*. **Fiona MacDonald** is editor of *The Journalist's Handbook* and deputy editor of the *Scottish Review*. **Ian Mackenzie** is a writer and broadcaster and former head of religious programmes at BBC Scotland. **Dr Calum MacLeod** is a company director and chairman of Grampian Health Board. **Dr John Macleod** is a general practitioner on North Uist and Deputy Lieutenant of the Western Isles. **Rev Roddy MacLeod** is Church of Scotland minister of Cumlodden, Lochfyneside and Lochgair, Argyll. **Ronald Mavor** is a playwright and a former director of the Scottish Arts Council. **John Millar** is editor of the *Arran Banner*. **Dr Leo Murray** is accident and emergency consultant at Ayr Hospital. **Michael Park** is a member of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board and a former president of the Law Society of Scotland. **Sir Lewis Robertson** is chairman of the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. He was the first chief executive of the Scottish Development Agency and has served on the boards of many prominent companies. **Kenneth Roy** is editor of the *Scottish Review* and publisher of *Who's Who in Scotland*. **John Scott** is a farmer and Lord-Lieutenant of Shetland. **Frances Simpson** is manager of the Princess Royal Trust carers' centre in Dundee. **Father Martin T. Warren** is a Cistercian monk at Sancta Maria Abbey, Nunraw, near Haddington, and the abbey chronicler. **Jack Webster** is an author and journalist and a columnist on *The Herald*. **Elizabeth Whitley** is an ecclesiastical historian. **Hamish Whyte** is a publisher and writer.

The early hours

Midnight

Jack Webster, Glasgow

I look out as the midnight hour strikes and a new day begins. It is cold and wet and a fox is howling outside my gate. He turns to face me, as if to say: 'Do you know what day this is, old man?' And so to bed.

12.01am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

It feels like New Year – a moment for reflection and remembrance, very much a time for sentiment. I have worked for Scotland's independence all my life, and I am thinking of absent friends who in their life could have justly made the same claim. Why do I feel no elation at what today will achieve? The squalid, vicious and bogus campaign, so never-ending, is part of the answer. But what really matters is Scotland in relation to the wider world. Without powers and functions in that area, our parliament must remain only 'parliament'. How can four years of sensible political debate be sustained on the topics

within its permitted range? Topics which, once principles to guide action have been established, could safely be left to civil servants and professional functionaries. A parliament which can rescue us from pitiful, dangerous and costly posturing abroad, and can be brought to finance the restoration of a decent society, that would be exciting.

12.20am

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Nightly ritual – bath, then to bed with *The Scotsman* and the *Press and Journal*. A day of change is forecast for Scotland – the wonderful spell of sunny weather is due to end today. Fifteen minutes later black cat (which adopted the manse last year) wakes me up, having paid its respects, returns to its nocturnal activities. Before getting back to sleep, read some pages of *Preaching with Power, Sermons by Black Preachers*, received yesterday.

2.00am

Tam Dalyell, London

If anyone had suggested at any time since the fateful day at Dalintober Street, when the Scottish Labour Party did a U-turn in favour of a Scottish Assembly, that my mind would not be on Edinburgh government on election day, I would have been incredulous. But truth to tell, worries about the Balkans have evicted worries about the break-up of Britain. I wake up and ponder over the meeting at which I had been the opening speaker a few hours earlier. An eve-of-poll rally in Scotland? No such thing. The venue was the huge Methodist hall, opposite Westminster Abbey, where 1,700 people, standing 10 deep in the aisles, listened to passionate speeches for the end of bombing to an audience many of whom have come to think that Blair, Cook and Robertson ought to be arraigned as war criminals. It would have been better if Robertson had never gone near defence, sticking to devolution. Turn on the radio as I slip up to the bathroom, and find the proportional representation of the Scottish Parliament the last item on the hourly World Service news.

3.15am

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Rise for the night office. Only eight turn up, plus a visitor. More of us would be present, but two are on Caldey Island where its new abbot was blessed yesterday afternoon, and several others have indifferent health.

4.00am

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

First light to the lambing ewes. Two needing help, eight pairs, three singles, 400 lambed, 500 to go. A cloudless dawn with a brisk east wind off the North Sea, cold as 60°N.

4.00am

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

Awake with a twinging conscience. I hadn't said the prayers for peace in the Balkans which took such earnest, if incoherent, shape in the first few weeks of the war against Serbia. Deliver us from the evil we have aggravated. Forgive us our miscalculations. As I am drifting back to sleep, it occurs to me that I had better pray for Scotland as well. It's odd to agree over Serbia and nothing else with Alex Salmond and Tony Benn. Tam Dalyell's no problem. I've agreed with him half the time ever since he was a fellow Tory before Suez.

4.15am

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Hasten to the kitchen to heat the ready-made porridge, can't bear the stuff myself, and must remember to switch on the boiler. That done, I can relax and prepare for mass. Sung mass, 10 monks and four visitors. Holy communion, the central event of our day.

4.20am

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Up at loo. Sip of water. All quiet.

5.00am

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Sun up to warm the new born lambs and shepherd's fingers.

5.30am

Fiona MacDonald, Prestwick

The BBC World Service presents the news headlines. Foreign ministers from seven leading economic powers and Russia will be meeting in Bonn to discuss the Kosovo crisis. The US has appealed to Macedonia to reconsider its decision to close its border to refugees. Foreign ministers from Indonesia and Portugal have agreed to a referendum to give East Timor some control over its affairs. There is a campaign to prevent a former Iranian mayor from being sent to prison for corruption. Of an historic day in a little country on the north-west edge of Europe? Not a word. Rockall Malin Hebrides Bailey. Wind south-east or south, five or six. Occasional rain, visibility moderate or good. Quick burst of *Rule Britannia* before a contemplation for the day. Are they trying to tell us something?

5.30am

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Fog, a lively breeze, a shower... breakfast... did Christ live at the intuitional level all the time? A pre-critical and pre-reflective level of awareness of true fact – God in our midst.

Liturgy, a tool, with God's help, to free everyone from slavery to things and people, and set them in an eternal intuitional ambience, so that seeing creation as a whole, its cause will be plainly seen, resulting in praise and thanksgiving, communion with God and his holy ones.

5.45am

Iain Anderson, Langbank

The radio alarm goes off! This is unprecedented since it has been set by the Joint Householder – Marion – who hates mornings! However, this is her big day when she hopes to be re-elected as SNP councillor for Houston and Langbank.

5.55am

Fiona MacDonald, Prestwick

Newspaper boy of about 14 arrives with his bike in the doorway of a newsagents. At the nearby petrol station there is a flurry of activity. The man behind the counter says it's always busy at this time – British Aerospace workers starting their shift. Scan the newspapers on the stand outside:

Daily Record: 'Make it a Double Dewars.'

The Sun: 'This is the Day You Make History.'

Daily Express: 'Our Future in Our Hands.'

The Scotsman: 'Scotland Makes History.'

The Herald: 'No Mean City for Kosovan Refugees.'

Daily Mail: 'Chaos Looms at the Polls.'

Daily Star: 'Lover Dumped Me for Street Tracy.'

6.00am

Professor Steve Bruce, Oldmeldrum

Drive on empty roads the 23 miles to Aberdeen, the university and my office. Stoke up coffee pot and start replying to email. The replies automatically carry the time. I used to think this subtle way of advertising my early start to the working day would impress and encourage my colleagues. Then some smart arse told me that others achieve the same effect by just changing the clock settings on the PC.

6.00am

Ian Mackenzie, Helensburgh

Look out of the window. Ugh! Our street has one week of greatness per annum and this morning it has ended. The cherry blossom, egged on by a chortling sun, has for seven days enflamed us. The blossom's popping was loudest six days ago; yesterday, the rioting trees began to strip in the wind. But there was still a magic road to look forward to. I

would walk to vote on a pink carpet. Tread softly, for you tread on the dream of a new Scotland. Oh no. A night of wind and wet has removed even the normal dignity of grey. It's all a damp bedraggled mess. I ingest a celebratory pre-vote breakfast: shredded wheat and skimmed milk. The taste is of basket-chair and water.

6.00am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Awake. If you have pets, attend to their needs before your own. The cat agrees vigorously.

6.00am

Tam Dalyell, London

The 6am news does lead with the news that 36 million people would be voting, but not in the London boroughs, on this Super Thursday, but quickly moves on to the financial toll on the euro caused by the Balkan war. Today's papers referred to, including *The Herald*, calling on people to vote 'with clarity in your head and pride in your heart'. Quickly presses on to consider the sagas of a drunk in charge of a motorised skateboard, and a 31-year-old air hostess, arriving in Genoa, amazingly on time, who lost a bet with passengers and ran around the cabin in her undies; fortunately, she was only reprimanded by BA.

6.00am

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Wake earlier than usual – more likely due to the strong morning light than to the excitement of the day.

6.15am

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Deep silence in our home. It's listening to God, reading His word, conversing with Him... listening, listening, listening.

6.30am

Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith, Edinburgh

Wake without having heard my departing guests and turn on Radio 3 in order to start gently. Lindsay Quartet playing *Opus 135* – Beethoven. Did Radio 3 choose this on purpose? Beethoven wrote on the manuscript, *Musst es sein? Es musst sein!* Very appropriate for today. Switch briefly to Radio Scotland which has a programme about the Act of Union beginning with the bells of St Giles (dubbed) playing, as apparently they did, *Why should I be so sad on my wedding day?* Would be nice to have them back again, but what would they be playing today?

6.30am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Good Morning Scotland, as always, sharp but good-humoured and courteous. Sports news: in dark times in recent years I have argued that football loyalties are more important than politics. I have come to doubt that, as Dundee United wilt towards relegation. Only Dunfermline are in greater danger and for close on 20 years they were my first choice. In a way, the thought that one of them must survive brings a brief lift of sporting spirits.

6.30am

George Chalmers, Edinburgh

Shaving. Showering. (Thinking.) Outfit already pressed, ready for the day's proceedings. Radio 4 rhubarbing in the background, attempting to engage listeners in fictions of democracy. Disgraced, unembarrassable, rent-a-quote ex-MPs scrabble for 15 seconds more of fame. Ever seen a still photo of a politician with mouth firmly shut?

For me, today is not about primary colours and certainly not tartan braces. Tartan tacks would have been aesthetically preferable to BBC Scotland's gallus overexposure.

6.45am

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

To the oratory for morning prayer. What does one pray for on a day like this?

6.45am

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

The radio alarm goes off, bringing with it the familiar tones of John Milne and *GMS* to start the day. John sounds a shade demob-fevered, thankfully resisting all that grandiose 'date with destiny' stuff. He's the perfect foil to all who appear with him. Scotland already has its own national identity through the medium of radio, with many distinctive and authoritative voices.

6.45am

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Lauds, the dawn office... fog all round and rain!

6.46am

Dr Calum MacLeod, Aberdeen

Up and downstairs to be greeted as ever by our ancient golden retriever (Samantha) and our less ancient ginger tom (Rory). Despite my persistent questioning, neither of them will profess any interest in the election. Rory is the self-appointed chairman of the feline equivalent of MENSA and is frightfully proud of himself since he learned recently how

to open the bedroom curtains in order to gaze slobberingly at the blackbirds in the garden.

6.57am

John Millar, Brodick

Of course we are swimming today as we do almost every day. No long lie until Sunday. It is raining. And after such a nice spell. We drive to the pool. Will it be busy today? Deanna says she is undecided about her second vote. I've already decided I'll go for one of the list only candidates. Indeed, I have told Canon Kenyon Wright he has my vote and he thought it was quite fun that he had a whole paper behind him. Deanna is going to vote Conservative, Conservative, SNP. The last is Jim Lees, the candidate in our local election and he's a good bloke even though we are not in any sense nationalists. And we hate Labour. They pretend they have the high moral ground and are nasty bullies at heart.

The pool is packed. Six people. That is busier than we really like. We are lucky to live on Arran and have what is almost a private pool, and a good one too. There are two hotel guests and how one resents these intruders crowding out our swimming space.

7.00am

Dr Leo Murray, Ayr

Alarm. Not been called through the night. First cup of coffee and overalls over my working clothes. Bleeper and mobile phone in pockets – and out to feed my sheep and cattle. It has rained overnight, ending the dry sunny spell of the last few days, and drizzling yet. Pail feed to the cattle, to the two sheep yet to lamb in their small field, and to the ewes and lambs born over the last three weeks in the next field. Straw to the cattle, and back to the house. Everything green and lush at the moment. Struck by the bright bluebells glowing from their greenery. Overalls off, more coffee, and a short drive to the hospital. Part of the way following truck carrying electronic parts to the Compaq plant, between hawthorn hedges and Ayrshire fields, in sight of Mount Oliphant.

7.00am

Iain Anderson, Langbank

Marion casts her vote – first – in the local primary school in Langbank accompanied by her election agent, my brother, clad in Anderson tartan jacket and matching tie. Mr Anderson remains in bed, as do the two teenagers absolved from school duties at Greenock Academy.

7.00am

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

Start the day with the awareness that I cannot vote. For reasons that I still can't fathom (I

was sure that I filled in a registration form!) I am not on the electoral register. Disappointed at not being able to participate in the first Scottish Parliament election, but it means I can reflect on the outcome knowing that I am not responsible for it.

7.00am

Norman Gillies, Skye

Jean's alarm goes off and I am again struck by the thought that, however green we feel at times, we can't do without cars in rural areas. She is a social worker based in Portree and is faced with an hour's drive to get to the office about 45 miles away. She drives a 1.4 litre Polo which allows her to safely overtake the stray tourist who riddles along at 30mph admiring the scenery. She used to have a small-engined model, but found it ineffective in dealing with the local roads and downright dangerous when trying to overtake. The Chancellor, however, nice fellow though he is, penalises the rural motorist twice. Rural dwellers need cars and under-powered vehicles are not appropriate for our roads. Double whammy for the Treasury.

7.10am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Morning papers arrive – *The Courier* and *The Herald* – not *The Scotsman*; not any more or ever again. *The Courier* is hostile, but it always has been and is quite frank. In any case, its role is purely local. *The Scotsman* shares with Labour's campaign leaders the shame which should rightly attach to clever, educated experts who quite cynically, sniggering the while, set out to mislead and cheat those who are not as gifted as themselves. It used to be only certain types of Tory who build political careers on the fomenting of prejudice and misinformation.

7.30am

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

Meant to be awake at 7.25 to discover whom Radio Scotland risked with *Thought for the Day* on election morning; but slept through it. I remain pleasantly surprised that I've been allowed on it myself a few days either side of the poll.

The first post reminds me that I am to read the lessons on Sunday. I restrain my enthusiasm to discover why we're dipping into Nehemiah. I'm more receptive to an offer of further Scottish Rugby Union Murrayfield debentures, with seats in a nice bit of the east stand; almost all is forgiven to the SRU after this year's internationals. Then it dawns on me that they've no notion to take my present rights to an eyrie in the north stand in part-exchange, and that the cost would mean a massive non-returnable premium on already bloated ticket prices. When I discover that the Nehemiah passage is about usury (some campaigning linked to Christian Aid week, I suspect) I wonder if he could be invoked against the SRU.

7.30am

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Wispy pats my face and purrs. Born in the woods, winter brought her down to take over.

7.30am

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Unlock workshop and garage doors. Greeted by a soaking Rory, muddy paws up on my scapula, wags his tail with my rough handling, along his back and up and down his chest. He barks. Ferry some brethren to the village hall for voting. Ten parties pleading for our 'x'... a fair amount of derisive comment... I hope and pray good folk get in, folk who will live by God and his commandments.

7.35am

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

Unexpected and uncharacteristic flummox re choice of tie for this epic day. I go for the navy blue and thistley-looking Scottish Society of Anaesthetists. The society is the oldest in the world, dating from 1914, and has recently been foolish enough to ask me to edit its journal for the next four years. I'm dead chuffed, having only recently mastered joined-up writing.

7.45am

Muir Campbell, Troon

Woken as usual by my mum. Downstairs for usual routine, blood sugar 11.2 and insulin units 24. A bit high. About this time my mum points out to me that there seems to be an unusual number of people and cars in the street.

7.50am

Dr Leo Murray, Ayr

Into the A&E department. Collapsed man in his 60s just being transferred from ambulance cot to trolley, man who has had foreign body removed from eye being discharged, otherwise quiet.

I review the record of the patients already seen during the small hours of 6 May. Man breathless with chronic lung disease; young woman with chest pain; male overdose; child with abdominal pain – nothing serious; young man with appendicitis; another young man in police custody having cut himself with a knife; well-known alcoholic with further episode of pancreatitis; elderly man with fractured femur; old lady with heart attack; young woman with bronchitis; and a man with gastroenteritis. Routine night's work.

7.50am

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Sister Helen now in her late 80s and formerly my unpaid secretary arrives to serve my morning mass. Today's outcome is among my intentions.

7.55am

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

We have a prominent flagpole and a collection of some 27 flags of different countries or states. Yesterday was the flag of Zimbabwe as son Alasdair is there and I have emailed our friends to tell them it is flying. Today has to be my largest Scottish flag – the cross of St Andrew in recognition of the historic nature of today.

Morning

8.00am

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

A pretty foul day. In *The Scotsman*, very difficult to find any non-political pages – or to find anything new, or indeed worth reading, in the political ones.

8.00am

Tam Dalyell, London

Phone Kathleen at 8am as always. She has heard, as I have, Alan Clarke on Radio 4, about the Kosovo refugees. Kathleen says that we are raising expectations for the refugees that we cannot fulfil; that we have to organise ourselves if we are to take refugees, and that Alan Clarke was right to ask about schooling and a host of other awkward questions. She raises the issue of 'blackmailing', or being put in the wrong if you do not immediately welcome ethnic Albanians, whatever their criminal drugs activity, without screening, and if you do not welcome a Scottish Parliament.

Kathleen thinks the media has been quite wrong to pressurise by questioning and manipulating people into taking up positions they do not hold. One example was during the referendum, when the Nos were portrayed as being against having more say in our own affairs. Another example was an interview Kathleen had seen with Jeremy Paxman last night in which he tried to put the Greek Minister for Europe in the false position of favouring ethnic cleansing. All he was saying was that it would have an effect on the Greeks, being so near.

Kathleen objects to the posters 'Labour Labour Labour' without the candidate's name. She thinks it is a deliberate fudge by Donald Dewar to make the electorate forget all the squabbles about selection. She recalls how we sat down with Jimmy Boyle, my formidable

first agent, and worked out our own election address. A far cry from the centralised glossy guff coming out of party HQ nowadays.

8.00am

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

Exchange pleasantries with a wet squirrel on the kitchen windowsill. I love these clever, humorous, acrobatic creatures – a pest to some, a delight to me.

8.00am

Rose Galt, Glasgow

Wake up thinking in Italian. My late husband and I went to Italy for 20 years and made many friends there. Because he was fluent, I was lazy and learnt only 'supermarket Italian'. Last September, I enrolled in a class at Strathclyde University as a beginner. As I get out of bed, I ponder on the mysteries of language learning. Why can I talk to myself fluently, albeit at a simple level, yet become a mumbling monoglot when asked to open my mouth in class?

Am dismayed to find it's raining, not only because good weather means a higher turnout at the polls, but because, in a moment of loyal madness, I agreed to a last-minute appeal from my local Labour Party organiser to hand out leaflets for a few hours at my polling station. I first did this in 1945, as an eight-year-old, in Possilpark. Since then I've been an election junkie and always find election day exciting. This morning I remember past highlights (helping to get Bruce Millan elected in Craigton in 1959 against the trend, 1 May 1997) and, alas, the lowlights (the awful 80s).

8.00am

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

Dreich and drizzly as I wander in to vote. Two cold tartan rosettes half-heartedly hope I'll give their man my vote. Though never a nationalist, I do actually offer John Swinney my endorsement, as he's an excellent constituency MP.

8.00am

Michael Park, Aberdeen

My body clock alarm still responds to my pre-retirement regime, aiming to be at my office desk at 7am. Horrors – the alarm did its job but I simply turned over – the day is wrecked. One huge consolation – the day is now one third gone.

8.00am

Dr Calum MacLeod, Aberdeen

Off to St Mary's Episcopal Church to register the triple vote. Not a living soul there but the returning officer's staff and myself. Colour coding succinctly explained to me and in

a trice it was all over. Not a candidate in sight which slightly disappointed me. The Tory man is Tom Mason who is my next door neighbour and to whom I was prepared to offer my vote in exchange for cutting the hedge. Did I vote for him? I also know the Labour candidate, Lewis Macdonald. We are both sons of the manse. In fact, the same manse, since his late father succeeded mine as parish minister at St Columba's, Stornoway. Did I vote for *him*?

8.00am

Jack Webster, Glasgow

They say this is an historic day but it doesn't feel that way. Let's wait and see. 6 May? It rings a bell. My father died this day 22 years ago on his beloved farm of Honeyneuk at Maud in Aberdeenshire. A black crow had settled on his windowsill that evening. I hadn't believed these omens really happen. But they do.

This is also the birthday of an old friend, a very special friend. John Brown started designing the great Queen Mary in 1926 and had a finger in every Clydebank ship thereafter, through to the QE2 in 1966. A boy from the Cathcart district of Glasgow, he was the bright young naval architect of his day, given that unique opportunity to help shape the biggest luxury liner the world had ever seen.

8.05am

James Aitchison, Stirling

The garden looks bright – apple blossom, red tulips, blue poppies – even in this rain.

8.05am

Frances Simpson, Dundee

The day starts with a dilemma: what to do about my teenage son who doesn't want to spend yet another day at home alone because some youths set his school on fire resulting in only exam pupils being allowed to attend. We compromise: he can stay in bed all morning (not exactly hardship) and I'll push my organisation's family-friendly policies to the limit, by taking him to work with me in the afternoon.

8.10am

James Gunn Henderson, Golspie

A fresh easterly breeze ruffles the milk on my plate of home-made porridge, nuts and prunes as I sit outside having my breakfast. Across Loch Fleet are the walls of Skelbo Castle, where in 1290 the emissaries of Edward I learned of the death of the Maid of Norway, putting paid to his plans for a North Atlantic Treaty 700 years ahead of its fruition. Below me is the little pier where early last century sailing packets used to bring home from London the Countess of Sutherland, with her husband the Marquis of Stafford and his grandiose plans for clearing the glens of people in favour of sheep.

8.10am

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Woken by Otis purring in my face. Feed Otis, take cup of tea through to Winifred. Her temperature is 99.5°.

8.15am

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

Arrive at the rural idyll of Stracathro after the best five-mile drive to work in Scotland, though a tractor help around 20 cars along the contraflow, so it took longer than the usual eight minutes. There's been a settlement here since Roman times, but our much-loved hospital is again under threat. It was meant to close in 1961 but has defied the doubters and centralisers, through that potent combination of clinical excellence and customer loyalty. Today's *Courier* proclaims yet another 'crisis meeting' on 17 May. Ho, hum.

8.15am

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Early delivery of the *Almanach de Gotha*, republished after half a century, a fascinating reminder of the past – and in some cases present – splendour of royal (and some noble) houses in Continental Europe (including various Saxe-Coburgs); could not be more different from a wet polling day in Edinburgh.

8.30am

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Awakened by music of Kenny Mciver's morning programme on Radio nan Gaidheal. All human life is there. Age-gap in marriages. Centenary of Gideons – operate in 172 countries; distribute a million Bibles a month. Previous Scottish Parliament. Continental toilets. Steamies and launderettes.

8.30am

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Refurbishment at a climax, more tradesmen in the house than one would have thought possible.

8.30am

Hannah Downie, Troon

Hazel (the neighbour from across the road) meets me outside our front gardens. She launches straight into: 'Ugh! I hate this election!' This negative statement deflates my bad mood into a very bad mood as we set off to school. Fortunately our path to school takes us through a little wooded area. Following the winding path (created in order to dig the

fallen trees of the Boxing Day storm), I suddenly have a little epiphany – everything slots into place. All around me nature is working its miracle of springtime. I now feel much more confident and happy.

8.35am

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

The first patient, from my homeland in north Fife, is quickly sedated and prepared for his knee replacement. Orthopaedics is what we do best and there are six joints today, four of them on my list. He chooses country and western as his music selection, but snores soundly throughout. Later in the day, I actually have a lady who does karaoke in her spare time and we reckon we've something in common.

8.45am

Ian Mackenzie, Helensburgh

Walk to vote. Hat or brolly? Hat wins – useful as container for sandwich when not on head. When hat not on head.

At the main street crossing, Annie is bitter. She's been lollipop lady, child comforter and traffic tyrant, back to when my children had to cross this crossroads four times a day. Verbally gifted, she leaves me in no doubt what she thinks of 'they' who have added to the usual problems of high-achieving Helensburgh mothers racing each other late to school in off road vehicles with cow-catchers. Today, for the first time, voting is in the Victoria Halls, adjacent to the crossroads, and even Annie is at a loss how to get her primary school charges across the road.

I enter the mildly castellated Victoria Halls. Eleven days ago, Alex Salmond spoke here, and my wife, son and I strolled along. We'd have gone anyway – in the flesh still beats on the box – but his drubbing at the hands of *The Scotsman* and the *Record* made attendance an obligation. The hall was full that night. Our SNP candidate Lloyd Quinan gave a strong performance, as you'd expect of an STV weatherman; and Salmond, jolly on occasion, was straight on all key questions. So I'm happy today to be voting for him, not least as an act of retaliation against Andrew Neil's tantrum in *The Scotsman* when he didn't just throw all the toys out of the pram but unscrewed the kitchen sink, fridge and cooker in order to hurl them across Scotland at *The Herald* and the SNP.

Not a good example to the children.

8.45am

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

Sitting in the surgery writing a report on a medical student who has been with us for a month. Dynamic girl who has got herself involved with more local activities than any of the 113 other students I have had over the last 24 years. Herein lies the problem: she is just so obliging that I fear she is not going to cope with being a junior hospital doctor.

8.45am

Rose Galt, Glasgow

Rush to see if the postman has delivered the replacement disk for my email system which developed a 'fatal error' 10 days ago. Disappointment. I can't believe how much I've missed it. The Jeremiahs may bemoan the unstoppable advance of electronic communication and the dying art of letter-writing, but they're so wrong. I email my daughter in New York several times a week, sometimes only a few lines to relay a recipe, the downward progress of Partick Thistle, the latest jokes, as well as British news of which she is starved. It's cheap, quick, immediate and you don't have to assemble a pen, paper, envelope and stamp. The daily check for mail has replaced in anticipatory terms the plop of letters on the hall carpet. And you don't get electronic brown envelopes and never-to-be-repeated prize draw offers. Save the forests; use email.

8.45am

Professor Steve Bruce, Aberdeen

PC breaks. University computing engineers tell me it will be three or four days before they can even look at my machine. Wonder what private company would put up with such crap service. I have first political thought. None of the parties promising to end tuition fees has explained where it will find the money universities need to hire decent staff and mend the roof.

8.45am

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

First meeting of the day: the future of fundraising into the next decade. From vision to reality: what needs to be done at the strategic level as well as detailed discussion about the costs of fundraising for the university and how to cover the management and administration overheads. I have to explain all of this to the trustees of the University Foundation, which is the fundraising arm of the university.

8.45am

James Aitchison, Stirling

Skim *The Scotsman*. Yesterday's leader, 'Vote Labour', was a tease. But what did it mean?

8.50am

Norman Gillies, Skye

Take the two girls to the new school bus and drive the two miles to work. I enjoy my drive to work. I do not encounter any traffic lights or roundabouts, just a nice meander along the sea wall, admiring the views across the Sound of Sleat and into the mouths of two sea lochs, Loch Nevis and Loch Hourn. Knoydart gets nearer or further away depending on the weather. An ever-changing vista that never fails to attract me. On the

headland at Kilbeg a new building is evident but it does not impose itself too forcibly on the landscape. It does not intrude. As the eye continues to glimpse it, it will soon become a natural part of my morning landscape. It is the new campus, Arainn Chaluim Chille, of Sabhal Mor Ostaig, where I work.

9.00am

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

Well under way now. Big Dave Rowley is in good form, having returned from Australia and the Far East, travelling first class and five star all the way. He told us he wore space suits to operate in Hong Kong and was treated like a god in Kuala Lumpur. With typical disarming affection, Sharon Mulligan assures him: 'There's not much chance of that happening here, Prof!'

9.00am

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Look at mail. Cheque for £6.44 from Kelvin Books for Mariscat Press (any cheque brightens up the day of a small publisher).

9.00am

Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith, Edinburgh

Call at the polling station in Riddle's Court on my way to work. It must be the oldest close in the Lawnmarket and would certainly have existed when our last parliament was sitting. Did they have polling booths then?

Edinburgh is still a village in spite of being a capital city. Entrance to Riddle's Court stacked with black rubbish stacks awaiting collection, presumably not the voting slips. Only Labour and SNP posters outside – is anybody else standing? In spite of rubbish, rain and wind, it feels good to be voting in the Old Town, close to the old parliament for a new one also to be built in the Old Town. Like the Pope coming to the General Assembly building – history in the making.

9.00am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Return to the papers and to William McIlvanney. I have discovered that if you spend over 50 years preaching in politics you will in due course find your own words and ideas coming back at you. The sad thing is that when you say them nobody pays attention, but when persons of greater influence say them the world falls silent in approval. I feel, often, like a speech writer.

9.00am

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

Next meeting: future relationships between the university and education institutions in Lanarkshire. Discuss the educational opportunities that can be created within an open framework of student progression, with multiple entry and exit points. How to further the agenda for lifelong learning in Lanarkshire. Preparation for meeting the new Minister for Education (whoever that will be).

9.00am

Iain Anderson, Langbank

It is a grey, dreich morning in leafy Langbank, where a large Saltire flutters from the old converted stables nearby. I take a flask of tea to the school where my brother is in earnest conversation with the MacMillan clan chief, George, wearing the blue rosette of the Conservative Party. They take the tea but pretty well ignore me.

9.05am

Frances Simpson, Dundee

I need to take my primary school daughter to the fracture clinic to have her cast removed. Although there in good time, obviously we are sharing our appointment with two dozen other people, and the morning routine is shaping up to grind to a halt. I decide to try to adopt the same calm and unruffled approach which the staff in the clinic seem able to exude, despite being under pressure from anxious patients.

9.07am

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

Start writing article about Jozef Venglos for the Scottish Cup final programme. I have all the cuttings and facts, but no sense of him. It's been that way since the Old Firm took to appointing foreign coaches. Having come a long way to work here, these people keep their distance. No off-the-record chats, no insights. Whose fault is it? Like Dick Advocaat and, previously, Wim Jansen, Venglos has a low opinion of the Scottish press. Once said we were worse than the Portuguese newspapers. Suspect that was a savage insult.

9.15am

Iain Anderson, Langbank

I head for the Finlaystone estate where George MacMillan rules as a benevolent despot, one pace behind his wife Jane. As usual, I am accompanied by our large golden labrador Glint. Never mind, it's a long story! On this occasion, we are joined in the glades and the drizzle by Jock – my brother's disobedient West Highland terrier. The walk proves uneventful.

9.15am

John Blanche, Aberfoyle

The day dawned dark and grey. Loch Ard looks threatening on a day like this instead of blue and cheerful. Even the fresh green of the birch trees on the loch edge looks dull against the pines and spruces of the forest. The only good thing is that the hill behind Daldrishaig is sheltering us from the strong east wind. Thursday is refuse day. I put out our wheely bin only to realise that they come a day late when there has been a Monday holiday.

9.30am

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

To Furnace village hall to vote. Para Handy attended a ball in this very hall. At one time was SNP Argyll headquarters. Will previous history influence voting? Confronted by coloured paper of various lengths. Think of Irish catchphrase – 'Vote early and vote often'. Strongly tempted to give second vote to Robbie the Pict, who had best election slogan: 'Pick the Pict for Parliament on the Peachy Paper Please'. Next door to Furnace shop for *Oban Times*. Remember school days in North Uist when new young teacher from Inverness asked how many of us read *The Times*. He returned to the mainland thinking that 40% of Uist households took *The Times*, not knowing that what they meant was the one published in Argyll.

9.30am

Professor Hamish Keir, Aberdeen

In Aberdeen to attend the funeral of my ex-wife's late uncle. Splendid chap. I am a Scottish Conservative activist, being chairman of our association on the Black Isle, but I could not possibly have entertained the thought of putting politics before Uncle Jim, even on this election day. Lindsay (granddaughter, aged 10) and I cycle to the Buy-Near shop (a nearby general store which she called bynear when an infant, then converted to Buy-Near) overtly to purchase sweets but really to buy my *Daily Telegraph*. I tell her that she ought not to be listening to her Walkman while cycling. She bawls back over her shoulder that I should be wearing a helmet.

Thank the Good Lord for the *Telegraph*. It keeps me sane in this 'politically correct' (PC) world in which the first Scottish Parliament in 292 years will be opened in July without pomp and circumstance. Our Queen will turn up in a summer frock with posie, I suppose, and the Duke of Edinburgh in a lounge suit. Ugh! And there will be no opening of the daily sessions of parliament with Christian prayer, another example of downgrading by the PC lefties. And what is all this claptrap about abolition of BC and AD? In my eyes, this remains predominantly a Christian country. And I read today that some silly asses want *Just William* to be sanitised. Who *are* these dreadful people?

9.30am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

My election work is to phone and encourage 'For' voters to get out and vote, but general wisdom says that you don't start that until 10am. So I turn to some tidying in the garden.

9.30am

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Out to a grey-Galloway day. Over Solway, Sellafield is hidden, England a dark line. On bright days it seems so near! Feed hens, let them out to grass, but still fenced. When an absentee buyer took over the opposite hillside, for tax-avoidance blanket forestry, it exterminated all wildlife, and foxes ate my hens. Today lairds turn from farming to hand-rearing thousands of pheasants to be shot, so foxes are mostly eliminated.

9.35am

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

Today I have a low patient load as I am to take time for some administration, but one of our many Macdonalds is here with a skin problem that arises from his work with shellfish. He trained in fish processing and has built up a super business where he buys locally-caught lobsters, prawns and crabs, and then exports them to Europe. I wonder how this morning's announcement of 'no change' in the bank rate will affect him. The strong pound has adversely affected his trade and so he has to try and fly out more live shellfish so that they get a better price in Spain. A day of low mist and a late aircraft can ruin his balance for the week.

9.35am

James Gunn Henderson, on a bus

Comfortably seated in the Citylink coach on its 90-minute, 55-mile journey to Inverness, I reflect on the similarity of the couthy Highland towns through which we have passed – Dornoch on the north side of the Firth, and Tain on the south. Their warm sandstone buildings and surrounding greenery are a joy to the eye, as they have been for centuries past, long before the Union of the Crowns and parliament. What a contrast is Alness, the Ross-shire village which mushroomed like Thurso to dwarf the county towns of Dingwall and Wick, thanks to imported industry, now in decline. It was the ill-fated aluminium smelter that left Alness with a Clydeside population whose subsequent social problems it could have done without, and now diminishing Dounreay is leaving its host town equally devastated. Call centres have sprung up in Alness industrial estate, but our SNP candidate has succinctly hazarded their future – 'short-term gain, long-time regret'.

9.40am

John Millar, Brodick

Thursday is always a fraught day. It is the day we begin to layout the paper and from Thursday morning it looks a long, long way to Friday evening when it should be on the streets. It is also a day when I stay in the office at the one job. Jenni and Howard are at work when I arrive. We chat briefly about April Dancer. This is a quiz question from *The Herald*. To win malt whisky for life, which is quite a nice prospect, I had 19 out of 20 questions. The missing one is: in which 60s TV programme did Stephanie Powers play April Dancer? We have all become obsessed with finding the answer. Howard thinks a lady had a horse called April Dancer in the 70s, so she should know the answer.

9.45am

James Aitchison, Stirling

I finally take my lower back pain to my GP. His surgeries run late because he engages patients in the kind of conversation that is itself a therapy. He thinks an intervertebral whastit has gone again as it did – he checks my file – in August 1987. He gives me a prescription for painkillers, an appointment card for an X-ray later today, and the promise of physiotherapy when I get back from Gloucestershire. Norma and I change plans. We cancel our trip to the RSA annual exhibition in Edinburgh, and to the rickety little bistro in Jeffrey Street.

9.55am

George Chalmers, Edinburgh

Waverley Station. Raining, of course. 'Customers' slalom a contraflow of yellow cones warning of 'slippery surfaces'. Concourse tiles should be selected for safety rather than easy-clean, hazardous blandness. Green velcro? Aboard now; sharing damp drabness with sundry meeting-goers and straggling lawyers. Extending my brief, I decide to eavesdrop on the journey to Glasgow. After Haymarket, people settle into journey-mode. Three suits sit diagonally across. I occupy the outside seat of cramped twosomes.'

'... SNP to give away set-top decoders...' I mishear. Some people have no idea how to handle a broadsheet in a confined space; all that rustling and realigning. (It's impossible to read *The Guardian* fully extended in Glenochil's toilets.) Anyway, it is BSkyB donating decoders, pretending that something free means more for less. 'They may take our land – but they'll never take our satellite dishes.' This inner cry rings out across Canavan's valley as we rattle along under rumpled skies the colour of a spin-doctor's suit. (An urge to live in Falkirk West just to vote for, what appears, a person of integrity.) Dennis is a cert. Tommy Sheridan is a cert, of sorts. I might see him; for I'm off to Govan to confirm a death and catch-up with Vlad the Inhaler before the return journey.

10.00am

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

I have agreed to be surveyed by a very decent minister (in fact my own minister, but on sabbatical) as part of the fieldwork for a Princeton doctorate in ministry. I find myself telling him what astonishing expectations Scots Presbyterians have of their ministers and that we're too dependent on them, despite lip-service to the ministry of all believers. Unfortunately I'm not very convincing, even to myself, when it comes to finding quick and simple ways of reducing this dependence. I never had this self-doubt when writing editorials, fortunately.

10.00am

Professor Steve Bruce, Aberdeen

Meeting to discuss re-organising our postgraduate training to conform to new government 'guidelines'. The lead hand in the cheap plastic glove. Having given up trying to manage the economy, politicians and civil servants can devote all their ruling zeal to badgering and hectoring the public sector.

10.00am

Rose Galt, Glasgow

Standing outside the polling station handing out flyers in the company of two other party representatives, the SNP and the Scottish Socialist Party. We get on swimmingly, exchanging stories, greeting the voters. We express the hope that the new parliament will operate in a similar spirit.

10.00am

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Begin phoning. Within minutes the innocence of our [SNP] canvassers (an old complaint of mine) is revealed all over again. 'Sorry love, I'm Labour', 'I never tell anyone anything about my vote', 'Mind your own business' – all these answers in the first half hour or so and all 'Against's' in anyone's language.

10.00am

Rev David Graham, Aberdeen

Having to produce a sermon every week means I use the nooks and crannies of my diary to store sermon 'ingredients': quotes, stories, ideas. Today I enter a phrase: 'When the dawn comes up and retires in dismay'. I am more than a decade away from retirement and feel, still, far more of dawn than dismay. Tuesday mornings I do the coffees and books at our re-ordered church building. (Re-ordered, rather than refitted, is the ecclesiastical jargon, coming from England where the church is failing faster and has been driven to re-ordering or shutting). Our re-ordering includes: a street market with

two barrows, a books area, an ancient/developing world education area in the gallery and tower, and multipurpose use of the (pewless) church space. Today there is an after-school group in the church meeting in the morning because the schools are being used for the election (usually they meet in the afternoon). All of the children have both parents working. Out of real need? Whose?

Voters come into the coffee lounge, from the station opposite. They advise us that we should prepare for many more. In fact, numbers are only a bit above the usual: a familiar story. We are positive survivors of a Church of Scotland whose journey into the new millennium may not exceed four decades.

I buy two of Scotland's newspapers. Neither, on this historic day, has any material worth tearing out for *any* future. One of the articles is by Alasdair Gray who, long ago, we employed on a Glasgow community programme. Only for half a day: by lunchtime he had a better offer from the owner of the Ubiquitous Chip restaurant, who asked him to paint murals.

10.00am

Jack Webster, Glasgow

I drop in with a gift for John Brown. He looks resplendent in neat collar and tie and white cardigan. Is clear in the mind as ever. If my Scots blood boils a little at moments like this, it is because the powers that be in London have never seen fit to honour this significant figure of Scottish shipbuilding. His two predecessors at Clydebank became Sir James McNeill and Sir Thomas Bell. Come to think of it, we cannot always blame London. Not many of our own Scottish people bother to give him a thought either. He tells me he is not planning to vote. Apart from the fact of a busy birthday, he feels it is not for him, at 98, to help shape the future of our country.

10.12am

Ian Mackenzie, Glasgow

I arrive in an electric chocolate and custard train at Glasgow Queen Street low level. Low level suggests squalor, misery, dim lighting, despair; and yes, that's what you get here at rush-hour. But today I'm non-peak. They haven't found out about escalators, so I trudge up a steep stone stair, and stumble, blinking, into the airy light of Queen Street high level. Let me rephrase that. And grope into the Stygian shadows of the inside of a Zeppelin. Queen Street is currently an enigma wrapped up in a mystery, or to put it mundanely, an envelope. It is being, in Railtrack's winsome language, 'regenerated'.

This can cover anything, from repairing the roof to putting St Andrew's crosses on the toilet rolls – though the latter may be a vision too far even on this historic day. Actually, this is a spectacular sight, perhaps the most exciting contribution to Glasgow's year as City of Architecture and Design. Billowing waves and arching clouds of white tarpaulin loop and dive, like a cathedral apse on heroin, or like the Lloyd's inside-out building

turned outside-in again. Supporting this false ceiling is a sclerotic threnody of scaffolding on such a scale it must have taken more than two men and a ladder to put it together. The pyramids were nothing to this.

The train bit is, as always with Queen Street, an anti-climax. Compared with Glasgow Central, the grandest railway terminus in Britain, Queen Street was always a runt. Now, without even steam engines to give it character, it's an apology. Wee sprinters, like blind moles, creep in and out of Cowlairs tunnel to lie beside platforms, panting diesel fumes. I grab a fast espresso, munch the sandwich inside my hat, and take a cab.

10.15am

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Coffee. George Birnie comes in with the post, says quite a few Bressay folk have voted already. Tavish [John Scott's son, who is standing as Liberal Democrat candidate] off to Noss with David Manson and Robert Henderson and the dogs to gather the ewes. His way of relaxing after a hectic campaign. I do hope he is elected after all his work, not to mention the rest of the family rallying to the lambing.

10.15am

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

Leave home and drive to Cardonald, on the South Side of Glasgow, where my dad now lives in a residential home. At 84, his short-term memory hardly works at all and the present only has a faint existence. Conversation is the best of it for him. I can ask him about Coatbridge in the 1920s, his job as a fairground barker in Blackpool, Camden Town in the 1930s, the merchant navy, the Second World War, teaching in the east end of Glasgow.

10.15am

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

Preliminary meeting with a professorial candidate for the vacant chair of accounting. Talk about the key changes taking place in the accountancy profession which will affect the careers of future graduates. An overview of academic publications in the accountancy field. Discuss the theory and practice of accountancy.

10.25am

George Chalmers, on the train

Falkirk High Station. Another make-over in progress. '... but why is every toilet out of order?' Boarding mutterers look anxiously for untrustworthy, TARDIS-type loos. There's nothing more reassuring than being able to block the door during the act; with these Trekkie sliding doors, you're never quite at ease. Apparently every station must provide

disabled access to toilets; a crapper's charter. A couple of guys, looking almost disabled, practically fight for those touch-sensitive buttons that are probably linked to the internet.

10.29am

Ian Mackenzie, Glasgow

St Andrews Street. Why am I here? Here is Glasgow District Court, the lowest of the low. It is because it is low that I am here. Today Scotland elects the highest of the high. I want to see how some of the lower orders are spending this day.

Yesterday I phoned a lady in the relevant office of justice who gave me the low-down. Owing to illness among staff in the Procurator Fiscal's office – and other problems – resources are stretched and there isn't a lot going on at the moment. (A lawyer friend subsequently tells me that one of the 'problems' is the absence of a slice of the Scottish justice system in Holland. Tough if you're a low form of Scottish legal life with no connection to Lockerbie.)

The Old Bailey this isn't. It's an old block off the East End Saltmarket. The interior is utilitarian. Strip-lit stairs and corridors reveal lawyers in ragged black gowns conducting fast tête-à-têtes with dismal clients. I go to Stipendiary Magistrate Court 5.

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. No tiered high-backed benches, no dark wood. No heraldic arms. No gallery. The 'public' seating is chairs at the back of what I can only call a room, a biggish room, overheated and overlit. Inside a playpen sit two female clerks, white-shirted and black-skirted.

Young lawyerish persons drift in and out like baby crows pushed out of the nest and floating on a tail wind. Two court officers in white shirts with thick batons stand at a lectern checking lists and going away to collect those appearing to plead. One officer comes over to me to ask if I'm appearing. It would seem my efforts not to overdress for the occasion have been successful.

Behind a raised megadesk sits a man with a wig. Probably a stipendiary magistrate. Whatever his professional status, he's definitely the boss; people call him 'your honour'. His face is three-dimensional, puckish, inlaid with ruminative eyes. In between events, he's at repose.

I'm thwarted by the *sotto voce* factor. They're all speaking under the coverage of my radar and I can't hear a lot. But to relieve the low-key muttering there is a visual component: a non-stop ballet of biros. All of them – magistrate, clerks and procurator person, in light grey suit and patterned tie under the ubiquitous robe – all of them are writing *the whole time*, while simultaneously pursuing a paper-dance. Whirr – whirr – whirr. Like helicopter blades, the biros flail round and round. Bombs of files are loaded on the clerks' table, perused, muttered about, written on, and dropped on the floor. Little white doves of paper flutter between magistrate and clerks. And all the time, writing, writing, writing. No trace of entropy, this universe is not running down.

An unreconstructed Luddite, I am excited to behold with my own eyes the survival of a paper culture, more significant to me than cannibalism in a South Sea island. The literature of my youth was full of scenes like this – Dickens, Dostoevsky, Lewis Carroll, Kafka. This theatre of paper is so mesmerising, I have to force myself to recognise another strand of activity, which is, after all, the reason for the first: nothing to do with paper or even literature. A smear of humanity.

One by one, they are called for by name. An officer exits to fetch. A hiatus ensues. The magistrate's eyes rest on the horizon. The female clerks whisper. The officer returns, announces a name with the noisiness of a toastmaster, and the person cited is directed to stand-sit, sit-stand, stand-sit to order at a lectern, while a lawyer hovers, as the prisoner's personal demon. Most clients are handcuffed. A few aren't, waiting as free men on the chairs.

The unfree ones, the handcuffed, are removed back each to their particular dungeon.

It's a litany of small troubles. A traffic offence here, a breach of the peace there, a stealing something somewhere else.

All are young. A black youngster is asked if he has seen the complaint. No. He's shown it. Has he a lawyer? No. Then get one. Trial in July. A broken-faced broken-brained white of 20 talks interminably at the magistrate in a monotone like Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. A plump teenager with a ponytail grunts yes and no. As he is led away, I see his face. The eyes are dead, the expression is stony. These are human? If to be human is to be free, these aren't. They're ghosts, devoid of the power to control their future. Today is low-key activity – pleading and fixing dates for trial. It's haunting enough. I don't know if I could endure the actual trials.

Suddenly the court is adjourned. I can find only one other in business.

The situation in Court 6 is similar to that in Court 5, except that the procession of sad human beings is absent. Nobody is cited. Presumably these pleadings are on paper. There are other differences. This room is cooler. And people are audible. The room is the same, the acoustic can't be different. It's just that everyone is speaking up. Again, there are two female clerks, but the senior one looks homely and encourages the procurator's representative with big grins. As well she might, for the lassie from the fiscal's office is just that, a lassie. That's ageist and sexist, isn't it? So how can I put it? She's young, petite, and seen from side and back, chic. The hair is swept up into what I would once have called a bun, to reveal a swan-like neck. Her spine is curved, due to being in a perpetually half-standing position, reading from papers. Lawyers who attend court regularly must take up a disproportionate number of orthopaedic beds, as a result of jumping up, sitting down, but mainly hovering at an uncomfortable angle in between.

The object of all this spinal attention is another magisterial wig. He dominates the room in a style markedly different from his confrère in Court 5. Central casting must have chosen them for contrast. Whereas the Court 5 magistrate's demeanour suggests a monk waiting philosophically for the train, this physically larger man is in dynamically

leaning forward mode, furiously scribbling, like a bulldog scratching the gravel outside his kennel. He seems bucolically genial, grunting, 'I'm obliged to you' to the lassie. He and she are getting through a load of cases fast, dates being fixed, fines announced, everyone writing as if their lives depend on it, when suddenly out of the blue, the bulldog barks. I can't swear that the lassie jumps, but as the sole member of the public, I do. The magistrate is querying a point about a fixed fine in relation to the absence of insurance, and I think – but who am I? – it implies a criticism of the procurator's office. In that room devoted to scholarly writing and the study of calendars, the mini-explosion accompanied by the flashing of eyes is startling.

Almost at once, he shrugs his shoulders and says: 'I seem to be very tired'. It sounds like an apology, but I cannot pretend on so brief an acquaintance to have decoded the lingo, still less the thought-forms, of the law as practised on a quiet day at Glasgow's District Court.

10.30am

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

I drive to the garden centre at Tillicoultry, intending only to buy potting compost. I wander round with a trolley in the rain, and buy dianthus and a small willow tree. I think of planting the tree to mark this day – admitting its significance for the first time.

10.30am

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Coffee and toast. Look at papers. *Scotsman* headline: 'Scotland makes history'. Election occupies pages two to 15. Read Alasdair Gray's election essay – he tells us to vote anything but Labour. Okay. Asked if he's excited about the new parliament, he says: 'No, I'm just glad'. Okay.

10.30am

John Millar, Brodick

I get stuck into the layouts. I am not sure how many pages we are this week, 20 or 24. I know perfectly well that we cannot get it into 20 but I wish we could because it is so much easier. It is a thin week, though, letters not so good as last week and less advertising. We have the election, of course, although it is my belief that people are not really interested in it. So we don't do too much on it. I must confess that I have read hardly a word about it in *The Herald* and not even seen it mentioned on TV, but that is because we do not watch TV except *Coronation Street*.

10.30am

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Postie van arrives. This is an event, like the steamer calling. He delivers and collects, all and sundries.

10.35am

James Gunn Henderson, Inverness

'You're Henderson, aren't you?,' says the Inverness taxi driver taking me to BBC Highland's studios in Culduthel Road. It is Duncan Mackintosh, whom I had last hired when I was an *Express* cub reporter more than 40 years ago. 'No, I won't drop you here,' he says in the jokey tones I recall of yore. 'I will allow you to get out, now that you have paid your fare.'

10.35am

James Aitchison, Stirling

After a coffee and a pipe, I potter away at *The Great Folly*, or, how the mind transmuted language into poetry.

10.40am

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Lochgilphead

To Lochgilphead Parish Church. Service of thanksgiving for Jim Pattison, who died suddenly last Thursday. Civil engineer. Keen gardener and photographer. Kirk elder. Generous friend. A full church. (Get last available space in Co-op car park.) Sing 23rd Psalm, not to ubiquitous *Crimond* but to elegant *Wiltshire*. Invited for tea after service.

10.45am

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

Get up. Best thing in *The Herald* a splendid essay by Willie McIlvanney with the brilliant aperçu that the old Scotch perennial Labour voters unconsciously subsidised the conversion of their party into a home counties-friendly, middle of the road party through the last 10 years. And a good piece by Ruth Wishart (not often my favourite journalist) reminding us of those who fought for home rule and are not around to celebrate. I would add Monty Mackenzie, Douglas Young, Alastair Dunnett, John P Mackintosh, George Scott Moncrieff and, of course, John MacCormick, whom I used to meet late at night, and not always entirely sober, in the Art Club on my fortnightly day off from the Victoria Infirmary. At least Tranter is still with us. We'll remember them with honour this evening. Looked for, but couldn't find, a certificate from the Scottish Covenant for which I paid £5 in, I guess, the 40s and which was to be redeemable when we had a Scottish Parliament. Oh well... Now I'm going out to vote.

10.45am

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Put on skirt, as for Sundays, to collect pension and vote. Decide I will wear the silver SNP badge given to me by those voters daft enough to ask me to stand against Sir Alec Douglas-Home – that hater of independence – in Perthshire. They faced, not only the

enormous hostility of those days, but implied threat to tied houses and jobs. What made the opposition so bitter then? Only the oil money? Or was Edinburgh always nearer London than Scotland?

10.50am

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

I am in the dentist's chair and the drill is making deep inroads into a back tooth. In these circumstances any conversation is impossible. However, when he is finished, I venture to advise him that anything he says may be taken down and used in evidence against him. I mention that I am keeping a diary for the day. What does he have to say? 'Buy an electric toothbrush!' Pressed a little further, he declares himself against the break-up of the union. His wife is against the Channel Tunnel into the bargain.

10.55am

George Chalmers, Glasgow

Queen Street Station. Time for a coffee before the subway to Govan. Real coffee too. Boulevards ahead of on-train mud served by trolley caterers in washed-out tartan waistcoats reminiscent of your granny's old dishcloth. Apropos grannies: it occurs to me that future Scotland strips should be based on a thought-through combination of whatever colours Peter Snow displays on tonight's pie chart fest. A topic unmentioned, except for one suit to snide: 'They're voting in England too, apparently'.

11.00am

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

I have to make the coffee, my wife having taken on an extra shift at the high-class charity shop to which my wardrobe is increasingly and elegantly indebted. Important visitors get ground stuff, not instant. But why does it not taste any better – and never as good as the aroma from a freshly-opened packet?

11.00am

Elizabeth Whitley, Dalbeattie

In Dalbeattie: have I mistaken the day? No sign in its entire length of any election. No posters, stickers, labels, balloons. Only a modest 'Polling Station' on town hall. I collect pension, library books: chat with choir member who sings lovely Gaelic songs. The main street is busy, everyone smiling and friendly.

11.00am

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Susan Briggs rings, discusses last night's premiere of Scottish Opera's new *Aida*. Agree that procession (with Tupperware party) of motor car parts, television sets, perambulators and

so on was neither necessary nor helpful, but that voices were strong and orchestra was good, Verdi's music always a tonic. Some of the production was interesting, some (the Tupperware) pretty awful; but I liked the starkness of the last scene.

11.23am

Fiona MacDonald, Ardrossan

Two young women are buying chips from Albert's Fish and Chicken Bar. Late breakfast or early lunch?

Go into the Cheery Cup. In spite of its turquoise and sugar pink decor, it doesn't quite live up to its name. The floors are bare, as are the tables, apart from cheap salt and pepper pots and menus in plastic folders. But it's full of folk. Three workmen order the breakfast special.

The menu includes an international flavour: pizza, spaghetti bolognese, curry. But, of course, there are chips: chips on their own, chips with a roll, chips with curry sauce, chips with bolognese sauce, chips with cheese, chips with cheese and coleslaw (for the health conscious, perhaps?).

The waitress seems genuinely friendly when she comes to take my order. This is a small town, she knows her customers: 'That'll be £3.45 this morning Jim please,' she tells the man at the next table.

Nearby, four women chat and look down benignly on a little girl of about four who is tucking into a plate of chips and a carton of Ribena. 'Look, see how well she's doing,' one of the women says to encourage the child.

I strain to overhear other bits of conversation but can't distinguish much in the muted bumble. I think of my sister-in-law, a Bostonian, who told me that following a trip home to America she was relieved to board the plane which would take her back to Scotland. After the chaos and clamouring voices in the airport, she found peace and relief in a plane full of Scots 'just sitting quietly going about their lives'.

When I go to the counter to pay the bill, I notice that there are two other (chip-eating) children in the Cheery Cup today. Until this moment, I had not been aware of their presence.

It occurs to me that in this age of horror stories of indiscipline in schools, teacher-threatening parents, and frighteningly precocious children, the old working-class Scotland is still here, not interfering with anyone, just quietly going about its life.

11.25am

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

I go to vote at Dollar Civic Centre. Friendly Conservative contingent outside under umbrellas, SNP folk sheltering in the porch. As I go in, I think of elderly black South Africans in 1994, standing for hours in the dust and heat to cast their votes, saying: 'We never thought we'd live to see this day'. I used to be a floating, irregular voter. I still float, but now I always vote because of them.

11.30am

Frances Simpson, Dundee

Finally out in the torrential rain walking the half-mile back to the car from the hospital, I realise that my promised lunch-date in Dundee Contemporary Arts is probably a non-starter, with two offspring to deal with before I start work for the day. However, as the rain bounces off the bonnet of the car, I reflect that it probably isn't the best day to sample Dundee's emerging cafe society anyway.

11.30am

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

I take the coast road to vote in the village hall, driving through bluebell woods and gorse-gold moorland. This is the tourist land of golf courses and caravans: our paying guests, and welcome.

Now I brace myself. Last but not one election, in the Thatcher era, our village hall was picketed by fierce ladies with big rosettes and clipboards, accosting everyone in an intimidating manner, demanding names they knew already. So what now?

Tranquil silence. Fewer cars than usual. Inside the hall, where once I saw battles with intruders, are only two lonely-looking recorders in the dim space. I put my crosses, wondering if the third vote is a con, and noting that two of the candidates don't even live here. Our present number (SNP) is very much one of us, in every way that matters.

11.30am

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Into town. Train book James Sallis, *Black Hornet*. At Central Station I see the *Evening Times* is giving away a CD of the three tenors with every copy. Too early for lunch – pop into John Smith's (cardboard cut-outs of Salmond and Dewar in the window). Quick squint at Scottish books – note paperback edition of Thomas Pennant's *Tour of Scotland 1772* (at £18.99, one for the birthday list). Meet Tom Berry who has also wandered in to kill time. Buy *Blue Lightning*, a collection of crime/music stories edited by John Harvey – includes one by Roseanne Cash as well as favourites Ian Rankin, Walter Mosley and Sallis.

11.30am

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

Chair the steering group for resource allocation to the National Health Service in Scotland. A vital meeting which receives the first four chapters of the report in draft. It also examines the first stages of modelling of several of the Health Service blocks of provision. The draft chapters in these areas are imminent and the entire report has to be presented to ministers by the end of June. This is an intensive period. The resource allocation formula will set the provision for 85% of Scotland's health budget for all health boards.

11.40am

Ian Mackenzie, Glasgow

Glad to escape the strip-lighting of the courtrooms, I step out into the gloom of St Andrews Street. It's a short street interspersed with disconsolate premises including a law firm opposite the court from which it would be surprising to see a pin-stripe suit emerge. But at the end of the street is a singularity. Queen Street Station had been clad in an envelope of white cloud. Here is a huge wall of green material hiding a structure surmounted by a bell-tower; it has to be a church being renovated, a little belatedly, for Glasgow's Year of Architecture. Later enquiries reveal it to be St Andrews Church, an edifice famous not only for remarkable interior plaster work but for a portico so heavy that the builder spent a night sitting under it to remove fears that it would fall down.

A lot of structures were going up in the New Glasgow of those days – not least a balloon which in 1785 used St Andrews Square as a launching site. It is reported that 100,000 people soared upwards. Two and a half hours later, he landed at Hawick, which is more than you can easily do today since London tore up the Waverley railway line through the Borders.

I walk slowly back to George Square via the Tron. I haven't been in the Saltmarket area for years, and vaguely assumed it would have been regenerated. Well, money doesn't grow on trees, and Rome wasn't rebuilt in a day. The Year of Culture, and the cleaning up of the Merchant City, would seem to have been washed away by time before the improving tide reached this beach. What I'm walking through is wretched enough to deserve serious work. Those shops that are not boarded up recall a desperately faded past.

As I tread mournfully on, the Tron Theatre marks the beginning of the new market culture, but even when I step from Ingram Street into Hutcheson Street, the wide grey blocks of stone seem heartless on a wet, grey day, despite islands of light, a smart Italian cafe, a sandwich bar, and beckoning directly ahead, a gem of a Georgian building. It's the Hutcheson Hall, once Hutcheson's Hospital. Concerts are held in its brilliant interior.

Part of Glasgow's problem is just size. Edinburgh has its wastelands, but they are condensed and its architectural gems are more compactly viewable, though Glasgow's are more numerous.

There's a lot to do to make the backside of Scotland a viewable part of a new nation. Is it money shortage? Glasgow has just opened a gigantic new shopping mall – what, another? I will only have to walk a few yards beyond Queen Street to arrive at Buchanan Galleries.

11.40am

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

The mail irritatingly late – largely bills, plus invitation cards for Brechin Diocesan celebration on 22 May; with the civil (but notably uncivil) war at St Paul's Cathedral,

celebration will not be easy; but I suppose that we shall feel a strengthened duty to attend to show support.

11.48am

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

At the dentist's in Clarkston. I've been coming to this practice since childhood, even though I don't live in the area any more. Familiar people and surroundings count when a drill is approaching your teeth. Soon this will be my only reason to visit Clarkston. I cross the road to settle the estate agent's bill. The family home has been sold now that dad can no longer stay there. The buyers don't move in until July, so I go to pick up the mail that is collecting behind the front door and make a desultory effort to tug up a few of the weeds on the front path.

11.50am

James Gunn Henderson, Inverness

After my 'live' chat with Mark Stephen of Scottish Connections on the demise of Wick Radio, the old GPO maritime link with the trawler men in the North Sea and beyond, I am still chortling over retired Golspie-born radio operator Tom MacLennan's tale of woe. He had taken a call from a fishing skipper who was concerned about the state of his mate's left leg. 'It is not only bending back, but forwards too, and side to side,' he told his alarmed onshore agent. 'But it's all right – he's got another two replacements at home. Send one on to us.'

11.57am

Fiona MacDonald, Ardrossan Library

'Today this library opens at 1pm,' says a sign on the door. I scan the noticeboard in the foyer. The RNIB want Dare Devils for the Ultimate Challenge Death Slide down the Eglinton Tower, Eglinton Country Park, on Sunday 6 June. But most of the notices are exhortations to self-improvement: Saturday leisure classes, summer schools for adults, summer schools for 'kids', college open days. For the older generation, there are tea dances and mystery tours (Ardrossan residents only).

I spot an intimation that the Royal Society of Edinburgh will have a lecture by Sir Roy Strong, FSA, writer and historian, on the subject of 'Goodbye Britain? – A consideration of the cultural implications for the arts of devolution to Scotland in 1999 in the light of what occurred in the aftermath of 1603 and 1707'. It will be held in the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh. I think of the grilles covering the library windows outside and the notice warning of 24-hour CCTV surveillance cameras. I think of the Eglinton Arms across the road, a building second to none in the spectacular scale of its dereliction, and I wonder what it's like inside the Royal College of Physicians.

Afternoon

12 noon

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Our reading at lunch, *Longitude* by Dava Sobel. A well-written and fascinating story of the battle for the £20,000 prize offered by the government in Westminster to the person who could come up with a practical method of determining longitude for mariners. The lunar distance party versus John Harrison. Most of us are enjoying the story. It brings back to me memories of seeing John Harrison's chronometers in the Kensington Science Museum many years ago: beautiful and awesome.

12 noon

George Chalmers, Glasgow Govan Cross

Meet some people. We gather at the back of the crematorium. Apres-burn, in a sunless bar, a daily mix of unemployed and unemployable mingle; the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor going through the motions of life. Who speaks for this constituency? Consensus is evident in an established pecking order. 'When you live next to a cemetery, you can't cry for everybody.' (Demographically speaking, it's pure Rab C, but Russian in origin I think.)

12 noon

Dr Leo Murray, Ayr

Hospital presentation by the chief executive on an external audit of our organisational efficiency. Working well, seeing more and more patients for less and less funding. The hospital has done 16% more work over the past six years with no increase in funding after inflation stripped out. Funding of our Health Service will be a big issue for the new parliament.

12 noon

Frances Simpson, Dundee

Vote. I feel genuinely uplifted by the experience, reassured that a sense of occasion on the day finally eclipses the election overload of the past few weeks.

12 noon

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

To Horseshoe (where I meet Tom Berry) for lunch: two Scotch broths, macaroni cheese for me and hotpot for Tom. Tom says no talk about the election, he's fed up with politics. We ask each other how each other's family is. Talk about accents – how our Glaswegian has been mistaken for just about everything else, e.g. English, Australian, Northern Irish. Tom was told by one American woman: 'I sure like your brogue'. Guy in

the loo combing his hair, going on about how he wished the black would come back. Grey's okay.

12 noon

Iain Anderson, Langbank

We repair to the Langbank lodge for a snack lunch over which we discuss the election and encounter several constituents who wish Marion well. The village's only shop has already bestowed its unspoken seal of approval on the SNP candidate.

12 noon

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Saxe Coburg Place isn't normally a battlefield of political activists, partly perhaps because of a sometimes irritating (and mistaken) assumption that everyone in it votes only one way; so hardly anyone bothers to canvass. Its leafy calm seems pretty well undisturbed today; certainly undisturbed by me, for a postal vote lets me stay at home and, more important, actually gave me time to read the voting papers, not so easy at a polling station. Not much the wiser, perhaps, for having done so, but at least I am reasonably confident of having voted as I intended, despite a proliferation of party names.

12 noon

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Home for country dinner-hour.

12.10pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Nelson lambed her usual twins as she has done each year since she lost an eye to a bonxie when a gimmer. Bit of a character, yon one.

12.10pm

James Halliday, Blairgowrie

Today I go for lunch, a regular once a month outing, with two ex-colleagues from Dundee College of Education. Set off for Blairgowrie and our lunch at Cargill's. The trees and fields have more posters by far than the houses, and they are all voting Scottish Conservative. Some sympathetic citizens have the SNP's black and gold on display. Not a lot of people know this. The first people to use these colours were myself and my supporters in Stirling Burghs in 1955. No SNP candidate had previously used identifiable colours, and even Robert McIntyre had never seen any need to do so. We found that the colours worked well in posters and leaflets, and my Melrose aunt made two rosettes, one for me and one for agent Murdoch Young. Melrose, like Glasgow University, Uddingston Grammar and Dunfermline High, all use heraldic black and gold. I found

them very comfortable. In the rising days of 1974, it was a pleasure to drive through Scotland and find the colours always meeting you, with a new candidate as it were picking up the baton.

12.15pm

Professor Hamish Keir, on his way to the funeral

On the dot Aunt Audrey and Linda arrive. I lock up, set the alarm and we bundle into the car for the 25-minute drive to Drumoak Kirk. The road through Cults, Bielside, Milltimber and Peterculter is festooned with yellow political notices, predominantly Lib Dem.

It's a grey greeshach day, but dry. The Kirk is already packed. Granny (the late Jim's sister) and grandpa are greeting mourners, all very respectable looking people, many of them from the farming and rural communities – probably Conservatives surviving in Lib Dem territory.

12.15pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Fulfil my democratic duty. Friendly banter with the candidates stationed expectantly at the door of the voting station. I say I would like to have 10 votes to distribute among them; then I could apportion them as teachers apportion stars to their pupils for diligence! A Conservative candidate – a man of long council experience and locally favoured for this ward – says a lady had passed on a bike with a salutation: 'God be with you'. He sensed that this was more appropriate as a valediction to a sinking ship. I note that church halls seemed to be popular places as voting stations. Is there any connection?

12.20pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

Voted. Bloody raining. Lab, Lib Dem and Scot Nat, if you want to know. (a) I admire Donald Dewar, want him to be First Minister, and suspect he will do a Thomas à Becket on Tony Blair and be wildly Scottish, (b) because I don't want Labour to have an overall majority, and (c) because the nice lad was the only one to call at my door. Bought a few more bits and pieces for my election party – just a few friends and neighbours from the right-hand side of the close. On the other side they are decent enough folks, but obstructed my attempts to get a nice new door on the close for four years, the old Glasgow wash-house-key situation. But we won. Met another near neighbour coming in as I was going out of the polling booth. They own the garden outside my kitchen, did it up nicely when I arrived, but have let it go to jungle and prowling, and howling, cats. I said: 'It's a great day'. No smile. One begins to understand Kosovo.

12.30pm

Ian Mackenzie, Glasgow

I enter Buchanan Galleries and am swallowed up by the thrusting culture at the heart of modernity. New Glasgow, New Scotland, New Politics, New Consumerism, Old Adam. No envelope round this Cathedral of Culture. Here are the Killing Fields of Credit. Trample softly for you trample on my overdraft.

But it is my brain that is being trampled on, for I now experience a condition to which I am not frequently prone: a loss for words. No, hang on a minute, I can feel a word coming on. Yes, here it is. Monstrous. This place is monstrous. But deprived though I suddenly am of speech, breath, and a seat to sit heavily down on, I can still distinguish the nuances of words, and I don't mean that this is a monstrosity. It's too glorious, in its mountainous way, to be dismissed. It's monstrous in the way St Peter's Rome might seem to a Free Kirk elder from Stornoway. But I must control my rhetoric. This is more St Paul's than St Peter's.

The whispering gallery in the John Lewis dome houses a cafe which I must reach as soon as possible. Some hope: I make a wrong move. Seeing no escalator I wander along a gargantuan spur of stone and glass and light. I stumble on Austin Reed, the gentlemen's outfitter, newly transferred from Gordon Street. On Gordon Street it was a quiet haven from the world, dimly lit, discreet. Trousers were tried on between hushed negotiations with a measuring tape. Here, it's just a shop, and all kinds of totally ordinary people are wandering in and out. How dare they! Rock music in a confessional would be less shocking. Dazed, I reach at last an escalator. It takes me upward and onward and I arrive in a food hall at the opposite end of the spur from the cafe I wanted. Here, families are at wee tables eating burgers. I flee, but not before feeling airsick at sudden views of thousands of antlike creatures flowing up and down and across contrapuntal chasms in dizzying vaults below. It is the human race, shopping. I've seen nothing like it since I read *Paradise Lost*.

After many adventures, I attain the coffee house in the dome's gallery. Before eating I must inject insulin. I do so with suave secrecy, shielding my left leg from nearby tables as I roll up the trouser. Into the thigh goes the needle. It is then that I observe a mass of upturned faces breasting the top of the escalator below studying with interest my left thigh, perfectly visible through the protective balustrade whose clear glass I now realise reaches to the floor. I look at the yellow and orange murals on the cafe walls, then up to the dome itself, lit in soft lavender and violet. I pray that the new Scottish Parliament will be as transparent as my leg. And that gives me a vision. Allow the upturned Edinburgh boats a few decades of chicanery. Then let Glasgow and the Highlands declare UDI. Let Buchanan Galleries be the venue for all theatres of dispute – parliament, local councils, courts. All seen through glass brightly. Access to all. Justice part of life, do it while you shop. Shop while you worship. Worship while you take coffee and cake. All free. Paradise regained.

12.30pm

James Gunn Henderson, Inverness

Hailed by my old pal Charles Kennedy MP, as I approach the cafe in the Eastgate shopping centre, in company with Lib Dem candidate John Farquhar Munro and his agent. Charles offers me a coffee and the other half of his 'prime Ross-shire beef sandwich, while I readily accept. 'This is not treating, you understand,' says the potential new leader of the party. 'I am not a candidate here, neither are you a constituent.'

12.30pm

Iain Anderson, Glasgow

I make my way to the BBC in Glasgow where the *Fine Tunes* office seems oblivious to the imminence of a new Scottish Parliament. This is not unusual!

12.30pm

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Lunch. There are alternative versions of William Pitt's last words, one, high-minded, being 'My country! Oh, my country!', and the other, less high-minded, being 'I think I could eat one of Bellamy's veal pies'. Events following the election may or may not bring us (when the time comes) to the former thought: but I am probably more apt to follow the latter example, substituting one of many pastry-bearing foods, quite possibly Marks & Spencer's sausage rolls.

12.30pm

John Blanche, Aberfoyle

My wife is off to see and 'service' her 99-year-old mother, who has recently fallen and sustained a hairline fracture of her pelvis. The fall was the result of not taking her zimmer out with her, because she was 'not going out with that thing in public'. Fiona thinks she is too old to have a mother and yet is full of admiration for her determination to go on living on her own. We try to persuade her to rest her leg but she 'cannot sit around all day doing nothing'.

12.34pm

Fiona MacDonald, Fairlie

A blink of sun – only one in the whole day. The village looks picturesque and prosperous. The trees in gardens along the road have grown lush. Outside a polling station people are smiling.

12.40pm

John Millar, Brodick

Deanna calls us to lunch. It is convenient to have lunch before Howard starts printing.

We stand around the printing press and discuss April Dancer – again. Susanna who works on a Wednesday had suggested the internet. We hate the internet, but I know somebody at Kildonan who has it. I give him a ring and put the question to him. Ten minutes later, he rings back with the answer – *The Girl from Uncle*. Great. We send it away. Malt whisky for life, although I do not think much of their definition. It means a case a year for 30 years. A case a year is about a bottle a month, so I'd call it malt whisky for three months of the year for life. But it's better than a kick in the pants.

12.40pm

James Halliday, Cargill's Restaurant, Blairgowrie

Fellow diners turn out to be the Tory candidate, Mr Fraser, and, presumably, Mrs Fraser. They chat, but not without tact, to staff and customers, though not us. I remember at an earlier election, meeting Nicky Fairbairn and his supporting team in a horse-drawn carriage. Apart from Nicky himself, the other occupants were the most physically perfect group of people I can recall seeing. Hair, teeth, dress, grooming, all as superb as the generations of breeding and privileged nourishment had produced. The Tories can produce some plug-uglies, but not always.

12.40pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

My housekeeper – as thoughtful as ever – asks whether I could manage a gammon steak. I am not sure whether this concern is prompted by the thought of my having been to the dentist or by the day's circumstances. Children in the playground under my study window seem noisier than usual. Is the excitement getting to them? – the consequence of our vote will certainly do so eventually. That's a thought. Free education and generous maintenance grants when they reach university age?

12.45pm

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

I look at a photograph of a family wedding party, taken in 1908. My grandfather, born in 1861, was among the guests. The Scotland of 1707 seems so remote, the 292 years since the last parliament so long; it surprises me to reflect that three lives of average life spanned half of them.

12.59pm

Fiona MacDonald, Largs Tourist Information Office

Allison from Pollok advises us via the visitors' book that Largs is fricken freezin. And it is.

1.00pm

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

Lunch. I had bought a high-seasoned, heavily promoted brand of pepper salami. It tastes like sawdust. The phrase is hackneyed but exactly catches the flavour. The disaster reminds me of a vivid polemic from George Orwell (in *Coming Up for Air*, I think). I must look it up. By the way, what side would Orwell have been on: Bosnia or Kosovo? The thought occurs to me because some of the romantic left, like Michael Foot, manage to commit themselves in Yugoslavian civil wars as they once did to the Spanish one. But Orwell was of the hard-headed left; and if he'd been spared might have ended up a Tory.

1.00pm

Frances Simpson, Dundee

One child back at school, the other in the office with me, lunch cancelled, work seems almost an irrelevance. But it isn't, as my first caller of the afternoon confirms. A young mother of a child with a disability is in tears because her local social work department (from another council area) has informed her that no help is available to help her get her son to school so that she can keep on her part-time job. She has been told that she should give up her job to stay at home with her son – as parents of non-disabled children do. Do they? Not my experience so far today. Puts my cancelled lunch-date into perspective, however.

1.00pm

Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith, Edinburgh

To lunch with the National Trust in its splendid boardroom in Charlotte Square, refurbished in this century for the Marquess of Bute, with silver door handles, no less. Lunch for the members of Europa Nostra who went on a three-day tour of the Borders following the big conference in Glasgow last week. As a vice-president of Europa Nostra, I had overall responsibility for the organisation but left it in the hands of others, as a result of which it was a success, much helped by a fantastic spell of weather. The executive president, the chairman of a Belgian bank, was appalled by the whole concept of devolution of the Walloons as the beginning of the end for his country. Fortunately, a Norwegian banker came to my rescue who had no reservation about the success of his country's separation from Sweden at the beginning of this century. Probably all that can be learned from this is that each situation is different.

1.00pm

Professor Hamish Keir, Drumoak Kirk

The minister conducts the service. It makes me feel humble, and thankful that I am a Presbyterian. Somehow he makes us glad for Jim's life rather than sad for his departure. Nevertheless, tears abound. Lindsay (aged 10) weeps too and asks for a handkerchief. I

give her one that I didn't use for giving my black shoes a final polish. Afterwards, there is the customary solemn procession on foot to the road-end followed by a swift drive to the short committal service at Aberdeen Crematorium. Lindsay and I do not attend because the puir wee lass is too upset. We go home.

Norman returns with Catherine and offers to drive me to the railway station. I accept, but ask to be dropped off at Marischal College, where I still have an office. That majestic building stands alone in silent, sombre splendour, now almost empty, save for six scientists, security men and a car park attendant – something to do with 'rationalisation' and money. I feel rancorously reminiscent. It was an excellent place before the new managerial, appraisal and monitoring systems eliminated education from academe. I guess Marischal will become a hotel or company HQ.

1.02pm

Kevin McCarra, Marks & Spencer, Newton Mearns

Dinner to buy (onion bhaji, Indian menu for two, lemon mousse) because Susan is back this evening. Her work as a management consultant usually keeps her in London all week, but she's returning early this time. Partly she wants to vote, mostly she wants to be in Glasgow.

1.03pm

Fiona MacDonald, Atlantic Amusements, Largs

The tension is palpable around the Daytona Dodgems. Teenage school pupils have filled the cars and those not lucky enough to get on stand round watching and eating sugary snacks washed down with fizzy drinks. The attendant finishes taking the money and throws a switch. Mayhem ensues. Much ramming, screeching and general hilarity. I cross the road to the Viking Amusements. Lacking the attractions of the Daytona Dodgems, there are only a few schoolchildren spending their lunch hour in here. I take stock of the other customers. There is a man in a suit who has probably just popped out of the office. A young man, casually dressed, perhaps in his early 20s, is engrossed in the fruit machine he is playing. Towards the back, a middle-aged woman in trainers is, like the young man, in a world of her own. A cigarette is hanging from her lower lip and I note that the ash on the end must be nearly an inch long. The machine she is playing is called Andy Capp.

1.20pm

John Millar, Brodick

Back to work. Deanna goes into her office. Howard starts to print and Jenni and I go upstairs. The building is alive when the printing press is thumping away. The layouts are going slowly.

1.28pm

Fiona MacDonald, Nardini's, Largs

Lunch arrives. At £4.85 for a parma ham sandwich and a diet coke, they might have remembered to throw in a napkin. Two coaches draw up outside and disgorge their elderly contents.

1.30pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

My shepherd's sleep.

1.30pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Can't resist a visit to HMV and their two for £21 CD offer. Coming out bump into Tom again, who's on his way to see friends in the West End. Notice in a window of Bargain Books: 'New! *Scotland – History of a Nation*. Was £12.99. Now £5'.

1.30pm

Professor Steve Bruce, Aberdeen

Meeting to discuss new degree in sports studies. Wonder if we should have these students graduate in track suits and trainers.

1.45pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

Listen to the lunch-hour concert on BBC Three. Beethoven's *Op 18 No. 4 Quartet*. I think he was spoilt for my generation by the bang, bang, whizz, Tochter aus Elysium, approach of, mainly, Toscanini. He is also a delicate 'tone painter'. But why did the classical composers so love these boring minuets with every eight or 24 bars repeated and then, after the trio, the whole damn thing yet again?

1.45pm

James Gunn Henderson, on a bus

Earlier this week I met up with Reay Clarke, the Edderton farmer who first publicised in 1959 the dream of bridging the three firths – the Dornoch, Cromarty and Kessock – to shorten the north road between Inverness and John O'Groats. Now, 40 years on, here I am floating over all three structures on a route which has lost many of the old perils and hazards, thanks to his persistence and that of the late Pat Hunter-Gordon.

1.45pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

To Haddington for messages. Chilly and damp, smiles not so plentiful as when the sun is

out and the air warm. Get home to more wet paws and conversation with Rory, his wet nose probing everything I had brought back. When I head for the garage to set off for Haddington, his tail droops more and more, he looks so lonely... he makes me feel guilty at leaving him.

1.50pm

Norman Gillies, Skye

My mailbag contains a letter from a Japanese graduate student, Yuko Yoneyma, who majored in sociolinguistics at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo. She now wishes to learn Gaelic. Our summer schools are truly international and it's becoming easier to think of a country not represented than remember all those that are. The list is impressive. I also receive a letter from a lady in Albuquerque, New Mexico, enclosing an article on Scots in New Mexico. It contains this little nugget under the headline 'Wha's Like Us' – 'Did you know the US 1990 census reports that in the United States 3,315,306 residents report their primary ancestry as Scottish and 29,082 New Mexicans claim Scottish ancestry? Of the top 15 ancestry groups Scots are 11th, comprising 2% of the population. In New Mexico 1.9% of the population claims Scottish heritage. The 1990 census also reports that of the 15 largest ethnic groups, Scottish-Americans have the most education, highest income, and the lowest unemployment rates'.

2.00pm

Iain Anderson, Glasgow

In studio 10 I meander through *Mr Anderson's Fine Tunes*, which includes some patriotic Scottish songs. I present them impartially, wondering if such music has a party political colour. The producer, being Canadian, is aloof.

2.00pm

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Switch to *Mr Anderson's Fine Tunes*. Relaxing background listening for sermon preparation. Radio much more civilised and less distracting form of broadcasting than the box in the corner. Iain Anderson gives intimation of General Assembly Gaelic service in Edinburgh on Sunday. Good! Should attract more worshippers, as there are rumours that Gaelic Assembly service is in danger of being downgraded.

2.00pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Long conversation with Deacon John Woodside, custodian of the Blairs Museum, regarding the appointment of a curator for the museum, and about arrangements for its formal opening on the occasion of the centenary of the laying of the foundation stone of the Blairs Chapel. The pride of the museum is the famous memorial portrait of Mary,

Queen of Scots. The Stuarts were still on the throne, albeit of the United Kingdom, when we last held a parliament in Edinburgh. It got the chop as surely as poor Mary did.

2.00pm

Dr Calum MacLeod, Aberdeen

Spend the afternoon with the general manager [of Grampian Health Board, of which he is chairman], the two Trust chairmen and other senior colleagues preparing for our annual appearance next Monday before the chief executive of the NHS in Scotland when we shall give an account of our stewardship. It's called the Accountability Review and it's serious business.

While all this is going on, an engineer is in the car park installing a new phone in my car because the old one has been 'cloned', i.e. some hacker gained access to the number and went on an unbelievable telephonic binge. Full marks to Vodafone who took the resulting call charges on the nose without question. I note that the new phone is a Nokia and I reflect that Nokia is an indigenous, independent company in Finland which is now one of the most successful in the world. It's great to have Motorola at Livingston, but will the Scottish Parliament help us to create one or two Nokias of our own – big world leaders?

2.00pm

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Shut my gate, as part of a neighbour's herd of Red Devons pass to fresh grazing. They are handsome beasts, with a young bull my neighbour tells me was a junior champion. He has white Galloways too, and their fluffy calves, with black ears and muzzles, look out of a toy shop. One animal charity suggests we should all be vegetarians, to end cruelty. What then would be in the fields? Theme parks with giraffes?

This little valley is an ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area), so everyone gets some compensation for not fertilising land, or over-grazing. We still have family farms, which makes a human-sized landscape – and a hard-working life. From where I sit, over the dyke is the tiny ruined kirk that has seen all history pass, and the pattern remain.

Vikings and Romans left, and Ninian came preaching; Edward of England came, hammering the Scots into submission, and leaving a donation; the Bruces restored independence, and the Reformation passed the charge from Church of Rome to Church of Scotland. Next century, the dominie/preacher/Covenanter was sent to an Edinburgh dungeon: then, by Archbishop Sharp, to starve on a Shetland island. Then, with one brilliant stroke, the Aliens Act of 1705, the English abolished Scotland!

For the next year, when Scots drove their entire GNP – 'sheep, cattle, horses and linen' – south to market, they found the border closed and armed. They were ruined. Hence 1707. My latest date for an Independence Day mega party would be the 300th anniversary: 2007. Some of us are voting for that.

2.00pm

Rev David Graham, Aberdeen

We go to vote, in the church halls of the Tartan Kirkie. (These nicknames probably go back to Genesis, via north-east insecurity). I go on to visit one of our worthy elderly members, who is in one of the newer homes. To stop the confused elderly walking out, the home has a security system where entry is gained by punching a number pad with the right code. I have forgotten the code. The kitchen staff let me in. Chastened, I visit my lady. The Book of Proverbs describes how she used to be: 'She opened her mouth with wisdom and, on her tongue, was the law of kindness. She looked well to the ways of her household and ate not the bread of idleness. Strength and honour were her clothing and she will rejoice in time to come'.

2.04pm

Fiona MacDonald, Ladies' toilets, Nardini's, Largs

Daughter: Please can I get one?

Mother: No.

Daughter: Please can I get one?

Mother: No. Stop going on, you're driving me crazy.

Daughter: If I stop going on can I get one?

2.05pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Train home. Nice passage in Sallis about memory: 'Like a bad actor, memory always goes for effect, abjuring motivation, consistency, good sense'.

2.13pm

James Gunn Henderson, on a bus

Mohammed al-Fayed was once again refused a British passport today. I am reminded not by the newspaper headlines, but by his shocking pink Balnagowan Castle nesting among the trees at Kildary. Tasteless maybe, but not many have had a bad word for him in these parts for he uses local suppliers and tradesmen for his personal needs and those of his regular guests, among whom Dodi and Diana were once numbered. Around the same time, Charles would have been entertaining Camilla in a shooting lodge less than 50 miles away as the crow flies.

2.15pm

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

Visit the polling station to check on the clerk [his wife] and see if she and the presiding officer are short of anything. They are there from 6.30am till 11.15pm and so food is taken in to them. A newspaper they would like, so I collect our own and get one for

them. In the *Stornaway Gazette*, a photograph of our daughter Beth in her Scottish women's rugby kit, coming off the field from beating Italy in the European championships. It is her club AGM tonight and I wonder if she is going to be coaxed into taking on the captaincy.

2.15pm

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

One lady, wakening in the ward covered in tin foil, tells charge nurse Big John she feels like a turkey. 'Don't worry,' says John, 'we haven't put the stuffing in yet!'

2.15pm

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

Back in my house in Kelvinbridge. Usually, I spend the weekend covering football matches in England, but other people are doing Manchester United and Arsenal this time, so there isn't anything very interesting left. The office call to suggest that I just have Saturday and Sunday off. Kind people. The doorbell rings. It's a man delivering a standard lamp. We've been here for 20 months, but are still furnishing the place. Most rooms don't yet have lampshades. We're either too fussy or too lazy.

2.30pm

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

I prick out seedlings of petunia and ponder the plot of my next children's novel for the Dublin publisher Poolbeg Press. I think how wonderful it would be if, in our 'new' Scotland, a publisher appeared with flair and enthusiasm for children's literature, matching the style and distinction of Poolbeg and other Irish publishers. But I shall not hold my breath.

2.30pm

John Blanche, Aberfoyle

On a day that is not the best and when one is in need of comfort, I am turning to writing more of my journal of family history and its part in the Scotch whisky business. When in business myself I used to think that I would much prefer to talk to people in figures rather than words, as I feel more comfortable with figures as a result of my accountancy training. However, to my astonishment, I have become enthusiastic about writing on a subject I know something about.

I went to vote after lunch and managed to put the three ballot papers in the correct boxes. The new parliament is a worthwhile innovation if it can hold the government more accountable for its actions in Scotland. The old Scottish Office was never very willing to change its mind in the face of reasonable representations. It is also a step towards the UK becoming a federal state if the English can be persuaded that

Westminster is not the English Parliament and set up one of their own. This is probably a pipe dream.

Another task to be done before the journal is to order more wine from one of my mail order suppliers. It is surprising how quickly the bottles can disappear or rather the contents. The bottles themselves are a real chore to dispose of to the bottle bank, which is sometimes full when I come along with four dozen. There is, however, the excitement of the arrival of the wines and the impatient wait to try out the new ones. Having decided in retirement to drink moderately but well, I am not into cheap wines. They often lack flavour anyway and I think that the alcohol equivalent to be had from Scotch is much better value.

2.30pm

Professor Steve Bruce, Aberdeen

Having run out of things to do without a PC, decided to go home and stay there until my machine is fixed. First sign of election. One of our leading farmers, ice cream maker Maitland Mackie, quit the Tories for the Lib Dems last year and is now on the regional list. A Tory potato farmer has placed a trailer load of tattle boxes next to the road. Painted on it in big letters: 'Eat Mackie's Ice Cream, but vote Tory'. In his field on the opposite side of the road, Mackie has retaliated with an ice cream van. Its side reads: 'Eat Tatties, but vote Lib Dem'.

2.35pm

Kenneth Roy, Irvine Jobcentre

There used to be a programme on the radio called *Music While You Work*. Now, down at the jobcentre, there is music while you look for work – maddening, nothing muzak. There are 15 – repeat 15 – petty officials here to help the punters, except that at the moment there is not a single punter who wants their help. Staff outnumber customers by three to one, and such customers as there are seem content to stare at the vacancy boards in a manner befitting their content. That is to say, vacantly.

Among the jobs on offer:

Toilet Attendant, £3.60 an hour, 10pm-2am, Friday and Saturday. This is listed as a 'man-exempted vacancy under the Sex Discrimination Act'. Not sure about this. What is a man-exempted vacancy? A woman, presumably. But wait: the convenience in question is clearly described as a 'Male Toilet Area'. Why would the services of a woman be needed in a Male Toilet Area at 2am? This is why Irvine Jobcentre employs 15 petty officials. It is to deconstruct the baffling language of the vacancy.

Karaoke Disc Jockey in Saltcoats, no experience required.

Party Plan Organiser, 10 hours per week, 'to sell Ladies and Gents lingerie. Leads supplied'.

Time-served plasterer, £189.39 p/w.

Labourer with horticultural experience, £3.75 per hour.

Senior Social Worker, Kilmarnock Prison, 'managed and operated by Premier Prison Services Ltd', £21,939 p/a.

Tank Crew Personnel, aged 16-26, no educational qualifications required, £180 p/w.

I don't mind the crisis of sexual identity in the Male Toilet Area. Karaoke in Saltcoats and lingerie parties with leads supplied are just about tolerable. I can pretend that underpaid plasterers and horticultural labourers are consoled by Proust or the smell of roses. And if I was ever banged up in Kilmarnock private nick, I might welcome the pastoral assistance of a senior social worker.

But the Tank Crew Personnel – that has the stench of State cynicism. It is a blatant invitation to shaven-headed, uneducated, lily-white little boys to come and be cannon fodder for £9,000 a year. It is a reason to mistrust politicians, of whom we have too many, of whom we are about to have still more within a few hours.

2.40pm

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Telephone call from primary school. Had been expected at 2.35 – not 3.25 as I had thought – to help with Gaelic words for songs. Drop everything and go to school.

2.55pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Mother comes to collect cat for weekend. She loves having him and he does like her flat, especially her balcony where he sits sniffing the air. Go out to Giffnock with her in the car to keep Otis company on the back seat, keep him calm, but he's very good. Mum feeling a bit under the weather – but she has voted, she says. Deliver Otis.

3.00pm

Frances Simpson, Dundee

Younger child arrives in the office to wait for me to take her home, as her brother is already with me. We hosted a 'take your daughter to work day' for BT staff last week, and now I'm having a 'take all of your children to work day' all of my own.

3.00pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Back to my correspondence, having grabbed some time to look more fully at the journals. Note my friend and colleague's piece in *The Scotsman*. Bishop Bruce Cameron, for the Scottish Episcopal Church, remarked: 'Democracy does not end by casting a vote in an election. It is through day to day involvement in our local communities, churches, and voluntary organisations that the quality of life can be improved'. This is true, but how many in fact do get involved except by casting their vote at election time? He

continues: 'It is essential that there is real and effective partnership between parliament and people'. That is surely the underlying justification for what is happening today.

3.02pm

Fiona MacDonald, North Ayrshire Museum, Saltcoats

The local authority has provided for its citizens a cheerful wee museum documenting the area's industrial and social history. Amongst the memorabilia, an oldish man in a flat cap is examining a folder of photographs. 'I didn't know this was here till one of the boys told me this morning,' he is eagerly telling a woman who has popped in to use the photocopier in the back room.

'Look, that's me there. He's gone. And he's gone. Aye, they say time and tide waits for no man.'

For £1 he has a copy made and goes off happily.

'Glad you got it,' says the woman.

'Aye, that'll be something to brag about tonight.'

The woman, perhaps in her early 40s, and I leave simultaneously. 'Just passing half an hour?' she asks. 'You realise you're getting old yourself when things in museums look familiar,' she says pleasantly.

3.15pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Walk down to Giffnock Station. Ticket office closed since I was last here. Stand on platform thinking about Giffnock – I was born here (the nursing home is now a hotel/pub) – but I have no nostalgia. Train to Crossmyloof. Home.

3.20pm

John Millar, Brodick

Mike Lunan comes in and comes straight upstairs to speak to me. He wants a late entry in the *What's On*. No problem. Then he embarks on something else. How do I rate the way my confrères on the big papers have handled the election? Mike is a prominent SNP person on the island, well respected. Firstly they are not my confrères. We paddle our own canoe here at the *Banner*. I tell him I have no view, have seen nothing of it on TV, and have read about it only in the *Sunday Telegraph*, which takes an outsider's view. He is angry when I point out that many people are very hostile to the SNP. My daughter wrote the other day saying she might even vote Labour to stop the SNP. Mind you, I am the reverse of that.

3.30pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Shepherd awakes, feels old beyond his years. Getting up is like swimming through treacle.

3.30pm

Muir Campbell, Troon

Walk home under the blistering sun with my jacket on and feeling the heat. It reminds me to record how many sunshine hours there were in the day for my geography investigation. I really must get this investigation out of the way. However, it is too nice a day for me to stay in, so I go out to play 'wallie' with Ian and Chris. Ian loses as usual because he couldn't hit a barn door with a football, never mind a school wall.

3.30pm

George Chalmers, Glasgow Charing Cross area

Recognise two of a rootless group of indigenous refugees dressed in homeless-chic. They look buoyed by the day's expectations. Two personal issue giro's and a script for methadone and valium; a certain sun shines on them. 'Goin' tae see Vlad, wee man?' asks one, eyes pinned.

'Aye, is he in?'

'Aye,' (formulating a theory with a deeply wrinkled brow). 'Were you at court thi day?'

'No – a funeral – Rab Reed.'

'Whit wiz it, an o.d.?''

'No, silent pneumonia.'

'First thing he kept quiet about, eh?'

3.40pm

Ian Mackenzie, Helensburgh

I step off the chocolate and custard train back at Helensburgh Central Station. There is a spring in my step. I've seen the past, and I've seen the future, and here I am home again, comfortably in between.

3.45pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

Wake from a good sleep. Now to arrange things for the evening. The salmon lies in the fish-kettle. A salad and a potato salad. Cheese. Bottles and glasses. Cousin Jen is bringing puddings, which I never make or think about. And wheel the telly through from the bedroom to the drawing room. And... Oh well. Lots of time...

3.45pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Down to school to vote. Moira and Barbara in charge cheerfully keeping us right. The polling station is in the primary one classroom. We are all starting a new lesson. New voting for a new parliament. New ideas for an old nation. Funny to be voting for my son, but apt.

3.45pm

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

My last patient of the day is an old friend from September, when she had her hip done. She evidently doesn't mind missing her vote. 'Wha cares anyway. They a' just want to be Prime Minister.'

3.45pm

Fiona MacDonald, Gullis's Leisure Centre, Saltcoats

In an area reserved for over 18s, half a dozen or so people are transfixed in front of fruit machines. They have obviously fed in fairly large stakes because they are able to play several times before having to add further money. I note that they use both hands – hitting the buttons with rapid expertise. I decide to see if I can figure out the attraction and feed 30p – the minimum amount required – into the slot and press the start button. The machine whirrs into life, providing no more than two or three seconds of expectation and then... nothing. It stares back at me like a snake contentedly digesting its victim and marvelling at its gullibility. I shrink away, feeling foolish.

Outside the area penned off for adults a variety of video games are blaring. One man is controlling the players in a football match on a large screen. By the door a violent game called 'Revenge of the Zombies' is running, trying to entice people to have a go. There is a lot of kicking going on, accompanied by horrible sound effects. On the wall above the machine a neon sign declares: Have a nice day.

Evening

4.00pm

Lucy Anderson, Troon

School was just as dismal and uneventful as ever. You'd think teachers would have more sense of 'the greatness' of the occasion and try to introduce just a little of the carnival atmosphere into the curriculum. But no such luck, as we spent the day revising for the umpteen tests that are the lot of the Scottish child. I'd like to be able to report that we spent our free time discussing the election. However, we used our free time to practise our wolf whistles. Sadly I'm hopeless at it, but observers of popular culture should note that it's going to be the next big thing – bigger than the yoyo and even the cyber pet. How will business men make money out of the wolf whistle? Nicola (best friend) and I talked about the election on the way home. We decided that if we were voting we would vote Lib Dem or SNP because they never win and nobody will ever know if they would be best at the job.

4.00pm

Hannah Downie, Troon

School was, once again, uneventful. Each subject seemed to merge into the next in a whirl of dull colours. It was a routine texture of sameness: teacher talk; pupil write; and, inevitably, 'homework for tomorrow'. History did stand out. We were debating who was responsible for the First World War. We were put into groups, each representing a country. My group was Britain. We were told to devise questions and come to a conclusion. We came to an unanimous if somewhat unsurprising decision to blame Germany. As I was sitting there, I found myself contemplating the iconic nature of the class discussion: here we were debating the Balkan crisis which precipitated the First World War, as we watch the current Balkan tragedy unfold nightly on our television screens.

4.00pm

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Back at my desk and sermon preparation. Theme – spreading the word. Parable of sower. Reminded that to broadcast originally meant to scatter seed. Poor devastated Kosovo still in news. When and how is it all going to end?

4.00pm

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Our architect is committed this evening to showing the Scott Monument (for the restoration of which has been responsible) to Count Tolstoy. Another item that seems lightyears away from polling day. Word that youngest granddaughter Jessie, birthday party today in Oxford, is delighted by Elspeth's careful choice of dress for her. Nice to have enthusiastic grandchildren.

4.00pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Kate Wooldridge phones about a production at the Arches, *Sweeping out the Dark*, based on poems by Edwin Morgan – as I'm publishing Eddie's new collection, suggests mutual publicity. Agree to lunch at Nico's on 13th with Eddie and herself to discuss.

4.10pm

Jack Webster, Glasgow

Listening as usual to Radio 2's accumulator quiz on the Ed Stewart show. A woman competitor, who sounds otherwise intelligent, thinks the Windy City is Oklahoma. Well, it has been a bit blowy there recently but wouldn't you think she would have known about Chicago?

Nor had she ever heard of Don Bradman. 'Before my time' is the shrug of age, the

modern excuse for ignorance, as if anything 'before my time' is of no consequence. And we think we live in an age of information, enlightenment, sophistication?

Information may provide answers to a quiz (though not always!) but wisdom depends on how you use it.

4.15pm

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

Trying to do my column for Saturday's *Times*. Research completed, phone calls made. It's about Liverpool, who used to be anchored by tradition and have been cut adrift in modern football. Find myself plodding, but the office want the piece filed this evening so I keep on writing.

4.30pm

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Hens grumbling at the gate, sound like a mutinous Woman's Guild. I hurry with mash, collect eggs.

4.30pm

John Blanche, Aberfoyle

By late afternoon I still have not started to write (family journal). The travel agent called several times regarding arrangements for a visit to Venice to celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary. We had the idea of going by the Orient Express but the thought of queuing in the evenings for the loo and a shower before donning a dinner jacket did not appeal. It is odd to find that the cabins do not have full facilities, whereas Canada can do so at a fraction of the price.

I have sat at home in my study all day and spoken only to the postmistress when I took some letters to the village. I quickly realised in retirement that socialising is important and so I go to golf three times a week, we go to concerts in Glasgow, and we have friends in for dinner to help with the wine cellar. Fiona helps to run various activities in the village, from church to Abbeyfield, otherwise, being a dedicated gardener, she could so easily live a very solitary life, as could I sitting in front of a PC.

4.30pm

Jack Webster, Glasgow

Radio reports say sun is shining in Shetland. But not in Glasgow. When the rain goes off, I walk to the polling station at Netherlee School, acknowledging with equal grace the local candidates as they hover by the gate, but giving no hint of how I'll vote. That's my business. Why do we tolerate 'exit polls'? They are an impertinence. Homeward bound, I bounce through the park from the Derby Cafe, licking a gigantic cone of the best ice cream in Glasgow. They boast about their stuff in Largs and Aberdeen but, take it from a

connoisseur, Netherlee beats them all. I'm jaunty as a kid. Yet I have lived through every election since the Gold Standard one of 1931.

4.45pm

Kenneth Roy, Bridgegate House, Irvine

'Please do not throw confetti in the building.' It is my greatest fear that the new Scotland about to be born will be governed by the dim municipal minds responsible for such orders, the mindset that believes in keeping official corridors swept and smelling of disinfectant, free of spontaneity and joy, a land fit for early morning cleaners.

4.50pm

James Gunn Henderson, in his car

On my way back into Golspie, I am almost creamed by a blue minibus hurtling round a bend on the single-track road. I pile onto the grass verge, as the driver brakes furiously trying to avoid me. I see the astonished faces of his passengers, some of them bent forwards with the rapid deceleration, as they safely slide past. Phew!

4.50pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Call in at the office of our millennium appeal co-ordinator. I broach the question of her and her family's voting. She has three sons for one of whom this will be his first time voting. I reflect on the extraordinary nature of the democratic system whereby the vote of one young person is of the same value, in effect, as that of a bishop who has seen many administrations both locally and nationally and has had, by reason of his very office, to reflect on what are the foundations of a just society, and to judge individuals and their parties thereby.

4.55pm

James Aitchison, Stirling

In the X-ray department, a cleaner switches off her giant swivel-mop to chat to a patient lying on a trolley. Norma and I agree that my ache is a result of my rough gardening, and my age, and my weight. We'll keep hunting for a smaller house and garden.

The radiographer realigns her machine and me with a gentle, slow-motion precision for each of three pictures. She asks me to wait in the cubicle. Shoeless and trouserless, I should feel more absurd than I do. I'm more at ease with my absurdity nowadays. The radiographer recalls me for another picture.

4.55pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Watch end of *Countdown* with Winifred. Start making the tea – spicy chickpea stew to have with leftovers of last night's carry-out mushroom fried rice.

5.00pm

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

At odd times I try to keep up my French by watching the Paris TV5 on cable. They put subtitles in French on some of their films and soaps; otherwise I'd never follow the colloquialisms, which involve repeated use of several words not in my dictionary but apparently milder in usage than their equivalent English obscenities. Without the subtitles, I could never have followed the dialogue in which a femme fatale warns someone: 'Watch out – if you want to keep your balls well attached!' But they seem more polite in the game shows.

5.00pm

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

Regular 'surgery' time with academic heads of departments includes a visit to the facilities for the new joint postgraduate diploma in law between Glasgow and Strathclyde universities. Other departments want to see the teaching environment in the newly refurbished building. Everyone is impressed by the extensive audio-visual support and flexible use of space. 'I want one,' says the head of management science. This is what we need to expand in the extensive continuing professional development market. But how to pay for it? The law school has an income stream for this through full-fee paying postgraduate and part-time students. But this high-quality facility is what we would like for all our students. The need for more fundraising is imperative.

5.00pm

Dr Leo Murray, Ayr

End of the working day today for me. Paint the last of the byre walls by the house, splattering white paint on crumbly rendering between stones laid 200 years ago. Blue round the windows. Blue and white. I wonder about painting a saltire on the lean-to roof. And so to vote!

Here about Ayr are many small farms, and the signs allocating people to polling booths are long lists of their names. High Corton, High Glengall, Mount Oliphant, Mount Ferguson – and many more – date from the mid-1700s – not long after we lost our parliament. Three crosses and out – and off, in a maudlin Scottish sort of way, to the Tam O'Shanter Inn in the High Street of Ayr, to celebrate with a couple of pints.

5.00pm

Jack Webster, Glasgow

I meet a neighbour, who starts speaking about the history of our local 'village', just five miles from Argyle Street. Quite a fascinating story, considering most of these bungalows date only from the early 1930s. Maybe history is in the air today, except for those who think it is 'before my time'.

5.05pm

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

The house's high-class cook is a polling clerk and not back till 11.15, so I have to think about feeding myself. I open the freezer and there is a small pack of lythe (pollack) which I caught last week. I will cook it in milk, in the oven, with some chopped vegetables and fresh ginger.

5.10pm

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Return from posting letters to find water from burst main gushing across road. Telephone emergency number. Place two cones by roadside to warn traffic of hazard, but cars still rush through. Last time this happened (in exactly the same location), it being a Friday night, water engineers did not arrive until 10 hours later!

5.14pm

Professor Hamish Keir, on a train

Take the 17.14 to Inverness. I have a reserved 'airline' seat on this commuter train. A colossally corpulent quine shoehorns herself into the seat beside me, towering over me so that I have to lean away hard against the window. I decide to keep the centre armrest down. She forages around in her bag and pulls out a king-size Mars Bar and an orange-coloured bottle of osmotically balanced Lucozade for athletes. Both are consumed by the time we reach Dyce Station. I feel peckish. I ruminate upon the work of the Rowett Research Institute in Aberdeen, on the Scottish diet, and on the drain on the NHS. The quine prises herself out of the seat and oozes out onto the platform at Inverurie. Relax and read my April and May issues of *Life and Work*.

5.20pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Cooked tea tonight... scrambled egg and toast, very nice...God bless the cook.

5.20pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

It isn't raining but the sun has not come to grace our festival. Nor is there much sign of a festival. Across the road two whole buildings are scaffolded and chaps throw slates and bags of cement down great chutes of multi-coloured barrels – the aftermath of the gales in December and January. Will we break out the flags tomorrow? Why are we not dancing in the streets?

It's surely a more wonderful event than the mathematically doubtful millennium which, as Gore Vidal put it, will celebrate our inheritance of some 'ancient moral creeds from primitive Palestinian sects'.

But this is Scotland, after all. We take our celebrations soberly – or drunkenly, as when we beat France, and Wales beat England at rugby. Ninety-minute patriots? Will today change us? Why not? It's been a long time coming.

5.24pm

Fiona MacDonald, Mitchell Library, Glasgow

Can't resist hopping off the M8 to visit one of my favourite places: the Glasgow history room in the Mitchell Library. I am surprised and pleased to find that the exhibition area just outside it is currently devoted to the paddle steamer Waverley and scan the photographs to see if I appear in any of the crowd scenes (having spent a happy summer on board checking tickets at the end of the gangway and wiping the rain off the seats). I am not there but am pleased to note that Roddy McIsaac, bosun for 18 years, has a place of honour and it is rightly stated that his 'distinctive profile, sharp sense of humour and friendliness made him one of the great Waverley characters'.

5.30pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

I decide that I have dealt enough with correspondence for one day. I pick up a pamphlet in which I read a sermon by Cardinal Newman which has some bearing on the events of the day. It was the sermon he gave in Rome on the occasion of his being made a cardinal, and in it he reflects on the great apostasy of the age. Victoria was still on the throne when he made his remarks, but what he noted then is still relevant today, when we consider the place of the churches – and of faith – in our society. Great truths, commonly held, provide a sound base for society. Liberal relativism provides only shifting sand.

5.30pm

John Millar, Brodick

I arrive home. Alan Bleakley, our joiner, is just leaving. He comes from Bolton and is a super worker but gosh, his accent. We never really know what he is talking about. Still, we have the most elegant stair in Brodick and Alan built that in 1992. He has been doing a small job in the kitchen where we thought we had damp. It looks okay and maybe I'll be able to tidy things up at the weekend.

I pour a drink. Deanna is not home yet having gone to the Co-op. She arrives soon and I help her in with the shopping, then sit down with my drink. I can feel the relaxation in my legs, having been standing all day. I pick up *The Herald*. The front page picture is of a baby with a bottle in its mouth and a St Andrew's flag stuck in the pram. The caption reads: 'A toast to the future: a child enjoys his milk, and the sun, at a nationalist rally in Edinburgh. The grown-ups would have more serious thoughts in mind as Scotland's new era beckons'.

This turns me off. I have no quarrel with the caption writer but I am less keen on the

sentiment. The 'grown-ups' are not so grown-up, I think. They are tribalist, they are smug, they are racist. Yet, I appreciate the picture. And I could have written the caption myself. But I do believe we should try to include a bit more truth, even in a caption. That is playing to the gallery. And the gallery means the mob. And the history of the 20th century tells us what that means.

5.40pm

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

Antony and I leave for Bridge of Earn to visit my brother Hamish and sister-in-law Ali, who is gardener at Balmano Castle. We take cheese and a carafe of Californian red, reminiscent of our youth. Drenched spring leaves, wet sheep and lambs, the Ochils rubbed out by mist. The castle is tall and elegant, the lodge warm and welcoming with our parents' furniture and Hamish's paintings on the walls.

5.45pm

Kenneth Roy, Irvine Public Library

The dull smack of books being stamped for issue. The largest sections of our library are: horror (Saturday night in Irvine); science fiction (Sunday morning in Kilwinning); and westerns (aka the buses). One may also borrow videos, including *Advanced Country Line Dancing* (hey, what about *Elementary Country Line Dancing?*), *The Art of Putting* by Ben Crenshaw, *Edinburgh Trams*, and *From Scotland with Love*, featuring Sydney Devine.

There is no section devoted to Scottish books, although a volume of poems by Norman MacCaig has found its way into the tucked-away corner devoted to 'literature', the exclusivity of which term appears to confirm that the rest of the building contains, not literature, but rather the sort of rubbish that it is no business of a public library to be subsidising.

Go in search of romance, but stumble upon politics instead. *Partners in Love* – Donny and Jim. *Little Boy Blue* – David McLetchie. *Doctor Delicious* – Sam Galbraith. *The Nine Month Marriage* – Labour and the Lib Dems. *In Bed with a Stranger* – Donny and Jim again. *No more Mister Nice Guy* – Alex Salmond. *A Most Eligible Bachelor* – Tommy Sheridan. *Never Say Die* – Phil Gallie. *Wait and See* – the Scottish electorate.

A plaque commemorates John Smith of Irvine, a member of the International Brigade who was killed on 8 September 1938 at the Battle of Ebro during the Spanish Civil War. Had this idealistic young man been spared, he might now be an elderly pensioner tottering into Irvine Library in the search for intellectual nourishment, only to discover that he had fought the Battle of Ebro for a better world that never quite materialised.

6.00pm

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Have an egg for my tea. They really are different from shop ones.

6.00pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Birthday tea at Gardie Cottage. Tavish 33 today, could be MSP for Shetland tonight. Margaret getting excited at the prospect. Lorna has a new bike, so I promise Alasdair to help build a pirate ship out of driftwood.

6.00pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Vespers. Fog is still hanging around. We're still celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death. 'I will not leave you orphans'... we trust in his promise.

6.00pm

George Chalmers, Glasgow

Up to Vlad's; beautiful redstone bay-windowed flat. Spotlessly clean; he'd been up all night. Looking alertly thin, he's developing nose-hair dandruff, and never ever still. 'Voted yet?' I ask as he moves toward the kitchen. 'No. Don't believe in it an' I'll tell you why...' Fill in the rest for yourself. (Talk about paying for your pleasures). Still, it's a nice night now. Embraced in Glasgow's warm sodium glow.

6.00pm

Michael Park, Aberdeen

I am persuaded by my wife that I must vote – it is my public duty. She has voted and son and I are carted to the polling station – or is it now called a polling place?

Only two defenders of democracy are in evidence – the local council Conservative candidate who looks chilled to the marrow, and a lady sporting ribbons. In any event, the candidate greets us and agrees it is cold and damp. The lady says nothing but manages a wan smile.

Inside I become confused. Where do I vote? I contemplate asking a gentleman who is striding up and down, but he is wearing a bonnet and does not look sufficiently 'official' to be likely to help. But I have found the answer. My son precedes me, but I am able to identify his shoes and trousers from the knee downwards, in one of the booths. If he is in the right place then so must I be.

Innovation – an additional official there to ensure that we do not put the wrong paper in the wrong box. One paper is apparently officially described as 'peach' colour. Even at the back of 6pm the officials smile and laugh at the situation that if a peach is such a colour, it should probably be thrown out and not eaten under any circumstances.

6.00pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Eat with Kenny and Christina. C (18 last month) voting for the first time, asks about the

voting system, what it's all about. Try to explain, with last minute lecture on importance of day, must vote, historic blah. Kirsty Wark on TV trailing the election coverage – she does stir the emotions a bit.

6.00pm

Kenneth Roy, Irvine harbourside

(Pub crawl one) Harbour Lights

An old man is delivering a lecture to the barmaid on the technique of planting potatoes. The TV screen high above the bar is tuned to football on Sky Sports – not a match as such, but a sequence of goals, dozens of goals, scored from every conceivable angle. This is experience ruthlessly distilled into 'highlights', a narcotic of continuous incident and excitement, excising all that is flawed or merely routine. It is hard to imagine anything more tedious than a constant diet of such highlights. Better plant potatoes.

(Pub crawl two) Marina Inn

'So who's going to win the election?' the pert young barmaid is asking as I march to the bar.

'Labour, I reckon,' replies the soothsayer punter, 'but a hung parliament. I voted SNP myself'.

'I didn't vote. Meant to this morning, but by the time I'd finished washing my hair, there was no time. But if I had voted, I'd have voted socialist.' She raises her arm in a gesture of solidarity.

'History in the making,' intones Jackie Bird from her box for the umpteenth time, 'with less than four hours to go to the close of polls'.

But I am not listening to Ms Bird. I am thinking of the destiny of Scotland reduced to a straight choice between civic duty and Vosene medicated shampoo.

(Pub crawl three) Ship Inn

No credit cards. Licensed since 1754, before Visa had been invented. Background music from Diana Ross:

Tell me what I did so wrong

To make you stay away so long

Flashback to 1969, and a party to launch *Scottish Theatre* magazine. James Aitchison, he of the bad back, was present. We played Diana Ross that night and gazed admiringly at the front cover with its photograph of a young Rita Tushingham. Alexander Scott, writing in the *Scots Independent*, attacked us for using a picture of an English actress.

Someone is reading the *Daily Telegraph*. Headline: 'Scotland wasn't broke, but they fixed it anyway'.

Feel detached, alienated. It must be the drink. Leave my briefcase behind in the pub.

6.03pm

Sir John P Arbuthnott, Glasgow

Home. This is the one night off this week; no lectures or formal dinners to chair; only three sets of committee papers to read for tomorrow.

6.15pm

Frances Simpson, Dundee

I visit a friend to go with her to a meeting this evening and find a mutual friend visiting with her young baby. She wanted to return to work once the baby was born, but her employer wouldn't allow her any more than the statutory maternity leave of 14 weeks, and she had had to take some of those weeks early due to the pressure of her job making it impossible to work whilst pregnant.

6.20pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

A quiet period for reading and prayer, relaxing, unwinding, resting, trying to pick up the threads of the early morning's thoughts. Can't do it easily, for the day has been curiously busy. Never mind.

6.25pm

Fiona MacDonald, Time Capsule, Coatbridge

I try to make a call from the phone in the Waterfall Cafe overlooking the swimming pool in this glorified sports complex. Whether I use a 10p or 20p coin, the machine simply spits it out again. A man is standing at a suitable distance waiting his turn. 'I can't get the money to stay in,' I tell him lamely.

'I'm not being cheeky, but what kind of coins are you using?' he asks. I stretch out my hand to show him and he nods to indicate that they look appropriate. Another unsuccessful attempt. 'Try dialling the number first, love,' he suggests diffidently. I do. It works. And I am struck – not for the first time today – by the respect and decency with which working-class Scots treat even total strangers.

6.26pm

Dr Calum MacLeod, on a train

Take the train to Glasgow. From Aberdeen to Glasgow the entire country is wrapped in fog and I ask myself whether our politicians have done the same to the electorate. This weather must surely mean a low turnout. I try ScotRail's chicken soup and find it surprisingly tasty. Why do the trains to Glasgow 'shoogle' whereas the trains to Edinburgh glide along like swans? It's like their footballers. Willie Henderson and Jimmy Johnstone 'shoogled', but Gordon Smith and Willie Bauld... ah, now!

6.30pm

Dr Charles Allison, Brechin

List finished, heading for home. Very little election talk, just a long day with three of our four cases more complex than planned. The final lady, who was quite happily awake for the last 20 minutes, perceptively told us we were 'a right blethering lot'.

6.50pm

Bishop Mario Conti, Aberdeen

Ironically, I end the day by going to the university's senior common room for the AGM of the Dante Alighieri – more popularly known as the Italian Circle, where I enjoy the company of a friendly group which reminds me of my Italian roots. The buffet supper allows one to move around enquiring of people their views on the significance of the day, and what they expect the outcome will be. Judging by what one heard, the pattern is going to be complicated, perhaps ensuring a rich fabric. Let's hope it holds together, and is not like the fabric of Christ's saying, where a new patch caused the old garment to tear.

7.00pm

Fiona MacDonald, Time Capsule, Coatbridge

In the Waterfall Cafe, children are refuelling on chicken nuggets and ice cream. Schoolgirls sit around exchanging gossip.

Down below, a boy of about nine or 10 wearing swimming trunks and arm bands propels his wheelchair to the top of the steps leading down into the swimming pool. His father follows close behind, places the tiny girl he is carrying carefully on the floor and lifts the boy down to the lower steps.

Using his hands to propel himself along, the boy makes it down into the water, through the shallows, and escapes to a freedom where he is indistinguishable from all the other boys. The father remains at the edge until his wife arrives to relieve him of his responsibility for the tiny tot. Immediately, he sets off into the pool, his head scanning for his son who has disappeared under an archway in pursuit of fun. It's an achingly tender scene.

7.00pm

Sir Lewis Robertson, Edinburgh

Timetable hair-raisingly disrupted by refurbishment tradesmen, but get to the New Club in time for second half of concert by the very gifted youngsters from St Mary's Music School, some remarkably good and confident playing, some unusual pieces. This is followed by a club dinner, interesting conversation generally. But absolutely no conversation at all about the election; save for one remark as the performers are thanked, no mention whatever. Yet again, polling day by and large eludes me.

7.00pm

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Channel 4 News. 'Nationalism' gets a few critical glances. Does it not occur to those who purport to see Belfast in Scotland or Kosovo in Scotland that the catastrophes in these countries are caused less by the innate nastiness of the people than by the fact that they are armed to the teeth? Even in sectarian Glasgow nothing comparable could ever occur because the enabling means are not available.

7.00pm

Tam Dalyell, canvassing in Linlithgow

One couple I take from Justinhaugh Drive say they will only vote for named candidates, and will not on principle vote for a party list. Another confides that he had voted for Mary Mulligan (Labour candidate) and for Tommy Sheridan's 'outfit' on the list. 'I'm just Old Labour,' he says. 'Yes,' I respond. 'I'm Ancient Labour myself.' He chuckles, and says that in 1962, like his friends the Alexander Brothers, he had been very suspicious of me. Strange, he says, it should be you, and not Cook, who should be shouting against bombing. Ruefully, he adds that he had come to like me since I opposed devolution in 1978-79. He still does not think a Scottish Parliament is a good idea, but believes everyone has a duty to vote. I never cease to marvel how some very infirm and crippled people display their determination to vote. I suspect it is therapeutic. One still counts.

I decide not to go to the count, partly because I am tired, partly because it is an evening that belongs to other candidates, and candidly because, if I did go, I could not restrain myself from entering a steaming row with Robin Cook, whom I blame, in great measure, along with his odious friend, Madeleine Albright, for the Balkan War. I think sadly of the happier joint counts in 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1997, when Margaret was alongside him. But then, if Margaret had still been with him, he would not have become Blair's prisoner, and she would have had so much to say about bombing and their CND past, that he would have opposed this madness against Belgrade.

7.10pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Bell clangs again. We head for the Lady Cloister to sing the May litany to honour Mary, the Lord's mum, and so fulfil the fourth commandment, 'Honour your father and your mother'.

After the litany, we go to Chapter. I'm half asleep by now. A short passage from our new constitutions is read – in one ear and out the other, shift myself about a bit, try to look intelligent, hard work at this end of the day, and make a supreme effort to listen to *Reflections of an Aspiring Monk...* give up.

7.10pm

Norman Gillies, Skye

Leave home to travel to Inverness, as I am heading for Stornoway for a meeting tomorrow morning. I meet my wife Jean on the road. She is heading for home after a hard day of social working.

7.10pm

Professor Steve Bruce, Oldmeldrum

To village hall to vote. An old lady in front of me makes a fuss about how complicated it is. Her main problem seems to be lack of spectacles rather than PR voting system. The clerk has to point out her desired candidates. Vote Lib Dem for constituency and local council but (because the LDs will do well on the constituency vote) SNP for party. I am not yet a full-blown nationalist, but with every year I get closer. The least laudable reason for this gradual conversion is petulance. I am fed up with politicians and newspaper editors trying to frighten me with the prospect of Scotland as an impoverished gentlewoman divorcee fallen on hard times. Can England really be supporting us so generously?

7.26pm

George Chalmers, Queen Street Station, Glasgow

Choca-block. (Feeling a bit paranoid.) Lots of bustle and brolleys. Two coppers weighed down with weaponry vacantly scan the area. There's a wobble of Girl Guides who'll have guys tied in knots before long. Train's in; just time to buy water.

7.28pm

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

I hear Susan coming in. She hurt her back lugging the laptop up some stairs in Southampton, but it's not so bad now. Chiropractor tomorrow. After voting, we eat and then assemble the hi-tech standard lamp. Despite being made in Italy, it has helpful instructions.

7.30pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Compline, a favourite office with us monks and our visitors. It is the church's bedtime prayer. Day is done, labours are finished, a sharing with holy Simeon in his prayer, 'At last all-powerful Master, give leave to your servant to go in peace according to your promise'. A quiet gentle office, gathering up all who long for true life and yet are so often battered by forces beyond comprehension, who retire in tears, who are dying, who know not what the morrow will bring. All we can do is trust in Him who has promised: 'I will not leave you orphans'.

7.30pm

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

To Cramond for choir practice, not looking forward to our organist-choirmaster's determination that we should sing some Fauré in French. However, we also have two sprightly modern anthems from John Rutter and Julian Dams – one written for the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the other for a Royal Air Force anniversary. From scenes like these our sacred music springs. Just before we tackle the Fauré, the maestro suddenly asks: 'Have you all voted?' Some hands go up and, if silence also indicates assent, we all have. Some voice also asks: 'Did you all vote the right way?', but we keep our counsel and talk about the length of the PR list paper.

7.30pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Christina and I walk to polling station at Pollokshields Burgh Hall. Go over the three voting papers again with C on the way. The hall is busy and buzzing. Mohammed Sarwar standing outside in support of the Labour candidate, the QC Gordon Jackson. C doesn't seem to have any problem with the procedure. I vote and then go back and vote twice more – I have proxies for John and Moira Bell, neighbours who are in the States and won't be back until tomorrow. Resist temptation to vote contrary to instructions. Leave polling station and C says she feels good.

7.30pm

Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith, Edinburgh

Back from the office having stopped off at M&S food hall to restock an empty freezer. Evening shopping apparently produces extra staff to help customers pack their purchases. The girl in front proceeded to scoop all mine into her bags at which I remonstrated vigorously but she was only packing them for me. Is this part of the new dawn?

Back in the flat, I put on the TV but miss anything of interest. Make an appalling supper – apparently one should not microwave smoked fish.

7.35pm

Professor Hamish Keir, on a train

These ScotRail services really are excellent, and we arrive on time in Inverness where I am met by Eve. She knows that I am in a melancholy mood, so whisks me across the Kessock Bridge to the Black Isle, straight on to the polling station (Fortrose Town Hall) and hands me my polling card. What foresight! I cast my three Scottish Conservative votes and thereby feel less morose.

7.45pm

Eileen Dunlop, Balmanno Castle

We sit down to supper by candlelight. Talk of the election is soon overtaken by more intimate concerns, family, work, the holidays. We laugh and enjoy good food and wine. I remember a favourite poem by Douglas Dunn about going to visit friends at Kirkbymoorside; I relish his wish that it should always be today, 'one hour on this, the pleasant side of history'.

7.45pm

John Millar, Brodick

As soon as I approach the polling clerk, May Fenton, she asks why I was not at a wedding last Saturday. It was a wonderful wedding, she says, I was going to phone you. This always upsets me because we do not like to miss anything and certainly not a wedding. However they (bride and groom) probably had no local connection and I had presumably checked it out and decided against it. I point out that I would have been there had I been asked but often these holiday people (I actually said *nouveau riche*) feel themselves much superior to the *Arran Banner*. The other polling clerk hands me my papers with me almost forgetting why I am there. Into the booth and I put three crosses – Mike Johnson, Conservative, Canon Kenyon Wright, Independent, and Jim Lees, SNP.

We walk along the shore to work. I go upstairs to start writing but I can hardly be bothered. I make a list of the stories that I must write. Often I calculate the number of words I must write and then write to fit the space. It's usually about 4,000 at this point in the week, although I have already written several feature articles. Eventually I start as if by remote control.

7.45pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

Lock up. Apple blossom in profusion, thick fog and an easterly breeze. The rhubarb is jungle thick... better get on and make some rhubarb jam, yum yum. A portly crow on the garth getting a last bite before shut-eye, bunnies scatter at my coming, silence... the Great Silence, the sacrament of the night – no talking until the Lauds.

The final hours

8.00pm

Rose Galt, Glasgow

To my brother's and sister-in-law's flat – with carry-out pizzas and bottle of wine – for election coverage. As I said earlier, I'm still at 62 enormously excited by elections. But

waiting for results is essentially a communal activity. I did it alone at the referendum in 1997 and found myself screaming 'Yes! Yes!' as the results came in to an empty room. Never again.

8.00pm

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Self-indulgence. Watch *The Bill*.

8.00pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Watch *The Bill*.

8.00pm

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Mainly English TV here, and much rubbish. No need to wait up, we're on our way! To a Scotland worth her place in the world.

8.00pm

Father Martin T Warren, Nunraw

To bed and bliss. 'Good night Bertie' to my small brown teddy bear who guards my cell.

8.10pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

Oh, God. Oh, God. Help! However much time you have you (I) never finish until a minute before the doorbell rings. I have dished the fish, put out the knives, forks, glasses, and the cheese: but I still have to do the potato salad and the green salad and... Till later...

8.36pm

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

The meal of lythe was great and a fresh girdle scone and butter went well with it. Just watched a fascinating start to a new series on BBC 2, where a renovated schooner is sailing on wildlife tours of the islands off the west coast. This is of particular interest this year, as Lochmaddy Bay has been made a Special Area of Marine Conservation on account of the immense and varied wildlife on the bottom of the bay. Already there has been a glass-bottomed boat doing short tours.

8.40pm

Dr Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Water engineers arrive in numbers, with squad of vehicles and temporary traffic lights,

three and a half hours after fractured main reported. Good neighbour Jim Christie phones to ask if I have water for tea. Had taken precaution of filling kettle before supply ran out.

8.40pm

Professor Hamish Keir, Black Isle

We are staying at the house of a friend (in her absence for the next fortnight) looking after her eccentric, amnesiac husband. He is a retired academic bacteriologist, so distinguished that he has bacteria named after him. I think: 'That's better than Sean Connery having James Bond called after him'. We dine, then move through to the garden room. We have a long chat about his university days in Edinburgh and Reading. The amnesia has not affected these memories. He hasn't voted, and I am grateful for that! Three times within five minutes he asks me where his wife is, and three times I tell him that she has gone to visit their daughters and grandchildren in England.

8.48pm

Fiona MacDonald, Troon fishmarket

A fisherman is striding up the quay. He is Jim Brown and he has just come off the Southern Sun.

'Did you vote today?' I ask.

'No,' he smiles. 'No polling stations out there. And by the time I get home, they'll be closed.'

'What was it like at sea today?'

'Lovely. Flat calm. Lovely.'

9.00pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

BBC news takes 16 minutes before a brief mention of our election. London does not like it.

9.00pm

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Go on a round of polling stations. In my more active and office-holding days I liked to get a last impression. Robert McIntyre always insisted that his instinctive nose told him more than polls did. I have always agreed. The bad news is that all our people have gone from the gates. Ken Guild appears to collect posters and seems pleased with things. A dozen or so Tories remain doggedly at Forthill. That is somehow to be expected.

My nose says that we have done well, certainly in Dundee, and that the Tories will do, as in 1970, a great deal better than expected.

9.00pm

Iain Anderson, Glasgow

Return to the controller's do at the Beeb, rubbing shoulders with the great, the good and the politically interested. The purvey here is seriously good, enjoyed by such as Willie McIlvanney, Johnny Watson and Dougie Donnelly, who are not averse to a little football banter. The famous Burns performer Jack Weir provides me with 18 requests he wishes to hear on *Fine Tunes*. I promise him my future attention and head home when the delay after Hamilton becomes interminable.

9.00pm

Kenneth Roy, Loans

Attempt, under expert supervision, to make biscuits known as Ginger Parlies. Years ago, when I was a minor celebrity reading the Scottish news on the telly, I opened the Balerno Church sale of work and was given a book of recipes prepared by the faithful. One of the recipes was for Ginger Parlies – so named because they were popular with members of the old parliament in Edinburgh.

The ingredients:

50g (2oz) margarine; 50g (2oz) treacle; 50g (2oz) of soft brown sugar; 100g (4oz) of plain flour; 1 level tsp of ground ginger; egg white to glaze.

Method:

(I) Light oven at 350 or gas no.4. Grease tray. The equivalent of entering talks with the Lib Dems.

(II) Sieve dry ingredients together. Creates a sort of coalition.

(III) Add remainder of ingredients and mix well together until like 'sticky breadcrumbs'. I have to warn you that working with treacle is seriously messy. Rather like negotiating with Jim Wallace, one imagines.

(IV) Roll into balls size of walnuts – more my scene – and place on tray a little apart. One turns out to bear a distinct resemblance to Ginger Parly Kennedy (sonsy looking ball, bit on the fat side).

(V) Flatten and decorate with prongs of fork. Think of Robin Cook as one stabs.

(VI) Brush with egg white. Makes 15 balls. The consequent indigestion I blame on Kirsty Wark, not my wonderful Ginger Parlies.

9.00pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

Made it, I think. Have I forgotten anything? It's a kind of Canadian party – everyone will help themselves to food and drink. Ah! The door bell.

9.10pm

James Aitchison, Stirling

I finish a chapter of *The Great Folly*. The project is even more fun than the PhD thesis 25 years ago. Yes, retirement was my best career move.

9.15pm

Norman Gillies, Inverness

Arrive at the Travel Inn in Inverness. Their literature exhorts me – 'Take a fresh look... we've changed'. I hadn't noticed. The change doesn't impact on their bedrooms because they remain anonymous as usual. I can analyse the election results in the company of a bottle of red wine from Cahors. The name escapes me, but the date is 1987 and it should be dry enough to stick to my tongue.

9.20pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Tavish and Margaret plus Kirsty home from Toronto for this week, off to Lerwick on the Bressay ferry for the count. Wish them well, then up to the lambing for the last of the daylight. What a day – 17 hours of sunshine, Shetland's secret.

9.30pm

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

As I come out (from choir practice), a cold haar drifts in from the Forth and savages my throat. It's the one thing I dislike about Edinburgh after 30 years here – far worse than any assumption that you've had your tea.

9.30pm

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

As I walk up to the flagpole and lower the Scottish flag, the calm evening is loaded with the calls of several sorts of birds. North Uist is effectively bare of trees but we have a number, and they draw in many small birds to roost or nest. The island has a special RSPB reserve at Balranald and with the lack of trees is a special place for ground nesting birds. I am worried for the future. Hedgehogs, which some enthusiast introduced to South Uist and have worked their way north, are having a devastating effect on the ground nests in the south corner of the island. They do not just eat the eggs, but kill the chicks as well.

9.30pm

Dr Calum MacLeod, Glasgow

My overnight hostelry is the Thistle Hotel. Previously it was called the Hospitality Inn, but before that it was the Skean Dhu, developed by the late Bob Mullins, an Aberdeen-

based American who subsequently retired to California. The first Skean Dhu Hotel in Aberdeen, however, was originally the brainchild of a Mr Skene and a Mr Hunter from Fraserburgh and Peterhead respectively and the name represents the first letters of their surnames – Ske-and-Hu. Even our Rory would admit that was clever!

I stayed here a few weeks ago and discovered on arrival that Tony Blair was also in residence and that I was to be accompanied, under protest I may say, by two very large men, bristling with technology and truncheons, all the way from the reception desk to the door of my room. I tried to explain that I intended to do no harm to the Prime Minister, but my assurances proved unacceptable. I trust that our First Minister will cause less inconvenience to the lieges.

Why am I in Glasgow? Tomorrow I am to chair the AGM of Scottish Media Group, having acted as its chairman since last August, wedged in between the departure to government of our very own Gus, now Lord MacDonald of Tradeston, and the arrival next month of Don Cruickshank. I shall have warm things to say about them both. If the meeting were in Aberdeen, I would only need to say that Don is a product of Robert Gordon's College and Aberdeen University and that would be enough, but since it's in Glasgow I shall have to bring in a few more of his many achievements.

9.30pm

Jack Webster, Glasgow

Go for an evening stroll and pass the polling station once more. In those final minutes there is a hum, if not a buzz. Soon it will all be signed and sealed. The analysts will talk the night away, Peter Snow will go over the top with his swingometer, and a new day will dawn – and maybe a new era with it.

9.30pm

George Chalmers, Edinburgh

Back in flat in Edinburgh. Journey spent smilingly alone and content; may it continue. Music on; Afro Celt sound system. Can't recall how I got here.

9.35pm

Hamish Whyte, Glasgow

Choose some CDs to take for the weekend. Put on Mackenzie's *Scottish Concerto* as appropriate to the occasion.

9.45pm

John Millar, Brodick

That's enough. Fed up and exhausted. Home again and I make a cup of tea. I am wondering what to do about the elections. I want all the results in tomorrow's paper even though they do not start counting the local ones until 11am. The election officer has

promised to fax me the results as soon as they come out (in the event he forgot). And I'll get the Scottish Parliament ones from the radio in the morning. So there's not much point in staying up. We've got swimming at 7 o'clock anyway. And I have to confess that all this talk of devolution and independence for Scotland and a new Scottish pride makes me rather sad, makes me feel like an outsider in my own country. I love Scotland, but there are many things about my fellow Scots, especially the nationalists and all the thinly disguised anti-Englishness, which make me feel ashamed.

9.56pm

Dr John Macleod, Lochmaddy

Soon the polling station will close and the team will seal the ballot boxes... now with modern plastic clips, but still the old-fashioned sealing wax is required for closing the envelopes containing the counterfoils of the voting slips. Polling clerk had to take a box of matches to melt the wax and I hope they didn't burn the envelopes in the process. I wonder if she will be very tired or will still have some energy left to give my beard a trim before we go to Glasgow for a wedding tomorrow.

10.00pm

Elizabeth Whitley, Southwick

Bed-time, Wispy!

10.00pm

George Chalmers, Edinburgh

Sample new band-aid-on-the-psyche drama on C4. Scottish guy unconvincing as mental-case (which takes some doing). A razor-blunt soap.

10.00pm

Rose Galt, Glasgow

So it's all over, the voting, that is. The low turnout is disappointing and you can't put it all down to the weather – we're Scots for God's sake. I am incensed, considering the struggle for universal suffrage and the victims of that struggle, that so many people just can't be bothered to vote. Before this diary ends at midnight, I hope at least one result is in and that by tomorrow we'll have a parliament in which no one party – even mine – has an overall majority. The historic nature of this day has been alluded to, perhaps ad nauseam, in the media for months. Yes, it is a momentous day and that should be noted. But the real significance is surely the method of voting. For the first time in British history we have an element of proportional representation.

10.00pm

Tam Dalyell, Linlithgow

I am hearing the first exit polls from the BBC. If it is true that Labour has failed to get an overall majority, and is dependent on Lib Dem coalition partners, we are entitled to ask 'What can such a coalition do for Scotland, that a Labour government with a substantial majority cannot do?' Many in the Labour Party will ask: why did we sweat our guts out to hold the Labour Party together over 18 years, simply to get a coalition? Will activists bother to do the hard work of the party in the future when they see Dewar and the Lib Dems carving up decisions in public, albeit it is now clear that the extent of their clandestine relationship was far more extensive than we ever imagined. Forgive me for feeling bitter that the striving of so many Labour members for a successful Labour government may have been squandered, by becoming the prisoner of a minority party, many of whose members are deeply anti-socialist at home, and hawks for military adventures abroad.

10.00pm

Dr Leo Murray, Ayr

The votes for the election are being counted. What difference will it make to the 153 people who attended the A&E department today? To the 46 admitted to hospital? To the lady with cancer spread to her bones? To the man with the brain tumour? To the young boy with his first epileptic fit? To the six people with heart attacks? To the person suddenly blind in one eye? To the man in police custody? To me? To you?

10.00pm

Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith, Edinburgh

Thoroughly turned off by the idiocy of cross-questioning politicians about exit polls. What can they say? The political commentators have come out of this election much worse than the politicians. The fundamental intention of everybody involved in planning the new parliamentary arrangements has been to get away from confrontational politics, but this does not make exciting television.

10.00pm

James Aitchison, Stirling

Kirsty Wark's lips are moving, but I can't hear what she's saying, partly because of my right-ear deafness, partly because my mind is beginning to close down, and partly because I'm not interested. I'm interested in the result, but what's happening on the screen seems like fiction.

10.00pm

Kenneth Roy, Loans

'All the indications are that you have voted in your droves,' declares Kirsty Wark at the beginning of the programme. The evidence of one's own eyes throughout the day, and of others, suggests otherwise.

Remember some of my own BBC elections: the strobing jacket of February 1974 which so terrified the children – that was the night Harold Wilson, to my private delight, squeaked home; and, nine years later, in a rather different atmosphere, politically and personally, fronting the Radio Scotland all-night coverage in the company of Mike Russell. Before the programme, Geoffrey Cameron, the producer, took us to the Ubiquitous Chip and got the adrenaline flowing by firing dozens of questions about the key seats. Mike and Geoff, I reflect, have now been dead quite a long time.

10.00pm

Professor Hamish Keir, Black Isle

Eve comes in with cups of tea. He (the eccentric, amnesiac friend) asks where his wife is. She explains. He goes to bed declaring that his wife will be wondering why he is staying up so late, and comes back 10 minutes later, minus one slipper and with his pyjama jacket buttoned up one hole out of register. He asks where his wife is. I tell him. He shuffles off to bed. I manage to finish off my *Telegraph* without having to resort to a dictionary, because Boris Johnson doesn't have an article in the paper today.

10.00pm

Muir Campbell, Troon

Get ready for bed. I can't wait till tomorrow to find out if the Scottish National Party has won this election or not. This could mean eventual freedom if SNP win – one of my dreams ever since I saw *Braveheart*.

10.00pm

Ronald Mavor, Glasgow

I propose, with a glass of champagne, *Habemus Consilium*. From here on things become less clear.

10.05pm

Rev. Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

Listen with half an ear to Gaelic radio election programme while preparing Gaelic sermon for Sunday. Get an occasional glimpse of television coverage. Informed interesting comment on Gaelic programme, even without Peter Snow's graphics.

10.15pm

Frances Simpson, Dundee

Returning home, I discover that my two, having shared my working day with me, have shared my husband's working evening with him. What is all of this trying to tell me? Balancing family and work is a well-worn issue, with familiar pros and cons. But a stress-free routine needs more than just family-friendly policies, and appropriate childcare arrangements. Maybe we parents ourselves need to rethink the balance. Maybe it's not about always mixing our children with work but occasionally putting them before it. The next time I'm handed an opportunity to spend some unscheduled time with one or both of them, maybe I'll take it, guilt-free.

10.30pm

John Scott, Bressay, Shetland

Clewed up the ewes for the day. Bath, bed and sleep.

10.30pm

R D Kernohan, Edinburgh

Home, with the heating turned up. I browse the Ceefax for exit polls from Scotland and early council results from England. It's all as I feared, but no worse. And so, slightly disconsolate, to bed – unsure whether, when I've put down my book on Romania, I'll drop off to sleep or risk slipping through just to see how things are going on the TV. Some of us never learn.

10.30pm

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

Newsnight. Look at exit poll. It's not as exciting, under proportional representation, when you don't get an absolute winner. Maybe political maturity is as dull as the other types of maturity.

10.30pm

Lucy Anderson, Troon

I am sitting on my bed and I can hear the man from *Tomorrow's World* (I've forgotten his name) talking about the election on my brother's TV. I have two questions on my mind: who is going to win the election? and, even more importantly, what am I going to wear to tomorrow's 'no uniform day' at school?

10.45pm

Eileen Dunlop, Dollar

While Antony puts the car in the garage, I stand at the window in the dark. I hear an owl hooting beyond the chatter of the burn. At the end of the garden, columnar

cherry is like a tall ghost against the dark wood. We go to bed without turning on the television.

11.00pm

Sir James Dunbar-Nasmith, Edinburgh

Time I settled down to preparing a speech I have to make tomorrow evening to some of the High Constables of Edinburgh. They were founded in 1611, so have already experienced 100 years of Scottish Government. Seems a good start to weave some appropriate remarks around, but why does one always leave the preparation until it is too late to do it properly?

11.00pm

Professor Hamish Keir, Black Isle

Somnolence prevails and I repair to bed, plug in my earphones and listen to my radio. I oscillate between Radio 4 and 5, both of which exert upon me a strong soporific effect which terminates my conscious relationship with 6 May 1999.

11.00pm

Dr Calum MacLeod, Glasgow

I am now propped up on my pillows watching the election night programme on my favourite channel. Determined as I am to switch off at midnight, I know it will not happen. The great day is slipping into night and I am much more wide awake now than I was during the rehearsal for the accountability review.

11.15pm

Kevin McCarra, Glasgow

Skip the election coverage and watch *Late Review* instead.

11.15pm

Professor Steve Bruce, Oldmeldrum

See Tom McCabe get elected and then nothing. The presenters gradually become hysterical as they realise that nothing is going to happen and they have to talk about it. For hours. And hours. Much impressive computer graphics (I bet the BBC can repair PC faults in 24 hours!), but no-one seems to have grasped the spirit of PR. The constituency seats are treated as the 'real' ones; the regional top-ups are consolation prizes. Counting should have been left till the next day and all the seats announced at once. Of course they are tired, but very few of the politicians in the studios seem like nice people. They cannot resist making cheap and nasty jibes. Is it inevitable that those who wish to promote the social good and serve the people should be so unpleasant?

11.45pm

Professor Steve Bruce, Oldmeldrum

Retire to bed with a slight sense of anti-climax, only partly explained by cock-up with the counts and lack of results. My mood probably has more to do with knowing that tangible benefits of the new parliament will be slow to appear. Of course, much about it will be good: better gender balance, sensible working hours, little pomp, no huge majorities. Long-term, demarcation disputes will lead to greater ill-feeling between Scotland and London. In the lifetime of my children, the UK will break up and I cannot say I mind the thought. But I cannot expect that next year will be vastly better than this year.

11.55pm

James Gunn Henderson, Golspie

Having had a few bedtime drams, we drift off in the completely apathetic knowledge that the New Labour man has taken Hamilton South, and only 45% had bothered to turn out in Govan... *Sic transit gloria Albae*.

11.55pm

Jack Webster, Glasgow

Back home, Kirsty Wark is already into action, a political leopard on the prowl. Her eyes have a strangely mesmerising quality. Soon we see Labour's outcast, Dennis Canavan, getting his own back with a resounding victory. Then Tommy Sheridan looks set for a seat, raising the clenched fist of the left. Is this the way of the new Scotland?

For the young, all this may be a prospect to stir the adrenaline. For the old cynic, it is time to contemplate with a nod of intended wisdom, to expect very little in the way of change and, whatever the outcome, to consider what a privilege and joy it is to be nothing more than alive and well.

11.59pm

James Halliday, Broughty Ferry

Bed. Am not staying up because tomorrow sees the dedication in the Smith Gallery in Stirling of a memorial to Robert Burnett, a loyal party stalwart in Stirling. Stirling seems a very apt place for me to be when Scotland's parliament comes to pass.

Midnight

Iain Anderson, Langbank

My brother is sound asleep in front of a blaring TV. The dogs are asleep at his feet. The Joint Householder is in Paisley Town Hall observing the action. Your observer, on hearing the duff information that Roseanna Cunningham had lost in Perth, goes to bed.

Midnight

Rev Roddy MacLeod, Furnace

So ends Thursday 6 May 1999 as it began, with the nightly ritual of relaxing bath, then to bed for mental stimulation with *The Scotsman* and *Press and Journal*. Water engineers have worked valiantly and restored water supply. Black cat still on prowl. Will listen to election coverage on Gaelic radio until I fall asleep. Tomorrow's pages in *Pray Now*, Church of Scotland's devotional manual, open with words:

*Another day
for meeting new challenges,
for encountering new faces,
for undertaking the routine tasks
with renewed energy*

Midnight

Professor Steve Bruce, Oldmeldrum

Listen to further Kosovar refugee stories on the radio news. Realise that most people in the world would envy our stability, peace and prosperity. A slight sense of anti-climax is infinitely preferable to such alternatives as terror and despair. On that thought, close diary on the day my PC died and Scotland elected a parliament.

The heavy mob

Tom Shields

2000

My devotion for and commitment to the Scots Parliament has its roots in irrationality. It is more or less the same irrationality that comes into play when supporting the Scotland football team. Actually we don't support Scotland. We follow the team to the ends of the earth, preferably to a city with good food, cheap drink, and beautiful women.

That beautiful women bit is to do with the Tartan Army fantasy that they are Casanovas in kilts. The reality is somewhat similar to what happens on the football park. Low scoring rate, high disappointment factor. When you follow Scotland you are not supporting a football team, you are re-enacting a tragedy. A Scotland fan said this to me after Scotland shot themselves in the foot 2–1 against Brazil in the opening match of France 1998 and I have clung to it as an explanation ever since.

So, in the same way that I have never tried to rationalise following Craig Brown and company, I have never attempted to work out the logic of a Scots parliament. Basically, if it's good enough for hundreds of other communities from Bavaria to Catalonia to have their parliament, then it's good enough for the Scots. Factor into this a deep-rooted feeling of discontent with London and the London media and you have an old Labour fellow traveller who is strongly into devolution and not averse to the concept of independence.

I am no nationalist. I have spent enough time arranging foreign travel to claim the name internationalist. I am a Scot with a wee throwback to Ireland where my father's family came from. His ancestors, the Ó Siadhails, so the Irish Tourist Board genealogy centre in Dublin told me, were poets, philosophers, and surgeons and advisers to Irish kings. This does not explain how my great-grandfather came to be digging ditches in Glasgow. There must have been a lot of redundancies among Ireland's poets, philosophers, and surgeons and advisers to the kings. Ireland has two parliaments, although the northern one has not been in session much of late, so why shouldn't Scotland have one?

The remit for this article was to write about one day in the life of the Scots parliament. I have been to the parliament perhaps a dozen times in its short new life and, frankly, some of those days have been snooze-inducing. But most parliaments are like that. The editor has indulged me by allowing me to wander over fragments of memory of the new democracy on the Mound.

The first day, the opening meeting of the parliament was moving and memorable. I deliberately avoided the subsequent, stage-managed opening by the Queen, but the first day I confess to having a tear in the e'e. I even felt a warmth towards that old bastard

John Knox whose statue stands in the courtyard of the temporary premises of the parliament. I had a wee glow, without a drink, when Madame Ecosse, Winnie Ewing, reconvened the proceedings with a reference to an auld sang which was now to have many new verses. And I saw Lord/Sir David Steel in a new light. He wasn't a smooth, county-set git, but an able statesman who, as presiding officer, could set standards of behaviour. From what I can see, he has done so.

I was proud of many of this first intake of MSPs – for example, Susan Deacon, who had been rejected by the Stalinist Labour selection process, but who appealed and won through. She is now the Scottish Health Minister, a formidable presence, undoubtedly the star of the parliament, but, more importantly, a down-to-earth person and mother of Claire, the daughter she carried up the Royal Mile on the procession to parliament on the first day.

There was a sense in the assembly that, for the first time in years, the views of the Scottish electorate were being represented in an elected body.

There they were, that rare species – Conservatives, 18 of them. None of them had been elected by name but their emergence from the list reflected the fact that there are Scots electors who want Tories to have a say in the governance of Scotland.

And what a lot of SNP members – 35 of them – at last a physical embodiment of the independence ideal. It was good to see that nice man Mike Russell, filmmaker and author, give up the trade of political apparatchik and become a veritable tribune of the people.

Then there were the Lib Dems, with one of their number, Keith Raffan, an Englishman, giving us some non-xenophobic cred. Even more incredibly, the Lib Dems were in government as part of the coalition. Lord/Sir David Steel's pronunciamento to go back to their constituencies and prepare for power had finally come to pass.

You could not help but warm to the Three Amigos, those elected members from outwith the party structures. Tommy Sheridan, the Scottish Socialist Party candidate who seeks to be the conscience of Labour past. Dennis Canavan who is the conscience of Labour present. Robin Harper, the Green Party man, who is the conscience of many people who reject politics of any stripe. The Scots parliament would have been nane the waur of the election of a few more independents.

There are various ways of assessing the success of a parliament. In its first few months the Scots parliament is tackling the feudal system and warrant sales, and has reversed the Blair Government's iniquitous imposition of fees on students. Full marks so far, I would say.

Another test is the quality of debate. Donald Dewar, that old stand-up politico has done very well, as you might expect. Lloyd Quinan of the SNP, as you might expect of a former weatherman, is worried about global warming. He is a Hibs supporter which might be another factor given the climate usually to be expected at Easter Road.

Brian Monteith, the right-wing chap is, rather worryingly, emerging as the cuddly

tendency of the Tory presence in the parliament. He has recently been recruited by the *Glasgow Herald* as a parliamentary diarist in the mould of Alan Clark. Unfortunately, so far there has been little news of shagging. Mr Monteith tells us regularly how he keeps missing games involving his team, Hibs. Is this a Scots parliament or a Hibernian parliament?, one asks.

Some of the newcomers, many of them ordinary people who have found their way into the parliament, have been lambasted by those of the university debate squad as lamentable public speakers. These ordinary punters will get better and it should surely be borne in mind that many of their contributions will be in committee where common sense and a wee bit of experience of the real world might count more than skills in the field of oratory.

The rich tapestry of language is also apparent in the parliament, without the PC imperative of giving equality to minority tongues. Alasdair Morrison, the bright young Labourite, speaks eloquently in his native tongue on the rare occasion of a debate in Gaelic. West of Scotland MSPs speak almost equally eloquently in their native tongue. The glottal stop is much in evidence as Glasgow and Lanarkshire voices urge Alex Salmond: 'Hey, don't fla'er yersel'. The SNP MSPs tend to refer more to the mither tongue. The bottom line is that how all of us speak is represented in the debates of the parliament.

How is the wee parliament on the Mound perceived by the general public? The public galleries always seem to be full. But the perception must inevitably be through the media.

If you read the yellow press, the impression must be that there is no parliament. There is no debate. There is a cast of Holyrood characters, most of them not elected, who feature on the front pages because they are spin doctors, and who make the front page because their standard of behaviour falls below that which is apparently expected of spin doctors. Now, there's a concept.

The Scots parliament is a tender shoot. You might expect that, after 292 years out of the business, it might be allowed a wee breather, a spell away from harsh criticism. But life is not like that.

The reality is that the parliament is being reported by a press corps consisting of some heavy duty dudes. These guys are not there to report the progress of the Carbeth Hutters Protection Act. They are there for blood. They are predators. They will spot the politician or political advisor who has wandered away from the herd. They will claw him or her down like an antelope who has wandered into the vicinity of a pack of hyenas.

The irony is that the press corps covering the parliament constitutes a body of men and women who are possibly the finest, most talented journalists in any parliament in the whole wide world. It is just a shame that they work for the publications they do.

The latest canard is about the building which should be its seat. The parliament is about people, not buildings. I like that old Calvinist General Assembly place because it seems a historical and suitable place. It is near the old parliament. It just seems right.

MSPs and civil servants may complain about lack of office space. Get a life, I say: get on the email. Any government office that does not have space for political advisers must have a future. All any MSP needs for office space is email and access to the internet. The plan for a grand £230m edifice is a knee-jerk reaction to the past.

The Scots parliament is finding its feet. I think it is doing so very well. It sits in plenary session for one and a half days a week which is probably half a day too long. A parliament which talks less and listens more to its people is certainly something to aim for.

Has Scotland changed in 20 years of devolution?

Gerry Hassan

2018

Twenty years ago, Scotland began the devolution era when the Scotland Act 1998, which established the framework for the Scottish Parliament, achieved royal assent on 19 November 1998 – the final parliamentary debate having taken place two days before in the House of Lords.

Much has happened in the intervening 20 years. The Scottish Parliament was set up with a Scottish Executive, which morphed into the Scottish Government. Donald Dewar became the first of five First Ministers, and died tragically in October 2000. Labour-Lib Dem coalition administrations gave way to minority, then majority, then minority SNP rule. A parliament set up in George Robertson's words to 'kill nationalism stone dead' has ended – by next year – with 12 years of continuous SNP administration following on from the first eight years of Labour-Lib Dem rule.

There was the rise and fall of the Scottish Socialists; the role of the Greens; the fall-off of the Lib Dems; and rather implausibly for some, the return of the Scottish Tories from the shadows under the leadership of Ruth Davidson. There have been numerous political waves – of which the indyref has been the most powerful and disruptive. There has been lots of political comment and controversy, along with numerous political scandals – Tommy Sheridan, David McLetchie, Wendy Alexander and others – all becoming engulfed in controversy which ended their political careers. There have been significant amounts of legislation, passed on nearly every aspect of domestic life, from education and health to local government, law and order, land reform, the environment and climate change.

All of this leads to the question: what change has this brought to Scotland and is it change for the better? For a start, we have to ask questions seldom asked: What is this thing called 'devolution'? Who created it, who owns it and what does it mean? The word entered the everyday political lexicon in the late 1960s and early 1970s, replacing the earlier term 'home rule', which had been associated with Scottish self-government, Keir Hardie, James Maxton and the ILP.

The word originally denoted a number of compromises – not just about remaining in the UK, and having an elected Scottish body, but as an intermediate level of government between local government and UK national government. Devolution was devised not to rearrange the political dynamics and power within the UK, but to legitimise them. This has meant that devolution has evolved in Scotland, as well as in Wales and in the stalled example of Northern Ireland, as an opt-out from the political centre and Whitehall mindset. They have forgotten about us, but as Brexit has painfully shown, there has been

no grown-up way for the centre to listen to the devolved administrations, while the British Government and state has not exactly reformed and democratised itself.

Labour never had a fully-fledged idea of what devolution was for – either in Scotland or across the UK – seeing it here as a halfway house and a compromise. The Tories saw the idea as a negative until it happened and then tried to make peace with it – which at first convinced few people. The SNP were sceptical of devolution before the parliament was set up, only coming onboard in the 1997 referendum. And then, when they came to office and noted Labour's lack of ambition, they embraced it as the best means to secure independence.

As the years have passed, the SNP have come to tell the story of devolution as their own, displacing Labour and placing themselves centre stage – an account which requires quite a selective remaking of the past, and which some nationalists worry has become the main ambition of the Nicola Sturgeon-led party.

Twenty years on, devolution can be seen in many respects as a success. No-one talks about abolishing the parliament. It is now the focal point of public life. And in the last two decades when people have been asked which political institution they see as the most important in the country, more and more have said the Scottish Parliament, and less and less Westminster.

But there is another level on which the parliament must be assessed – namely, that of ideas, imagination, innovation and pluralism. In these areas, the picture is a much more mixed one.

Too much commentary on the parliament fails to differentiate between the idea of the institution and the reality of what it actually does and how it operates. The Scottish Parliament as an idea has become uncontested – its creation righting a historic wrong, filling a void at the centre of public life, and providing an elected voice.

But as a working institution its record is more complex. Where has the Scottish Parliament proven itself as the central political authority of public life? Where has it supplied vision, purpose, direction, taken on vested interests, and shown courage and boldness? Where has the Scottish Parliament – a body of 129 elected representatives – shown its mettle and held the Scottish Executive/Government to account when it had to? On all of these questions, the answer is: on not enough occasions. Take the last point. The first and second SNP minority governments have had to bargain and compromise with the parliament to get several of their annual budgets through, but this is the exception, not the rule.

Where have been the defining debates and decisions which have shaped contemporary Scotland? People used to cite the Iraq War debate as one such instance, filled with moral sentiment and exchange, but that was a debate over a subject the parliament had no power over, and lest we forget, it voted to endorse the ill-fated Iraq military expedition. Perhaps the Clause 28 debate in 2000 was one – the first ever public conversation about homosexuality in modern Scotland – and a genuine moment of

maturing, taking on difficult opinions, and a nation coming of age. But that was 18 years ago.

Too often devolution has been associated with the official story of progressive Scotland and the belief that we are inexorably becoming a fairer, more equal society. A reality check is needed here, for Scotland, despite all our good intentions and warm rhetoric, is making little progress on becoming more equal.

Research commissioned by the ESRC 'Understanding Inequalities' programme, by Gwilym Pryce of Sheffield University, shows that over the years 1998-2016, Scotland, as measured by the Gini co-efficient, made no progress at all in becoming more equal. We have broadly remained in the same place, more equal than the rest of the UK – with a large part of the difference explained by the scale of inequality in London.

The same is true when looking at wider measurements which track the lived experience of inequality – from air pollution to quality of housing and access to employment. Scotland, on this more human and tangible set of indicators, is not making any substantive progress in becoming more equal.

To some, all of this can be reduced to the need for more powers to the Scottish Parliament and Westminster 'power grabs'. Yet, this is just too easy a dismissal. Two decades of a Scottish Parliament with substantial power and the legitimacy to lead and shape, and most of our politicians of every persuasion have failed to talk about the trade-offs, difficult choices and need to redistribute income, wealth and power, which are fundamental in addressing inequality. Take local government finance. Not only do we have council tax, but years of a council tax freeze which cushioned the better-off. We cannot even sum up the political leadership to have a revaluation of property values which are based on 1991 levels. That is before we get into no-go areas such as a better way to finance local government, local government structures and the need for smaller councils, as well as a strategic Greater Glasgow, and the onward march of centralisation across public life. Holyrood, like Westminster, does not always know best, but is always the last to realise this.

Allowing for this, Scotland has dramatically changed in these last 20 years. Some of this is directly connected to the establishment of the parliament and its very existence acting as an enabler for wider change. Take the afore-mentioned Clause 28, sex education in schools, LGBT equality, human rights, the smoking ban, and minimum pricing on alcohol as examples.

What has been missing has been a fully-formed vision of what kind of future Scotland we want. One that has imagination, daring, idealism, but also realism, and an awareness of the harsh economic times we live in and cold climate blowing across the globe. One version of the last 20 years has seen too much focus on public spending and its allocation to interest groups who know how to lobby and are embedded in the system: education and health particularly. Devolution was never a radical project in Scotland, but instead about those who already had influence maintaining it.

It is also salutary to note that over the long campaign of the indyref there were endless debates in pubs, clubs and town halls about the Scotland of the future, and whether we could be a bit more Nordic or a better social democracy, and yet very little of this seems to have left a legacy which has percolated into conventional politics. Maybe it will over time, but it almost feels as if the SNP is presiding, after a referendum they initiated, over a return to business-as-usual politics.

Today, across the political spectrum – SNP, Tories, Labour, Lib Dems, even the Scottish Greens – there is silence where there should be vision, energy and ideas about our future. How can this strange state of affairs be explained? The parliament came about with enormous public support and goodwill, but little time was spent on what it should actually do.

Devolution, in the dominant story of the parliament, has been a political class set of processes. The SNP version of independence, for all the 2014 rhetoric, has been about normalising Scotland and 'the full powers of a parliament' – a narrow political class notion of change.

What has been absent has been the idea of seeing and using the parliament as a catalyst for wider societal and cultural change, facilitating others and aiding the democratisation and empowerment of others, whether individuals, communities or society. Such a bold vision would require that politicians and the political centre has the courage to let go, experiment, encourage risks and even allow for occasional failure.

This is the vision that Scotland should be looking to post-devolution and post-Brexit, irrespective of whether we end up formally independent: a country which embraces and practices self-government not just in the hands of its politicians, but in its people. It would require not just moving past the current idea of 'devolution', but the SNP's idea of 'independence'.

TRAVEL

Chinatown

Neil McFadyean

1995

Beijing, literally the 'Northern Capital', formerly the home to what the West perceived to be both the Red Menace and the Yellow Peril, and now the heart of a rapidly changing, dynamic and potentially awesome economic superpower, lay bathed in a pleasant autumnal sun. The red walls and yellow painted roof of the Forbidden City appeared from behind an orderly row of trees and as I twisted my head to the right I could see the famous features of the late Chairman Mao directly below the Tiananmen gate. Everything appeared as it had been portrayed on numerous paintings, postcards and BBC broadcasts with one small addition: about half a million extras.

Naive I was not. I knew all about China's population problems and the time I had spent in the country had convinced me that for China, a sudden loss of perhaps two or three million people could only be in the nation's interest. However, my decision to come to Tiananmen Square now appeared ill-advised. More than a few of Beijing's citizens had decided to spend Sunday morning in the same way and for the last half mile or so my feet had hardly touched the ground. I was thus spending Sunday seeing the sights that the three or four thousand locals immediately around me fancied taking in. Elbows dug into my midriff, hands stretched out from all directions, and as the ruck moved ever onwards, children lucky enough to have reached the safety of parental shoulders peered down at my reddening face. I knew what they were thinking. I was thinking much the same:

'What the hell is a foreigner doing here?'

Teaching was the short answer. Wrestling with the food, language, culture and chaotic traffic system came not far behind. I had been enticed to China by a woman who had promised me respectful, hard-working students, rewarding co-operation with my Chinese colleagues and a keener understanding of China as it leapt towards the 21st century. It all seemed rather exotic and idyllic; something a 20-something Glaswegian male should endeavour to experience. Yet as one more well-padded elbow sought out my solar plexus, I had to confess to some serious second thoughts.

My home was on the fourth floor of the school dormitory, a monument to Chinese socialist realism. Grey was the dominant colour (grey was the *only* colour) interspersed with flaking plaster and the odd wall poster extolling the virtues of 'Silence', 'Cleanliness' and 'Respect for our Teachers'. Austere it may have been, but as a foreign teacher I was in many ways sheltered from the harsh realities of everyday life in the dormitory. The students shared eight to a room; I shared a two-bedroom apartment with a fellow traveller from San Francisco. The students had one lavatory and shower room among, perhaps, 250 ('lavatory' and 'shower room' being used here in the loosest sense as, so far as I could make out, the

toilet consisted of five small holes in the concrete floor while the shower was a hose tied to the wall). I had the luxury of a standard-design, fully-flushing, Western-style lavatory and a relatively proficient gas-heated shower.

Such 'private facilities' cushioned the initial culture shock, but my main concern was the fact that there was only one small entrance to the building, which also doubled as the exit (emergency or otherwise). I was even more distressed to learn that the 'keeper' of the dormitory, a permanently angry individual named Mr Zu, locked the dormitory from the inside every evening at 10 o'clock. No doubt the key was then tucked neatly under his pillow until six the next morning when the doors were reopened.

This was clearly a disaster waiting to happen. There were more than 500 people in the building and not one of them, apparently, had ever come across the words 'fire' or 'escape'. I had already checked the supply of spare bed sheets in the room and their potential for withstanding 12 stones of weight when tied together, by the time I summoned the courage to confront Mr Zu.

I presented my concerns in what I thought was a sensible and respectful manner. I smiled sweetly and assured him that I did not wish to make trouble but that surely it was in everybody's interests to tighten up the safety procedures in the dormitory. Mr Zu listened without interruption. I waited for a response. He nodded slowly. The nodding gave way to a toothy grin which was the prelude to an enthusiastic clearing of the throat. He threw his head back and deposited a large lump of saliva on the floor directly in front of me. Fixing me with a well-practised glare, Mr Zu shuffled towards me: 'Mr Neil, if you want fire escape then there is hotel very near'. He nodded in the direction of the window. Without waiting for my response, he extended a large hand and rested it on my shoulder as he ushered me to the door and gently pushed me into the corridor.

Teaching seemed to be free of any threats to personal safety. I had been asked to teach oral English to students from both the junior and senior school. The classes were much larger than in your average Scottish secondary – 50 to 55 pupils per class – but there were few disciplinary problems and most were eager learners. Their perceptions of Scotland were either non-existent or amalgams of the many cultural stereotypes that prevail worldwide. I fielded with ease the accusations that all Scotsmen wore kilts, and refuted the claim that whisky was all we drank. They had never heard of Irn Bru. My only moment of hesitancy came when one 14-year-old asked if it was true that all Scottish students liked to smoke drugs. My Chinese colleague eyed me nervously from the back of the class. Drugs, I emphasised, were bad and certainly no students I knew would ever touch them. The class blinked collectively. They seemed disappointed.

As a teacher, my only real problems were with one of the senior classes I taught on a Friday afternoon. Nearly every class I taught had an even split between boys and girls, and more often than not the girls were the more active and harder workers. But Class 4 was all-male and did not seem too impressed with their foreign guest. Jokes, smiles, games and even my pathetic attempts at utilising beginners' Chinese did nothing to improve the class

atmosphere. They were all leather jackets, spiky hair and bad attitude. I pleaded with the class teacher for inspiration. Surely there was something I could do to stimulate their interest in the joys of the English language. My colleague looked at me with a mixture of pity and despair: 'Mr Neil, you are a boy. They do not like boys, they like beautiful women'.

Mealtimes, too, required cultural readjustment. My hosts were more than generous in providing me with three meals a day free of charge. This was no small concession. For the duration of my stay I was living on a modest teacher's salary and could ill afford the bastions of American cultural imperialism which were springing up all over the city. Anyway, I wanted to live the life of the average Beijinger.

Within a day or two, it was clear that three meals a day would have to be reduced to two. Breakfast was served at 6am and, I was reliably informed, consisted of rice, steamed bread and pickled veg. My desire to experience Beijing life at the cutting edge evaporated and an extra half hour in bed seemed preferable to chronic indigestion. Lunch and dinner were easier on a sensitive, occidental stomach and, in the warmer months at least, were often delicious. The main difficulty was in discovering what it was that you were shovelling into your mouth. The menu, naturally, was a collection of scrawled Chinese characters and, as my literacy stretched to six characters, there was little danger of deciphering the code. So it became common practice for me to march into the kitchen and inspect the vats of food.

The kitchen staff were remarkably tolerant of the daily intrusions and patiently followed me round. Every day the pantomime reached its predictable conclusion: I would point at the least dangerous looking food and ask in my best Beijing dialect: 'What is this?' And every time, the response would be: 'Very good, very good, Mr Neil. Chinese food very tasty.' There would then follow, in heavily accented Mandarin Chinese, a detailed description of the origin and preparation of the dish and my plate would be piled high. I rarely knew what I was eating.

As the school had no dining facilities, I often ate in the privacy of my own room, which enabled me to dispose of unwanted food without offending the kitchen staff. The longer I lived in China, the more I became aware of the important role that food plays in Chinese culture. The Chinese are intensely proud of their cuisine (rightly so) and take every opportunity to introduce you to new and more exotic delights while reminding you that there is no better culinary experience than the Chinese one. I was therefore painfully aware that pushing large spoonfuls of spicy beancurd and Chinese cabbage into the rubbish bin would not make me flavour of the month with friends and colleagues. At the same time, it became obvious that the school menu worked to a strict rota that saw the same dishes reappearing week in, week out. I decided to extend my horizons, and inspect the local restaurants.

This turned out to be the right decision. It opened up the whole gamut of everyday, humdrum, warts-and-all Beijing life. I ventured outside the relative safety of the school walls and in turn Beijing and its people opened up to me.

As a foreigner in an area with few, if any, outsiders, I was the object of many inquisitive

glances and pointing fingers. One day, to avoid prolonged exposure to these 'stare squads', I stumbled into a small restaurant only minutes from the school and tried to look as casual as I could. Not one of the other customers looked up from their steaming bowls of rice or noodles and, remarkably, it took a couple of minutes to attract the attention of the waiter. This felt like my sort of place, particularly when the 'patron' and his staff appeared to take a shine to me. I was introduced to three generations of the owner's family, most of the customers, and the chef, who gave me a guided tour of the kitchen. The wife of the owner then insisted I visit them for Sunday lunch. Overawed by generosity, I realised that there was no question of my hosts accepting payment for any of the incredible dishes which kept coming from the tiny kitchen. But it was politely hinted by the patron that I might consider giving his daughter some basic English lessons on a Sunday morning.

The deal was formally struck over a glass of rice wine which turned into several dozen more. Two hours later, I was helped over the, by now locked, school gates by one of the waiters and made my way towards the dorm. Of course the doors were locked, but the rice wine had given me unexpected reserves of bravado: I banged. A couple of choruses of *Flower of Scotland* later, the doors swung open and Mr Zu appeared, keys in hand and just a little antagonised. I lurched towards him as if to embrace an old friend, but some nifty footwork on his part resulted in a face full of plaster for me. The doors banged shut, the key turned in the lock, and the unmistakable sound of Mr Zu clearing his throat convinced me that it was time for bed.

Similar experiences were repeated many times during the following months. The restaurant became my second home, the owner and his wife became surrogate parents, the customers became Chinese language tutors, and Beijing became less exotic, less alien and more like home. As my language skills improved, so the culture became more penetrable and the line between the oriental and the occidental was often blurred. My students continued to work hard, the kitchen served the same dishes on the same days and Class 4 refused to warm to me.

A degree of normality, unimaginable when I first arrived, settled over my life and Beijing, with its chaotic crowds, was a comfortable place to live. By the end, I was a committed Sinophile. Even Mr Zu seemed to find a place in his heart for me. He still locked the doors at 10 o'clock sharp, laughed off my demands for better safety precautions, and cleared his throat with undisguised gusto. But we grew to understand each other a little better, just as I grew to understand China a little better.

A Scot abroad

Tom Hubbard

1996

January 1993

As our airport bus reaches Grenoble, the Aberdeen student wishes me 'Bon courage!' She's one of many young foreign arrivals who face this new year with a *mélange* of calm and bounce. No language problems for them. Aren't they the real 'New Europe', rather than the politicians' sloganising? I wonder. In the eastern reaches of these mountains which now surround us, there rages the most vicious European conflict since 1945. Sarajevo, like Grenoble, once hosted the Winter Olympics.

We disperse. The students head for the city tram stop. I'm here for six months as a lecturer; already I feel an estrangement from the home country. However, it's a Scot, Keith Dixon, who greets me at the bus station, and he's arranged for me to conduct postgraduate seminars in Scottish literature and culture. He takes me across the square to an Indochinese restaurant.

He's been in France for 20-odd years, taught at various universities. Now and then he goes back to recharge his 'Scotticité', see his folks, fish at Loch Leven. His wife and daughters are French, as he has become. He's of working-class Edinburgh origin, politically combative, conspiratorially witty; Parisian confrontations have acquainted him with the ungente custody of the *flics*. He was expelled from the French Communist Party for 'lack of discipline'. At Grenoble, he's a specialist in 20th-century Scottish fiction and politics; his colleague, Pierre Morère, tackles the Enlightenment and its aftermath. So my own interests, spanning the years 1871 to 1914, will fit neatly into the syllabus.

I ask Keith why he left Edinburgh. 'Because of the contradictions.' Robert Louis Stevenson remarked that if you look over posh South Bridge to the Cowgate below, you could 'view one rank of society from another in the twinkling of an eye'. For me, the 'contradictions' are as much cultural as sociological, and involve the city's hinterland. Working in Edinburgh and living in Fife, I found that the Forth Bridge, not South, was the point at which I felt culture shock.

February-March 1993

My flat is in Meylan, now a suburb of Grenoble. A Sunday stroll becomes a climb, through the original village, up farm roads and woods until you reach the bare rock. You can leave one weather for another: in winter, you can lie on a grassy slope, stripped to the waist, and look down at the cold, polluted reek of the city; more 'contradictions'.

Only a few minutes walk from the flat, I pass a memorial to Resistance fighters (on the site of their execution) and then the house where Berlioz, aged 12, fell in love with a girl of

18. In the heart of old Grenoble is the birthplace of Stendhal. Composer and novelist were variously close to French Romanticism, which (as elsewhere in Europe) had made a guru of Sir Walter Scott. Berlioz took the *cor anglais* theme from his *Rob Roy* overture and redeployed it for viola in his second symphony, *Harold in Italy*: a curious, if unintended, symbol of the mutuality of north and south.

Keith has introduced me to my office-mate, Dominique Delmaire. He's a Scotophile, more precisely an Orcadophile; a friend of George Mackay Brown, on whom he's writing a thesis. In his home town, Gap, he runs a writers' and performers' group called Les Alpes Vagabondes. They want to present a spectacle on the theme of the alchemists' four elements: could I contribute? Again, there's a confluence of my own and colleagues' plans, for I've just been researching a possible *Scottish Faust* project; my archetype is Michael Scot, historical polymath and legendary wizard of the Middle Ages. He originated in the Borders or, less plausibly, Fife. Chauvinistically, I opt for the latter. Dominique and I discuss text, translation, masks, costumes and props for what is to become *La tentation de Michael Scot*.

At my desk in Meylan, between the massif of the Grande Chartreuse and the mountain chain of Belledonne, I find my raw material in Michael's 'birthplace', Balwearie Tower, now a bleak ruin a mile from my Kirkcaldy home. This isn't culture shock, it's culture stock: sampling it, adding to it.

My Michael is a provincial Scot who builds a scholarly reputation in Paris and Bologna, translates Arabic alchemical texts in Toledo, then returns to Scotland where he is denounced for heresy and imprisoned. After many years, he escapes and bitterly resolves to make up for lost time by entering a pact with the devil. In the traditional way, he's redeemed by love, but his young wife dies in giving birth to a girl. Perpetual seeker of the philosopher's stone, Michael enters a church bareheaded and a stone finds him; it falls from the roof and strikes him on the temple. He dies in the arms of his daughter, who represents a future which will consolidate and refine his scientific legacy.

Our Scoto-French *spectacle* is scheduled for March, in the foyer of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Gap. At Dominique's behest, I've sculpted a plaster object which is supposed to be an alchemist's stone. As the poem unfolds, performed in English and over-head-projected in French, the 'stone' reposes on straw, in a basket. At the end, it's plucked from the straw and turned towards the audience, who now recognise it as a skull.

All along, source material has included images as well as texts. A painting by the 19th-century artist Fantin-Latour, a native of Grenoble, depicts Faust's famous vision of Helen of Troy; this is transmuted into one of the delights conjured up by Auld Nick for our Michael. 'The ripe young empress in the haze', in my text, becomes Dominique's much sexier *La jeune et mûre impératrice des brumes*.

Whatever Michael Scot's future, the French present is much less alluring. It's election time, and the far right fare better than expected: temptation by old devils in new masks.

April 1993

My wife and daughter have come out for Easter, and we all cram into my flat. My family always tease me that Claire, our youngest, is my favourite, but I've been missing what remains of her babyhood. Over these months I've drunk coffee at the Place Sainte-Claire, not just because it is a photogenic part of town, but because it bears the name of my even more photogenic daughter. Now she herself, with her mum, meets me after work in that same square. It's a fine spring day and I show off the old town to my womenfolk; we arrive at Place Félix Poulat where Claire makes straight for the carousel. In my wanderings I've noticed that many European towns have their own carousel, painted with local scenes. Rilke has a wonderful poem about the one in the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris – 'And now and then, all white, an elephant'. That line, like the carousel elephant, is recurrent – with the counterpoint that each kid, sometime, will outgrow such pleasures.

We are an international collection, myself and my neighbours in the Résidence Lafayette. Portuguese, Spaniards, Canadians, Americans, Germans, a Scot (me) on two floors. A third floor is entirely Polish. We're all teachers or students, or both. A Pole accompanies me on the bus to the campus: we converse in the host language.

May-June 1993

It's still barely believable. I've had the chance to teach my favourite period in Scottish studies, and been paid decent money for it. No way could that have happened in Scotland. I head for an academic conference in Perpignan. My presentation is on Scottish artists in the Mediterranean: Crawhall, Melville and McBey in North Africa, the Colourists in Cézanne country, and the last years of Charles Rennie Mackintosh on the coast near Perpignan itself. I refer to Stevenson and Cunninghame Graham as their literary counterparts, wandering Scots who heeded the call of the south.

In 1893, RLS referred to his own 'voluntary exile'; in 1993, I am wary of the phrase – isn't 'exile' always compulsory? Preparing my talk has made me think of my own reasons for working abroad. These artists and writers left home out of mingled necessity and choice. In my own case, it's not easy to separate the two. A healthier bank balance, professional fulfilment, experience of other cultures. To the genuine exile, these are luxuries. Whatever the constraints of Scotland, it's not Bosnia.

I'm fascinated by the varieties of European experience. In the art gallery at Nice, I face the self-portrait, painted shortly before her death, of Marie Bashkirtseff. It's dated 1884; she was only 26. A Ukrainian-born aristocrat whose family had settled on the Côte d'Azur, she outgrew the pampered posing of her adolescence and was desperate to prove herself as a dedicated and industrious artist. A Paris studio witnessed the long hours of a short life. Not quite the poor, kerchiefed Slav of more recent times, but her 'contradictions' were painfully real, not the self-dramatising of a poor little rich girl, as I had once assumed. As a northerner who has encountered her in the south, I will read her journal to discover how she united (if at all) the tendencies of east and west.

My undergraduate classes have ended, and I'll be leaving Grenoble for good. The first-year course took place in large, ill-lit amphithéâtres, during the last period of the day. I was lecturing, in English, to young French folk: I had to play it for laughs, poetry spectacle had taught me how to maximise the use of space. Beside the platform, there was a door in the wall; we had no idea what lay behind it, so it became a useful prop while explicating the mysteries of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

July-September 1993

Interregnum in Scotland, unexpectedly brief. I've been offered a year's contract at the University of Connecticut. We take a last family outing, to Dunfermline Glen. Sons Christopher and Gavin accompany me to the ruins of Malcolm's tower. I love to stand up there and hear the chimes from the Abbey. 'Isn't it great, dad,' says Christopher. 'This place is hundreds of years old, and we can walk through it and touch it.'

The next day is my first in the New World. The Jewish writer Abraham Cahan, arriving in America, saw a dilapidated building and marvelled: 'How did it get time to get old?' That was in 1882. Now, heading north from JFK, I'm aware of the forest on either side of the highway; my first digs will be within walking distance of the Nipmuck trail, blazed by the ancient indigenous nation of north-eastern Connecticut. The very name 'Connecticut' derives from a native word, referring to the wide river which divides the state in two. I'm wondering how America got time to get new.

October-December 1993

There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones (MacDiarmid). In Connecticut, there is juxtaposition of the primeval, the prosperous, and the Puerto Rican; from the Caribbean island came the workers for the thread industry, but that has gone, leaving unemployment, drugs and decay. The campus is hosting a reading by the Nicaraguan poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal. I've long been an aficionado of his work. He speaks frankly of the successes and failures of the revolution in which he was a key player.

Henry James, who was more obsessive than most in contrasting America and Europe, remarked that 'it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature'. Well, to me there seems no shortage of American literature, which is just as well since it provides me with much of my *raison d'être*. I'm in Hartford, checking out Mark Twain's eccentrically-designed home. Here he wrote his major works, but he had to flit when he went broke. He, too, contrasted the two continents, but with little reverence for Europe and much apprehension for America. Personal tragedy caught up with him, as well as America's 'contradictions' – not least between its decorous pretensions and its crude realities.

Y'all starin at this here shack o mine?

It's a-spoutin an a-spillin o hot vermilion bricks

Likes I wuz gittin mad at folks, or busting maself cryin

*My jokes in blood. But, enter! See, I can fix
 Them rooms real genteel. We had lit out for Eu-rope,
 Brought back the fancy stuff from Geneva – Edinboro –
 Livy an the galls sure had some cause to hope
 They'd sivilaaazed Sam Clemens kinda thorough.
 Still – sittin cozy – within the conservatory plants
 I sees a graveyard, bowie knife, injun dance;
 Armageddon from a dynamo's single spark.
 City kids are shootin up along the Avenue:
 An this shocked old clown lays by his billiard cue.
 Gazin down a microscope at the Great Dark.*

While teaching the American 'tall tale' in my short story course, I show slides of the Mark Twain house. A student tells me he lives just round the corner but has never visited it. Actually that neighbourhood is rich in American icons. Next door to Mark Twain lived Harriet Beecher Stowe: one of her walls bears a watercolour of Aberdeen's Brig o Balgownie. Katharine Hepburn was born a few houses along, and nearby was the abode of Noah Webster, compiler of the classic American dictionary. He was a real pro. His wife once caught him embracing the maid. 'Noah!' she exclaimed, 'I am surprised!' 'No, my dear,' he replied, 'I am surprised – *you* are astonished'.

I'm to address a colleague's class on Scots language. In the course of research, I'm amazed to encounter the Victorian Doric classic, *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*, on the shelves of the UConn library. Here's Scotland, less than a mile from the Nipmuck trail. Not so surreal, however: Gushetneuk and Nipmuck both concern the means by which the land is ill-divided. More surreal is my Thanksgiving break in Quebec: France, Scotland and North America, mosaically together. It sums up my 1993.

February-March 1994

A benign conspiracy by my Irish-American housemate, Jack Manning, and his office-mate Richard Peterson, who in infancy was emigrated from his native Ayr. We're all in the Faculty Renaissance Group, and it's Jack's and my turn to be the hosts. In our New England parlour, I'm to present not a Burns, but a Henryson Supper. After the Christmas break, I carry a haggis from Kirkcaldy, Fife, to Storrs, Conn, and its consumption accompanies my tribute to our greatest tragic poet and sometime schoolmaster of Dunfermline Abbey.

Another faculty colleague, Marilyn Waniek, is an Afro-American poet who works with jazz musicians. We meet up in the Cafe Earth off Route 195, and compare notes on the status of Scots and Black English. I've included Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932) on the short story course. He was a pioneering black writer who transcribed the speech of his ex-slave characters; like printed Scots, it looks confusing until you read it aloud. We shouldn't overstress such identifications. The South's Scottish legacy hasn't been considered

altogether benign: the cult of medievalism, derived from Walter Scott; slave-owners from the old country.

Farewell to students. Jack and I receive a last invitation to the sorority Phi Beta Kappa. The young women are trim and polite: they serve tea and home baking. You feel they should all be called Harriet or Abigail. They're extremely strict on membership: to get into Phi Beta Kappa, a girl must have an excellent GPA (Grade Point Average). The walls are adorned with group photographs going back decades. It's a long way from my Grenoble encounter with an economics professor who was agonising which communist candidate to vote for, the official one, or the dissident.

A Philadelphia professor, passing through, informs me of the death of Labour leader John Smith. It occurred a fortnight ago.

January 1996

It was difficult returning to Scotland for the foreseeable future. I experienced not so much culture shock as culture block. Successive relocations had left me with a sense of possible permanent dislocation. If I felt like that, though, how must it be for the Turkish migrant or the Bosnian refugee? Such comparisons seem ludicrous, but they do help you empathise with what you will never have to experience.

Now, all at once, come confirmations of new postings. In August, I begin two years on the literature and language faculty of the University of North Carolina at Asheville, a centre of Scots and Scots-Irish settlement. Before I leave for a week's lecture tour of northern Italy, I learned that the British Council will back me for a month's work at Budapest University's English Department, in the spring. I'll be teaching an expanded and intensive version of the Scottish course which I'd presented as a one-off at Grenoble.

In Italy, I speak on Robert Louis Stevenson, a northerner who settled permanently as far south as it was possible to go. Before flying back, I stop off at Campione, on the eastern shore of Lake Lugano. It's a detached piece of Italy entirely surrounded by Switzerland. Entering the town through an unguarded frontier that is difficult to take seriously, I visited the first building. This is the church of the Madonna dei Ghirli, its terraced garden descending to the lake. Storms are not unknown in this region, but the boats look so flimsy. Inside the church there's a book where visitors inscribe prayers, requesting the Mother of God to protect them and their families. I turn over the pages and, despite all my suspicions of organised religion, I am strangely moved. Outside, the Alps recall Grenoble, three years ago.

Travel makes you aware of your strength and vulnerability. RLS wrote of the strolling player 'who has gone upon a pilgrimage that will last him his life long, because there is no end to it short of perfection'. The perfection's impossible, the insecurity inevitable. My own secular pilgrimage seems more endless, more recurrent, than the childhood carousel. Daughter Claire has asked me if there's a carousel in Budapest. In fact, the English Department flanks the City Park where Ferenc Molnar set his play *Liliom*, about a

fairground barker who mans the merry-go-round. The political upheavals of the 1930s forced Molnar, a Jew, to settle in America. Rodgers and Hammerstein turned his play into the musical *Carousel*, and he received his ample share of the royalties. But he was no longer the boulevardier of Budapest, the inveterate ladies' man. He died in New York at the age of 74, rich but lonely. Exile, pilgrim, *bon courage*!

Not a surplus of amenity

William Hunter

1997

One full day and night in Motherwell sounds like the first prize in a raffle that for its second prize offered a whole weekend. Which is a hoary piece of impudence for a 24-hour intruder to start off with. But old jokes work well in Motherwell. At the winter show in the town's very own theatre they worked wondrously well. *Sleeping Beauty* was a two-hour romp of noise and hilarity, elegantly dressed. It was the happy kind of show where the stars introduce the audience to itself. Wishaw Brownies were in the house that night along with pensioners of Craigneuk Elderly Forum and Marks and Spencer staffers on an outing. A Craigneuk lady kept me going on sweeties. More were hurled from the stage. Every one of the 395 seats had an elated bottom on it, except when it was too exciting to sit. At the rough command of the pantomime's good fairy, called Ferr Enough, everybody, or nearly, rose to bellows a big blow of air that, by magic, changed the scenery. Six local schoolgirls hoofed like troupers with the cast. For a couple of hours we were all the same age. Only the jokes were good and old.

The pantomime's king, a purply disguised Dave Anderson, all plummy ham and opulent with thespian business, explained that he had not always been a king. 'I used to be a tap dancer, but I kept falling in the sink,' he said. He confessed that the first time he kissed his voluptuous (un-anorexic, that is) Queen Diana he got a lump in his throat because she was eating a picked onion at the time. Such whimsies dwindle when transferred to print. At the time they lost nothing in the telling. Like Dave Anderson, most of the namely performers were television faces. There was Lesley Fitzsimons as a gorgeously frightening witch. There was the bauchly Ferr Enough of Nicola Park, uttering optimistic nonsense in gallus rhyme with a dirty laugh rasping enough to remove rust. And there was Andy Cameron, the chief comic. But it was a Motherwell audience's own show in its own Motherwell theatre.

My earnest purpose after a long Motherwell day was to garner local references and sociological morsels as to how the town stands and what it may deliver to a tourist seeker of entertainment. Like everywhere else, however improbable, Motherwell wants to be visited.

Kingly Dave Anderson may have obliged. He declared waggishly: 'There is many a joke in Motherwell that they don't laugh at in London. D'you know why? 'Cos they cannie hear it'. In an oh-so-serious note blindly scribbled in the dark, I seem to have wondered whether there was a hint that Motherwellians (can they really call themselves that?) feel faraway and forgotten people, ho hum. Andy Cameron dived straight in, no messing, when as the court jester he heartbreakingly plighted his troth to the beautiful princess. He promised to love, honour, obey and buy her a big hoose in Steps. When the princess was bewitched into a year's long sleep, she had to lie (the court clown narrated) in Forgewood Castle. That got

one of the louder, more knowing laughs of the evening. A baffled outsider was left to assume that Forgewood is a less than enchanted glade of habitation in the area.

Local government – the owners of the theatre and of the concert hall next door – received its lumps. Its councillors have been accused of a lust for travel. Municipal responsibilities have, while, moved them to undertake fact-finding missions anent water supply, sewerage improvements and the creation of tropical swimming baths, which they believe are best studied in some of the world's more exotic locations. Andy Cameron explained the absence of civic dignitaries from the script of *Sleeping Beauty* by revealing that they were away on duty from their loved ones to study pineapple farming in Hawaii. In a glum note I appear to have pondered whether as an allegory for Motherwell it was about half right to use the words sleeping and beauty. Until the bright lights of the night life it had been a busy little day.

I had arrived by train. Railways were the midwife of industrial Motherwell. It was rich born. Coal, ironstone, fireclay for bricks, sand for moulding and plenty of wood, all that good stuff, were there. Then (at the start of last century) and now the bleat was the same. Somebody else's money was needed to create a new Jerusalem. Now, for an industrial good fairy, horizons are scanned in the direction of Taiwan; then, the magic wand was held by the iron masters of Coatbridge and Coltness and Glasgow. Motherwell landlords energetically sought what has come to be called inward investment. They hoped not to let the grass grow under their feet where they could dig dirty great holes in the ground instead, But nobody came until the trains did.

Modern carpetbaggers have a choice about where to haul in the luggage of their preconceptions about the place. There is Airbles Station. Alight (lovely railway word), platform boards proclaim, for Motherwell College and for Motherwell Football Club – two resorts to tick off on any serious tourist's itinerary. The main station is a low-level cave that appears to have been constructed a bit at a time, its builders ad libbing between trains. An inscrutable billboard announces Green Gateway. A poster loco bursts through some sort of luxuriant floral beauty that might be a daffodil. It is not clear whether the gate to greenness lies ahead of the new arrival or of train pilgrims who are getting the hell out.

Norman Turner, who is North Lanarkshire Council's director of leisure services, had suggested that the first place to go might be the town library. Visitor enquiries were welcomed there. He promised that the library's cafe provides the best cappuccino in the west of Scotland. He may have said the Western world. Imperishably in stone, the library entrance carries the message, 'Let There Be Light'. It was what this benighted traveller needed...

I was not so bemused, however, as to fail to notice across the road, and near enough to what's left of the town cross, a relic of former municipal grandeur and of local pride of yore. What once upon a time was Motherwell town hall has had a partial change of use and a fairly complete decline of dignity into a snooker room and an Irish pub called Biddy Mulligan's. Here is the kind of stray observation that occupies much bulk in the note-taking

of a pert outsider. Is it a carefree, candid indication of popular philistine enthusiasm?, he asks himself. Is it more? Does it show a sturdy reluctance to be awed by the lumpy weight of parochial tradition? Maybe it says as much about Motherwell as anything found in a library book.

The most enduring modern book of travel in Scotland started in old Lanarkshire. Edwin Muir, poet, novelist and teacher, was so impressed and depressed by what he saw there in 1934 he decided to make his *Scottish Journey*. He started in Edinburgh and finished idyllically on Orkney. Around Motherwell, though, he had found the impetus for his odyssey. He wrote:

The first thought of writing this book came to me two years ago after I had driven through the mining districts of Lanarkshire. The journey took me through Hamilton, Airdrie and Motherwell. It was a warm, overcast summer day; groups of idle, sullen-looking young men stood at the street corners; small groups were wandering on the blue-black ranges of pit-dumps which in that region are the substitute for nature; the houses looked empty and unemployed like their tenants; and the road along which the car stumbled was pitted and rent, as if it had recently been under shell-fire. Everything had the look of a Sunday which had lasted for many years during which the bells had forgotten to ring and the Salvation Army with its accordions and concertinas, had gone into seclusion, so that one did not even trouble to put on one's best clothes: a disused, slovenly, everlasting Sunday... Airdrie and Motherwell are the most improbable places imaginable in which to be left with nothing to do, for only rough work could reconcile anyone to living in them.

Strangely, himself with nothing to do but write a book, when he made his learned ride through the land, he gave Motherwell the body swerve. His slippered footsteps took him instead to Carfin Grotto, the shrine on the lines of the grotto at Lourdes completed in 1922 by the voluntary labour of miners and railwaymen. Perhaps Motherwell's grotteness clotted his quill. For whatever reason, he passed by, leaving local writers to cover the ground he declined to tread.

To hand in the library bookshop came *Motherwell Post War*, one of three chronicles by Jean Stirling, a former teacher sometimes called Mrs Motherwell, although not in her hearing. Since light skimming may be forgiven in a one-night, know-all tourist, I have torn from her bookie a quote from a reader's letter (in 1945) to the local paper. It protested against the work of early graffiti writers and wall daubers of whitewash political slogans. The letter-writer suggested the town could do without them. As he tartly observed: *There is not a surplus of amenity at any time*. It read like the plain, mild, humorous, honest, wry, quick mouthful of a holiday postcard message from Motherwell for all time.

Also from the library bookshop, and heavier to hold, came *Steelopolis*, a scholarly excursion by Robert Duncan into the making of Motherwell. A tutor organiser for the

Workers' Educational Association, Robert Duncan, has an unquenchable enthusiasm for everyday detail that was basic. One item that leapt to the eye concerned his statistical curiosity about how many residents of Watsonville, a settlement of miners' cottages, shared one dry lavvy. He reckoned it was 50 inhabitants per privy.

I promised myself a go at both books for bedside reading. For going on with, I supposed I'd better get out onto the cold streets and off a comfy library seat. Rough work (as old Muir said) was the thing. But, yes, the coffee, smilingly served, was as good as Norman Turner had promised.

For lumpier nourishment beckoned a decent, wood-panelled tavern, smoke-filled and aromatic with frying smells. Skimpy, lurid paintings of ancient locomotives (old Motherwell-built tramcars) were still adorned with frilly Xmas ribbons. There was no rice or potatoes, the young waitress said, but there could be chips with everything she had. She confided that the steak pie was smashing, and it was. Taking the order, and to rest her ankles, she alighted on the seat across the table. She made Motherwell feel homely, like going to have your tea at your auntie's house. Folk at the next table volunteered how cold it was and wasn't there a terrible lot of flu about.

Nobody ever said anything worth overhearing in a pub. Still, it seemed a part of a fact-finding, investigative day-tripper's duty to pry. Two topics caught the ear. A couple of sisters, they looked like, talked brightly about swimming. They had a friend with three daughters, one of whom swam not at all. The discussion concerned which of the two other girls swam better. At the time it seemed like a sun-kissed debate for a freezing day. Later, I was to understand a little more. What I also learned by eavesdropping was Motherwell's other way to identify a person. Talking in a small town about a vague acquaintance, people will say where he lives, whom he is married on to, which pub he drinks in. An extra tag in a Motherwell pub was to add how long unemployed. 'No, he hasn't worked for two years' was overheard many times. (Well, three times: it seemed a lot.)

For a pudding, I grazed on the *Motherwell Times* and the *Bellshill Speaker*, which had been displayed almost furtively at the railway station. *Bellshill Speaker* could be about the most resonant title in world journalism. Really, however, it was the Motherwell paper by another name. Except for their front pages, both sheets were the same. Identically, they shared a district news section which included tidings that vandals in Newarthill had thrown bricks at a bus, whereas windows which vandals in New Stevenston had targeted were a primary school's. Pensioners at Hattonrigg had been entertained by a guitarist and singer called Dr John Reid. He is otherwise their Member of Parliament.

Like its stablemate, and ringer, the *Speaker* filled its centre pages with a review of the year that was awa', cropping 1996 into neat stooks of snappy paragraphs, allowing me to cherrypick the old calendar for tourist titbits (and to mix metaphors).

In April, the opening of a theme park in Strathclyde Park had 'caused traffic chaos for miles around as 125,000 visited it on the opening weekend'. The theme park, a whizzo electronic showground, cost £12m. A July paragraph added that the operators, M & D

Leisure, announced extension plans to cost a further £6m. In their first three months, the M & D shows and roundabouts had half a million visitors. More than 60,000 fans packed into Strathclyde Park in July for a two-day T in the Park pop festival. Other holiday feasts included a fancy dress parade through Motherwell for the opening in November of a £4m heritage centre. Even more spectacular was the summer's day demolition of the cooling towers and gas holders of the former Ravenscraig steelworks. In July, 700 visitors had been attracted to the first day of a pilgrimage centre at Carfin Grotto, suggesting that Edwin Muir did not err in his lengthy diversion to the shrine. Whither I decided unwisely to wander was to Strathclyde Park, where summer tourists teem for their playtime and pop. Where young families frolicked on frozen paths, your elderly explorer fell down.

A conceit of one-day investigators is that they can soak up the essence of a place readily and as if by osmosis. Absorbing them through the bahookie is a sorer trick. So let me just say that Strathclyde Park is a very fine park but beware of sitting down in it suddenly. For winter perusal there are abundantly colourful travel brochures which extol its sporting life. On its 1,650 acres (200 acres of them a man-made loch), fun seekers walk, windsurf, water ski and watch birds or the world go by. Ice-breaking adventures persist through winter time. And while at international regattas famous salts flog the water of the loch, for even the sedatest of local people it is like having their own vast private estate at the foot of the town.

Motherwell takes relaxed pride in its historic parks – Duchess, Calder, Clyde, Shields Glen. Most hallowed turf, however, is Fir Park, home of its football team. Famously, they sport strips of amber and claret, originally the racing colours of the lairdy family who owned the ground. Not always has the football story been so colourful. Great modern park, pity about the present team. Diehard loyalists persist in calling them the Steelmen, a bleak anachronism. Most fans settle for shouting 'Up the 'Well'. But there are mutterings also of Dossers, a harshly fond nickname for heroes who have had the habit of dozing off for years like the pantomime's sleeping beauty. It can seem like another age since the Dossers' extravaganza display to win the Scottish Cup, although that last triumph was only in 1991. My visit was not best-times. On the previous weekend the 'Well had been defeated, demolished, robbed and otherwise gubbed in Edinburgh by Hearts.

At the best of times, an empty football park is not the cheeriest place. Without a crowd and the mob fragrance of pies and furtive cigarette smoke, a collective whiff of beer, a football shrine is an abandoned corrugated-iron auction mart with a trim, deserted pasture behind the shed. At Fir Park the safer ground is to stay in the past. Fame studs the Steelmen's story – especially the symbiotic left-wing of Bob Ferrier and Gentleman George Stevenson. In Motherwell it would be a *left-wing*. And once upon a time there was the wisdom of John Hunter, called Sailor Hunter because of his rolling gait, manager for 35 years and the wiles of Ian St John, Joe McBride, Willie Hunter (strange name for a star). Above all, strode Andy Paton, centre-half of renown, defensive maestro, ball wizard.

Motherwell's traditional emphasis on artistry has always seemed strangely placed. Yet

balletic grace in a rough old game became the sophisticated taste of groundlings who were raucous pitmen, gnarled steelworkers, rude railwaymen. How come? In his matey office, after he had tried to talk away the lingering pain of the cuffing by Hearts, John Swinburne, commercial manager and club historian, explained that the town had looked to the team to bring dreams to drab working lives. 'I remember asking Andy Paton much the same question you have asked me,' he said. 'Andy suggested the players used to see it as part of their job to add brightness, even beauty, for the sake of the supporters. They'd had another lousy week of work. Saturday afternoon was their brief time to breathe God's good air. The players felt they had an obligation to entertain', John Swinburne recalled.

At the new Motherwell Heritage Centre, the £4m masterpiece gazetted in the *Bellshill Speaker's* annual review, the leathern sphere has a thorough airing. Just about every ball the 'Well ever kicked seems to be computer-stored in the long, airy local archive room. In Motherwell, as in all coalfields, conventional philosophy held that sport mattered more than life and death. Lanarkshire colliers fancied whippets and raced pigeons. Quoits were big with them. Motherwell's own rarer obsession, echoing the two sisters in the lunchtime pub, was for swimming. By apt design the new museum towers on the site of the old burgh baths. 'For the swimming bath was in itself a heritage centre', Jean Stirling, the town diarist and former teacher, was to tell me later in the afternoon. Motherwell's baths were built in 1916. Before then, bathers used the Clyde when they couldn't bring themselves to go to Hamilton for a dip. Miners and steelmen went home via its tubs from work.

After the end of the Hitler war came an invigorating splash. Motherwell swimmers were Scottish champions and sometimes British ones as well. Seven contestants from the MAS and WPC – the famously cumbersome initials of Motherwell Amateur Swimming and Water Polo Club – were chosen for the London Olympics in 1948 – Margaret Girvan, Cathie Gibson, Jack Wardrop, Trevor Harrop, Forbes Gentleman, Ian Johnston, David Murray. Cathie Gibson won a bronze medal. All were protégés of the remarkable David Crabb, bathsmaster from 1935 to 1968, a dapper fellow who added a dash to town life roaring about in his two-tone MG car. He was an unemployed steelworker who became an acrobatic diver. Dare-Devil Davie would go into rivers off bridges and plunge into indoor pools from the rafters. His pioneering knack was to coach children to swim from an early age and keep them keen.

So the pleasure of Motherwell Heritage Centre is to portray a town story that was more than a clartily industrial and rough tale. Within its gleaming walls is a bright treasure-house of Lanarkshire life and a tricky electronic palace of the past. Historic figures magically appear on ceilings, walls speak, everyday darg is dramatised. There is a bijou bughut picture house. Old heavy industry is beaten into a shape suitable for the new leisure trade. But the grit of hard facts and the real dross of ordinary living are abundantly retained – Lanarkshire's enthusiasm for utopian dream communities; greed and good-heartedness; its strange ways with strong drink. Robert Duncan's *Steelopolis* reveals that in 1916 'Well's magistrates prohibited the sale of whisky in the burgh. Motherwell took its drouth by

tramcar to boundary dramshops until the publicans went to the law courts to get regular living back on the rails.

When Ravenscraig stopped making steel, the past formally shut down in Motherwell like the lid on a vault. Now the future town has been given visiting rights to its own youth. It has a one-door entrance to the many-roomed shack of its past. Holidaymakers are supposed to have a hunger for information. They get fed a diet of statistics – the height of cathedral spires, the thickness of castle walls, the dates of antique battles. It may not be so big a jump from holiday learning about the ecology of vineyards to wanting to know about dynasties of the dark ages of coal and steel. Motherwell Heritage Centre looks so new and exotic it might be a flying object that landed, unidentified from another planet. With its curved walls topped by a five-story tower, my crude eye saw it as belonging to the food-processor school of architecture.

Two wifies passing in the street gave it a glance. 'What's that, then?' one asked. 'Its the new place where you go to see the old places,' her pal replied. In a shapeless town, few other buildings catch the eye, apart from the library and the facade of the old town hall, or Biddy Mulligan's place.

Any philanthropy shown by the coalmasters and ironmasters has not been enshrined in architectural treasures. Were they that mean? It was a question I took to a gingerbread afternoon tea at the fireside of Mr and Mrs Motherwell – Jean Stirling, whose little book had become my holiday companion, and Robin Stirling, for 28 years editor of the *Motherwell Times*. Her diary chronicles the first modern tourists in 1948. They were such rare birds the paper interviewed them at length. She said: 'They were local people who had made good in America and came back to say hullo'. In his mild way he had to concede: 'Philanthropy? There was no philanthropy here from the bosses. They never put their hand in their pocket. Industry donated nothing'.

Public enterprise shapes Motherwell's leisure. Most of the fun and games have the taxpayers for a patron. They built the theatre and concert hall. Parkland pursuits were decreed by them. They created the pleasuredome called Aquatec, the warm swimming lagoon and disco ice-skating arena which has replaced David Crabb's spartan bathhouse academy. Out of the public purse has come the serious splendour of the heritage centre, but slowly. Motherwell has talked about having a museum for 50 years. 'It takes things time to happen here,' Jean Stirling said. All local books like hers have the imprint of the local authority. Motherwell can feel like the last socialist state outside Albania.

In his dressing room before bounding into pantomime action, Andy Cameron looked relaxed, as if he was only about to take a shower. 'Come away in,' he cried. 'What do you think I can tell you? Well, their kids are magical and marvellous and quick and knowledgeable, I can tell you that. Sometimes I think Motherwell feels like Paisley. Both have their own wee dialect. They've different ways of speaking and looking at the world. And they can take it. When I used to crack that closing the 'Craig would mean 3,000 nightshift workers wouldn't have a place to sleep, they liked that.'

Any place with a station called Airbles hints at a complex hinterland. Even the place names and bus destinations look hard to penetrate – Cleland, Craigneuk, Overtoun, Tannochside, Viewpark, Waterloo, never mind Gowkthrapple or West Grindledyke. When Motherwell and Wishaw were a joint burgh, Jean Stirling said, there was an idea to call it Wishwell. It was hard to tell if she was kidding. From the boom-time days of a frontier town a rough-and-ready way had to be found to handle the names of the frenzy of new people who caused an immigrant melting pot of Irish, Welsh, Spanish, Polish, English, Lithuanians. A Yousef Pestedejinksis soon found himself naturalised as Joe McCluskey because the pay clerk at the colliery office found it easier to handle. A one-day passport does not get around that lot, never mind the robust, neighbourly, private world of the surviving miners' welfare clubs.

When the bed of my B & B called, it was to the muckle former townhouse of one of the moneybags of unlamented memory. Although large and lofty enough to fly an eagle in, the hotel room was most hospitably warm but dark as a coal seam. Only one meek ceiling bulb dented the gloom. In such stately circumstances I was too overawed to ask for more light. So the bed got trundled across the salon for some dim reading in the twilight zone, causing a rumbling squeak that added to the haunted notion of being the only stranger in town. Sleep came with Robert Duncan's learned tome on the chest.

Morning brought illumination of one Motherwell thought, if that is what it may be. Its misfortune (this was the insight) is to be the wrong size in a wrong, although central, place. First, the town grew too big, too fast, decently to care for its people. Now, with the population down to 30,000, it will need to make much use of what muscle it has to elbow a place on the holiday map. Worse than its hard history is its luckless geography. Twelve miles from Glasgow is too near and not near enough – the city is too handy for grander entertainment and posher shopping. But by being closer to the keelies, Clydebank and Paisley have made a better fist of keeping an individual character of their own because they have always had to keep alert to dam the swimming influence of Glasgow.

A jolly breakfast was hearty enough to face a day of digging coal or stripping steel. Instead, I had a quick keek more at the heritage centre. At the foot of the museum tower, whose azure light so bravely brightens the night skyline, is enscrolled a list of district notables, which I had omitted to copy. Most favoured son is Sir Alexander Gibson, orchestra conductor and pianist (also, I learned from Jean Stirling's book, a clarinet player). Nancy Riach is there among the swimmers. Sporting heroes include Sir Matt Busby, Jimmy Johnstone, Alex James, boxer Chic Calderwood. There's Peggy Herbison, Mick McGahey, the Reverend William Barclay, Bill McCue and Andrew Keir. I cannot now recall if George Clarkson, the music hall comic, is mentioned. But the Alexander Brothers are there, Robert Wilson the tenor, folk poet Hamish Imlach. Sheena Easton comes from Bellshill... An overworked pen had run dry. It is a roll that should be completed on some other day. One visit to Motherwell Heritage Centre is enough only to enjoy the affection and efficiency which have gone into it. Even two long afternoons may not suffice. Besides, I never got to Biddy Mulligan's Irish hostelry.

Stone cold

Ian Mackenzie

1997

Recently I found in a friend's house the 1989 *Reader's Digest Driver's Atlas of the British Isles*. Each map had a folded extension describing principal features of its area. Turning to the north-east knuckle of Scotland, to what features was one's attention drawn? Zero. There was a reason, naturally: Orkney and Shetland had to be fitted on to the page, which put them just off Peterhead. But that wasn't a cause, it was a consequence. It derived from a long tradition of everything between Aberdeen and Elgin being written off as too dull to mention. Well, when your American college friend's daughter phones from Amsterdam to say she has two days in Scotland and what should she see, do you say Turriff? East of the Grampian mountains, that corner is simply taken not to have scenery.

I should be fair. In the gazetteer at the back of the atlas there was a reference to Pitmedden's garden and a couple of castles. But you'd never have guessed that this region has more castles than a chess tournament. Out of interest, I walked into Waterstones and looked at the 1996 *Fodor Guide to Scotland*. The index had no trace of Fraserburgh or Peterhead. So I made a resolution. I would revisit this scorned landscape; and to give a structure to the enterprise, I'd follow the route of one of its lost lines: a track ripped up in the wake of Dr Beeching's railway purge of the 1960s. That was a massacre about which as usual we grumbled, but in which as usual we were overcome. Owing to the north-east being deficient in approved scenery and retired generals, it was the region hardest hit.

To visit the north-east it is impossible to avoid the city of mica-glittering granite. But Aberdeen's attractions are not exhausted by silver spires and svelte boulevards. Central belters tend not to know that Old Aberdeen has a cathedral and university precinct which out-ambiences most of its rivals. By comparison, Edinburgh's Old Quad has the winsomeness of Alcatraz. And Gilbert Scott's gothic Gilmorehill surely yearns to serve as a Walt Disney set for Wagner's recently discovered early opera, *Die 100 Rottweilern*.

As for domestic architecture, if every Englishman's home is his castle, every Aberdonian's is a granite bungalow with two turrets and an award-winning rose garden. To linger in this sonsie city would be to load the dice against dullness. Yet there is nowhere else to begin. Uniquely among Scottish cities, Aberdeen is a provincial capital. Even after the oil revolution, regional life flows from it, towards it and through it.

But my project was to journey away from the city into the interior, to search for the heart of dullness. So which road to take? Obviously not the one to glamorous Deeside. Donside would also be a diversion. Not as green as Deeside, it also lacks the Royals and Lochnagar; but its main road, curving languorously with the Don, sports the odd overloaded capercaillie prancing your windscreen, while from roads on the high moors

you can see white hares in season leap like angels at a rave. Nothing dull about that.

Well, then, why not up the coast road to the Fodor-ignored Peterhead and Fraserburgh? Tempting. Swathes of bleak landscape promise a satisfactory dullness rating. But this coastline has marvels: some of the best beaches in Scotland; raunchy rock theatre climaxing in the salty orgasms of the Bullars of Buchan; the Ythan Estuary burbling with wildfowl, Bram Stoker's Slains Castle; Peterhead, a pink seaside town paved with black gold; and grey old Fraserburgh, endlessly winching a heaving North Sea into the Moray Firth. What more do you want of excitement? Yet dullness lurks. Even in summer, a thick haar can blanket the coastline for a week. Go inland to escape, and your eye will be drawn from one treeless field to the next and the one after that, until many fields later you come upon a visual event: on the horizon, a leafless tree bending before the wind.

As I swithered, the ghost of Dr Beeching nudged me. Grass grows now where once steam chuckled and whistled. Echoes of a lost civilisation called. On the afternoon of Thursday 19 December, I abandoned Christmas, Costa Clyde, and the Gulf Stream, and pointed the car bonnet at the Arctic.

You should know my ordnance: basically, a car and a bagful of carols. The car was to get me physically from A to B, the carols to get me there psychologically. I had just bought a second-hand car and this journey would be its first proper trial. Would we get on, or was this a match made in hell? The carols, on the other hand, were artefacts made in heaven, or at least in the antechamber to paradise that David Willcocks' reign at King's College Cambridge inaugurated. Since childhood, one of the solaces that has remained least tarnished has been the deep magic of Christmas carols. John Barbirolli wanted to die to the sound of Elgar's *Second Symphony*; Sydney Smith famously ordered up pate de fois gras and trumpets. I'd settle for a King's carol echoing away at my end. Striking now into the heart of north-eastern landscape allegedly bare, dull, and bereft of magic, I'd look to carols for emotional insurance.

The long-range forecast had warned of bitter cold and possible snow, but the day's forecast had relented: the north-east would be dry. Through the Carse of Stirling, up to Perth, along the Tay to Dundee, wintry showers blattered with prejudice. Dundee passed in a splash, Forfar, Brechin, Laurencekirk were blodges in the windscreen and then it was dry and we were dancing into the dusk with the holly and the ivy and sweet singing in the choir.

As the road soared above Stonehaven, I realised I hadn't before driven from Stirling to Aberdeen on non-stop dual carriageway. The ease of dual carriageway driving was disorientating; it was turning reality into virtual reality. Technology had domesticated space-time so that even in dirty weather one sat in an armchair passing cities like ships in the night or lights in the sky.

Then suddenly there was one hell of a light in the sky. Brilliant in white light, it appeared as a spaceship edging over the horizon. The impression was sustained by the road descending in a long right bend so that the intenser light of Aberdeen's city centre was

revealed section by section, till the whole city seemed to be banking over the coast. Then we hit the ring road.

Unlike Dundee's orbital road, Aberdeen's ring route cuts through real estate. To try and cross any major conurbation at the unhappy hour usually involved the helpless inhalation of gridlocked poison. Here, the air was brisk and everything went with a swing. There's a certain width of interpretation in Aberdeen driving, no doubt attributable to genetic programming in the manoeuvring of tractors, oil rigs and trawlers. Despite or because of this dalliance with danger, Aberdeen seemed unusually luminous. Even after dark the granite sparkled.

I was spat out of Aberdeen into hail and slow-moving traffic on the A96 to Inverness. It was through a blurred windscreen that I saw several signs saying 'Castle Trail' and my first Christmas lights of the day in Kintore. I was running out of steam now, so branched off after Inverurie to look at what my AA handbook said was a cheap hotel. The fact that I saw it in a blizzard may have something to do with its spartan frontage and Dickensian windows suggesting a narrow bed with a crater, and gruel for supper. I chickened out and beat a hasty retreat to busy Inverurie, but the hotel there had a Rotary feel, so I followed a sign to the Ardennan Country House Hotel. My heart sank a little: the ambience would be wrong; within easy commuting distance of Aberdeen, it would be all oil, dollars and a Jacuzzi full of barbecued Texans.

I couldn't have been more wrong. It was a plain building, entered at the side through what looked like a fire door. Reception was a small desk overlooking two gaunt rooms, one a bar-dining room, the other a function room awaiting, by the looks of it, a function. It was all so plain I recognised my journey into the interior had begun. A rangy young man greeted me. A quiet room, I said, but is there a function? Yes, he said, but only for 60 and there's no music. 'It's just a newsie.' The function room was under my functional bedroom. Their voices were the music; rolling like the North Sea or fields of tatties. Suddenly it all went quiet. I remembered my time in Buchan. They're eating, I thought. When Highlanders eat, the conviviality escalates. In the north-east, your meat's taken seriously.

I took breakfast alone at eight in the large bar-dining room. Surrounded by the debris of previous breakfasters. I observed to the young man that people had started early. With just a touch of briskness, he said: 'People have work to do'. 'Do you do everything here?' I asked. 'Yes, and help on my father's farm once a week and chef here twice a week.' The function last night had been the Aberdeen Angus Society. Dismissing a picture of Angus and Aberdeen exchanging ambassadors, I realised we were into cows. The silent mass munching was explained. And BSE? Not much of a problem. The supermarkets were selling less beef but in this part of the world everyone trusted their local butcher and his meat supply.

Yes, he was the hotel owner, previously a farmer from near Memsie in Buchan. I asked if he noticed much difference between Memsie and Inverurie. He hesitated, but the energy crackling in his hesitation was that of Olivier taking breath before Agincourt. 'They work

harder in Buchan. Farmers are farmers, but they don't work quite so hard here. Mind you, in *Moray* – they're so laid back it's *mañana*.' He rolled his eyes and raised his arms to heaven. Moray was only a few miles up the road. Clearly he had never been to Inverness, let alone the Hebrides, or he would not have allowed himself to exhaust so quickly his repertoire of amazement.

This overnight stay had worked: it had pitchforked me into a different culture, one where visual and verbal plainness exposes a seam of direct communication with an unexpected emotional kickback. I went outside, packed the car and sniffed. Ah, I hadn't smelled this smell for a quarter of a century. The word is smell, but the word fails to pack the punch that the smell does. It was the bitter day the weather people had forecast but yet the air was pregnant with earth and sea, turnip and salt, fish and cows. Strangely elated, I pointed the car at Inch. Where? What? Why?

I had chosen Inch to be the heart of dullness. On whose authority? The method of the pin, or in this case the pen. I had aimed it randomly on the map between Aberdeen and Elgin and it had landed between Oyne and Inch. Inch was thus appointed to test to destruction my theory that dull places weren't dull. On this shaky premise I constructed a plan. With Inch as anchor, I'd play out the extant Great North Railway line through Inch to what was once Cairnie Junction, then branch off on the route of the now dead Moray Coast Railway, following its ghosts through the fishing towns.

I swung back on to the A96, to meet at once that old enemy of progress, *schedulus interruptus*. A sign said 'Easter Aquhorthies Recumbent Stone Circle'. I squealed around the roundabout and drove up a featureless road. Geology, archaeology, pre-history, are not my things, but I couldn't dodge a name like that. The landscape was bleak, so why was it already liberating? The holly bears a berry. Here it was red rosehips that were lining the road. In a bare landscape they were pure theatre.

This was liberation. Thinness exposes. Too many mountains and lochs drown your emotional palate. This landscape was lemon sorbet after Christmas pud.

The stone circle was on a high crest of land facing south, and even after walking the 400 metres from the car, I was colder than a cube in an icebox. Too frozen to tremble, I stood inside the circle and immediately found myself being supervised. Craning her neck to see me over the crest was the Mither Tap of Bennachie, witch-like as Suilven. Bennachie rises over 518 metres but exerts a palpable presence over the whole north-eastern plain. Away to the east, she is seen from near Peterhead guarding the western approaches. From Buchan it is clear that beyond her be dragons and wizards. But I had to look at the stones.

Even on a morning like a pumice stone, I'm capable of reading, so I can tell you that Recumbent Stone Circles from up to the third millennium BC are circles of standing stones whose two tallest, on the south-western arc, flank a massive slab laid on its side (the recumbent) and wedged to make the upper surface level. The recumbent and flankers frame the moon rising or setting in the southern sky, thus enabling lunar observations of seasonal changes by the small farming communities who built these circles, which would

also have been used as communal ritual centres. The stones I was looking at included pinkish porphyry and glowing red jasper, and the huge recumbent was of reddish granite from nearby Bennachie. There, I couldn't have put it better myself. Whereupon a large plane took off from Dyce, circled the stones, and aimed for Scandinavia. Two technologies separated by 5,000 years, but the one I was level with impressed me more; it was so gargantuanly emphatic.

Back in the car, a small red car parked alongside. An elderly man extracted a small boy of about six, and the two of them set off to find the moon amid 5,000-year-old stones. Such is entertainment in Inverurie. Boy and grandad, off they went, off they went together, into the eternal whether. It was 9.30am. You don't waste a day in the north-east. I put on a carol. What a junior religion Christianity is. A much older paganism gives Christmas its undertow.

Having left the A96 with its lorries I found myself making a lengthier acquaintance with Bennachie. The Mither Tap is only the most prominent of the summits which mark the five-mile range, and at the end of it, there was Inch: the heart of dullness; the horror, the horror! I approached it with respect due to an entity upon which hung the hypothesis of my journey. The first impression was of a well-ordered compact settlement sitting in a small plain with the only active railway station between Inverurie and Huntly at one end and rising a mile or two to the north, a pyramidal hill. This was unusual enough to require guide book consultation. It had a name, Dunnideer, and the 11th-century vitrified fort surmounting it gave it a mythic air. Such a dull town, Bennachie on one side, and an Egyptian pyramid on the other. There was also a pink Episcopalian church. I tried the door. Locked.

Round the corner, in damaging contrast, was a building almost airborne with candle power. Festooned with an armoury of Christmas baubles was the veterinary surgery, festive with talking bipeds and snarling quadrupeds. It would have put a Spanish cathedral to shame, let alone the Pisky church and the gaunt grey kirk in the next street. I parked at the little post office and watched as cheerful a collection of individuals as I'd seen all Advent. It was like viewing an episode of *Take the High Road* in which the cast had been told to look specially happy, except that all the Inch women were beautiful. I kept seeing tall girls in black boots and long flaxen hair and they can't all have been the same person.

I walked along to a gallery shop. Hum. I couldn't afford these paintings but my eyes met the owner's. I went in. 'The mistake is coming through that door,' I said. He didn't need an explanation. 'When I was in Crete, you could put the paintings outside. In Scottish weather you can't, and the door is a psychological barrier.' He said his prices were negotiable and as his name, Michael Mann, was on each painting, he clearly had the right. I chose a benign Bennachie and he knocked off 30%. During these negotiations, the knell of doom sounded. It seemed an odd thing to happen in Inch on a Friday morning. Clonk, clonk tolled the bell. It could only be a call to prayer in a Presbyterian kirk. But who wanted to pray at five to 11? I preferred to talk with Mr Mann. 'Why is Inch unknown?' I asked. He said he was

on the local tourist board and they were trying, but the government had set up statutory tourist quangos without resources. Surprise, surprise.

After nosing round some comfortable looking houses, I came on a signpost to a 'Picardy Stone'. I now knew that this corner of Scotland contained 99 Pictish sites unique to Grampian, but so far today I'd only seen one. The road climbed between tall naked trees until I saw the stone in the middle of a ploughed field. Although still freezing, the reddish-brown earth had the buoyancy of a deep pile carpet. Then a real surprise. The abstract design on the stone was thrillingly clear. Double circles with a Z in between suggested the first draft of a flying bicycle by Leonardo da Vinci, but a Pict had stood here between 11 and 14 centuries ago and carved the geometric design with phenomenal precision and physical commitment *as if it mattered*. But what matters?

Having descended back to Inch, I found the road past the kirk jammed with cars. I parked cunningly opposite the church door and was rewarded. Children poured out like the Pied Piper on fast rewind. Each one had eyes as clear and some as round as the double circle on the Picardy stone. The minister stooped deeply to encompass the children. Sometimes he was able with a smile, which was not in the least ingratiating, to say something encouraging to one. More often he had to shovel an armful into an embrace.

Thus excavated into the street, children were sieved into parents' possession and vehicles. It was only a primary school carol service, yet with Dunblane stones still encircling the Scottish consciousness, such a vulnerable concentration on a few square metres of pavement exposed the fragility of young life and of the emotions adults invest in the hopes and fears of all the years. The vehicles scattered like a flock of birds and I exchanged friendly pleasantries with the minister, before he shut the door. Anyone wanting somewhere open would now have to visit the vet, the post office, the art gallery or a stone circle. For me, it was time for farewell to a place which, quite apart from proving my theory, had in the space of an hour and a half genuinely charmed me.

I was aware that there was more to Inch than I was seeing: the crime, cruelty, meanness, tragedy, that lurks in any place. But I wasn't making a balanced sociological profile, just enjoying a journey. Behind my King's carols there will have been blistering loves and hates, and no doubt a chorister or two will since have met disaster, disappointment or death. But the carols remain as artefacts. Towns likewise are structures to enable an acceptable emotional shape to be salvaged from individual human inadequacy.

On my way to Cairnie Junction, the King's choir sang *In the Bleak Midwinter*. 'Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain.' Did the Picts with their open stones understand this better than we with our closed churches? 'Heaven and earth will flee away.' This north-east is eschatological country. On the other hand, a tenor was now softly singing 'a breast full of milk and a manger full of hay', and before long that's how it was. Between rounded breasts of fecund hills and fields to be full of barley, I followed the grass-overgrown railway to the coast. Now the greyness was cracking. Turquoise pools of sky appeared between slivers of cloud, and black crows flew over lime stubble. Without

warning, the entire landscape was flooded by gold sunlight, as if my car and I were to be beamed up into an Inca sky-ship. The fact that we were still earthbound was made plain by a bit of paper on a farm-track fence-post offering Kerr's Pinks and Duke of York's tatties and with every bag, a free turnip. Another farm road announced that it was South Canterbury. Archbishop Carey was nowhere to be seen. The only movement was of lonely tractors imitating horses on the skyline. The road climbed, and suddenly round a corner, there was this grey-blue thing higher than the land. It was the sea. I'd come through the dull part of Scotland, and I'd found it tenderly and poignantly beautiful.

I went a little east to Portsoy. Not only was it selling, in its uniquely preserved 17th-century harbour, its own unique Portsoy marble used in Versailles, but it had converted a section of the closed railway line to practical use: a paved path for feet, not wheels.

A few miles west, Cullen is an opera set consisting essentially of one main street sloping to the gaily coloured seatown, and crossed by high viaducts of the Great North of Scotland Railway. If you can't be Kiev and have a Great Gate, be Cullen and have a Great North Viaduct. Some years ago, vandals posing as accountants tried to have the viaducts destroyed. Hullabaloo ensued and for once the Philistines lost. Memories remain of the days when, during the July Fair, special trains brought holidaymakers to Cullen direct from Glasgow. Not now. But as the world remembers Rome, Cullen remembers the Great North.

I took coffee and an Aberdeen buttery in the Tea Cozy. Teenagers were greeting each other; locals who hadn't escaped Cullen joshing with mates just home from Aberdeen University. So might Winchester welcome home Oxford; except that Winchester lacks a moon riding over the sea. The Seafield Arms dominates the street, so like any Renault commercial, I drove my Renault under the archway into the courtyard.

After dinner, which really did include Cullen Skink – where else would you eat skink? – I heard carols and walked into the street. The carols were being spewed from a local fire engine brilliant with Christmas lights weaving round the square. I looked up at the viaduct and my mind broke from its moorings. On the viaduct was a jet black Great North of Scotland steam locomotive, as large as life, outlined in gold. It was exactly the loco type on whose footplate I'd ridden as a child.

Against this epiphany I had no defence. Destabilised by the mad fire engine in the square and my dream engine in the sky, I weaved along the pavement, intoxicated by delight.

The next morning, I sloped into the breakfast room to eat fish. Three smartly suited Koreans smiled, but their verbal greeting was obliterated. It wasn't that the four men with boots and moustaches at another table were behaving badly. They just had voices like 32-foot organ pipes bathed in tar. I took them to be Slavs in from the sea, but they were Italians home from the hill: hunters on a shooting expedition. They wanted beer with their breakfast, not bottled but straight from the keg. The dainty waitress scuttled off and scuttled back. The man with the key was out. Would they take bottled? A moustache curled and a boot twitched but they took it like men. The waitress came to me hopefully. Perhaps I would be ordinary. I explained that with my lightly poached smoked haddock I would need

an egg sufficiently cooked that it didn't bleed, plus a slice of medium rare black pudding.

Post-breakfast, the Italians strode around in their boots taking photos of each other. One of them, an Omar Sharif lookalike, approached the waitress. 'Would you put'... his voice lowered '[something inaudible] into the fridge?' They may have been hunters, but they killed for a purpose: their voices needed nourishing.

Herbert Cox, the hotel owner, turned out to be on the town Christmas lighting committee. He didn't reveal which particular brain had hatched the idea of a loco on the viaduct, but when I paid tribute to the exactness of the model he said the father of the local electrician was well versed in train matters. I wandered across to the newsagent and looked up. No wonder I'd missed it in the gloaming. A hairline wire shape was an ineffective ghost, waiting for the witching hour to produce a black sky to give it solidity; whereupon Cullen would have its miracle again.

Before turning for home, I followed the lost railway line along the cliffs to look at Portknockie and Findochty. Or rather, their roofs. Well, down their chimneys. Their precipitous huddling would have inspired me to Dylan Thomas rhapsodising, if I was Dylan Thomas and it was the night before. On the road along Findochty's Mediterranean-looking harbour there was total gridlock: a lorry had met a car.

I drove back to Cullen's long beach, walked past the stacks of old red sandstone called The Three Kings and watched the waves. 'The sea! the sea!' cried Walt Whitman. Yes, indeed. But also: the fields, the fields. The stones, the stones. And our artefacts that live after us: the viaducts, streets and pavements that keep us from seeing too much of the earth, the earth.

I got into the car and pointed it south. And what do you think happened on the way home? A red light flashed at Inch Station level-crossing, and the barrier fell. Thus I was compelled to see, not a ghost train, but a real diesel sprinter, blue in tooth and paw. A granny figure, bent over many carrier bags, dismounted. She plodded through the gate and Inschwads. Back from Christmas shopping in Aberdeen or Inverurie seemed a reasonable bet. She'd probably squandered her pension and whatever else she had on the next two generations. Her hawk-nosed face reflected in human form the Mither Tap of Bennachie, framing her from behind: the hill unmoved by her, sitting there long before all her ancestors. Destined to sit there long after all her descendants.

Clonakilty, God help us

Kenneth Roy

1999

One of the great Anglo-Irish journalists, Patrick O'Donovan, rarely wrote about Ireland. He found it difficult to be objective. But he did write, once, in 1964, about the town of his forefathers and when I read the piece in a collection of his journalism, it occurred to me that one day I must go.

So here I am in Clonakilty, West Cork.

O'Donovan wrote: 'It is not one of the treasures of Ireland... It is unostentatious and of almost Macedonian bareness. It is a long street of small houses, painted in bright, surprising colours. There is a suggestion of horse dung about the streets. The windows are all blinded with lace. There is a monument, a statute of a man holding a pike in memory of one of their hopeless uprisings. There are hot little long-ceilinged, stout-scented bars with none of the homely splendours of the English pub, but bare, dark, undecorated, single-minded and each with the name of its owner exquisitely painted over its front'.

Thirty-five years later, on this late Saturday afternoon, the only thing missing is the suggestion of horse dung: indeed Clonakilty smells reasonably sweet. But otherwise, it is reassuringly as O'Donovan described it: the extrovert pinks and greens of the houses, the laced windows, the uncompromising pubs. At first glance, we might be back in 1964 in a little Irish town where time stands still.

Nothing has changed; yet subtly everything has changed. I go looking for the monument to the hopeless uprising – don't ask me what it was about; even O'Donovan found it too complicated to explain to readers of the *Observer*. And it's there all right, bang in the centre of town, erected to the memory of the 'men who fought and fell at the Battle of the Big Cross, 19th June 1798'.

A wreath has been laid recently, but there the reverence to the dead of the Big Cross begins and ends. Small children clamber over the statue. Under the tragic figure holding the pike, youths with green hair loll on benches and strum guitars and knock back the lager before depositing the cans in the old-fashioned telephone box that must have been here when Patrick O'Donovan was last in Clonakilty many moons ago. And, in the midst of the banal and idle scene that is being repeated in town squares across Ireland and Europe, I note the incongruity of the inscription on the statue:

They rose in dark and evil day

To right their native land

They kindled here a living blaze

That nothing shall withstand

The pubs, too, are not immune from the encroachment of modern civilisation: I poke

my nose into the darkest of them in time to hear the England football manager declaim from a box above the bar: 'I think they were both bookable offences under the rules'. It is the last thing you want to hear in the town of Patrick O'Donovan's forefathers.

In the shops you may still buy the black and white puddings for which Clonakilty is celebrated: 'Original Harrington's recipe, dates back 100 years, a favourite treat of the Irish at home and abroad'. But you may also rent videos of the latest Hollywood nasties, or attend the clinic of Chinese medicine in O'Rahilly Street, or avail yourself of DJ Ted's Laser Light Show in the Boiler Room.

In 1880, when the town was controlled by a few rich Protestant families, the Catholics defiantly built a Gothic pile as big as one of the smaller cathedrals – 'spiky, unforgiving, wildly extravagant and greyly sad', O'Donovan called it. It must have cost a packet. 'It is Clonakilty's great gesture and there is a splendour about it in a place that was once poor, that compels admiration.'

But even the Church is selling out to the technology of the global village. The faithful no longer light candles before they pray for the sick and sorrowing: they put their money in a slot, press a button and wait for a light to flicker inside an otherwise hollow tube. There is something of beauty and mystery and comfort about a living flame lit in the gloom of a church. How much is there in a hollow tube?

I am here partly to find out if Patrick O'Donovan is celebrated or even much remembered Clonakilty. In Kerr's bookshop, the owner is unfailingly helpful but has to acknowledge that not in all the years she has been running the shop has anyone inquired after Patrick O'Donovan, writer.

I ask a few of the older punters in O'Donovan's Bar – no relation, it seems – but am met by curious stares or pure Irishisms.

'Sure, it's a popular name. Did he come from the town or the country?'

'Well, I'm not sure. But he was a very famous journalist in his day.'

'I wish I came from Scotland. I was in Scotland once. As far as Dunoon I went.'

'But you've never heard of Patrick O'Donovan?'

'Well, see, if you could give me the name of the *street*.'

In the evening, in O'Donovan's Bar, a folk singer entertains the crowd.

And the wild mountain thyme

Grows around the bloomin' heather

But still no-one has heard of my journalistic hero. Several profess that the O'Donovan I should be looking for is O'Donovan Rossa, whose wife, Mary Jane Irwin, poetess and Fenian, was born in a little house next to the new hotel where I am staying. I know this, because there is a plaque in her honour. But none, anywhere, to Patrick O'Donovan, who might as well never have existed.

Journalists are not remembered. Our short shelf-life – try saying that when you've had a few in O'Donovan's Bar – reflects the essential flimsiness of our product. But he was no ordinary hack. He should have been the glorious exception that proves the rule.

In 1948, Mary Henderson was covering a guerrilla war in Greece for *Time* magazine. She drove to the front with an incongruous figure in a loud cap who mumbled constantly as their jeep dodged mine craters and disembowelled mules. 'Konitza lies on the lap... on the slope... in the arms... pinned against...' Her companion was writing his piece.

To stop him mumbling, Mary Henderson asked him: 'Where would you like to be at this moment if you could be transported there?'

'Entering the Brompton Oratory [the church he attended in Knightsbridge, London] in my best Sunday clothes,' Patrick O'Donovan replied without hesitation.

The devout Catholic, for whom Christmas represented 'the gentlest and most lovely idea that mankind ever conceived, more beautiful than Aphrodite and her waves', did not often spend Christmas at home. He saw too much war and too many deaths.

One Christmas he was in Bethlehem when Arabs shot at his car out of the darkness. 'At midnight,' he wrote, 'the clangour of the bell, announcing again one piece of news that has never lost its savour, will rock across a country rent in two and constrained for the last time by British law. There will be little peace and no goodwill'. Another Christmas he celebrated in a bleak railway carriage between Dusseldorf and Hamburg among the ruins of a defeated Germany.

He spent Christmas 1948 in revolutionary China, in a Jesuit mission house with its windows barred and its doors locked. He was preparing for sleep in an ice-cold room decorated with dark furniture and pictures of the saints when the bishop knocked at his door and asked him to serve midnight mass in the cathedral. There was a heap of bedding at the back of the church; a smell of poverty and unwashed wool rose above the incense and the wax. The Chinese 'knelt in complete absorption' while shooting continued in the streets. A few months later the town was in communist hands.

Patrick O'Donovan died at Christmas, 1981, aged 63. He lived long enough to witness the decline of Christian belief, though not to report the more spectacular eclipse of communism. Nor did he live long enough to see the town of Clonakilty transformed into a magnet for tourists complete with 'model village' in which visitors are invited to 'step back in time'. But who in his right mind would wish to step back into Clonakilty's unhappy past? All over the world, when Irishmen gathered and this little town was mentioned, the words 'God help us' were added in acknowledgement of its famines – its terrible famines. I don't expect the Almighty's assistance is invoked any longer, except possibly as an old joke. For the first time in its history, Clonakilty feels prosperous.

At closing time, the entire company in O'Donovan's Bar abruptly stands up and sings with a stirring show of unanimity and passion.

'Tell me,' I say to a man from Wexford. 'What is that song we have just been singing?'

'It is the national anthem of Ireland,' he replies. 'It is sung at the end of the night in pubs all over Ireland.' And the clock in O'Donovan's is going backwards: I swear it.

Next morning, I embark upon a church crawl, but not to the Presbyterian church, which is now the post office, there being no Presbyterians left in Clonakilty. At the Methodist

church, 31 worshippers listen to their young pastor talk in a matey way about 'having a good confab'. Up on its grave-stuffed hill, where, as O'Donovan observed, 'Catholics and Protestants lie side by side in the only mutual peace they ever knew', the Church of Ireland is also in session, but behind closed doors. I peer in the window and guess there are about 70 locked inside.

These are theological sideshows, for the predominance of the Catholic church is simply overwhelming. The first mass of the morning attracts at least 700, including many bejeaned young, and the following one 90 minutes later about the same number. 'As full as any railway station in the world' is how O'Donovan remembered the church. It is full still.

Boiled eggs for tea

Fiona MacDonald

2000

Anchors aweigh

The view from midway across the Clyde is suitably sombre for a Glasgow Fair Wednesday to be spent chasing ghosts: the ghosts of Para Handy, Dougie, The Tar, Sunny Jim and Macphail, the ghost of their creator, Argyllshire poet, historical novelist and journalist Neil Munro, and the ghost of the Scotland he captured so beautifully in the early years of the 20th century.

The heatwave of the previous week is a distant memory as I scan the waters of the firth for signs of life. To the south-west, there is the chimney of the white elephant power station at Inverkip. Further downriver, the Hunterston ore terminal is just visible in the greyness of the day. From the deck of the ferry which plies between Gourock and Hunter's Quay, the only other craft visible are two distant pleasure cruisers with cargoes of passengers enjoying a July morning with a wee sail doon the water. Looking east, to the Tail of the Bank – the area where the river flowing down from Glasgow opens out to stretch from Greenock across to Helensburgh – there is nothing at all to be seen on the water. It's hard to imagine the activity which would have filled the scene when the Para Handy stories first appeared in the *Glasgow Evening News* between 1905 and 1923, under the pen-name Hugh Foulis.

Once off the ferry, I turn right and head along the side of the Holy Loch, the loch which seemed so incongruously named when it had at its heart a US nuclear submarine base. I stop beside the war memorial on a small promontory to look at the names honoured with two faded poppy wreaths. Like war memorials all over the country, it contains two plaques – one for each of the world wars.

To the Glory of God and the honoured memory of the 124 officers and non-commissioned officers and men of Sandbank and Ardnadam who served in the Great War 1914-1919.

I wonder if Pte John Cameron, Pte John Campbell, PO Colin Kerr, and all of the others named followed the fortunes of the crew of the Vital Spark when they appeared in print for the first time.

The second plaque is dedicated not just to men of the area, but also to the crews of HM submarines Snapper, Syrtis, Unbeaten, Unique, Untamed and Vandal who sailed from the Holy Loch and failed to return.

Such names, such ghosts.

Land ahoy

Help! I am in danger of sinking into melancholia, which is not appropriate given that my first stop is Colintrave, the scene of The Tar's extraordinary conundrum in the tale A

Stroke of Luck. My aim is to visit the settings of some of my favourite Para Handy stories and I am heading over the hills, round the top of Loch Striven and down to the tiny hamlet overlooking the Kyles of Bute where in Munro's words:

It was a night of harmony on the good ship Vital Spark. She was fast in the mud at Colintrave quay, and, in the den of her, Para Handy was giving his song. 'The Dancing Master'...

The air of gaiety and wellbeing was added to by Dougie's efforts on his Jew's-harp. Having repeated the only two verses he knew several times, the captain stamped along to the music.

'If I had chust on my other boots,' he declared. 'This ones iss too light for singing with...'

The reason for the jollity was that Dougie had passed off a coarse fish called a stenlock as a cod to a gullible Glasgow woman on holiday in the village. At first he had only meant to tease her, but she had taken it seriously and handed over two shillings which was duly spent on ale. The Tar, in particularly good humour because he had, that day, been awarded a pay rise, was anxious to contribute to the merriment and declared that he would give them 'a guess'. This was greeted with some interest and surprise given that this particular crew member was never one to exert himself unnecessarily.

'Weel done, Colin!' said the Captain, who had never before seen such enterprise on the part of The Tar. 'Tell us the guess if you can mind it.'

'It begins something like this,' said The Tar nervously: 'Whether would you raither, – That's the start of it.'

'Fine, Colin, fine!' Said the Captain encouragingly. 'Take your breath and start again.'

'Whether would you raither,' proceeded The Tar – 'whether would you raither or walk there?'

Reading the story you can hear the wheels turning in the crew's minds, see them exchanging looks, before Dougie asks for 'the guess' to be repeated 'slow', and Macphail, always one to show that he was a man of some erudition, declared that if he had a pencil and a lump of paper he could work it out.

When The Tar refuses to admit that something is missing from the conundrum, the answer is demanded of him. 'Man, I don't mind whether there wass an answer or no,' he has to confess.

The above is a subplot in a story which follows Dougie's increasingly troubled conscience and involves a denouement in which Para Handy exploits the power of his Argyllshire guile over the lowlander's gullibility. When the woman comes to the boat to complain that she has boiled the fish for three hours and it is still like leather, the captain asks what she used to boil it. He has to admit that water seems appropriate, but enquires what kind of coals she used.

'Jist plain black yins...I bocht them frae Cameron along the road there...'

'Cameron!... Wass I not sure there wass something or other wrong? Cameron's coals wouldna boil a wulk...'

The story with its conundrum vignette illustrates the reason why television is not able to capture the charm and craft of Neil Munro's stories. Television is a blunt instrument which demands action, a speedy unfolding of events, visual humour. So much so that the television series is really only a comedy show based on Munro's characters. The minister hiding on the ship from Dougie, the superstitious mate, the runaway trailer with Macphail on board, careering down a hill onto Brodick pier: these are the things people remember if you mention Para Handy. But neither event appears in Munro's stories, and the TV humour pales into insignificance when compared to that which pours from the Inveraray author's pen.

Indeed, some of the funniest stories set on the Vital Spark are flights of fancy involving little or no action, such as *Pension Farms* in which a conversation about the merits of egg farms descends into the bizarre when the captain informs his crew that farming *pensioners* is a much better way to make a living.

'I have a cousin yonder oot in Gigha wi' a stock o' five fine healthy uncles – no' a man o' them under 70. There's another frien' o' my own in Mull wi' thirteen head o' chenuine old Macleans. He gaithered them aboot the islands wi' a boat whenever the rumours o' the pensions started... It wassna every wan he would take; they must be aal Macleans, for the Mull Macleans never die till they're centurions... They're yonder, noo, in Loch Scridian, kept like fightin' cocks...'

And so he goes on, explaining the economics of a scheme made possible by the newly introduced old age pension, with the crew solemnly feeding him lines such as Dougie's enquiry about the possibility of branding the stock.

Humour like this has to be *read*. It doesn't translate to the insatiable, in-one-ear-out-the-other, world of the small screen.

And so, I find myself on the shoreline in Colintrave. The greyness of the sky has been pierced by patches of an ice blue colour, and a warmth has become detectable in the air. The throb of the engines of the CalMac ferry which plies between here and the Isle of Bute, perhaps less than a quarter of a mile away, fills the hamlet. I have walked past the cars waiting to get on and followed a concrete slipway down to the waterline. Suddenly another CalMac ship hoves into view and I strain to remember the ditty which goes something like:

The earth belongs unto the Lord and all that it contains

Except for all the western isles – they are all Macbrayne's

When it is close enough to read the name on the side, I see that this is the Saturn, with a cargo of day trippers. She passes Colintrave and heads through the narrows of the Kyles of Bute and round the north end of the island towards Tighnabruaich. The Colintrave ferry waits for her to pass and itself get under way. Silence descends on the village and more tourists begin to drift along to await her return. As I watch her progress towards the island another literary ghost bobs into my head. Wee Macgregor, the much doted-upon child of the Macgregor and Purdie families. His adventures at home in Glasgow and on holiday in Rothesay have long been a delight and, come to think of it, his creator, J J Bell, was a

contemporary of Munro. But I suppress thoughts of the boy – I have enough ghosts for one day – and turn the car northward.

Full ahead

The road round the top of Loch Riddon then south towards Tighnabruaich is set high on a hillside and the National Trust for Scotland has provided a viewpoint which highlights various places of interest. Five cars are already parked there and their occupants are scanning the view from the roadside. The day has now brightened considerably and the view of the Kyles is stunning.

Ormidale on Loch Riddon gets a mention on the plaque. It seems that this was the landing place of Norse troops in 1089. Until now I had never been quite sure where Ormidale was but the story *Para Handy has an Eye to Business* is introduced with some lines which immediately capture the tranquility of the area:

It was a lovely day, and the Vital Spark, without a cargo, lay at the pier of Ormidale, her newly painted under-strakes reflected in a loch like a mirror, making a crimson blotch in a scene that was otherwise winter-brown. For a day and a half more there was nothing to be done. 'It's the life of a Perfect Chentleman' said Dougie...

The companionable atmosphere was shattered when Para Handy suggested that perhaps the crew might carry out a little tarring on the vessel, a suggestion quickly scorned by the others. Macphail in particular was engrossed, as usual, in a piece of romantic fiction and did not want to be disturbed.

'Maybe it'll do fine when we get to Tarbert. It's an awfu' peety they're no' buildin' boats o' this size wi' a kind of a study in them for the use o' the enchineers,' declared the captain looking at Dougie, the mate, for support which was not to be forthcoming.

I note that Neil Munro and Para Handy are mentioned on the National Trust plaque. The Maids of Bute are two rocks which have been painted to look like reclining women and, as it points out, Para Handy claimed to have been the first man to have decorated them thus.

The view from the vantage point is fine but it's now lunchtime and it seems ages since breakfast. Onwards to Tighnabruaich, where the Saturn has disgorged her passengers and is now lying at the pier awaiting their return. The Royal Hotel offers an imaginative menu and the food is served by waitresses dressed in black trousers and waistcoats and white shirts, looking as if they belong more in a smart city restaurant than a hotel in rural Argyll.

The day is now warm and I sit outside overlooking the shore as butterflies and bumble bees busy themselves in the bright yellow flowers at the front of the hotel.

How to Buy a Boat is set on the shore here and is a masterclass on second-hand buying. Para Handy, in need of a punt, falls into conversation, apparently casually, with a hirer of rowing boats. First he tricks the man into admitting that business is bad, then he instills anxiety that it won't get better by telling him that the weather forecast for the summer isn't good and that rowing boats are going cheap at Millport. The man is no fool and when he

challenges Para Handy about his interest, the captain makes to walk away before casually pointing at one of the boats with his foot and declaring 'There's wan I aalways wondered at you keepin', Dan,'... 'she's a prutty old stager, I'll be bound...'

'Are ye wantin' a boat?' asks Dan, no longer in any doubt about what is going on.

Still Para Handy shadow boxes, declaring that if the boat is on the market he will keep his ears open for a buyer. Later he feigns astonishment when a price is mentioned, and when the seller eventually asks how much the captain is prepared to pay, Para Handy asks: 'What for?'

'For this boat. Say three pounds. It's a bargain.'

'Oh, for this wan! I wouldna hurt your feelings, but if I wass wantin' a boat I wouldna take this wan in a gift. Still and on, a boat iss a handy thing for them that needs it...'

And on they go, back and forth, until a deal is struck with which they are both quietly happy.

No sign of anyone hiring boats today though, just some locals walking their dogs and a man emptying hedge clippings from a wheelbarrow onto the shore. I stroll over to talk to him and he tells me that there were three piers here. The one where the Saturn is lying now, the one to the south at Kames and the one which is now a pile of rotting timbers near the front of the Royal Hotel. He remembers when all three were busy with steamers full of cargoes, holidaymakers and daytrippers. Later, in an art shop, I buy a locally produced book of recollections in which one woman remembers that when she lived in London, her family would travel to Tighnabruaich every second weekend. They'd leave Euston on the 11 o'clock sleeper, arrive in Central Station at 6.30am, board the train for Gourock, catch the ferry there, and arrive in the village by 10am. On the Sunday, they sailed from the village at 5.30pm, and her husband was able to walk straight to his office from Euston on Monday morning.

The assistant in the art shop claims they're having a good season this year with lots more coaches than usual. 'An hour and a half from Glasgow and you're in another world,' she says.

It's true.

Today's daytrippers are beginning to wander back from the shops, past the fine, substantial houses with their colourful gardens, towards the Saturn. Generally, they are middle-aged, the women wearing floral print skirts, the men with expensive cameras round their necks. The voices are mostly Scottish. These visitors to Tighnabruaich look as if they might be revisiting their childhood haunts, though one or two are possibly P S Waverley fanatics who have washed up here, confused and lost without the mothership, which is in dry lock being rebuilt. And then I notice that, with one exception, *there are no children*. Why? Does a day's cruise through our country's magnificent scenery to a pretty Argyllshire village hold no attraction for our little electronics enthusiasts of today?

What has changed? Why have Scottish families lost their desire to explore their own country, to introduce their children to the wonders on their doorstep?

But there is no time to ponder this further. Loch Fyne, where I am heading next, is a mighty long loch. First, I have to go through Glendaruel, then up one side of the loch, round the top and down to Inveraray where Munro was born, and finally to Tarbert, the setting for so many of Para Handy's exploits, by nightfall.

Dead slow

'Torture Death and Damnation The Story of Scottish Crime and Punishment 1500-1750'. Inveraray Jail, complete with its gruesome exhibition (branding, ears nailed to posts – you get the picture) is busy with tourists. I make this my first port of call in the town because I read on an internet site that Neil Munro may have actually lived here (the basis for this unlikely assumption being that Munro's mother may have been employed there, and married the governor Malcolm Thomson, after he had retired).

As I hand over the entrance fee, I ask the woman behind the desk if she knows whether the Munro story is true. She doesn't, and I head upstairs past a dummy in Victorian garb. As I near the top of the stairs, I hear someone call out and turn to see another dummy behind me which I had not previously noticed. After a moment or two, I realise that this dummy in a crimson crinoline is addressing me. Indeed, she is asking me whether I had just made an enquiry about Neil Munro. Irene Parkes, a guide at the jail, has been in the town for 11 years. She doesn't know whether Munro lived in the jail but she'll 'phone her husband and ask him whether he knows'. She has, of course, heard of Munro and got some of his books from the library when she first arrived in the town. 'The library?' I say. 'Perhaps I should drop in there.' 'Well, no,' says Irene. 'It only comes every third Thursday.'

She goes off and I make my way into the former courtroom where a trial is going on. The judge, the prisoners in the dock, and the lawyers are represented by yet more dummies with expressive faces, and the vivid recorded transcripts are of actual trials. Only after sitting here for a few minutes do I realise that I am not beside a fellow tourist, but another lifeless figure in Victorian dress. Slowly, it dawns on me that I am the only human being in the room.

Leaving the courtroom, I head outside towards the former prison cells only to be waylaid by Ian Macdonald. Dressed in prison warder's uniform, he waves me into a long narrow cage, and although one half of my brain is telling me that this is indeed nothing but an empty cage and that he has a key in his hand which he is surely going to use, the other half is confused by people who turn out to be dummies and dummies who turn out to be people. So, ever so meekly, I step inside and, of course, he locks me in. By now, Irene Parkes has phoned her husband and come to look for me. From behind the bars, feeling just a little foolish, I hear that Mr Parkes was not able to add much to what I already knew, and that he too thinks it unlikely that Munro ever did live in the jail.

Leaving the exercise cage, for this is what it turns out to be, I go into the jail itself. Now, it has to be said that as a tourist attraction, everything is presented extraordinarily well. The haunting sound of the mother singing a soothing Gaelic lullaby to her baby behind the cell

door, the men complaining in Gaelic to each other about the conditions, the laughter of the insane, the whipping table, the equipment of hard labour, the cells which visitors can enter and inspect: the effect is vivid. There are plaques telling real-life stories such as the tale of the pauper girl who stole a pair of shoes and was sentenced to 40 days in prison and three years in a reformatory school, or the 12-year-old boy who got 30 days in prison and five years in a reformatory school for breaking into a shop. Educational, it certainly is. But a piece of entertainment? The families spending the afternoon here certainly seem to be enjoying themselves. The oppression oozing from every stone so strongly that you can actually *smell* it seems to be passing them by. As they leave they will stop to browse in the gift shop where they may buy trinkets to remind them of a happy afternoon wading in the mire of human misery in the summer of 2000.

Outside, I follow Irene Parkes' directions to Crombie's Land where Munro was born in 1863, and sure enough, at the edge of the loch, in the shadow of the prison wall, I find the very house, now renamed Para Handy Cottage and complete with a plaque commemorating the author. The illegitimate son of a kitchen maid, Munro found work in the office of the sheriff clerk of Argyll on leaving school. This was a prestigious post and there is much speculation that his father may have been a figure of influence, who secured this position for his son. There is a further belief that Munro's mother had worked in Inveraray Castle, seat of the Duke of Argyll, before she gave birth. So it is possible that the dukedom had, at last, produced something fine.

This being Scotland in the Glasgow Fair, we are experiencing every season in one day. By now it is late afternoon and the day has turned hot. Small children are girning and dragging their feet. Parents look weary. Boys are fishing over on the pier, where one man is videoing a fish in the flat calm waters below while his wife waits patiently beside him. My mind spins forward to a winter afternoon when this couple decide to relive their summer holiday to remind them of happy, sunny days. What will he say to her? 'Oh look dear, remember that herring we met in Inveraray?'

A sign nearby reminds everyone that Inveraray has been home of the Clan Campbell since the early 15th century, and that Loch Fyne was famed for its herring fishing. The town's motto, it tells us, is *semper tibi pendeat halec* – May there always be a herring in your net. The heyday of Loch Fyne herring fishing is commemorated in *Herring – a Gossip*, another flight of fancy in which Para Handy gets carried away: 'The herrin' wass that thick in Loch Fyne in them days,' recalled the Captain, 'that you sometimes couldna get your anchor to the ground...' At the time of writing however, the industry was in a bad way and Macphail summarises the newspaper debate about what should be done:

'...Then a chap would write that there should be a close time so as to gie the herrin' time to draw their breaths for another breenge into the nets; and anither chap would be takin' the bread oot o' the mooths o' his wife and weans. A scientific man said herrin' came on cycles –'

'He's a liar, anyway,' said the Captain, with conviction. 'They were in Loch Fyne afore the cycle was invented. Are you sure, Macphail, it's no' the cod he means?'

Troubled waters

It was a dirty evening, coming on to dusk, and the Vital Spark went walloping drunkenly down Loch Fyne with a cargo of oak bark, badly trimmed. She staggered to every shock of the sea; the waves came combing over her quarter, and Dougie the mate began to wish they had never sailed that day from Kilcatrine. They had struggled round the point of Pennymore, the prospect looking every moment blacker, and he turned a dozen projects over in his mind for inducing Para Handy to anchor somewhere till the morning. At last he remembered Para's partiality for anything in the way of long-shore gaiety, and the lights of the village of Furnace gave him an idea. [from 'A Lost Man']

I never expected to find Furnace Village Hall. If it was still there at all, it would surely be a run down affair with broken windows, and weeds sprouting from its guttering. True, there is no ball going on there this evening, as there had been that wild night when Dougie successfully persuaded the captain to turn the vessel to starboard to join 'the spree', but the hall, right on the main street and with a red and white sign declaring in large letters that this is indeed Furnace Village Hall is still in good shape. There are signs of community life too. The notice board outside declares that Wee Alan was one of the winners of the Kilmory Camanachd Club Lottery Draw, that a regatta and gala day will be held on 5 August, and much more besides.

This afternoon, however, a torpor has settled over the village and not a sound is to be heard on the street or in the gardens of the surrounding homes. It's too hot to wander far but I notice the war memorial nearby and go over to look at the names. There is an H Munro of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (ASH) and I can only wonder whether this may be Neil Munro's son Hugh who fell in France in 1915. After the war, the grieving father travelled to Lochgoilhead to hear how his son, an only child, died. James Armstrong, who was my grandfather and a fellow officer in the ASH, explained that the enemy had placed a German flag on no man's land under cover of darkness. Hugh declared that he would go out to take it down. A sniper's bullet found its mark. One more senseless death in a muddy ocean of senseless deaths.

Yet, although Munro lost his son near to the start of the war, many of the stories are set against its backdrop and reveal no anti-war sentiments. Of course, if they had, they would never have made it into print anyway. The Scotland he depicts is couthy and comforting. It's a world of conversation lozenges, and boiled eggs for tea – a world where the ferocity of the midges is the worst thing life can throw at you. The terrible, grinding poverty of the Glasgow tenements is never mentioned, nor the ill-health of their inhabitants. In wartime, this became a world where women gave white feathers to fit-looking young men who were not in uniform (in *Sunny Jim Rejected*, Jim, who had a glass eye, declared that on his last trip to Loch Fyne he had received as many feathers 'as would stuff a bolster'). A later story sees him joining up successfully under false pretences. And that's the irony: *Para Handy* is set in an innocent world which seems strangely alien at the start of this new century, yet the government was rounding up its male citizens and sending them off to the indescribable

horrors of the First World War, and, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, most of these men were willing to go – which would be unimaginable now.

Finished with engines

Now that I am on Loch Fyneside, there are numerous settings for the Vital Spark's adventures which I could visit. But the day is growing late so I must choose and I settle on Crarae and Ardrishaig before Tarbert. It was on Crarae quay that the captain observed a little family group advancing towards him with 'a chilly air of separation'.

'Take my word for it, Dougie,' said Para Handy, 'that man's no' in very good trum; you can see by the way he's banging the box against his legs and speaking to himsel'.

The cause of the trouble in *Lodgers on a House-Boat*, was that the family had arrived from Glasgow for a week's holiday in the village, but there were no lodgings to be had. After a little persuasion, mainly in the form of flattery about his vessel (always the captain's weak point), Para Handy agrees to allow the family to stay on the boat, with predictably disastrous results.

So Crarae had been the target, but I am through it before I know it (and even on the return journey next day, looking out for it more carefully, I fail to spot it). There was no sign, no particularly noticeable cluster of houses. Glaswegians are, of course, a garrulous, outgoing bunch who quickly make friends with natives and fellow holidaymakers alike, and no doubt the area may have been a bit busier 90 years ago, but still, I can't help but wonder: what did they *do* all day during those precious holiday weeks?

Ardrishaig is bigger than expected and it's here that I find a third public acknowledgement of Munro and his work. A number of lifebuoys have been placed on railings along the front, each with a plaque in the middle explaining some of the town's history. One states:

Around the mid 1850s the first steam-powered coasters were built in the Clyde shipyards. Small enough to navigate inland waterways yet sturdy enough to beach themselves between tides, these puffers used the Crinan Canal to reach the remotest islands and inlets of Argyll with cargoes of building material, coal and grains. Their hardy crews of three or four men of great skill and experience were commemorated in Neil Munro's tales of Para Handy and his puffer Vital Spark.

Another plaque points out that tourism has been a major local industry since the 1830s, and that by the 1880s, up to five passenger steamers a day were docking at the town. The frenzied scene on Ardrishaig pier in *Wee Teeny* captures the atmosphere of a Glasgow Fair Saturday, with the quay black with people, a steamer hooting wildly to urge everyone to hurry on board, and Glasgow women defying the purser 'to let the ship go away without their John, for he had paid his money for his ticket, and though he was only a working man his money was as good as everyone else's...' In the utter chaos, a small child, Teeny, is left behind and it falls to the Vital Spark to reunite her with her parents in Rothesay. The crew set about the task with gusto. Macphail and The Tar amuse her with 'pocket-knives, oil-

cans, cotton-waste, and other maritime toys', Dougie has armed himself with sweeties, and the captain washes his face and puts on his other jacket and his watch chain out of respect for the passenger. All goes well until the child becomes bored and announces she wants to go 'ta-ta'. 'Mercy on us, she canna be more ta-ta than she iss unless we throw her over the side', says Para Handy on hearing the news.

And so to Tarbert, which bursts into view as a riot of colour. I can hardly believe it – there is a fair going full blast. The most perplexing cargo he ever had to carry, says Para Handy in *Queer Cargoes*, was the paraphernalia of the showmen heading for Tarbert Fair. Accompanying their equipment was the Fattest Woman in the World, No-Boned Billy (or the Boy Serpent) and the Mesmerising Man. When they later visit the fair, Dougie, to his eternal embarrassment, ends up 'marrying' the Fattest Woman in the World on stage while under the influence of hypnosis.

On this lovely summer evening the picturesque Argyllshire fishing village is throbbing to the music of more modern pleasures. It's hard to imagine those on board the Trail Blazer Waltzers being much amused by having the Mesmerising Man read the bumps on their heads. Once the delights of the Roller Ghoster have been tasted, No-Boned Billy could hold little interest.

We have moved on in our demands for entertainment. But, frazzled at the end of a busy day, I find there is still much pleasure to be had joining the crew of the Vital Spark, be they spending an evening contentedly alongside a pier in a silver grey fog, or walloping drunkenly down Loch Fyne with a cargo of oak bark, badly trimmed.

Bowing deeply

Magnus Linklater

2000

Day 1

Met at the airport by Ms Takeshita; impressed by bathroom with heated loo seat; surreptitious copying of other people's eating techniques.

After an 11-hour flight, made tolerable by Japan Airlines' in-flight service Club Class – Japanese breakfast and dinner, Japanese civility, and endless Japanese hot towels – I was met at Narita Airport by my guide Ms Taeko Takeshita, whose surname, for some reason, was all too easy to commit to memory. She was accompanied by a chauffeur in the first of a series of large black President automobiles which swished silently to a halt by the pavement. The weather was cold but dry, rather like Scotland in winter without the rain. We drove in to Tokyo, an hour's journey away, while Taeko churned out a series of facts about Japan.

First impressions of Tokyo were entirely unlike I had imagined it. The streets were broad, not overcrowded, far from the jostling sort of atmosphere one might have expected. This may have had something to do with the recession, which is the only topic of conversation in Japan. The Imperial Hotel is very grand, very big, in the heart of the Ginza area, which is the posh bit of Tokyo near the Imperial Palace. Unpacked, found my way round my vast room (the bathroom had a heated loo seat with built-in electronic bidet, such a surprise), then ventured out to find something to eat.

The streets were thronged, but not *that* thronged, the neon signs did indeed flash but not oppressively so. In short, it was a good city in which to walk, and, so everyone insists, very safe. Certainly, there were lots of women unaccompanied and restaurants by the mile. I ate in a friendly Japanese restaurant which served perfectly nice, if still strange, food – lumps of rice, fish wrapped in paper, soup with things floating in it. And green tea, which is ubiquitous. Choosing from the menu was made easier because there were pictures of all the dishes. Knowing when and how to eat them was more complex. Surreptitious copying of other customers helped.

Day 2

Ms Takeshita's disconcerting behaviour; words of conciliation concerning General MacArthur; to a darkened room in the name of art.

Was met in the lobby by Taeko, and whisked all of half a mile to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find the office of Mr Watanabe Masaru, head of the Second West Europe Division.

I began to realise that being escorted by Taeko was a slightly baffling experience. She is

very small, rather short-sighted, and delightfully vague. Whether it was her short sight or her vagueness, but she never seemed to be entirely certain where she was going. She would set off ahead of me, stomping along towards the nearest notice board which she would study closely without apparently learning anything to her advantage. Then she would set off in the opposite direction, peering anxiously around her. Finally she would stop someone and ask for instructions and we would set off back where we had come from, while she smiled apologetically. Even when she knew where she was going she would look as if she didn't, glancing right as she turned left, and left as she turned right as if she half-wished she was going the other way. It was quite disconcerting.

Finally, we reached Mr Watanabe's rather cramped office, and we drank green tea and discussed the Japanese economy. Light at the end of the tunnel seemed to be a recurring phrase. We were also joined by Miss Oka, a cheerful lady who spoke English very well and knew lots of people in Britain ('Did you know that Peter Parker writes haikus?' she asked casually). Then we set off along some other corridors, searching for the offices of Mr Muto Masatoshi, deputy director of the Cultural Affairs Division, where we talked about the arts in Japan.

I had arranged to have lunch with Robert Whyman, *The Times's* man in Tokyo, at the Foreign Correspondents Club. Naturally, we ended up at the wrong place, and had to drive round central Tokyo for some time before we found it. An enjoyable lunch. Robert is an old Tokyo hand, author of a good book about Richard Sorge, the Soviet spy, and instructive about Japan. We arranged to meet again. Then it was off again with Taeko in the car, first to the Tokyo Museum – which deals with the history of Tokyo, from Edo (as it was originally called under the old emperors) to today. Lots of stuff about Samurai and Shogun, and the tiny houses people lived in, but the bit that struck home was the section on the Second World War. I simply hadn't appreciated that so much of Tokyo had been flattened by bombing. Whole areas were simply devastated by conventional bombs and about 100,000 people were killed – 30,000 more than died at Nagasaki. I asked Taeko what the Japanese thought about General MacArthur. She said they liked him. 'He helped us rebuild Japan,' she said. Very forgiving.

On to Opera City, a brand new opera house, concert hall and theatre complex, which also had a gallery with two exhibitions. One, by a famous Japanese artist called Lambata, who lived to 92 and painted all his life (literally, his last pictures were painted in the hospital bed where he died). Since he lived so long, he was influenced by everyone from Braques to Jackson Pollock, whose work is faithfully reflected as he travels through life. He ends up with huge, rather muddy paintings of his own. Then there was a contemporary exhibition of 'installations', a lot of it on video. We ended up in a darkened room with eyes and ears blocked by electronic masks which only emitted the sound of the heartbeats of the other people in the room. We had to find our way to or round them by circles of light which we could see on the screen inside our masks, and which were, apparently, the body heat of the others. Very Japanese, but is it art?

We were shown around the opera house, etc. Vast, all mod cons. They have a new full-time opera company, a new full-time ballet company, a new full-time national theatre, and they are just starting their first season. Bold or what? It's all the result of planning during the golden years when Japan was rich, a period now known as the Japanese Bubble. The Japanese themselves call it bubble-o. We watched a rehearsal of *Petrushka*, then realised it was being directed by Norita, who used to be the prima ballerina at Scottish Ballet, so we fell into each other's arms, figuratively speaking.

Back to the hotel, then to dinner with Mr Watanabe at a posh Japanese restaurant. Although we were waited on by waitresses in kimonos, we had proper seats, so it was fairly westernised. Dish after dish, most of them eatable, the most delicious being *shusha shusha*, thin strips of beef which you dip into boiling water for a minute then eat with sauce, like a fondue.

Day 3

An audience with a Living National Treasure, and the Treasure's formidable wife; a misunderstanding concerning Stanley Baxter.

Picked up and taken by Taeko back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (more going round in circles) where I had an hour with Mr Numata Sadaaki, very smooth, very senior diplomat (he is about to take up a post as ambassador in Pakistan), who knows far more people of importance in Britain than I do. He was bright enough to know exactly what I wanted to know, and far too bright to tell me. Instead, I was given a sophisticated Eurocentric sort of view about Japan, a country which becomes more baffling with each person I talk to. The whole place is a mass of contradictions: ultra modern, highly traditional, sure of some things, totally unconfident about others, wanting to be like the West, but determined to remain Japanese, they go on and on. And now, with the recession, they are obsessed by what went wrong and how to put it right. 'Self-analysis is the engine for change,' said Sadaaki gnomically.

Lunch with Taeko at a sushi bar – fascinating to watch the nimble fingers of the waiters behind the bar as they slice bits of fish, fold them into balls of rice, and wrap them in seaweed, tying them into a neat little parcel in milliseconds. Although signs in shops and restaurants are in English as well as Kanji, communication is not easy, since although the Japanese are taught English grammar and writing, they do not learn conversation in English. But everyone is very smiley and friendly. Afternoon at the National Museum, lots of bowls and buddhas, but the revelation was the early 13th-, 14th- and 15th-century painting, the delicacy of the colours, the design, the paper, so elegant and simple and beautiful. There was one paper screen from the 15th century that looked as modern as if it had been painted yesterday, and indeed it might have been. The style has barely changed in 500 years.

We came back through the part of the city devoted to shops selling electronic gear. Quite extraordinary. Street after street of mobile phones, TVs, cameras, etc. Everyone has a (tiny)

mobile phone of course. And they are obsessed by new gadgets. The area was very reminiscent of Kowloon – it's a kind of electronic pornography.

Taeko and the chauffeur talk to each other a lot. The sound is rather like hens at roosting time. A sort of sing-song clucking which goes up and down and occasionally erupts into a sort of animated squawk. Hi means okay, or right. Ha seems less certain. Aaah on an upward note means, I'm thinking about it.

On to that evening's entertainment – Kabuki Theatre. It was the first night of a new season, beginning at 4.30 in the afternoon and ending five hours later. I was allowed to interview the lead actor, Japan's most famous Kabuki actor, Ganjiro, before he went on stage. He was surrounded by acolytes, and we were ushered into his tiny backstage room, after removing our shoes, and kneeling in front of him. He was charming, about 70, and rather giggly. His wife was there too, formidable, a politician, chairman of the general assembly of the Liberal Party. They are coming to Glasgow next year, putting on a Kabuki show at the Theatre Royal as part of the Japan 2001 events. God knows what Glasgow will make of it. Ganjiro's speciality is playing women, young and old, which has earned him a huge reputation in Japan. He is now an officially designated Living National Treasure, one of a small number of actors, artists, musicians, etc who have been given this honoured status because of their contribution to national life. He gets a grant from the government and is adulated wherever he goes. Kabuki is an all-male business, and the roles are kept within families. Thus Ganjiro had taken over from his father who had succeeded his grandfather. Now his son was on stage too, at the age of 10. He explained about all that and then we had to leave so that he could begin putting on his elaborate make-up and dress.

The theatre was packed. The performances entirely stylised – Kabuki hasn't changed for about 200 years, and everyone knows the characters and the plots backwards. They applaud and shout at odd intervals. The whole thing is beautiful to look at, amazingly static, and completely baffling unless you have been well-briefed beforehand. Luckily, they provide an English commentary through earphones. Ganjiro came on and played an ugly girl, which he did in a style reminiscent of Stanley Baxter. Then he came back on as a lovelorn girl who throws herself off a bridge after being dumped by the hero. He is followed by the male hero who also throws himself off the bridge. The audience went wild, although they had seen it, unchanged, a hundred times before. I asked Taeko what she made of it, and she said she didn't understand it any more than I had.

The evening was later to lead to some embarrassment. I wrote a column for *Scotland on Sunday*, in which I said that watching Mr Ganjiro dressed as a woman in a highly stylised performance, full of incomprehensible ritual, reminded me of nothing so much as our own pantomime. Mr Ganjiro, I concluded, was Japan's answer to Stanley Baxter. Within a day or two of it appearing, I had an anxious call from Miss Oka asking me who Stanley Baxter was. I answered lightly that he was one of our favourite Scottish comedians. On my return to Edinburgh, I got an email from her, saying that there had been much comment about my article, and she hoped that I hadn't intended to insult a Living National Treasure. If I had,

they might need to reconsider coming to Scotland at all. I assured her that nothing had been further from my mind, and that in fact I had been paying Mr Ganjiro an enormous compliment. Stanley Baxter, after all, was the nearest thing Scotland had to a Living National Treasure. Whether this worked or not remains to be seen. It just goes to show that dealing with Japanese cultural traditions is like walking on eggshells.

Day 4

Learn more than anyone needs to know about Korean blue celadon; an evening with a geisha; throw beans at the devil; become somewhat intoxicated.

A day for firsts. First trip on the bullet train, first encounter with a geisha, first time throwing beans at the devil. We hurried through Tokyo Station (super-clean, super-efficient), shifting course behind Taeko as she peered for the signs for the Kyoto train. Almost inevitably, we had to go back on our tracks a couple of times. And the ticket machine wouldn't accept her tickets because she pushed the wrong ones in. However, we had time to buy lunch for the journey – boxes with sushi, elegantly presented, with chopsticks and soya sauce, such a contrast to Burger King. Then a smooth sleek, long-nosed silver snake eased in to the platform.

We travelled in a 'green' carriage as the first class is known. They're too democratic to use the terms first or second class. Very comfortable seats, more like an airline than train, but with much more leg-room. The train whips along at speeds of up to 300 mph without a lurch or a rattle. I hung a bag on a hook on the seat in front of me and it scarcely swayed. Immaculately turned out conductor and girls pushing trolleys. You are automatically given a hot towel to refresh you. We got to Kyoto, 325 miles away, in two hours and 18 minutes. Taeko and I were joined by Miss Oka. We were met by the standard limo and driven through anonymous looking streets to our first destination.

Kyoto is the ancient capital of Japan, and the old town is very old. But the rest is depressingly modern. We picked up an interpreter and were taken to the house of a 70-year-old potter called Sunzei Tani. He lives in a traditional Japanese house, where we had to take off our shoes, and where we were offered green tea and sweet cakes as we listened to Dr Tani and admired his work.

On bowing: this was a day for bowing. The further you get away from western-dominated Tokyo, the lower and more frequently you bow. The lower you bow, the more respectful you are, the more you indicate how important the other person is, and the politer you become. It is not so much the lowness of the bow but the endless dipping that is obligatory. You put your hands to your sides, and dip down several times, smiling as you do so, keeping your face turned to the object of your respectful attention. You also have to hand over your card, gripping it with both hands, then receive the card of the person you are greeting. You mustn't just pop it into your wallet, you have to study it with every expression of interest, raising your eyebrows and shaking your head to indicate admiration and amazement at what it reveals. Aha, ahaaa is a useful response. There is also quite an art

to bowing farewell, as you have to bow and turn to go at the same time, or bow as you get into a car, or bow as you close a door. You see perfectly good friends bowing to each other, and in any public place, the waiters or shop-keepers bow to the customer with fawning enthusiasm. In the hotel, the girls bow to the lift as the door closes.

Everyone bowed to Dr Tani, who appears to be a considerable citizen in Kyoto, and also immensely pleased with himself. He works in Korean blue celadon (porcelain), and is, it appears, the man who rediscovered it. By his account, he went out to Korea to dig for bauxite and found some early Korean earthenware. Being, as he told us, an engineer and a chemist as well as an artist, he was able to work out for the first time how to restore it, which the Koreans themselves had been unable to figure. He is therefore responsible for a massive Korean industry, and for single-handedly boosting the sale of Korea's most sought-after souvenir. He now also makes pots of various kinds which go on show round the world. He had photographs signed by people like Jacques Chirac and Prince Albert of Monaco round his wall, together with testimonials from various museums saying how grateful they were to have been able to show his work. 'I am not interested in money,' he told us. 'Many people have come to ask me to sell them my work, but I am not interested in selling.' He was, however, deeply interested in the possibility of having an exhibition of his work in Edinburgh, and he wondered if I could help him in this regard. Not to be outdone, I said I would speak to the Museum of Scotland, which impressed him enormously. By the time the afternoon had ended, he had assumed it was fixed. I can't wait to tell Mark Jones, the museum's director, not least because I doubt if he will warm to Dr Tani's work which is very glazed and glittery. He showed us some lacquer boxes he has made, which looked exactly like the ones you get in John Lewis.

For some reason, he seemed to regard me as an extremely important contact and invited me to dinner that evening, which I accepted. Thence, after much bowing and fawning, on to the prefecture, where we were greeted by a full delegation of senior officials. We sat at a table with a Japanese and a British flag in the middle, like a summit conference, and I had to explain the state of Scottish-Japanese relations, and compare the civic situation in Edinburgh and Kyoto. Mr Satori Shimmi, section chief of the International Division of the Governor's Office of the Kyoto Prefectural Government – for it was he – told us he had met the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, Mr Elic Mirrigan, and was arranging an exhibition of Japanese gardens at Lauriston Castle next year. I told him I virtually lived in Lauriston Castle, and extended to him the freedom of the City of Edinburgh. By the time the conversation had ended, I was dealing in bilateral trade.

We then set out on our next mission, to visit an artist who makes kimonos – not just any artist, but Mr Tokio Hata, who is another Japanese Living National Treasure. Actually, Mr Hata himself was not there, but his son Noburo and his granddaughter Toki were, and there was a video of the Living National Treasure. By now we were trailing a delegation of seven people – three from the prefecture, two from the city's crafts division, an interpreter, Taeko, and me. At the gallery there were five others, so we made a sizeable audience. Mr

Hata's kimonos were stunning, and the technique he uses ancient, complex and completely baffling, despite the video. Since Kyoto is the dye capital of Japan, it involved many stages of transferring colours, of delicate painting on silk, and finally of washing in the clear river-water of Kyoto. The most moving bit of the video showed Mr Hata sitting contemplating the Zen rock garden at the Ryoanji Temple, which was made in the 16th century. 'I have been coming here for 50 years,' he said, 'and even though I might come for another 50 I would only have begun to understand the mystery and meaning of this garden'. I asked his son what it was like having a father who was a Living National Treasure. He said it was like having any other father – fathers, he said, are fathers. The man from the prefecture said that these days they were known, not as Living National Treasures but as 'important intangible assets'. Somehow it doesn't have the same ring.

Next, with our expanding delegation, to an obi factory. I couldn't believe there were still obi factories in Japan. The Kabuki play in Tokyo had been set in an obi factory, which I imagined was a throwback to the 17th century. But no, here was one, and one, what is more, that appeared to be thriving. An obi is the broad band of silk, elaborately decorated, that you tie round your kimono, and it is sought after for special occasions. The factory had 22 people working on machines that looked like spinning jennies. They hadn't changed much, so far as we could see, since they were invented a hundred years ago. Hundreds of threads came down from the ceiling to be woven into dazzling silk patterns. The girls working them had flying fingers, the machines clanked and whirred – it was like a scene from an Italian opera.

There had been one change, however. Formerly, the pattern and colours were drawn on paper, and the order in which the appropriate threads were selected was dictated by a complex pattern of holes in the paper. Now it was done by computer. But the weaving machines remained unchanged. Each obi, from concept to completion, takes three years. There is no government support. How can it possibly pay? The boss, a twinkling figure with a nice line in repartee, admitted it was a tough going, and could the Scottish Arts Council help? I promised to fly over a team at once. But the truth emerged when he said that they managed to produce 100 obis per month, and quoted the price. One was for sale at 1.5 million yen, or nearly £10,000, one for 8 million yen or £50,000. Yes, he said, he had no lack of customers. So plainly the gloss hasn't completely gone off the Japanese economy.

Then it was off to dinner with Dr Tani – just me and my interpreter. We were ushered into a very Japanese restaurant, removed our shoes, then up some stairs into a private room where we were greeted by the madam, on her knees, bowing as if to Mecca. My heart sank as I saw there were no seats, just floor-level things to kneel on. Along one side of the table was Dr Tani and his son who runs the business side of his empire. Along the other was me, my interpreter – and a geisha! Well, actually, she was a geika, a trainee geisha, known as a Mika-yan, or dancer. She was elaborately painted, coffered and dressed. She was like a china doll. But when she smiled, she revealed yellowing buck teeth which slightly spoiled the effect. Her job was to sit beside us, pour out drinks and smile. Apart from asking us if

we wanted more beer or sake she was silent. If you looked at her she smiled and nodded and poured you out more to drink. It was disconcerting.

Not, however, for Dr Tani, who continued his conversation about the wonderful work he was doing. He was about to deliver a lecture on Korean blue celadon in which he intended to advance the theory that Korean blue celadon could bring peace to the world. I asked him how this might be achieved, and he said that if everyone had the opportunity to contemplate Korean blue celadon, they would find it immensely calming. I couldn't quite think how to respond to this, but, bolstered by enormous quantities of sake and beer, I ventured to outline the Scottish Arts Council's policy on crafts and how they could help boost the economies of rural areas. Perhaps Dr Tani had something like this in mind for Korean blue celadon. He did not. He wanted nothing to do with communities, he was only interested in world peace, and his lecture would explain how this was to happen.

Meanwhile, course after course was being brought in by kimono-clad waitresses, who mostly seemed to walk on their knees. There was raw fish, and rice cakes, ginger, little bits of seaweed, and, every now and then, something ferociously hot. It seemed to go on for ever, and the muscles in my legs were screaming in agony. I began by kneeling, then slumping sideways, sitting up with my legs straight in front of me, then back to kneeling. Just as I thought I had lost all sensation below the waist, Dr Tani got up and said we were going to a nightclub. It was the 3rd of February, when they celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of spring, and we had to throw beans at the devil.

Photographs were taken, we bowed our farewells, and drove on to a very swish nightclub, which Dr Tani assured us was the biggest and most exclusive in Kyoto. I was deeply impressed. I had read about the geisha clubs of Kyoto in my guide book which said: 'They line the alley, unassuming almost to the point of invisibility behind their opaque slatted windows, guarded by exquisitely refined, unforgiving, unbridgeable matrons, who, unless the visitor has been invited by a very rich and very trusted client, will not allow him to cross the threshold for love – or, even, for money'. Yet here we were, being greeted by a smiling and apparently forgiving matron. We did, of course, have a very rich and very trusted client – Dr Tani.

We went upstairs into a dimly-lit room, where there were tables with men only around them. Each table, however, had a girl, or sometimes two, performing almost the same ritual as the geisha. They were hostesses in short skirts – though one or two were in modern kimonos. They were perhaps a bit more interventionist – ours, who was very glamorous, ventured a joke or two. But mainly they were there to minister to the men, listen to their conversations, nod in appreciation, laugh at their jokes, and fill up their glasses. Their main excitement seemed to be replenishing the ice bucket. Whether there was more in store later in the evening I have no means of knowing. It must be a dismal way to spend an evening, though apparently they are well-paid, tipped, and who knows what else. We drank Japanese whisky, and discussed the merits of Korean blue celadon, until the nightclub boss announced that the time had come to throw beans.

I was invited, as an honoured gaijin, or foreigner, to throw the first bean. I was given a costume to put on, and a box of soya beans. Then a fearsome creature in a devil's mask came in, and we pelted him with beans, while the hostesses clapped and giggled and the men shouted out appropriate insults. Finally, when that was over, we all posed for photographs with the devil, and went back to drinking.

What with the sake and the Japanese whisky and the bean-throwing, I was fairly pie-eyed by now, but I was told there was another ritual, which was to eat a foot-long sushi roll – you had to consume it all at one go, and you weren't allowed to speak until you had done so. Since I was completely bloated, not to say bloated, I didn't see how I could do it, so I took a bite and tried to conceal the rest of it under the table, where, alas, it was spotted by our hostess who drew it to everyone's attention. I had to plead the ignorance of the foreigner.

Finally, even Dr Tani ran out of steam, and we all went home, not, unfortunately, before he'd made a date to show us the treasures of some temple to which, he said, only he and the Emperor had access.

They happened to include some examples of his own work in Korean blue celadon.

Day 5

The maker of creative thoughts buys a title; feels he has seen enough temples.

Nara, and the day of the temple. Taeko and I entrained for Nara, said to be the most beautiful and ancient city of Japan. 'A spacious, public beauty,' said my guidebook, 'a beauty amid which to congregate and applaud'. Well, up to a point. Drive through or round it and you'd think you were in any Japanese town – undistinguished concrete buildings, higgledy-piggledy modern architecture, nothing to write home about.

It does, however, have an old town of narrow streets and rather fascinating houses and shops. And it has temples. We saw the Horyuji temple, the oldest in Japan, which has two miraculous statues. One is a tall, elegant, 7th-century goddess known as the Kudara Kannon, which is simply sublime. The other is the Miroku Bosatsu or Buddha of the Futures, which is said to have been made by Prince Shotuko, the great patron of Japanese culture. It is just wonderful – soft and graceful, with a smile like the Mona Lisa's. Taeko and I knelt in front of it for ages. She was quite overcome, bowing and praying like anything. She is more of a Shinto person than a Buddhist – in fact she thinks most Buddhist priests are corrupt and that modern Japanese Buddhism favours the rich over the poor – but she has nothing against Buddha himself, and says the two can go quite well together: Shinto for births and weddings, Buddhism for death, because that way you have the chance of reincarnation.

Then we went to the Toshodaiji Temple which has an extraordinary main hall, with vast pillars of wood, like a Greek temple, and yet more Buddhas. Thence to Yakushiji, which has two very old pagodas, and where they were rebuilding the lecture hall or Kodo. I paid 2,000 yen to 'buy' a tile, on which I was allowed to inscribe some Japanese characters of my choice. I chose one which said something like: 'maker of creative thoughts' – in other

words, journalist. In two years' time it will be keeping the rain off the Kodo of Yakushiji, with my fine brushwork on it. I cannot think of a better way of spending 2,000 yen. On to Todai-ji, the biggest temple in Japan, and the largest wooden structure in the world. It was indeed big.

There are deer everywhere in Nara, roaming through the parks and onto the streets, begging for food from the tourists. Apparently in the old days if you harmed one you were executed. It's probably what Scottish Natural Heritage would like to do in Perthshire. I think I may have missed out one or two temples, but that, as they say, is enough temples. And so back to the marbled splendour of our own temple-hotel, the Miyako in Kyoto.

Day 6

Another meeting with Dr Tani; some observations on political correctness; experience the pleasures of naked communal bathing.

Up early to go to the Zen stone garden at Ryoanji Temple, so admired by Mr Hata. Just a few island rocks in the middle of a sea of raked gravel surrounded by a clay wall. It's been there, unchanged, for nearly 500 years. We were almost alone, and it was incredibly peaceful, sitting in the warm morning sun contemplating the simplicity of it. Taeko said you could think of it as a sea with islands, or a sky with clouds, or indeed a mother tiger with her cubs. There are said to be 15 separate rocks, but you can only count 13. Soami, the artist-gardener who made it, said that showed that you could never be certain about anything in life. Round the corner is an exquisite, and more conventional Japanese garden, with a pond full of mandarin ducks, trees perfectly framing it and a landscape beyond. The term 'borrowed landscape' comes from China. But the Japanese have perfected it, using the hills, the trees, even the skies beyond, to complete a perfect image.

We then had to get back to meet the ubiquitous Dr Tani who had promised to show us the treasures of the To-ji Temple. This turned out, against all expectations, to be hugely enjoyable. Dr Tani's considerable status means that people literally run when he appears. At the hotel, the manager and his top staff turned out to bid us farewell with the lowest bows ever seen, and the chauffeur ran like a lamplighter to open every door he could find on cars which weren't even needed. At the temple we were greeted by a beaming Buddhist monk who ushered us into a large reception room with bright red sofas, where we drank green tea, and he talked about the role of the temple in dispensing advice, mainly to broken families. The collapse of the Japanese family was, said our host, the worst thing that had happened in recent times in Japanese life. Dr Tani started to point out how Korean blue celadon might be able to help, but we were interrupted by a far more senior monk at this point who was the director-general of the entire temple. He agreed about the family, and said that last year there had been 33,000 suicides in Japan. Can this really be true? (Apparently it is.)

Then we were taken into the secret precincts of the temple, past a path which only 15 monks were allowed to use, where there was a red carpet and two tiny red slippers, monks

for the use of. Thence into the imperial section. That is, the apartments for use only by the Emperor. There were just two red cushions in the room – one for the Emperor, one for the Empress. Full marks to Dr Tani, he invited Taeko, and his assistant, and the running chauffeur to come too. It was quite a privilege. The Emperor's room (last used nine years ago) was, like all the others, completely bare, with paper screens, painted most beautifully by an artist in the 1930s, using that very spare brushwork to paint very simple branches, animals, birds and ponds. There was no treasure as such, just finely proportioned rooms, which we tiptoed through in our socks – even slippers had to be removed. No treasures as such until we were ushered into an ante-room, and there in a recess stood a small buddha – in Korean blue celadon. Yes, it was the work of Dr Tani, the only artefact, so far as I could see, in the imperial quarters. I imagine his role in the next incarnation is well-assured. We went back to the room with red sofas, to be given lunch of noodle soup, a present of textiles from the temple, and a farewell from the beaming monk. Finally, too, it was goodbye to Dr Tani who promises, however, to come to Edinburgh very, very soon. I fancy we have not heard the last of Korean blue celadon.

On political correctness: the Japanese are not strong on it. Their attitude to women – see above – is still male chauvinist to an extent that would be quite unacceptable in Britain (less so in Scotland!). Taeko said that it is almost impossible for a woman to get a senior executive job, even if she dedicates herself to a career and forgets about babies. They are expected to raise families and spend a lot of time in the kitchen. The husbands, according to Taeko, are never seen dead in the kitchen, and are best kept out of it in any event. The Japanese smoke like chimneys, and have clearly never heard of passive smoking, though the trains are mainly cigarette-free. Even Taeko said that there was a lot to be said for cigarette smoking, since it was a good way of relieving stress. They are not nearly as safety-obsessed as us, and it is amazing, in a modern nation which is notoriously clean, to see electric wires criss-crossing back streets, with dubious-looking connections wrapped in insulating tape which would render any health and safety officer in Britain apoplectic.

After Toji, we were chauffeured off to see Kinkaji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion, which is indeed golden, and stands amongst trees reflected in the mirror-surface of a lake. It was completely rebuilt after it was burnt to the ground by a mad monk in 1955 because it was said to be too perfect to exist in this wicked world. Yukio Mishima wrote a novel about it.

The main attraction is the garden which is immaculate, particularly the mosses round the edge of the lake, the reflections of the pavilion, and the pine trees which look as if they have been painted onto the sky. There is a bonsai tree, planted by an ancient Emperor, which has grown into a full-size tree, and therefore has to be propped up by an elaborate series of frames. The extraordinary thing about it is that, despite its size, it still looks like a miniature tree.

We went to see Nijo Castle, where the Shoguns stayed when they were in town – huge and imposing, with marvellous wall-paintings of trees and animals, and the 'nightingale

floor' – wooden planks which 'sing' as you walk on them to warn the Shogun's guards of an approaching stranger. We drove back through tiny streets with some fascinating miniature gardens, one with a little moss-covered mill wheel, turning slowly, while enormous carp swam in tiny canals, just beside the pavement. But the last thing we saw in Kyoto was probably the most remarkable of them all: Sanju-Sangen-Do, or the hall of 1,001 Buddhas. One huge golden Buddha sits in the centre of a hall which is supported by 33 pillars. Behind them, in a long gallery, in row after serried row, are literally 1001 Buddhas, bronzed, five or six feet tall, each with 20 arms holding a variety of symbolic objects, each different, sculpted in the 12th and 13th century. They are guarded by huge and fearsome statues of the Thunder God and the Wind God at either end of the hall, and then, in front, 28 guardian deities, scowling, menacing, threatening or simply standing. It's one of the most extraordinary sights I have ever seen.

Just in time to catch the 3.12 train to Hiroshima, hence to be whisked in yet another limousine onto the ferry to the island-shrine of Miyajima, which has a huge Shinto gate, the Otori Gate, standing in the water at the entrance to the harbour, painted orange-saffron.

We were booked into a traditional Japanese inn or Ryokan, a relief after the empty extravagance of our other hotels. It's a Japanese inn, no English spoken or written. Simple, with plain walls, a few simple paintings, tatami, or reed mats on the floor, and sliding paper screens. You take off your shoes to go in, remove your slippers in your room and change into a yukata – or Japanese dressing-gown, tied of course by an obi, with a loose jacket on top of it. My room had just a low table, a room with a basin screened off, a loo and cupboards.

The maid comes in, lays out dinner on the table – delicious, and beautifully presented with flowers and a flowering twig. They have a wonderful capacity for understatement. Taeko joined me for dinner. We sat on the floor while the courses were brought in by a succession of talkative and cheery girls, totally different from those geisha hostesses in Kyoto. After dinner, the maid comes in again, clears the table, pushes it to one end of the room, then unfolds a 'futon' – actually just a double quilt from the cupboard – lays it on the floor, spreads a sheet and a downie, and hey presto, I have a bed.

I go down to the communal bathhouse in the basement. You wash before you get into the bath – it's bad form to take even a soapsud into the bath. So you sit naked on a little stool and wash and shower, rinsing yourself from a wooden tub which you fill with water. Then you get into a big square hot bath, in which various other naked males are lounging. After a while you get out, dry, put on your yukata, and go to bed. I slept better than I have the whole time I have been here.

Day 7

Sobering visit to Hiroshima; reunion with Mulla-San, who say nothing happening in Asia this week.

Up betimes, to have breakfast, Japanese-style, downstairs. Everyone in yukata. Breakfast is

not unlike dinner – bits of fish, seaweed, soup, egg, served in bowls and boxes, and dishes and plates, to be picked at with chopsticks. Then we headed down to the shrine – a wooden structure jutting out into the bay, like piers, surrounded by water at high tide, with a plain Shinto altar where you throw money into a slatted box, bow twice, clap twice, pray and bow. No paintings or human figures depicted, but the shrine is guarded by two Korean lions, one with its mouth open, one shut. The letters of the Japanese alphabet begin with the open Aaah, and end with the closed Mmm. There are at least 3,000 characters. Back to the inn, into the bus, across the ferry, to Hiroshima.

Hiroshima is the best laid out city in Japan, for rather grim and obvious reasons. A memorial park, somewhat impersonal, with a modern sculpture in the form of an arch, ends in one of the few buildings to remain standing – a place once used for industrial exhibitions, now a ruin, with a twisted dome at the top, and crumbling walls. It would have fallen down or been pulled down years ago, except that it has been reinforced and propped up, and will now last forever – probably longer than some of the modern buildings round about it, because it stands as a memorial to the bomb.

When you go round the exhibition, explaining and illustrating in pitiless detail what happened, it takes some adjustment to grasp the enormity of it. There are some new pictures, which show in panorama the destruction of acre upon acre, an entire city flattened. But actually, the photographs I saw of Tokyo were as bad – and in fact more people were killed instantly in Tokyo – 100,000 as opposed to around 70,000 in Hiroshima. But the figure usually quoted, of 200,000, includes all those who died later of radiation. There are some horrific images, pictures taken in the immediate aftermath, of shocked groups of survivors, clothes torn and burnt. People have brought in shoes, shirts and trousers belonging to their children, caught in the blast, coming back home to die, and pieces of wall or roof which literally boiled in the heat. The steps outside a bank have been preserved, with the outline of the person who was sitting on them who melted into the stone. In the end, it becomes almost meaningless and the endless dedications to world peace seem somehow trite alongside the evidence of mass destruction.

Two theories – one advanced by Robert Whyman, *Times* man in Tokyo, one by Murray Sayle, ex-*Sunday Times*, long-time investigative reporter. The Whyman (and best accepted) version is that the bombs were dropped to prevent further useless loss of life – the Japanese regime had dictated that every Japanese must fight to the death to preserve the fatherland, and, while the Emperor and his ministers had carefully defended bunkers deep underground, ordinary people would simply have died in the streets in their thousands, fighting to the death.

The Sayle theory, set out in a long single issue of the *New Yorker*, reveals a more sinister motive. The American war machine was determined that the bomb should be used before the end of the war at all costs. It was vital that it be tested because otherwise there would be no means of demonstrating its potential. The argument that it would bring a speedy end to the war was used as a cloak for the scientists to carry out the ultimate live test. Their

formula was simple and deadly: one plane plus one bomb = minus one Japanese city.

After that, off to the airport, only to find all flights cancelled because of fog. Our wonderful chauffeur, who had deposited Taeko and me at the airport had hung around to check that we were all right, and was able to drive us back in time to catch a train to Tokyo. Taeko later said there were three things she liked about my visit: one, that I listened to her commentaries about Japan; two, that we were given lunch in the Toji temple rather than having to waste time and money having lunch with Dr Tani; three, that the chauffeur stayed behind at Hiroshima airport so that we didn't miss the Tokyo train.

An event-free journey back, then I joined Jenny and Murray Sayle at the Foreign Correspondents Club.

Murray is one of the great journalists of our time. An Australian, straight-talking, intolerant of the normal conventions which govern lesser men, he has always struck out on his own. He began in Britain on the *People*, around the time they were exposing the Messina Gang in Soho, and Jack 'The Spot' Valenti – remember them? Murray's hero was Duncan Webb, the reporter who first coined the phrase 'I made my excuses and left' when exposing what were known in those days as 'vice girls'. He was said to have worked at a desk surrounded by a bullet-proof screen because he 'feared for his life' at the hands of the Soho protection racketeers. Murray liked larger than life characters, and he is certainly one himself. He wrote a brilliant novel about the *People* called *A Crooked Sixpence* which was never published because of libel. The paper insisted it was pulped. I remember seeing it and the quotation at the front: 'There was a crooked man and he walked a crooked mile, he found a crooked sixpence and it wasn't enough'.

Murray covered wars and famines and Vietnam (he backed the Americans) and Bloody Sunday, and then sailed round the world in a single-handed yacht and wrote some terrific pieces for the *Sunday Times*. But he fell out with Harry Evans, didn't like the team journalists on the paper and left to go east, taking with him Jenny, whom I remember as the very sweet *Insight* secretary we all doted on. He worked for *Newsweek* in Hong Kong, and was said to have lived on a junk in the harbour without a telephone. The story is told that when *Newsweek* wanted to get in touch they had to send a boy down the pier and out in a sampan, to say 'Mullay-san, *Newsweek* say anything happening in Asia this week?' and the message would come back: 'Mullay-san say nothing happened in Asia this week'. Anyway, that didn't last long, and he moved to Japan with Jenny.

Unable to afford a house in Tokyo, he bought a house in a village on the slopes of Mount Fuji, about two hours outside the capital, and wrote long and brilliant, and always controversial pieces for *The Spectator*, *Literary Review* and *New Yorker* about Japan, the Far East, etc. Disaster struck when their house burnt down, and they lost everything. The villagers rallied round, raised £13,000 to help them out, and found them a new house. They have three children, Japanese-educated and bilingual, and I had not seen either of them for more than 20 years.

Seeing him again, he didn't disappoint. He was wearing a battered fisherman's hat and

chewing his trademark matchstick. Jenny was looking slim and elegant. I was amazed that she had survived (a) Murray, who must be a difficult man to be married to, and (b) Japan. But she has done both and, it seemed to me, got the measure of them both. Murray, who usually never stops talking, shut up whenever she interrupted him. And while she speaks good Japanese, he doesn't. 'Well, I'm the one who has to buy the food every day, I have to,' she said.

We went to 'the best sushi restaurant in Tokyo' where there is a live shark swimming in a tank, and gossiped endlessly about the old days, Japan and points east. Amongst many riveting facts about Japan, I remember these:

1.

Japanese education was originally known by the phrase meaning 'studying Barbarian books' – that is, they learnt about foreigners because they were impressed by some of the things they had done, particularly Britain because of their success in the opium wars. But they always thought of them as Barbarians, to be kept at arms length.

2.

The purpose of the Japanese economy is to maintain its social structures, not just to make people rich. The disparity between rich and poor is less in Japan than in any comparable capitalist country. 90% claim to be middle-class.

3.

Work in Japan is the purpose of life. *O-shigoto*, meaning literally 'honourable work' is what defines you. To be out of work is therefore more than just being jobless. It means you are a non-person, and not part of society. Maintaining employment is therefore a natural part of being a civilised society.

Day 8

Accused of being a very clever journalist; experience a Japanese joke at first-hand.

Interview with Japan Foundation, equivalent of the British Council. Not very interesting. Did some shopping at the Oriental Bazaar. The thing about Japanese souvenirs is that, unlike those of most other countries, you actually want to buy them. I told Taeko that I wanted to see some modern wood-block prints and we finally tracked down a gallery where there were some wonderful prints by an 86-year-old called Toko Shinoda. They were abstract and minimalist, but clearly Japanese in style and influence, with simple brushwork and strong lines. I spent the best part of an hour going through them and basically wanted to buy them all. But they were very expensive and in the end I got one small one.

Then on to see the top brass of *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the biggest selling newspaper in Japan – and that means big. They have a circulation of 10.2 million, make a profit of 460 million yen, run a baseball team and a symphony orchestra. They have a newsroom the size of an

aircraft hangar, and more journalists than I ever hope to see collected in one place. They no longer wear uniforms, however. They showed me their mission statement which stresses things that we in Britain have long since discarded as hopelessly old-fashioned and fuddy-duddy – such as trust and being believed by their readers. Being a right-wing newspaper, the people I spoke to were not at all impressed by the need to jump on board the internet bandwagon or catch up with information technology. One of them said he thought Japan should give it five to 10 years and allow change to be introduced slowly over the next 50 years. I said I thought that things were moving just a little faster than that, and they might risk being overtaken by events. 'Aha – you are very clever journalist, you ask difficult questions,' he said.

That evening, there was a reception at the British Embassy for a visiting minister called Janet Anderson, apparently Minister for Tourism. In the middle of the throng, she came up to me and said, you won't remember me but I was Peter Wilsher's secretary on the *Sunday Times*! The fact is I didn't remember her, but Peter Wilsher was the business editor, and I remember him very well. It appears she went on to work for Barbara Castle, then Jack Straw, then was persuaded to stand for parliament in some Liverpool seat, and the rest is history. The British Ambassador delivered his speech in fluent Japanese, including several jokes which had his audience in stitches.

Back to the hotel. Since it was quite early, I went out for a meal and decided to go to a sushi bar which is said to be so popular that you have to queue. Actually I didn't, because there was one place at the bar – next to a girl with her mother, who had come to visit her from the island of Kyushu. The girl spoke quite good English, was completely unshy and talked about her life in the big city in the most relaxed and uninhibited way. 'Men are terrible,' she said. 'They are only looking at your body.' And: 'I would tell you what I am doing in medical research, but I think I wait until you have finished eating'. And: 'Bad things are happening, like that kidnap case in the paper this morning'. I told her that I had been out to dinner with a geisha and she was very impressed. What did she do?, she asked. I said she filled up my glass with sake. At which the mother reached over and filled my glass with sake. 'I be geisha tonight,' she said. A Japanese joke, no less.

An observation: you rarely see fat people in Japan. A matter of diet? Genetics? Or both? Don't know, but it's true, and may be related to the very low incidence of heart disease in Japan.

Day 9

Learn about the Japanese underclass; leave puppet show at the interval, preferring to write an article for *The Times* of London.

I had cancelled the planned visit to the Sony exhibition centre where I was due to have been shown the latest in electronic technology. Instead, I was taken shopping by Taeko, then back to the Foreign Correspondents Club, where I had lunch with Robert Whymant, and a curious little Japanese journalist called Ryu Otomi who works for *Le Monde*, and talks very

fast and almost entirely incomprehensibly. I caught about one word in five. Clearly what he was saying was extremely interesting, particularly about the Burakumin, the never spoken about Japanese underclass, often Koreans, who are segregated and discriminated against. Japan's racial and social prejudice, he said, may be buried beneath the surface but it is real and unpleasant. He also said something at one stage which I thought was very Japanese. He had been rather dominating the conversation at one point and he apologised. 'I'm sorry for being extrovert,' he said. Robert said that the Japanese have a real fear about the younger generation not following in their footsteps and breaking the familiar mould. A terrible story had been in the papers about a mother who had killed her daughter because she was refusing to take a job in the local company and wanted to go abroad instead.

We were then joined by Alex Sayle, the 21-year-old son of Jenny and Murray. He is an articulate, self-possessed young man, studying computer science at Sydney University, but also working for an internet service company in Tokyo run by Japanese. Brought up entirely in Japanese schools, he speaks Japanese as his first language and English as his second. He is fluent in both, though I was intrigued both by his accent, which sits somewhere between Aylesbury and Alice Springs, and the fact that he sometimes had to reach for a word that would have come naturally to most of us. He has gone to university to learn more about computers and could end up in Australia or Japan – or indeed anywhere. He's obviously bright.

In the afternoon, interviews with a modern Japanese dance group, and the head of the Cultural Affairs Department. There was then a theatre visit to Bunraku, which is the Japanese puppet theatre – rather like Kabuki on sticks, highly stylised. There is no pretence that the puppets are not manipulated. In fact each one has three people – a puppet master who moves the head and the right arm, and who is well-known, and two assistants, with their faces draped in black, who operate the other limbs. The audience were all grown-ups and applauded the puppet masters as they were introduced. Again, it was about a lovelorn couple who commit suicide by jumping into a well. Don't the Japanese have any other storylines?

As luck would have it, the first interval came after only 20 minutes, and though Taeko was rather shocked, I suggested we make our excuses and leave – I had to get back to the hotel to write my column for *The Times*. The rest of the evening was spent trying to knit the sheer accumulation of impressions I had gathered over the past nine days into 970 words of crisp prose.

Day 10

An exchange of gifts. A final bow.

Early departure from the Imperial – Taeko is there to pick me up and whisk me to the airport. I present her with the customary gifts of a departing honoured visitor, and she is embarrassed at not having anything to give in return. I assure her, however, that her gift to me has been the communication to me of her encyclopaedic knowledge of Japanese history

and culture. She insists that when I come again I look her up and she will be happy to escort me again. We bow deeply to each other and I go through passport control. When I look back, she is still bowing.

A chippy in Brigadoon

George Chalmers

2002

Day 1

There are two things wrong with the ferry journey from Wemyss Bay to Rothesay; it only takes 40 minutes and you're never out of sight of land. Unless, of course, you choose to travel at the same time as me, when poor visibility limits Saturn to an outline at the end of the gangplank.

Walking ahead of me, showing faith in his seeing-eye dog, is a tall, bearded man in a tan raincoat. I recall noticing them at Glasgow Central because the dog looked as if it was reading the departure board. This sparked a replay of film footage showing George W Bush waving to Stevie Wonder, the image confirming the dictum that, truly, 'anyone can be President'.

An elderly couple observe me smiling, jump to a wrong conclusion and try to embarrass me with a 'we saw you laugh at the blind man' look. They have matching Gortex jackets and His and Her's backpacks strapped properly on their bodies. 'That dug tells the time,' I suggest, including the raffia-mafia in something unusual. 'Nods its head for the hours, wags its tail against his leg for the minutes – pretty smart eh?' They follow my gaze across, searching for telltale signs. 'They were on *One Man and his Watchdog* – maybe you saw it?' And their little wicker contact lenses steam-up trying to look disgusted.

They aren't Glaswegians. Glaswegians would have reacted in some way. Glasgow's turning into another Edinburgh where you only meet people from somewhere else. Rothesay's much the same. Although, mercifully, the Costa Clyde is free from bogus buskers in national costume wringing the life from a myth.

Thanks to an integrated transport system the 12.50 from Glasgow Central to Wemyss Bay had arrived in ample time to board the 13.45 ferry to Rothesay. In the early 1900s, Rothesay played host to thousands of working-class people in search of a cure for urban ills. And any overspill the Co-op Camp and Healthcare couldn't accommodate, far-sighted locals could. Rented rooms must have resembled multiple murder scenes as enterprising tenement dwellers marked out sleeping areas in chalk.

Today, along the promenade, there are multiple B&Bs to choose from, an accommodation resource that prompted a controlled influx of people from the urban sprawl of West Coast mainland. Inner city ailments were again imported to the Unexplored Isle, only this time the disabilities were more social than physical. The inexorable creep of contemporary problems are already beyond the landlady's chalk line. I phone the social work office for information on demographic change and its impact on the dynamic of the island. The three people I speak to are friendly and keen to help but don't have information to hand.

As a member of an escorted tour you don't even have to know the Matterhorn isn't a tuba –
Temple Fielding

On the upper deck of the Saturn I strike a Hemingway pose as we pull away but, within minutes, nails of wind-driven rain push me below. 'Bit blowy up top?' asks Gordon MacFarlane, in a deadpan kinda way. 'Very er, bracing,' I manage to gulp. 'Bracing?' laughs he. 'Well, I'm braced out.'

Ten minutes out into the Firth of Clyde and Gordon has embarked on his good deed for the day: a 'swift tour' of the island in the spare time he has before a late lunch date. 'You may fancy an open-topped bus of course,' he says, looking wryly into a curtain of wire wool enclosing the ship. He clasps both hands and delivers information in officer style. 'At two o'clock that's Toward Point – the lighthouse isn't operational of course. You'd take a dogleg right to Loch Striven. Warships refuel at the gantry there. Some clever bugger built a fake village up there during the Second World War – sparsely lit, it duped Gerry into bombing a few sheds. At nine o'clock you'd see Great Cumbrae – if it were visible.' We peer into layers of mist then turn our attention aboard ship.

We watch a woman in a pleated skirt make heavy weather of navigating a flight of wet iron stairs until a freak gust lifts her skirt and changes her descent into a saucy postcard. She blames her husband following on behind.

Rothesay, early afternoon

Gordon moved to the island from Gourock four years ago. He owns an untraceable English accent, speaks vaguely about his origins, and has an 'our man in Rothesay' air about him.

'Coming up, at one o'clock, is Ascog Hall – a Victorian fernery. £2.50 to look at ferns. At two o'clock, that's Yasmin Le Bon's place – up for sale I think. Now this is Mount Stuart House – and up there, at 10 o'clock, is the visitor centre.'

On a grassy slope waits a minimalist's dream in wood and grass. Its clean, straight lines provide a contrasting relief to the main attraction's ornate splendour. a design inspired by a paperclip, if memory serves.

Then on to the Ettrick Bay Tea Room, full of sensible folk sheltering from the rain. Too wet even for seals, otters and porpoises to frolic off-shore, or perhaps high levels of nitrates washed from the fields prohibit wildlife as much as potential swimmers. Big breath of air, then it's back in Gordon's untidy car across country to Port Bannatyne which Gordon considers 'a bit rough' but to me looks like Brigadoon with a chippy.

'Three fifteen,' says Gordon, and I look immediately to the right. 'No, it's quarter-past three,' he angles his watch. Twenty minutes later, Gordon drops me outside the Palace Bar. From inside comes the seductive click of pool balls – for me, a sound that holds a gravitational pull as a traffic cone to a pissed student. By 5pm, I've discovered a nice B&B, had a shower and changed into dry clothes. A break in the weather encourages a walk to the West End Cafe to devour an 'award-winning' fish tea, before pool at the Palace Bar.

Early evening

Royalty is so much a factor in the Palace Bar it could have been a 'grace and favour' boozer. Above the fading green baize of the pool table droops a Union Jack. Photos of Diana, et al, adorn the walls. 'Gonnae no' play pool the noo,' warns a thickset blonde behind the bar, then turns back to watch two Eastenders bawling abuse at each other. 'Ah get oot the hoose tae escape this,' grumps an old man in a baseball cap. There's a bit of forced banter between him and the woman that is probably a nightly happening. I order a 'soda water with lime and ice' and make my way back to a window seat. A voice from inside a nicotine cloud says, 'Is that wee George Chalmers?' and the rest of the night is used up recounting stories, real and imagined, from within the confines. After half an hour, I remember why the two characters I've met were only ever nodding acquaintances. They have a young female in tow. She spends the few hours shredding beer mats until I ask 'How many are you on a day?' and she leaves without a word. She has a 'Freddy Kruger was my care worker' look about her and an obvious vulnerability ripe for predatory exploitation.

Get back to the B&B around 10pm, switch on the telly and get an unwanted programme about paedophiles. Check out the neighbours' back gardens. Next door, rain-heavy shirts pegged out by an untrained man still hang on a line. From beyond that comes the sound of an unnatural water feature.

Day 2

6.30am

Wakened by vertical rain hammering on the corrugated iron roof of an extension that slopes away from the window. At least it drowns out the water feature. Enjoy two perfect poached eggs on toast in the owners' lounge that doubles as a breakfast bar. We chat in polite fashion until 'Tim's chances of winning Wimbledon' receives an extended airing. My 'half hen, half man' jibe puts paid to the amiable punditry. What is this fascination the English have with mediocrity? Yes, the owners are English – three years in the B&B business on the island, but had been visiting for 12 years before taking the plunge. Nice people, running a clean, comfortable place. I'd go back – but not during Wimbledon.

Out in the rain to try and meet a local. No chance. Only me and a couple of dedicated prom-lovers brave the elements. 'Fine day,' I cry, preferring to be considered the island idiot rather than a fern hunter on the prowl. Take shelter in a graffiti-free pagoda overlooking the harbour and scan the shoreline for washed-up body parts.

The rain eases to a torrent so I slog along to the refurbished Victorian toilets. Don't know if they are worth the £300,000 expense or, indeed, the 'must see' hype. Nice tiles though, and for someone with serious prostate problems it's an okay place to stand and wait, and wait. Condom machines spoil the aesthetic. One offers: Assorted 2x£1. Not a wide-ranging assortment unless one's the shape of Mount Stuart House or flavoured like an award-winning fish tea.

It's a short walk to the visitor centre past lines of Cordylines Australis (that's cabbage

palms to you and me). The crumbling facade of the Esplanade Hotel has bunches of ferns growing from every crack. Young people in grimy sportswear congregate outside an amusement arcade. The XL Cafe suggests we 'top everything off with a helping of double cream'.

Inside the visitors centre among the leaflets and timetables are some low-tech interactive exhibits that are too high-tech for me. 'Did Johnnie Beattie speak to you?' asks a helpful guy behind the desk. I confess to incompetence on the J B website but suggest he was never really funny anyway. He gives me a blank look and sorts some well-ordered pamphlets on the counter.

On the notice board a reminder from the OES of an Orange Walk on the 12th July. There is also an announcement of a psychic meeting on 22nd June hosted by John Starkey. Why does he have to advertise? Psychic groupies shouldn't need information. There are a couple of simple machines to operate if a glimpse back to Victorian entertainment is your bag. 'Mutoscope presents' two turn-handle peep shows: *The Mysterious Cafe* and *The Tramp's Unexpected Skate*. Goings-on at the cafe are indeed mysterious as only the top half of the flip card is visible. The tramp falls down a lot.

I've had enough. Go back to the fancy Victorian bog to wait some more and zip-up just in time to catch the 11am ferry to the mainland. A Captain Birdseye figure in yellow waterproofs greets passengers at the gangplank. He might be a local but I've lost the will to live and don't bother to ask.

When I reach home, I have to phone the Western General to arrange admission for my operation. Two days later, I'm lying prostrate receiving treatment from people from somewhere else. Brown-skinned women and Chinese men worked hand in surgical glove with ice-maidens from the Garbo School of Nursing. Raven-haired colleens stick tubes and needles into me whenever they pass. A careless visitor drops a 50 pence piece on my catheter tube that pays out in old pennies in my brain.

'You'll be on irrigation for a few days until you're totally washed-out,' says a handsome Asian surgeon.

'No problem, doc – I'm just back from Rothesay.' How we laugh.

I'm convinced he's left an instrument behind. It could be a tuba. Some days it feels more like the Matterhorn.

Return to Orkney

Hannah Summers

2003

Thursday: Hjaltland

'Smile, wee lass, you're going home,' says the jolly steward on the Hjaltland. It appears we're nearly there.

'Is this where you live?' he asks.

'No, but I did once, a long time ago.'

'A sentimental journey then?'

Leaving the boat, I search for familiar faces in the dark. Bob and Lu have come to meet me.

It's midnight.

Friday: Kirkwall

A wander round Kirkwall stirs old memories. My most recent of Broad Street is watching the Ba' one New Year's Day.

The Ba', which is technically 'no' a spectator's sport, is one of Orkney's unique traditions, first recorded in 1650. The object of the game between the Uppies and the Doonies – Up-the-gates and Down-the-gates – is for the teams to get the Ba' into their goal, the Uppies at Mackinson's Corner and the Doonies down to the harbour and touch the water for a win. A player's status as an 'Uppie' or a 'Doonie' depends on which side of the Mercat Cross they were born or where they first entered Kirkwall, although these days it is generally based on family loyalty. The rules are: there are no rules. The Ba' is thrown up at the Mercat Cross and any means required – kicking, carrying or smuggling the Ba' – are used to get it into goal.

The thrill of the Ba' is a vivid memory. I can see myself on dad's shoulders, craning for a better view. The atmosphere is one of intense excitement but also apprehension as the scrum would sway violently and without warning into the spectators.

After the game, the Ba' is presented to a well-deserved player. This is a great but expensive honour. The winner is required to host a party which lasts several days.

At the newsagents' my ears detect that gentle lilt which I have not heard for so long. *The Orcadian* is just out, and the sports pages are dedicated to this year's Ba', won by the Uppies for the 10th time in a row, 'despite a brave Doonie show of strength'.

On the way home I drop into the cathedral, an impressive Romanesque edifice which has witnessed over 800 years of Kirkwall life. The harmonious union of graceful pillars and rounded arches glow in a warm atmosphere created by the use of Old Red Sandstone.

Jim is head custodian at St Magnus. A complete eccentric, he prefers to describe himself

as an 'embittered romantic'. Although the cathedral is pivotal to the town and welcomes large numbers of visitors, he points out the dwindling religious following in the community: 'It is like fighting a losing battle'. According to Jim, materialism has changed the people here.

He claims that even commuting between areas or islands was unthinkable 30 years ago. It seems a strange issue to be so passionate about, but he describes travelling from Hoy to work in Kirkwall as if it were potential material for a tabloid scandal. 'In my day people kept to their own territory. We were hardly off our own street.'

The big identity issue is, of course, how 'Scottish' the Orcadians consider themselves.

'Well, we have been since the 15th century.'

I can feel a 'but' coming.

'Anyone who knows history has no reason to love the Scots. People have a romantic identification with Scandinavia.' He tells of the recent Orcadian and Shetland flags emblazoned with Icelandic crosses. 'They said 'up yours' to the Scots... Everyone had one.'

Saturday: Stromness

Bob and Lu take me to the other prominent town on Mainland Orkney. My parents were married in the Town House, Stromness, 24 years and one day ago. It's not exactly glowing in romantic aura but I guess it's kind of sweet. I attempt to conjure an image of the happy newlyweds bouncing down the path in a sea of confetti. (My mother later corrects me – it was snowing, the witnesses were rounded up at the last minute, and there was room for only eight – plus the dog – in the registry office where they were united by a colporteur.) Buy postcard to send delayed anniversary wishes.

Bob has a meeting at the Pier Arts Centre – he is the chairman – so I go along. The permanent collection is owned by Margaret Gardiner, who, in the 1930s, moved in social circles with Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. The gallery boasts a selection of abstract works by such pioneers as well as pieces by the younger artists of St Ives that Gardiner supported.

I feel immediately drawn to the gallery: it's one of the finest art spaces I have experienced. The upstairs gallery is particularly special. It has a bright ambiance and features a slanted roof and a series of windows at varying levels. Some are tiny at floor level while others are full-length from floor to ceiling. The ones facing out to sea frame picturesque scenes, constantly changing like works of art in their own right.

Driving back to Kirkwall we are blessed with one of those Orkney sunsets. A brochure I read on the boat describes the 'changing skies of Orkney' – this is not just a marketing ploy. Today, the sun seems to be playing a game where it leaves most of the land in darkness and selects only a small part to illuminate. Rays stream through a hole in the clouds silhouetting the hills across the bay. We drive around the coastal road and I spy the tiniest island ever – it is even devoid of a sheep. I wonder if it has its own speck on the map of the British Isles.

Saturday night: Kirkwall

In the Ayre Hotel, a sign above the bar reads: 'Avoid hangover. Stay drunk'. I've come to the right place, then. Order a glass of dry white wine, roll a cigarette, and am approached by Gavin, a cheery 22-year-old from Inverness who has lived on the island for seven years. He invites me to join his group and spend the evening with them.

Gavin tells me that all Orcadians are snobs at heart and prejudiced against outsiders – 'the downfall is not having the accent'. They seem pretty friendly to me, though. Several drinks and a few games of pool later, someone proclaims that it is 'time for Matches'. From my study of the Lonely Planet guide I recognise this as Orkney's only nightclub, Matchmakers.

I am soon queuing at the cloakroom of Matches to dispose of multiple layers. Girls in bright lipstick peel away their jackets to reveal low-cut black tops and sparkly jewels. It's not a bad venue and certainly no worse than any of the mainstream clubs back in Edinburgh. At closing time, Gavin insists that I sample the delights of the burger van down the road. Before I can protest, he has bought me a bacon cheeseburger which is truly the tastiest post-club snack I have had in a long time.

Sunday: Holm

Set off for Holm, my first home. It's a bleak afternoon and has barely been light all day. As we drive across the treeless landscape, Anne (a family friend) tells me stories from when I was 'peedie totty'. We pass her old house. Nearby lived the man who registered my birth – he was actually a carpenter. It was tradition then to take a half bottle of whisky to the registrar and I still have the spelling errors on my birth certificate to prove it.

Our house has been modernised – but it's still surrounded by dilapidated farm buildings.

Monday: Maes Howe

Maes Howe is 5,000 years old. It consists of a large mound with an entrance passage and burial chamber. In the 12th century it was invaded by Norsemen and Viking crusaders, who left runic inscriptions in the form of graffiti, some of it risqué. Those who built Maes Howe would certainly have been aware of the seasonal behaviour of the sun: the entrance is built in the direction of the midwinter sunset. On the shortest day of the year, and for roughly 20 days either side of the winter solstice, just before the sun sets behind the hills of Hoy, it shines into the tomb.

Moir, my tour guide, describes this 'magical' experience: 'It is so intense, like a light being switched on and no matter how often you see it you feel the same excitement'. You stand in the dark until the first chink of light appears on the right side of the passage. Rays hit the back wall until finally the whole tomb is lit up. This partly natural, partly man-made occurrence seems to have a particular significance in a place where seasons are largely defined by darkness and light.

Back soon

My final meal with Bob and Lu is spent listening to the windows rattling in the howling wind. 'Don't worry, it's a westerly wind, it won't affect your crossing on the east,' Lu assures me. Next door, Anne offers to give me sleeping tablets for the boat.

'At least it's not the Stromness-Scrabster crossing across the Pentland Firth,' her husband David adds. 'Don't worry about it.' I wasn't worried about it (until everyone kept telling me not to worry).

Finally, we leave for the port and say our goodbyes, thank yous and come back soon.

And come back I do: very soon. The boat from Lerwick has bypassed Orkney because of the bad weather and has headed straight for Aberdeen.

'And when will the next boat leave here?'

'Friday,' comes the reply.

Today is Monday.

Go to bed and read a poem called *Bloody Orkney*.

Echoes of home

John McKendrick

2006

'Foreigners pay six dollars,' insisted the toothless campesino as he spread himself across the entrance to the muddy road on the Caribbean coast of Panama with arms out wide like a flightless bird. He was half naked and painfully thin, with thick cut lines etched around his animated mouth. We both knew I need not pay and our conversation soon soured to an unpleasant argument, fuelled by the suffocating humidity of the jungle. In a final effort to part me from my money, he produced a carefully worded document in Spanish which he hoped I would not understand. Unfortunately for him, my Spanish was (just) up to the challenge of his coup de grace: it was a communique about littering and pollution in the park – no mention of fees. I drove on. Naively, I thought pirates had ceased to exist here many years ago, but here I was being illegitimately held up for significantly less than a piece of eight.

A little further down the road, I was surrounded by dense, frightening Panamanian rainforest teeming with howler monkeys and shrill sounding birds and blanketed with heavy vaporous mist. I had come to see the huge sprawl of shiny rocks that once made up the mighty Spanish fort of San Lorenzo, which still stands today, wearily protecting the mouth of the Rio Chagres, where in better days it had attempted to defend His Most Catholic Majesty's all-important Camino Real from pirate attack. It didn't do much good: Henry Morgan sacked Panama in 1671 and forced the city to be resettled further along the coast, where modern-day Panama City still stands. In the jungle, the mud-red road was heavy and cloggy with the morning's rain and I struggled for the next 40 minutes, both controlling my sliding car and berating myself for my lack of patience at understanding a poor man trying to make a living: I had been self-interested and mean.

I have lived in Panama for eight months. As a Scot who lived 10 years in London, it seemed quite normal to return to a small, rain-soaked country where the inhabitants passionately followed a hopeless football team. After learning some Spanish in Venezuela and Colombia, I had dropped by Panama a few years ago and was favourably impressed by its feel: a tropical, cosmopolitan atmosphere dominates, which provides the backdrop for a green, humid city divided between one part dominated by bland, high-rise towers and the other by narrow cobbled streets corralled by formerly elegant colonial homes. But Panama is much more than the sum of its physical parts; this small isthmian country reeks of international espionage and the murky shiftiness for which it has become too well known. Empty, darkened tower blocks populated by invented tenants paying astronomical, money-laundering rents are everywhere; powerful well-connected law firms discreetly solving their off-shore clients' problems are abundant; expensive restaurants patronised by Colombians

doing deals with Taiwanese businessmen predominate; and floating around the edges of all this, the watchful eyes and ever-listening presence of a large diplomatic community.

Panama is above all international. Of course, the Scots know this; it was their idea. The eastern province of Panama, Darien, claims a special place in Scottish history. Over 300 years ago, William Paterson's pioneer Caledonia not so much collapsed as rotted in its damp, ill-thought-out foundations and our forefathers were forced to leave. Paterson's vision, however, is alive and well, if somewhat further along the coast. To many, Panama is the 'door to the seas and the key to the universe'. Despite the fact that its canal is every day becoming too small, it is still the key hinge to many shipping lanes and the rapid increase in port facilities, banking and other services, and the free trade zone, cast Panama more or less as the entrepôt economy the Scots once looked to for national salvation.

The irrepressible energy of the Scots has ensured their return. Not in such numbers, but they are here nonetheless. Some Scots make money out of the canal, while others are becoming involved in a rapidly growing tourist market. There could even be a Scottish pub in a few years. Others are in happy retirement in big homes in the jungle or on farms in the highlands. Even the British ambassador is a Scot, and a generous one at that. He annually invites a large gathering of Brits, Panamanians and assorted diplomatic types to his grand residence on the main Avenida Balboa, which overlooks the Bay of Panama, for an excellent Burns Night. With plenty of tartan, Scotch, 'Highland' dancing and even a piper imported from Jamaica, that annually reconstructed picture of the Scot imagines a Scottishness that would have been totally alien to the good souls of New Edinburgh in 1699.

I wonder if Tom Nairn has visited Panama. Scotland's leading commentator on nationalism and identity should: he would be fascinated both by the place that did most to change Scottish national identity and by Panamanian identity. After all, both are small countries that have used nationalism to fight for independence and create a national identity as a bulwark against larger neighbours, whose own nationalism sought the contrary logic. Some Panamanians have seized upon this janus-faced theory of nationalism in their search to better understand their own country's political history. Nairn believes, or believed, that by looking inward and backward to language, custom and folklore, the elites in societies found strength to propel themselves forward to catch up on the economic development of other nations they observed around them. It had to be about economics: for Nairn, nationalism was, after all, Marxism's greatest failure. As a student, I was never too sure I understood this, even in the Scottish context, given Sir Walter Scott's romanticist revival of tartan-clad identity took place at a time when the Scottish economy was booming and Scots happily wrapped themselves up in their British identities.

Whatever the confused state of Scottish nationalism then or now, Panamanian identity (or nationalism) seems much clearer. There is no confusing muddle of ethnic, civic, cultural or linguistic issues, nor is there the clamour of theorists: no Gellner, Anderson, Smith et al. Panama is a young country, an artificial country: created by Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 to make way for the canal. Developed through the 20th century as a

centre for trade and banking, it has the second largest free trade area outside of Hong Kong, a large banking sector and impressive port facilities. The beginning of Panama's identity is to look out: 'Pro Mundo Beneficio' says its elegant national coat of arms. Panamanians have rallied behind this mental community: they are part of a country which has turned itself into a service sector for the world and their mental community needs no 'imagining', as Benedict Anderson would argue, to create a sense of national identity. The struggle to gain control over the canal – a vital link in the chain to ensure that Panamanians and not Americans provided the ultimate national service of running the canal – needed no imagining. It was real, and young men's deaths in riots in the 1960s are still commemorated during Martyr's Day every January. With full control of its canal since 2000 and the consolidation of its services sector, combined with its geography, Panama has viewed its identity by what it can do for the world. Its people look outward to the world to understand themselves.

Nor are Panamanians defined by what they are not. Despite almost 100 years of US abuse of the canal zone, land supposedly used to aid the operation of the canal, actually used for chemical testing, spying operations, troop training and, perhaps most offensively, the training of Latin American dictators in 'counter-insurgency' techniques during the Cold War at the infamous School of the Americas, Panamanians are not anti-American. In fact, by a very clear majority they supported both the US invasion to topple Manuel Noriega (ironically an alumnus of the School of the Americas) and supported a continuing US military presence in their country. They even converted the gruesome School of the Americas into a luxury canal-side hotel: there are few hard feelings here.

All this leads me to think the old world should look to the new. In Panama's steamy jungle, Scotland's largest national disaster took place. It affected the debate over national identity for years, as Union inevitably followed the realisation of inherent weaknesses in Scottish institutions. Thereafter Scots appeared only to succeed as Britons throughout the Enlightenment and into colonial times. After Empire, Scottish achievements appeared thin on the ground and questions of identity were more starkly posed, more politically answered, and anti-Englishness began to rise. Today, post-devolution, it seems Scots are no longer looking out to the world in the way they once did and too often when they do, it is to look across the border and grumble about their neighbours. Where is the spirit of Pro Mundo Beneficio in Scottish public life today? Where are the world-changing ideas, the innovative businesses, the projection of Scottish educational establishments as the best in the world? A post-devolution Scotland looks more closed, its politics narrower, its ambitions reduced and its ideas smaller.

Darien was a disaster for those personally involved, but not for Scotland. The importance of trade in the early 18th century ensured both England and Scotland had to look to Union for political and economic reasons. As Tom Devine's book on Scottish empire recently demonstrates, the Scots and their ideas poured across the world enriching, in a parallel manner, both where they went and where they came from. Their education,

innovation, hard work and passion had a profound effect. They gave and they received, but not just for self-interest: Scotland looked out to the world and the world looked to Scotland.

Today, Scotland is, of course, very different. Perhaps the division of responsibilities between Holyrood and Westminster creates a narrowing of vision. But Scots in finding both their identity and position in post-devolution Scotland must not forget to look out, to look beyond Edinburgh, when (if?) they ask themselves where is their place in the world. Whether the parliament in Edinburgh ends up like that of the much hoped-for one in New Edinburgh over 300 years ago still remains to be seen. The ruined Spanish fort at San Lorenzo stands as a timely reminder of the failure of closed, inward-looking policies: which neither reversed Spanish economic decline nor kept the pirates out, as modern-day Panama City reminds us.

Irish journey

Robins Millar

2008

In August 1911, Robins Millar went on a bicycle tour of Ireland. Later, he was to become a prominent editor and playwright, but in 1911 he was 22 years old and setting out on his career. He took a notebook with him. When it was full, the diary ended abruptly.

August 1911

Friday

As I had arranged all my packing on Thursday night, setting off in the morning did not give me much worry. Annie (my sister) packed a substantial lunch of sandwiches and I pedalled off in good time. Purchasing a spirit lamp in town detained me into my usual weakness – the last minute rush at the station, but a couple of seconds remained to run after all.

The sea was very smooth from Ardrossan to Belfast – smooth enough to permit me to pass almost all the time sketching. We were a phlegmatic crowd and even the salute of workmen in the Belfast yards scarcely aroused us into an answering wave. The dinner hour had set free all the hands engaged on an enormous vessel, Titanic of Liverpool, and it was curious to see them all lolling in their dungarees along the riverbank, watching those adventurous spirits who were disporting themselves in the not too pellucid waters.

In the heat of the day, most of us must have joined in envy. Swimming and diving would be the ideal occupations for such weather. The boat turned in the Lough and entered the harbour backwards. After a dainty passage, we were taken unawares by the swell that caught her in turning, and when she began to roll there was great commotion.

After a look at Belfast I caught the three o'clock train for Enniskillen, changing at Clones. I was amused by the way an Irish train starts. First, a loud bell clangs like a fire alarm half a dozen times. Then there is a great whistling. The guard whistles five or six times before the driver signals an acknowledgement. Meanwhile, shouts arise on every side: 'Kape away from that dhure! Close ut! Close ut! Shut the gates! Shut the dhure, I tell ye!' and so on. The guard whistles, another bell rings. We start at last, leaving the porters wrangling behind us.

I was still smiling at this performance when I realised I had left half of Annie's good sandwiches behind me. I had three hours' starvation before me. This cast a gloom upon my spirits. Happily, I was able to eke out a bare existence on chocolate from the automatic machines and to stave off an awful death till I got to a Temperance Hotel at Enniskillen at seven o'clock and sat down to a substantial tea.

I passed the evening chatting to a young man, one of the hotel people, and two fellow boarders from Manchester, father and son, the latter apparently a student in the Dental

Hospital there and a very nice fellow. Our 'landlord' is in the egg trade and he talked shop at great length, relating with remarkable vividness some stories of a local dealer who though extremely wealthy, dresses like a tramp; goes about ragged, malodorous and even barefooted, with the rain falling off his hat and his coat in tatters, but with pockets stuffed full of money, gold, silver, copper and notes all in different pockets.

In one Christmas season, on one deal in poultry, he lost £950 and although on the previous week he had lost £500, he 'merely laughed at the news'. When pushed for space, he frequently crowds his house with poultry in every room, having pigs running all through his grounds. And though reputed to be one of the richest men in the district, his dwelling is said to stink like a gasworks.

This 'Rankin' Temperance Hotel is very plain and comfortable. The charges should be moderate too, I should expect. I shall now sample the bed.

Saturday

The bed, though hard, was satisfactory. The breakfast was tasty. The bill was moderate (3/-). Oh admirable Rankins.

Enniskillen is a commonplace little town grouped picturesquely about two or three churches and a tall monument to the memory of officers and men of the 27th Regiment (Enniskillen Dragoons). Its houses are uninteresting in themselves. But the slumberous River Erne, winding among houses and trees mirrored in its placid, canal-like waters, gives the town some beauty. Seen from across the glassy lough, clumped together and rising round the hill to the spires and the graceful pillar of the monument, with its surmounting figure of some old general of the dragoons, it makes an unusual picture.

I had bought some methylated spirits for my lamp in a large store that seemed to contain a specimen of everything that had ever been made in time. Although the lamp seemed securely packed on my bicycle, it soon began to leak. So, after considering the bother that obtaining water and boiling cocoa for a midday lunch would mean; and balancing the bother and the doubtful advantage of cheapness against alternative means of lunching on the economic tack, I dropped it at the roadside for Fortune to dispose of. It was as well I did. The jangle of it gave me the air of a milk van. The farms would have been laying out their creamery cans at my approach. And, when I entered a town, people at the other end would have been rushing for their old pans, kettles, pots and pails to mend.

A recruiting sergeant in a white jacket with three red stripes cycled part of the way with me. He had enlisted 19 years ago in Glasgow (where he belonged to Townhead) and had been on foreign services in Africa, India, Egypt and China most of the time. He was loud in condemnation of 'this Christ-forsaken country'. Recruiting for the Royal Marine Light Infantry seemed to be a difficult business. And when he caught his men, it seemed they were frequently floored by the education test or the dental test. 'They never see a toothbrush about here,' he said. 'And they're too poor to buy soap.' He evidently did not consider himself an Irishman though his Glasgow accent had completely merged into a brogue.

On the way to Manor Hamilton, I met dozens of parties bound for the market in Belcoo or Enniskillen. Donkeys were almost invariable – donkeys in carts and donkeys with huge baskets slung one on each side, mostly containing geese, which craned long necks anxiously through their cages. They had come from the little cabins I passed all along the road, white-washed and thatched, with stone-flagged floors and open hearths. I met Saint Patrick, white-bearded and venerable, hobbling along rheumatically. When I saw the hovel he came out of I understood his rheumatism. Tattered, dirty but pretty children ran about the doors. A shaggy goat, tethered in a small field, cropped around its circle in the rough grass. Sometimes, one would be climbing the banks of the road, or straying through a peat bog with a donkey. Dogs rolled themselves lazily in the middle of the road amid the dust, too lazy to chase their fleas energetically. Pigs, too, had the freedom of the road, along with cows, ducks, geese and hens.

The cottages are, as a rule, substantial though rough. But the barns and outhouses are invariably crumbling ruins. The fields are much different from Scottish fields. They are divided into small crops. Potatoes, wheat, turnips, etc, grow in one field without hedges. Sometimes one corner is yellow with corn (often with big weeds among it) while the rest is green with pasture.

The road skirted a number of glassy silent lakes with cattle splashing among the rushes and the hills reflected deep around them. They were very lovely in a dreamy weird way. Curlews uttered lonely calls across their motionless surface. One could understand the spirit of Irish poetry beside them.

From Manor Hamilton into Sligo, the road had an execrable surface that profanity could not describe. Innumerable ruts and loose stones and hollows lurked all over it. Coming down hill, there was no course but to sit tight, clutch both brakes as a parachutist would his trapeze, and confess one's sins as fast as possible. I was glad to get into Sligo at last.

Sunday

Leaving my bicycle at Mullany's Central Commercial Hotel, 31-33 Ratcliffe St, whose specialities are 'Excellent Cuisine and Moderate Charges', I strolled down the street and investigated a ruined abbey. Half a dozen children had volunteered to fetch the key for the abbey. Presently they brought back two young ladies and had to be rewarded, of course, with pennies. The young ladies knew nothing about the ruins and, after gazing at a large number of desolate weed-grown gravestones, and peeping at the gloomy cloisters (which reminded one of a dunny), I parted somewhat grudgingly with a shilling – my smallest coin, worst luck – and went on my way, not rejoicing. As the company at the hotel was composed merely of some uncouth Irishmen, who sat at the table, or in corners, whispering to each other, I watched the people strolling past the door. They were mostly young men and maidens, but though I watched for over an hour while hundreds must have repassed often, I did not see one young man along with a maiden. The girls walked primly with their own girlfriends, and now and then giggled in the direction of a boy, but that seemed to be the limit of familiarity that convention permitted.

I turned in early to a mountainous spring bed which was exceedingly comfortable although the mattress below showed its horse hair in several places through the ragged covering. One of the Irishmen aforementioned managed to blunder into my room in the dark and waken me. However, I got to sleep about 12. Churchgoers woke me about eight. I did not get breakfast until 10, the hotel people having attended Mass. The cuisine might be excellent enough at Mullany's, but the service would not have seemed unduly hasty to a snail. One would imagine at the small Irish hotels that the rashers were the last relics of personal pets, which they could only part with after shedding tears.

I set off after 11 meaning to stop at Ballina. There was a difference in the cottages at the roadside. Though similar to those of the day before, many of their owners seemed to be of a better class. One often saw girls come out of them well dressed, in clean print frocks, sometimes with an apron over a white petticoat. In fact, it was surprising to see that respectable people lived in the poorest looking houses. Yet the cows still strolled about the front doors, with pigs and fowl, and of gardens there were but apologies. I saw only one gardener's garden and it was a priest's. Hedges and dykes were overgrown with grass and weeds. The people seemed to have no taste for keeping their surroundings pleasant. And inside, even when cleanliness is to their credit, the furnishings are bare and rough. The grate is a most amateurish erection. It would give a Scotch housewife the blues. It is not even blackleaded.

The road was not very hilly. For a long way it ran across a moor that stretched for 10 or more miles across, peatbogs everywhere, though here and there small patches were bright with weed flowers, purple, yellow and white. It was most uninteresting, once I left the sea behind.

Ballina did not impress me favourably once I got into it. The river is broad and imposing but the town is a poor affair. It was the first part of Connaught I had seen and I hardly admired the people. They were barbarians. Without much hesitation, I determined to make a rush for Castlebar, 24 miles more, as it was still only five o'clock. The road was level and easy till within 15 miles of my goal. There, though the sky was now clear, I ran into a district where a thunderstorm had only recently passed. The road became diabolical. The greasy ruts, which had previously jolted me up and down, now twisted my wheels in all directions. I could hardly keep the machine upright at times. I had begun to get used to the unmannerly Connaught natives (though nothing would ever accustom me to Connaught roads) when I reached Castlebar.

The police assured me there was not a Temperance Hotel in the place and directed me to the Imperial. It turns out to be the most swagger establishment in the town, with an Irish Automobile Association badge on its walls and a general air about it of a height of caste to which I, and my exchequer, are unaccustomed. Enormous mirrors overawe me at every turn. I look at the expensive wallpapers and linoleum and shudder for the morrow. My two fellow guests are barristers at the Irish Bar, whose talk is undiluted shop. A few more unfortunate landings like this will rush me on the rocks rather too rapidly altogether. It is

as well I subsisted today on three bottles of lemonade and a lunch of cake between 10 and 8.30. If my expenditure is to keep at a happy average, my future diet will not be much more luxurious for a while.

Monday

Happy error. The bill only amounted to 6/-. And I expected about 10. My anxieties must have been the obsessions of a fevered imagination.

There was not much to see in Castlebar. The small green in front of the hotel, surrounded by all the best buildings, was picturesque, and one view where a river ran like a narrow lane between the overhanging walls of houses was quaint, but otherwise there was not much to look at and I left about 11 for Tuam on the Dublin road.

The scenery and houses were much as before. Still the same ruined cottages formed a feature of the villages. Often in a row of three cottages one is roofless and crumbling, though the others are occupied. On Sunday, I passed the ruins of a fine, modern two-storey house, with only the four high stone walls standing, windows, roof, and floors, even the beams and rafters away; and a donkey stood placidly on the threshold looking like an innkeeper in his doorway.

Sunday is not rigidly kept as in Scotland, by the way. I saw men driving pigs in carts and driving sheep along the road; and in the evening, boys passed the window singing loudly *Fall in and follow me*. Indeed at Ballina I asked an old man what certain shouts could mean and he told me it was 'just the ball-playing'.

In country parts, the crossroads are the rendezvous for young fellows and girls; they loaf about, in their good clothes; but keep rigidly apart as a general rule.

When I was leaving Castlebar, a beggar who had been discoursing strange music asked for a copper and I discovered he had been using a leaf only on his tongue. One could have thought a clarinet was playing at first. He was not very sure of getting the note he arrived at always but the effect was quite astonishingly good.

While the small matter of adjusting the brake was engaging my attention, a young man cycling past referred to the weather and with this introduction we took each other's company for several miles. He pointed out a view of a castle battered down by Cromwell's soldiers. The curse of Cromwell was certainly a vigorous business. We discoursed on home rule and education quite entertainingly. He remarked that there was a great change noticeable in the country within the last 10 or 15 years for the better. What a lamentable countryside it must have been. However, that is a good sign. He spoke of increasing industries. So far, the only industry I see that is pursued with any degree of perseverance is keeping public houses. Agriculture comes in a bad second. The rest are nowhere.

In every little wayside hamlet of half a dozen cottages there are two or three licensed houses. Large beer barrels lie about the door. Inside there is a shop where groceries, chandlery and confectionery may be bought, and a bar, rather cool and pleasing to the eye with its varied liquor bottles and rows of glasses. 'Minerals' are always to be had. My daily

average is about five or six bottles of lemonade. My poor stomach must be feeling very drenched and looking forward to a watery death, a mineral-watery death.

The usual geese, pigs, sheep, etc, roamed about the road to Tuam, which I reached about half past three in scorching sunshine, betaking myself at once to another bar and gulping down two lemonades like a thirsty trout. Tea rooms don't flourish in places like Tuam. It is a collection of the humblest white-washed, thatched, single and double-roomed houses, above which rise the towers of two great churches, one, I believe, called a cathedral. All the streets are labelled in Gaelic and English. So are many of the shop signs; the remainder redolent of Gaelic in the spelling 'Padruic' for Patrick, 'Seamus', etc. And many people talk Gaelic in the streets.

The road to Galway was beyond execrable. Carlyle would not have fittingly execrated that rutty, bumpy, jolty, twisty, wrenching, tangling, mangling thing. An old man said that the contractor got 2/6 a perch for looking after it. If he had been my contractor, I should have ordered him to come off the perch.

Fortunately, it was dry and the wind was behind me (by the blessing of Fate it was so for my whole 55-mile day) but even at that my arms were sore from the innumerable encounters with loose stones and four-inch ruts. What effect a thunderstorm would have had on it, I shudder to imagine.

I sailed down two miles of footpaths at last into Galway and was instantly taken with the general air of the town. After a choice of a hotel, I had a look round which confirmed me in my first opinion. It is certainly the most captivating town I have discovered so far. It is full of quaint but clean old buildings, somewhat more civilised in architecture than the thatched cabin, which becomes so monotonous. A train took me down to Salthill on Galway Bay at a jog trot by starlight. A merry-go-round and some other amusements had drawn quite a lively crowd, a great many young girls among them with more than the average share of good looks. I only waited a few minutes at the shows, coming back by 10 to turn in, thoroughly fagged out.

A regular snoring through the wall, which has been unbroken for half an hour past, calls me to repose. Probably there will soon be a duet.

Tuesday

Galway looked as well as ever in the morning. The streets were brightened by the countrywomen's and fishwives' dresses as they drove past in donkey carts, or tramped along with shallow baskets on their heads, wearing scarlet petticoats, chocolate brown shawls and heliotrope or blue aprons. These red skirts of heavy cloth are often handmade in primitive fashion, I believe, from home materials and seem as thick and heavy as quilts.

Men and boys can sometimes be seen wearing hairy frieze coats, no doubt homespun also; rather unsuitable for scorching days like these but admirable for winter frosts. I saw a funeral party yesterday all dressed so and tramping stolidly over the road or driving in jaunting cars or donkey carts, two priests in black looking like crows among them.

About 12, I set out for Ennis, meaning to pass on to Limerick if possible. I was unlucky. Though pushing as hard as ever I did not seem to be covering the ground well. Twice too I went off on the wrong roads, wasting two or three miles each time; and nothing is so disheartening as retracing one's way for a quarter of an hour; it is more wearisome than twice the time on a steady run.

The roads were not quite as bad as before except in a few places, but never a signpost or a milestone waited to cheer or help the weary traveller. Irish roads at their worst deserve every profane adjective except the one which would compare them to the nether regions. For if the road to Hell were as badly paved, nobody would ever travel along it.

Just as the steeples of Ennis peeped first from among their trees, I caught sight of a lady in difficulty with her bicycle. She appeared to be investigating for a puncture with poor success. For once I had come across someone who knew less about a bike than myself and to air my small stock of knowledge was a distinct pleasure. My patch was a triumph. The lady was effusive. 'Sure I don't know how to thank you – I can just thank you so much,' she said. 'There's not many gentlemen like you knocking about.' At which I bounced onto my machine and rode off before the patch could begin to leak again.

The footpaths are the cyclist's blessing here. Today I ran along about 15 miles of them. Once there were two sleek donkeys grazing along the grass at the side of one, mamma and daughter. Mamma would not budge at my ringing till I was at her heels (which I could not turn round owing to the height of the path above the road – a foot or more). Then she trotted slowly in front keeping obstinately to the path, her filial youngster following her example. The more I tinkled my bell, the more doggedly she kept exactly in front. And only when she took it into her head to trot aside did the daughter move aside too.

At another narrow part, a fat priest and I almost met, then both gracefully gave room, and landed each ignominiously in the gutter.

The sky was deliciously blue and white all day; farmers were reaping the golden shining grain in the fields by hand; white yellow and brown butterflies flirted among the hedges. It was glorious weather though very warm. My total of lemonade drinks was five. The only untoward event was a sting from a wasp. It was enough of a misfortune for one day too, and it was small satisfaction that I succeeded in encompassing the ferocious creature's death at the time. My finger swelled considerably.

Very dusty and tired, I reached Ennis after 46 miles or so of cycling. A train was almost due for Limerick 22 miles further on, and as the roadbook described these 22 as a flat uninteresting road, bumpy most of the way and slightly hilly, I bought a ticket and reached Limerick by 7.30. I remarked on my dustiness to a fellow passenger. He laughed and said: 'Yes. Ye're covered with ut. Your whiskers is full of ut. It's like the appearance of the old man comin' on ye'.

Wednesday

There was not a great deal to see in Limerick. I sat in the hotel (so-called) all evening chatting to a young Irishman, of strikes and wasps and Irish politics and so on. He could

rattle on like a motor; never stopping for breath. He described delightfully how a friend of his sat upon a wasp nest and had his clothes filled with them (with dire effects). He told too how elections used to be lively in the days when there were Parnellites and Healyites, etc – he said one had to be 'every kind of it' for safety. He told me all about the religious orders in Limerick and the difference in their uniforms. I wished very much to see a Franciscan in brown robe with a cord around the waist, a cowl, skullcap and sandals. But I didn't see anything more picturesque in that way than a nun or two.

The hotel was a curiosity. It faced me as I came out of the station, a small restaurant with the usual advertisement of 'cheap beds' at the window. I was ushered first into a tiny room upstairs with two beds in it and the usual pictures of the Virgin, the death of Mary, Queen of Scots, the noble St Bernard and so on. After my customary bath in the wash hand basin, I stumbled down the dark staircase into the dining room, next to the 'front shop'. The mantelpiece and over-mantel held exactly 41 pieces of bric-a-brac; photos, flower glasses, and china shepherdesses; innumerable shepherdesses indeed; shepherdesses dancing, shepherdesses flirting under glass cases, shepherdesses asleep in armchairs, waiting at stiles, sitting on swings, doing every mortal thing, in fact, except shepherd.

The piano was covered with a similar display. So was the sideboard. So was the window table. It was not a place to be locked up in with a mad dog. There was a soiled cloth on the dinner table and a patent cage, which had caught a thousand flies or so which made as loathsome a sight to eat meals before as one could imagine. Whenever the extremely slovenly waitress left the room, two enormous cats prowled over the table, sampling the greasy dishes, the butter and the milk.

Behind was the kitchen, draped plentifully with drying cloths and most miserably kept; and the next room appeared to be the public dining room. Half a dozen bicycles were piled in one corner. And at one or two tables the habitués sat playing cards and dominoes. A few kilted soldiers from the barracks, Black Watch men, came in for an hour or two.

I was sound asleep when another young man was ushered into the room for the other bed by the landlady at about 12 o'clock. He had come over from Wales and was going on to Ennis in the morning, one of the rawest specimens I had come across, but most ingenuous and frank. He could tell me a great deal of the Welsh riots at Llanelli.

The road to Kilkenny went over some stiff hills four and five miles long, and against the wind my 40 miles was a fair achievement. Climbing a hill on a bumpy road against a breeze would take the spirit out of a lion – if he were cycling. Just as I struggled to the top of my six-mile hill, a wonderful panorama of the Kerry mountains seen across many miles of pastures burst on the view. They rose deep blue and jagged against the sky in the distance. It was an unexpected treat. After that, there was a fine scorch downhill for six miles more that was exhilarating indeed. The last 10 miles were on a firm surface through lovely Killarney scenery. Just as I came near the town, rain began to threaten. I raced in like mad and got in dry, with an unbroken record for weather, never having unrolled my cloak so

far. Outside, I hear heavy rain among the trees. The road will doubtless be ruined by morning, but I hope the weather clears again.

I was at the door of a hotel when a tout from another caught hold of me and, with promises of cheapness, lured me off. I am glad I chose this one now. I have met some delightful English people. One lady has been telling me her experiences on the last train the Welsh strikers permitted to pass through to Fishguard. The strikers held the gates at a level crossing and stopped them all night, having mauled the driver and raked out the fires. Some of the ruder spirits marched alongside the carriages jeering at the passengers while the crowd at the gates kept singing and shouting. She and her sister walked along to the gates and spoke to the strikers who were politely apologetic but unrelenting. Only the soldiers with bayonets who arrived in the morning enabled them to pass at length after an all-night wait.

She was quite angry with a donkey that awoke her the morning after her arrival, by heehawing like a reveille bugle at six o'clock.

My bedroom, said to be the last vacant spot in the hotel, measures eight feet by five and a half. But I feel more comfortable than I did last night. I feel convinced that the proprietor will not put anyone else beside me.

Alas. The rain sounds mournfully plentiful. My halcyon days seem over.

Thursday

A chained dog wakened me in the small hours with its mournful Jeremiah. The poor animal howled like a lost soul for hours (why I should suppose that lost souls howl is hard to say).

The morning was promising at first but rain came on and I delayed my start till half past 11. I set out first for Kenmare by Mucross and the Windy Gap. I got a magnificent panorama of the lakes and mountains and glens as I pushed the machine up three or four steep miles. The wide expanse open to view, so much diversified, was a grand sight. It was not so wild and rugged as the English Lakes scenery and the lakes were smaller, very small in fact. Some parts reminded me most of the Kyles of Bute, about Tighnabruaich.

At the summit of the gap was a cottage where one could buy lemonade and survey the purple mountains. Very welcome refreshment it was after the climb. An old woman in a red skirt and a shawl sat by the roadside. She was the aunt of the little boy who attended to the drinks. 'Jack, Jack,' she called as I appeared. 'Here's a gentleman wants a drink.' Jack came out of the cottage and looked at me. Then dashed back and, reappearing with tumblers, bolted to the water barrel to wash them and made for me full speed.

He told me that he had lived at that bleak spot all his life. His parents were dead and his brother who worked on the roads, scattering the stones, I suppose, that so frequently threatened my life, and the ancient dame were his only company. His chief occupation was keeping the one cow off dangerous cliffs when she scrambled about after the scanty grass; and journeying down now and then the six miles to Kenmare with a donkey for 'minerals' and provisions.

At Kenmare, I proceeded for Ballyvourney through scenery that speedily became very beautiful as I scorched along the good roads. These skirted the foot of low hills, winding tortuously. Every minute the scene changed. It was all very wild and beautiful.

I met a young fellow walking along. He was dressed in a smart black suit and a bowler hat and carried a small bag. Until he told me, I could not in the least suspect that he was on a walking tour. He had been lost on the hills a night or two before and walked 50 miles eventually, after trying in vain to sleep among the heather, seeking refuge in a hayrick. We discussed maps at some length. Presently, he confessed that he was seeking colour for newspaper articles, being a reporter or contributor to some Kilkenny journal. What idiotic follies are committed by these people who write for the papers. He talked about a novel he had stopped writing at the fourth chapter. And of a novel which a girlfriend was writing which had progressed more favourably and was to be called *The Pantheist*.

He was a tall six-foot handsome young fellow, a little over 20, with a typical Irish face. When I left him, although a shower had half soaked him while we were conversing, the way he squared his shoulders and swaggered off was perfectly dashing.

This shower, being very heavy, had necessitated the unrolling of my cloak for the first time. Later, it grew heavier and dismounting, I covered the steel of the bike with Vaseline and took shelter. It spoiled the roads for a few miles but turned out to be purely a local splash. Showers threatened all day over the various valleys, though I escaped the others. I could not help appreciating the point of a story told by a Limerick Irishman of a Yankee who, after three weeks of continuous drizzle, remarked 'Wa-al, I guess if this was our country we'd have a roof on it'.

I reached the top of a five-mile stiff climb with my tongue hanging out with thirst and determined to test the fabled Kerry hospitality. A farmer's wife was at her door and I asked for a drink of water. She promptly brought a big pint tumbler of milk and asked me to come in and sit down. She began to knead some flour on a board and when I asked if she was baking bread, she took it into her head that I'd like to taste it and made her daughter cut a slice of a loaf and butter it for me. 'Cut it nice and thin, Judy,' she said. The instruction was valuable for a thin slice to Judy was half an inch thick. I expect a thick one would have been half the loaf. It was sourmilk bread, very heavy and sour, and I soon had enough (though the taste was not so very execrable). Seizing the first opportunity when no-one was looking, I stuffed it into my pocket so as not to hurt her feelings.

She put the kneaded flour on to cook. There was no oven, not even a grate; only a peat fire on a huge hearth stone. The dough was put into a round flat pot, the red hot peats piled on top. She said it cooked in half an hour. The kitchen reminded me of a Yorkshire one I visited, except it was dirtier. Hams hung from the rafters. The floor was stone flags. By the huge fireplace on which, she explained, there was piled a big fire in winter, there was a kind of ingle seat or bench. One or two presses, a table and a few rough chairs completed the furnishing. The polished metal caught the eye. Everything was rough and ready and primitive. Mrs Lucy herself was as broad as a boat and was very much disordered as to the

hair and soiled about the face, but beaming with good nature. Judy, the eldest girl of 16 or 17, wore a rough frock with bare legs and feet. So did Jim and Francie, the younger imps. Judy blushed awfully when I made some joke about love letters. I suspect she had begun to long for them.

Francie sat on my knee and played at horses and investigated my watch and chain and eventually let me push her a little way on the bicycle. She was a yellow-haired, pretty healthy little thing of five; Jim being only four was shy. I think I made myself pretty much at home for half an hour and when I left they all stood in the middle of the road and waved till I got out of sight. I offered no money, for I could see it would not be acceptable. I tried to give Francie a penny on the quiet but she put it out of her hands as if it had been a caterpillar and ran away looking perfectly shocked. Their code of honour seems bred in the bone.

A few minutes brought me into Ballyvourney; or perhaps its real name judging from the post office is Ballymeera. It is a wayside village of a few disreputable-looking white cottages, not thatched however. A dozen goats straggle over the road between the house doors and the hedges. The signs of the few shops are in Gaelic only. A van too, like a butcher's or baker's van, was inscribed only with Gaelic. I seem to be in a foreign country. Yet I am on the main road to Cork, where motors pass daily and the hotel is one of the best furnished I have come across.

The sideboard in the dining room is 10- or 12-feet long of mahogany. The table is also good mahogany. It was more than I expected after being ushered into a bedroom where the bed at eight in the evening had not been made, but lay disordered as last night's occupant had left it.

The maid who attends the table (I am the only guest of course) is a pretty girl, tall and grave. Her frock is just a heavy loose woollen business, tied in at the waist and she wears men's boots. One meets a great many pretty country lasses on the roads of Kerry, generally wrapped in a black shawl, which gives a graceful curve to the figure.

I passed through a market today. There was a great collection of pony carts in the street and any amount of talk. It was rather an interesting sight.

The diary ends here. Robins' notebook is filled.

Scottish journey

Islay McLeod

2008

Sunday 29 June

Leave a deserted Kilmarnock, and within no time I'm in a deserted Stirling. A woman is feeding the pigeons. A spot of rain in the air.

At Dunkeld, black-headed gulls swoop and glide.

My next stop is another town bypassed by the A9 – a Pitlochry packed with tourists. Sandwich at the Cottage Tea Room – an old-fashioned cafe with a small dining area at the back of a tiny shop. I am content to sit writing notes until a neighbouring couple spoil the mood. The woman has been looking over at the waitress for some time – at first I wonder if she's glaring at me. Eventually she calls her over. Her coffee is cold and no scone has arrived. When she demands an explanation I feel embarrassed. The staff apologise and rush to right the wrong. But the woman says she has had enough and leaves – refusing to pay for anything.

Head down the main street, going for a cold drink at the Kingfisher Bar. On my way in, a man sitting outside shouts over: 'Here you, whatever you're having, I'll get it'. After a forced smile and polite decline, I quicken my step towards the front door.

As soon as I arrive in Inverness, I'm bombarded with ads promoting the Loch Ness Monster. I also discover a cruel secret of the city. The buttons on the pedestrian crossing are not buttons at all – they are white, solid, plastic plugs. Each time I fall for it, I become more aware that others around me are silently sniggering at the tourist.

My B&B is family-run. It's the night of the Euro 2008 Final between Spain and Germany, and I'm asked to join the family at a local pub. I have work to do, but am grateful for the offer. Outside for my final cigarette of the day, I watch two boys on bicycles trying out various stunts. One manages to bounce his vehicle up to a two-inch-wide grey railing, and keep it there. Skilful, totally fearless – how on earth did he learn he could do that?

Monday 30 June

Head north towards the Cromarty Firth. At Alness, I ask directions for Mothers Against Drugs. It turns out to be a small shop with the words 'People in Need' on the front. I try to enter: it's locked. A pleasant woman soon opens the door and lets me in. I explain I want to know about drugs and alcohol abuse in the area. Social worker Sam tells me she will have to check with Highland Council – they subsidise the organisation. After waiting in a room for 10 minutes, overhearing a call to the council, I feel the 'I'm sorry but no' coming. I'm given a press contact at the council and call him when I get back to the car. His secretary tells me this isn't his area of expertise and I'm given the mobile number of Councillor David Alston,

chairman of the Drugs and Alcohol Committee. Call him, leave a message – no reply by the end of the day – or ever.

On the road to Invergordon, a dilapidated wreck of a church – doors and windows boarded up – with a cemetery still in use; flowers recently laid. From one end of Invergordon to the other, murals depict the history of the town – from a respectful lifeboat tribute to a ludicrous scene of Highland pipers. If ever a town flaunted its industrial heritage, it's this one.

Leave the boring main road and go for a class-z instead. A single-track takes me to the Falls of Shin. Leave the car to admire the foaming surge and am attacked by flies, buzzing at my face and advancing towards the open car window. Whoosh them out rather pathetically – it takes me five minutes to find the last critter clinging to my hair. So much for the Falls of Shin.

For 38 miles, on the winding road from Lairg to Tongue, alone in a barren, beautiful wilderness, I quickly learn the etiquette of single-track roads – for the best drive, let the locals past, then follow them.

Tongue is bathed in a hazy afternoon sun for my arrival. Silence: utter silence. Still feel alone, but not lonely. Instantly want to tell others. Reach for my mobile. No reception.

I have a massive room in the hotel with two double beds and a single. Bouncing about childishly on the bed of my choice, I reach for the room phone and dial out. The lines are down. Reception tell me there's a phone-box in the street. With plenty of loose change I saunter over, only to discover that it doesn't accept money. Determined not to be beaten, I retreat to the local pub, The Brass Tap. Instantly love this tiny place with its dark wooden walls. Better still, it has a phone – and it works. A result! At last!

Back at the hotel, they seem to serve one table every half hour so I am persuaded to have an early dinner at 6.30. Scottish muzak blares repetitively out of the speakers. Retire to my room feeling slightly suffocated by endless renditions of *Highland Cathedral* and *Loch Lomond*.

Tuesday 1 July

Roll out of bed at 6am. I am to catch the 8.15am post-bus. Outside the post office, observe a sparrow, motionless, staring at the same spot in the grass. After a while it goes for the kill and thrusts its beak into the earth, pulling out a wriggling worm. It is the only visible life in Tongue before the arrival of the post-bus.

Don't be fooled: the 'bus' is a biggish van with seats for four passengers. I have company on the bumpy journey to Lairg with driver Patrick and Australian Steve. A couple of miles down the road we come to a halt for a goose. As it waddles across, four goslings follow. Steve is trying to reach Ullapool, 93 miles distant. Using public transport, including the post-bus, it will take him 10 hours, give or take the odd delay for mother goose.

We reach Altnaharra, which has some of the most volatile weather in the UK and is often frequented by weatherspotters, a breed of enthusiasts I didn't know existed. Then tiny

Crask. And when I say tiny, I mean tiny – Crask has a population of two and consists of a small inn, a place of refuge for travellers stranded by blizzards.

During a 15-minute stop at Lairg, I walk down to the waterfront. Not far from the shore there's the comical sight of a rock with a wee house on it. This is a long-running local joke – villagers take their boats out in the dead of night or at first light and add improvements. It currently has an extension, a couple of trees with hanging monkey, and a satellite dish.

For the return journey, I have Sean, a trainee chef, for company. He uses the post-bus to travel to work in Melness every Tuesday, returning home with a friend on Sunday. Sixteen years old without any other means of transport, he doesn't know how else he would get to work.

As soon as I'm back in Tongue, I jump into the car and head west on the A838. The single-track road winds its way through some of the most seductive scenery I've ever experienced. Eventually return to the coastal road by Loch Eriboll, through the villages of Laid and Sangobeg with their gorgeous beaches. Golden sand. Sun beating down. This is Scotland?

I'm hoping to board the ferry to the most westerly point of Scotland. Just as the post-bus turns out to be a four-seater van, so the ferry is a small boat for eight. I'm excited by the prospect, but the tides are problematic and sailing for the rest of the day has been cancelled. I never did make it to Cape Wrath.

Wednesday 2 July

Today I'm going east across the top of Scotland. The farther I travel the more the landscape changes. Hills disappear or are shadows in the distance. The wind picks up. The roads acquire a second lane. Crumbling crofts dot the countryside around the nuclear power station at Dounreay. Suddenly, the first petrol station in miles...

Can't resist pausing at the untouched beach of Dunnet, which stretches for miles. The road to Dunnet Head takes me through an uninhabited world of still blue waters until a lighthouse welcomes me to the most northerly point of the British mainland. I'm drawn at once to a cluster of brick-built buildings abandoned since the Second World War. Ignore the 'Dangerous – Keep Out' sign and peer in – almost unimaginably, this bleak place was once home to British servicemen. A jet streaks overhead from a local RAF base. Feel foolishly sentimental. Cry. Leave.

As I near John O'Groats, my imagination runs wild. One of my favourite films was set there – Peter Cook and Dudley Moore beginning *Monte Carlo Or Bust* in a blizzard. I soon realise that there is a reason for John O'Groats being situated where it is – it is to keep it as far away as possible from everywhere else.

Back to Scrabster in plenty of time to catch the ferry to Stromness. After a short walk, catch-up with R F Mackenzie's *A Search for Scotland*. I love this book and am soon so engrossed I fail to hear the car engines ahead rev-up.

The Orkney boat is boisterous. Three loud, severely drunk people make their way into

the lounge area. Pray they do not select the table next to mine; pray in vain. Wherever I escape – be it the deck, restaurant, even the toilets – they aren't far behind.

Drive around Stromness before making for my B&B. Amazed by the narrowness of the streets, almost reminiscent of the medieval lanes of Amsterdam. Receive a warm welcome from Kay and Neil Sinclair; instantly feel at home and appreciated.

Thursday 3 July

Share a rather large breakfast table in the morning with a family trio, the mother from Switzerland, the father from Germany, the son a bit of both! Bacon and eggs all round.

Drive to South Ronaldsay, stopping off at the harbour of St Margaret's Hope. The village looks caught in time with its wonderful greystone buildings and walls. Decide to explore more remote areas and head south.

An old man with hiking sticks is walking past a church. We get talking. His name is John Annal from Burwick. The church – St Peters – was closed years ago after the last local involved with it was buried. We chat about his life in Orkney. He was born here, loves the landscape and the way of life. Although he often visits his daughter in Edinburgh, and thinks Edinburgh is okay, he always longs to return to his homeland.

Reach Burray, a small village not far from St Margaret's Hope, and speak to the local postmistress, Irene Sutherland, about the imminent closure of Burray Post Office. She is only 49, yet her livelihood is over. Burray is a developing village – why take this service away from the community? The great trio of rural communication was the church, the post office and the pub. At Burray, the church has closed; now the post office; how long before the pub too?

Friday 4 July

Drive into Kirkwall and meet the managing director of Ortak jewellery. After a tour of the shop, offices and workshop I emerge with a new insight into the industry. As soon as you make your order, it goes through 27 stages of production.

Another lovely afternoon. Travel to the north of the mainland of Orkney – passing through Swannay, across to Evie Village and beyond.

Then to St Ola to meet Emile van Schayk, owner of the Orkney Wine Company. The shop is located at the top of a steep, rough, gravel slope. His family are as friendly as he is and I am interested to hear that his daughter wants to make her own flutes. The small company is expanding into larger premises not far from the Italian Chapel. He has a wine boiler called the Big Yin which amuses me. Even more when he tells me that the next will be the Even Bigger Yin.

The hotel I'm staying in, the Foveran, is great – another family-run establishment. I take a detour through Orphir, Houton and back again to Scapa, returning after 6pm. Sit outside and enjoy the sun, heading in to write some notes in the lounge before dinner. Decide to opt for the seafood platter. A big oyster sits on the top of the dish. Never tasted an oyster

before and have previously got quite squeamish at the thought – but tonight I go for it. Big mistake – a large salty slimy blob down my throat. And they say this is the food of love? Desperately hope for a good one. Rest of dinner divine.

A family comes into the restaurant – American. Don't seem to be like the British – no arguments after 15 minutes! The conversation drifts into golf, golf and more golf. All the women on the table totally bored. Maybe not so different after all...

Saturday 5 July

Misty morning; light drizzle. After checking-out, off to Kirkwall for a look around. The best streets are narrow and packed with shops – hidden behind the big hotels on the harbour front. I find a coffee and music shop – heaven! – called The Reel, run by local fiddlers, the Wrigley sisters. A double bass sits in the corner next to a black piano and the haunting lilt of a fiddle is playing in the background.

Head north-west towards Skara Brae; arrive to find tour buses. On leaving the site, meet a Welsh couple from Cardiff – rejoicing in the name Jones – who stayed at the same hotel last night. Long discussion on politics, Scottish independence, Welsh devolution, oil prices and Gordon Brown, and agreement that we like to be connected to each other and to the English.

After Skara Brae, I buy my mum an earth-coloured jug from the Westray pottery and go to Brogdar. The stones – Ring of Brogdar – sit anciently on their hill. Try to take some quick pics before a coach of tourists makes its way over to spoil the view.

Over coffee in Stromness, talk to an old chap with bushy beard and hiking boots. My fellow traveller cuts up his sandwich and, as he leaves, places the pieces on a wall outside. 'For the wee birds, not the greedy ones.'

Check-in at the ferry terminal. Three boys, barely in their teens, cycle manically past, shouting over to the queue of cars and passengers: 'Have a nice holiday, have a nice holiday' they cry, in a put-on attempt at Stephen Fry as the archetypal Englishman.

To the mainland.

Over dinner in my Wick hotel, working away at notes of the day, I fear I'm mistaken for a restaurant critic. I'm asked seven times during a one-course dinner (delicious locally-caught haddock – with the ubiquitous chips) whether 'everything is all right, madam'. As I'm settling the bill, an attractive waiter with an Eastern European accent hands me a tiny glass 'with the compliments of the manager, madam.' Thinking it is a small dessert wine or ice-vine I knock it back in one. Whisky. Urgh. Sleep well.

Sunday 6 July

Wake up to another drizzle. A long journey ahead, south-east to Macduff in rural Aberdeenshire, so leave early. Before long, the commercial curse of the south starts to creep in. At Elgin, pass the first Burger King I've come across for days. Rural farmland.

Check into the Highland Haven Hotel in Macduff, dragging my heavy suitcase to a room on the third floor. The window of my bedroom appears to have caved in on one corner and

won't open or shut. Rather amusingly, the television and its remote control seem to be totally different brand makes – incompatible. The bathroom has no soap, no toilet paper.

Escape to the car for a drive round rural Aberdeenshire following the stops of the old Great North of Scotland Railway – from Macduff to the junction of Inveramsay. Not one of the 10 stops exists any more and few have any remnants of station houses, tracks or platforms. I have read R F MacKenzie's description of the shack, Utopia, which once existed on the Inveramsay platform and where debate and discussion would continue long into the night. Yet nothing commemorates this amazing place now – not even a plaque.

The evening is... interesting. Go for dinner in the hotel restaurant and am taken aback by a menu in the Highland Haven which consists exclusively of Indian cuisine. Flick through the many pages desperately looking for something familiar and fail to find anything. The hotel has a noisy pub on the ground floor and I come across several young locals getting tanked up, screaming, laughing, one even crying when I go out for my final cigarette of the week.

Return hastily to my room, finishing my notes to the highlights of Federer being beaten by Nadal on the dysfunctional TV.

Monday 7 July

Travel east to the fishing town – or so I thought – of Peterhead. The rain is streaming down. The town centre on a Monday morning is grim. Coming from Kilmarnock, I'm used to seeing odd characters stoating down the street but here they seem to be everywhere – lots of elderly people with little to do and middle-aged men trudging about with their carrier bag of beer.

Visit the Fishermen's Mission on the harbour front for a light lunch. It exists to provide care for fishermen and their families. The tea room has a simple layout with lots of fishing memorabilia hung on the walls and displayed in cabinets. I soon sit down for a chat with Superintendent George Shaw, donned in his nautical-style uniform. He explains that six years ago the fishing industry was declining and many boats were decommissioned. But the industry seems to have pulled through one crisis after another and I am assured that fishermen are clever, hardy men, who will fight their corner.

At Peterhead Port Authority, they tell me that boys once went to sea as young as 15. All they needed was a boat and the basics, usually passed down in succeeding generations of the same family. The authority would often help them to acquire shares in a vessel. With the introduction of quotas, this age-old custom was lost.

One of the regular haunts of the fishermen is the Union Bar, a small basic pub almost as brown inside as it is out. Looks closed and uninviting, but I push the door and unexpectedly it opens. I speak to regulars at the bar. A deckhand called Sid says that the number of boats in his time has declined from 400 to 40. The quotas mean that few can afford to stay in the industry. The fishermen often throw back as many fish as they keep.

At the Harbour Lights, I find an older crowd. Propped at the end of the bar I speak to a

retired fisherman, Ian Baird, who entered the industry at the age of 15 and stayed with it for 39 years, following on from his grandfather and father. He sounds glum: things won't improve; the fishermen have not been as well treated as the farmers; self-employed tax is a burden in January and July.

But his friend offers a different perspective. 'Never mind the fishermen,' he implores. 'What about the welders?'

I am called over by an elderly punter, who beckons me close, fumbles about in his pocket, and eventually pushes two pound coins in my hand. 'You're fucking gorgeous, lass, get yourself a drink.' Decide it is time to leave the Harbour Lights. Pronto.

Dinner in Banff, then return to the hotel in Macduff. After typing up notes, I head outside for some fresh air (i.e. the inevitable cigarette) and get talking to a group of electricians from East Kilbride and Easterhouse. They are working locally. We have a great chat about international culture and politics, as people tend to do when they find themselves outside the Highland Haven Hotel, Macduff, after a close inspection of the menu.

Tuesday 8 July

Leave early. Arrive at Pitlochry Festival Theatre to find my mother, father and dog, who 'just happened to be passing'. We have lunch in the theatre; catch-up.

Tour of the theatre, meeting various members of staff, including a carpenter, scenic artist, head of stage and actor. My favourite place is the workshop, filled with sets, salvaged props from previous productions, tools and models.

Tonight I'm staying in Knockendarroch House, where the theatre's founder, John Stewart, lived. The theatre started in his garden – in a tent! The only word to describe the place is magical. It stands proudly on a hill overlooking the town. With the theatre now more than a mile away from its origins and from the people of Pitlochry, I wonder how John Stewart would feel about it today.

I get the bus to the theatre with four other guests from the hotel. One couple is Scottish and come to Pitlochry often. The other are on holiday from Washington DC.

The lounge area is getting busier by the minute. Will all the seats – 544 – be filled? Before we pour into the auditorium, I sit with two elderly women from Glasgow. They are worried that the play – Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* – may be beyond them. Try to put them at ease; tell them I've heard it all comes together after the interval.

From the moment the red-ruffled curtains open and the first lines are uttered, I enjoy the play. After a rush of applause, the auditorium hushes. The story weaves its way through 18th- and 20th-century lives, leaving a powerful message. My interpretation is that we are all imminently doomed, so we should make the most of our capability to experience pleasure, even if that does occasionally involve dinner in Macduff.

Almost get on the wrong bus, one bound for Edinburgh with nine Americans. It's dark outside and we all seem to be glad to return to Knockendarroch House. For me, it's the end of the road.

Calvin for company

Walter Humes

2008

I regard trips to Edinburgh as missionary work in the East – even one soul saved makes it all worthwhile. On this particular occasion, I was not going to see government officials in Victoria Quay so there was no need for the crucifix and the garlic. I settled into my seat on the train and hoped for a quiet journey. From past experience, I now avoid the four-seat arrangement round a table: for some reason I always seemed to attract any loonies, drunks or psychopaths on board to sit opposite me. For a time, I harboured the illusion that this was because I have a sympathetic face but I came to realise that deranged people need somebody to hate and anyone who looks like a respectable professional person – a misleading image that I have cultivated over many years – probably fits the bill quite well. In other words, my face is punchable rather than sympathetic.

At Croy, a young woman with a noisy child joined the train. At first, she made no attempt to restrain him as he roamed up and down the aisle annoying other passengers. However, when he tired of this and attempted to deflect his mother's attention from a copy of *Hello* magazine, she was provoked into shouting 'Don't dae that Calvin'. At this point, I was tempted to intervene by enquiring: 'Did you name your child after the 16th-century Protestant reformer or the manufacturer of designer underwear?' On reflection, however, I concluded that this might not be prudent. After all, at my time of life a knee in the groin could lead to painful complications. I contented myself with exchanging mild looks of disapproval with an elderly woman who had the bearing of a Church of Scotland elder. Her expression reminded me of one of my favourite lines from *Rab C Nesbitt*. Our hero was in his usual inebriated state and provoked a look of disgust from a woman in the street. Never to be upstaged by moral condemnation, he challenged her by saying: 'Why don't you get BUPA to unpucker your features?'

So you see, travelling by ScotRail from Glasgow to Edinburgh can be the gateway to a whole range of cultural experiences. Once you get to Edinburgh, of course, you enter a much darker world in which raw aggression is masked by a veneer of social courtesy. There is still much missionary work to be done.

Anybody for Albania?

Barbara Millar

2008

Yesterday – May Day – I couldn't help but think fondly of a long-forgotten radical travel company – though that is far too grand a description – which operated in the 1970s, possibly beyond. Yorkshire Tours, which had its roots in the Communist Party, took people, generally of a socialist persuasion, to countries where it was still difficult to travel. They went to East Germany, long before the Wall came down; to Soviet Russia, at the height of the Cold War; and to Albania, still very much uncharted territory, even for the most intrepid of travellers.

One infamous trip was on the Trans-Siberian railway. On crossing the border into China, fiscal regulations forbidding the export of roubles meant that the Yorkshire Tours group had to leave their Soviet cash behind for safekeeping until their return. All knowledge of their cash was denied when the time came to re-cross the Sino-Soviet border so the group's courier, Norman Greenfield, led a sit-down strike, preventing the train from continuing its journey. Eventually, so the story goes, Norman rang the Kremlin, said: 'Hello, this is Norman,' as an introduction and proceeded to negotiate the return of his comrades' cash.

A friend of mine celebrated May Day in East Berlin, which offered a great show of Red might. But, because everything on a Yorkshire Tours trip was done on a shoestring, he had to help butter the bread for the group's sandwiches while on the move, driving down to Dover. Another colleague recalled being at Leeds Bus Station one wet, late autumn evening when an old coach pulled into one of the stands. The door slid open – yes, the coach was that old – and a gent in a woolly hat popped his head outside and, in broadest Yorkshire, asked: 'Anybody for Albania?'

Those were the days.

The man who beat the snow

Jock Gallagher

2009

On Monday, the television doomily reported that London was paralysed. No buses, no tubes, no trains... and threw in for good measure that conditions underfoot made walking beyond perilous. When I decided to ignore all this and set off for London in the middle of the afternoon, my wife looked at the leaden sky and said simply but possibly accurately: 'You're mad!' I told myself that the mileage from my home in Worcestershire to central London is a mere 120 miles. Besides, in my mind, my journey really was necessary.

I have spent the best part of a year setting up the launch of the Centre for Freedom of the Media at London's Chatham House. We had set up a half-day conference to look at what had become of media freedom in the 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. There were guest speakers from Berlin, Vienna, Moscow and Kiev. The expected audience included senior journalists from the British and Russian media, academics from 10 universities, diplomats from several embassies, lawyers and politicians. The Chatham House people – partners in the conference – had had nearly 200 acceptances and were nearly as expectant as me about an important occasion. So I had a fair incentive to be there regardless of the weather.

When I ploughed my way through about four inches of snow to the station, I was disturbed to find that the car park was deserted. There was no-one on the platform and when I went to the ticket office, the booking clerk shook his head gloomily: 'London? You'll be lucky!' He seemed reluctant to sell me the ticket, almost as if he expected to have to sort out a refund when the train failed to materialise. It did, although it was late... by two minutes. Surprise, surprise, there was no buffet car.

It's a circuitous route that takes us tortuously north-west through the Black Country to Birmingham before we're allowed to then turn south-east for the capital. All along the route the snow was piled high and every now and again the flurry of snow would turn to blizzard. The Chiltern Railways heating actually worked, which allowed the view to appear very picturesque. Somewhere along the way, the conductor was pleased to announce we had picked up the two late minutes. Three hours later, we arrived in London – exactly on time.

It was only as I tried to go out of Marylebone Station that the chaos that is London became clear. There was no queue for taxis. There were no taxis. There was no queue for buses. There were no buses. This was five o'clock in the evening at what should have been the rush hour. There was no rush hour.

No attempt had been made to clear the pavements and in the evening's sub-zero temperature, the slush had turned to glistening ice. Shrewdly, as it turned out, I had booked a hotel less than a mile from the station. It took me only about 15 minutes to glide

gracefully across the ice and although I had the odd hairy moment, I didn't once lose my balance. Later, on television, I did see those unfortunates crashing down the stairs at Victoria Station.

I did lose my cool, however, when I hit the hotel. They weren't expecting me. They didn't think anyone would have made it... from the north. My room had been given to a stranded London businessman. Just before I could explode or even brandish the confirmation email, they went into diplomatic mode and said they would of course fit me in elsewhere and would adjust the bill. My new room proved to be a box on the second floor – it was initially unheated. The double bed (which I always book) was a single reminiscent of my old army bunk and the bath was a shower with no soap. They soon sorted the heating and supplied soap – I think I was meant to be grateful that they had put themselves out.

Later, on the deserted street, I failed to find a black cab and retreated to the hotel and put myself at the mercy of the dreaded mini-cab system. The journey that would normally have cost about £8 cost me £20 and took me through what was by now a ghost city. Restaurants were closed and so were the theatres and cinemas. There were very few pedestrians and almost as few cars.

When I got to the reception laid on at a colleague's home, the difference between the Londoner and the non-Londoner couldn't have been more marked. Those who had travelled from Berlin and Moscow, as well as Worcestershire and Sheffield, were totally sanguine and said little of their journeys. However, those who came from different areas around London spoke breathlessly of miserable journeys, near misses and of their anxiety about getting back home.

Throughout most of Monday, my email and then my mobile phone brought grim news about the likelihood of the conference being cancelled. With Heathrow closed, our international speakers were unlikely to reach London. Even if they did, Chatham House was unlikely to be able to stage the conference. Only a handful of their staff had made it to work on Monday and that day's conference crashed. The fear was that Tuesday would be a grim action replay.

I was never once tempted to call it quits and blame it all on the weather. We found alternative venues and prepared for a truncated version. Then the tide turned. A speaker from Moscow rang from her London hotel and asked the time of the reception. She had arrived at Heathrow totally unaware of any problems. Two other Russians reported in shortly afterwards. Our man from Berlin had one flight cancelled but simply sat it out at the airport and came on the next plane. We had a sad call from Kiev where the Ukrainian journalist had been told flights to Heathrow had been cancelled. He checked out the possibilities of flying from Kiev to Amsterdam, going by train to Paris and catching the Eurostar to London only to find that the London terminus was closed. He was our only casualty.

Then came good news – Chatham House confirmed they would certainly muster enough staff to handle the conference although they were uncertain about being able to provide

their usual hospitality. When Tuesday came, we gathered all the speakers and a few key guests in the reception room at Chatham House and apologised for lunch appearing in the form of sandwiches. No-one minded.

Ten minutes before we were due to start, I looked into the conference room and got a shock. There were six people luxuriating in the 200 seats. It appeared that the worst had happened. The weather had beaten us. Before I could report back to my colleagues, however, a few more people arrived... and then some more... and some more. 'People often leave it until the last minute,' said the Chatham House events manager.

When we took in the speakers, they were warmly welcomed by an audience of around 140 brave souls. The freedom of the media isn't going to be impeded by the hysteria of the London-centric media.

Buddha, can you spare a yen?

Roddy Charles

2010

I look at my watch for the 15th time in 15 minutes but it appears that my arm has separated from my body and entered a parallel dimension where time is not required to move in any particular direction. It's still 10.48pm. I swear it has been 10.40-something for the past hour or so.

On screen, Kazushi Sakuraba, diminutive master of submissions, gears up for what should be (if he has any brain cells still functioning) his retirement fight. Behind me, my wife sleeps on in a blissful state of year-end relaxation. Indeed, in a house of five people, I am the only person awake. There will be no champagne corks popping at the bells, no party poppers or awkward kisses; I don't even have a can of beer in my hand to celebrate with myself. It is New Year in Japan and I'm driving to do *Hatsumode*.

Sakuraba, the nation's favourite mixed martial artist (yes, they have one), is set to headline a two-hour-plus year-end show of ultimate fighting, against his long-time rival Kiyoshi Tamura. New Year in Japan is as synonymous with mixed martial arts as Hogmanay in Scotland is with, well... gale-driven downpours on Princes Street.

The year-end show used to be rather endearingly labelled *Otoko Matsuri* (Men's Festival) but now runs under the banner of *Dynamite!!* (with double exclamation mark!!). This year's event attracted a sell-out crowd of 25,643 to the Saitama Super Arena just outside Tokyo and was broadcast live nationwide. The alternative is NHK's (Japan's version of the BBC) *Kohaku Uta Gassen* (Red and white song battle), a singing contest featuring a range of the nation's most popular singers, both contemporary and traditional. Since its inception in 1951, it has consistently been the most watched programme on Japanese TV, though has suffered a ratings drop in the last 10 years or so, presumably due to the fact that half of the Japanese population are seemingly now too old to even see a television.

Personally, I prefer to watch the fighting, as punches are a lot easier to interpret than lyrics lionising fishermen labouring in the frozen seas north of Hokkaido. The popularity of both shows is boosted by the fact that New Year in Japan is a time when most people head back to the family home for some well-earned rest and contemplation.

My wife Kanna's family home is merely an hour's drive from our house on the Pacific coast of Shizuoka Prefecture, itself an hour or two south of Tokyo (or as a Glaswegian acquaintance of mine insists on calling it, 'The Big Smokio'), but for some it could be a marathon trek. Japan is a long narrow country and it seems to take forever to get anywhere, bullet trains or not. An enterprising burglar would certainly find about half the apartments in 'The Big Smokio' deserted from 30 December until 4 January. Fortunately though, burglars are about as common as plates of mince and tatties in the land of the rising sun.

Once home, the emphasis is firmly set on food, drink and relaxation – the latter being in very short supply the rest of the year round.

New Year's Eve is a fairly low-key affair. Soba noodles are traditionally eaten for dinner on the 31st and, for many, midnight sees a trip to pay respects at the local shrine – an act known as *Hatsumode*. On New Year's Day, everyone gets up reasonably early to eat zoni (soup with a pounded rice cake in it) and drink sake. The rice cake is so glutinous and sticky that tens of elderly people die across the peninsula every New Year's Day by choking on this traditional treat. Still, it's an honourable way to go. At a little after midnight, after toasting my reflection in the TV with an imaginary glass of champagne (Sakuraba lost an agonisingly dull bout on points, not that it will go any way to dent his popularity), I rouse Kanna and her younger brother Kei from their slumber and we set off.

My wife's local shrine is not quite as local as some. It's a 20-minute drive to the entrance and tends to get a tad busy in the wee small hours. En route the streets are deserted, not a car to be seen, but years of experience mean that hopes are not raised too high, rightly so, as it turns out. A two-hour wait for a parking space is our New Year's greeting from the gods.

At about 2.30am, I revive the slumber twins again and we set off into the bitterly cold night. The shrine is set in a ravine in a beautiful cedar forest, squeezed between two sparkling brooks. It is a peaceful place and for 364 nights a year so perfectly dark that it is almost impossible to walk up to it without ending up paddling in one of the aforementioned waterways. On the 31st however, for one night only, the circus comes to town.

The place is packed, and I mean Christmas Eve-shopping packed. It takes about a minute to move a step forward as we all patiently queue up for our chance. There are powerful floodlights all around, casting eerie shadows into the depths of the forest, hinting at unseen ancient beasts and spirits, or more often an old man taking a piss behind a tree. The path up to the main shrine is flanked on each side by stalls selling hot food and drinks. Fried noodles, octopus balls, frankfurters, taiyaki (a fish-shaped treat made with waffle batter and strangely containing no fish – it's actually filled with sweet bean paste), amazake (hot, sweet, milky sake), doner kebabs (honestly) and, of course, beer.

Now that I have served my time in purgatory (my wife always drives back – it's the sensible way round), I load up on the cold stuff, though my hands can barely tolerate the can even with gloves on. More waiting. I buy a third can from the vendors who are so conveniently placed that I don't even have to move from the line. I now feel a lot more inclined to have a conversation with the big man.

We finally reach the front of the queue and do our business. First, one throws a coin into the big collection box (no matter which god you pray to, they never seem to tire of money). Next, you pull on a large rope connected to a metal bell that rattles rather than rings and finally, you clap your hands together twice, close your eyes and ask for whatever you want. I ask the lord Buddha for a pay rise. It feels a bit like going to sit on Santa's knee.

Then, suddenly, it's all over. Three hours of waiting for a 20-second ritual, but I feel

somehow content, cleansed even. Next up is *omikuj*. Bit of a lottery this. In good old tombolo fashion, you reach into a box and select a small paper card from the thousands within. The card contains a very detailed description of your prospects for the New Year and is taken pretty seriously. The young girl in front of me screams and pumps the air after luckily picking *taikichi*, the most fortunate card available.

A crisis looms when my card advises me not to move house this year but my wife's card tells her it is an especially fortuitous year for moving. I remind her that we are moving in April regardless of these pieces of paper and she gives me a suspicious look, as if to say: 'You never wanted to move in the first place'. It is almost starting to get light. We fold our *omikuj* and then tie them on to some particularly auspicious string adorning one of the smaller shrine buildings. Apparently, this will bring good luck to the bad points on the cards, whilst handily leaving the good points unchanged.

On our way to the beach to watch the first sun of the New Year rise over the Pacific, I ask Kei what he requested from Buddha. 'It's a Shinto shrine, not a temple,' he informs me admonishingly, 'Buddha doesn't live there'. My wife laughs. 'Eight years you've been in this country!' she reminds me unnecessarily.

Oh well, I think to myself, sake for breakfast.

The 3.08 from Carlisle

Kenneth Roy

2011

If a £10 book token flutters out of Boswell's diaries, and it has been there for at least five years since the diaries were last opened, and if you live where I live, it is just as convenient to exchange the forgotten gift in Waterstones in Carlisle as it is to trudge up to Glasgow and along an overcrowded Sauchiehall Street to the city's only remaining bookshop. To cut a long sentence short, I took the morning train to England last Saturday.

On the afternoon train back, there were 40 passengers – customers as they are called these days – on the stretch between Dumfries and Kilmarnock, of whom 16 were behaving badly. If this turned out to be a microcosm of my native country, 40% of the Scottish population – 2,068,196 people – behave badly.

Only one, so far as I could tell, was behaving illegally – which would adapt to an all-Scotland total of 129,262 lawbreakers.

That left 24 people on the train who were behaving well, including a number of young men in their late teens or early 20s. For the purposes of our poll, we arrive at a figure of 3,102,295 people in Scotland who behave well.

But was the 3.08 from Carlisle truly a microcosm of Scotland? It feels all too plausible.

I had better tell you what everyone was up to on this train of national significance.

At the table immediately behind mine, there were two small children, a brother and sister, in the care of people I took to be their grandparents; he almost elderly. The children reacted as children do when they are mercilessly tickled. For the duration of the journey, they existed in a self-contained nuclear unit, a pool of hilarity, oblivious to the auditory pain of the external world.

My casual typecasting proved to be flawed. The girl called the old man 'daddy' and the woman I had down as granny addressed the girl as 'Paris'. I never did discover her brother's name, but I began to speculate wildly. I saw them as Paris and Brussels McGroarty.

At the far end of the train – the 40 of us having been contained within two carriages – four older boys, early teens, were leaping over the seats in so physically challenging a fashion that they had created a natural exclusion zone of several rows. They carried on, unchallenged, all the way to Kilmarnock and perhaps beyond.

So far, I have dealt only with the minor players, the walk-on parts. I'll turn now to the Oscar short-list.

At Dumfries, a character familiar from most train journeys joined us – the menacing one with the straggly beard. As he came unsteadily down the passage, I prayed hard that he would not settle himself on the aisle seat of the table opposite. It was a day of prayer. Earlier, I had said a small one in Carlisle Cathedral, as the last of the pale winter sun

glanced off its walls. But not all prayers are answered; the aisle seat of the table opposite might have been pre-destined for this man.

Fortunately, Paris and Brussels were too much even for him. He gave them a malevolent stare, muttered something under his breath and continued down the train until he found company more to his liking – two girls dressed for a long, eventful night in the clubs of Glasgow. Before long, he was half on his seat, half off it, as he stretched over to the table opposite, grabbed one of the girls and put his arm around her shoulder.

He had lit a cigarette by that stage. The other girl produced a mobile phone and took a photograph of the happy encounter. No-one in the group was quite sober, but no-one was quite drunk either. The mood was casually lecherous. It could have gone either way. It was 3.30pm on a Saturday afternoon.

The scene around the group was one of frozen passivity. The faces of the well-behaved registered blankness, but what lay behind the mask? Disgust? Resignation? Fear?

Of course I thought of the Big Society. I supposed this must be the sharp end of what the English public schoolboys who run the show have in mind – only the active citizenship necessary for the fulfilment of the scheme was missing here.

At Auchinleck, the home of Boswell, of riot and occasional shooting, five junior football supporters boarded the train. The match was over. Auchinleck Talbot had thumped Sauchie Juniors 4-1. The supporters, Auchinleck men living away, were in boisterous good humour. Out came the Strongbow and the Tennents, and soon the tables were awash with cans. It is only in that feeble miniature, the modern novel, that we behave out of our predictable stereotypes. In the life of the train, we are all conforming to them. The late middle-aged men with the shaved heads, the Auchinleck supporters, were conforming, and soon, so was I.

On one of his infrequent appearances, I asked the guard – they are known as something else now; customer service advisers or something of the kind, but I will call him the guard for old time's sake – I asked him for a policy statement on the smoker. I used to smoke on trains myself; I am not opposed to smoking or smokers; but the law is the law and I thought we had a law prohibiting smoking on trains.

'You have to catch them doing it,' he explained.

'You would catch them doing it if you patrolled the train more often.'

'I walk up the train after each stop to check the tickets.'

'But you do know who I'm talking about, don't you?'

'Yes,' he said. 'He's given us trouble before. But you have to catch them doing it.'

When the train pulled into Kilmarnock at 4.50, he emerged from his locked cabin and we had a further conversation. I asked him if it was always as bad as this. He nodded. He said that, if I wanted to experience seriously bad behaviour, I should join him on the last train out of Carlisle to Dumfries on a Saturday. He said that train would rock. Literally rock.

'Don't you carry mobile phones?'

'Yes,' he said, 'but – '. He left the sentence unfinished. I took it to mean that the use of mobile phones was only possible in an emergency. He was a young man. I pictured him with a wife and small children. Did I blame him for not confronting his own passengers – his 'customers'? Did I blame him for not accosting the deeply unpleasant smoker? I didn't.

For him, the ordeal of the 3.08 from Carlisle, carrying the weight of 40% of the Scottish population who behave badly, was far from over. The train from hell continued all the way to Glasgow. On the platform at Kilmarnock, two police officers observed 20 more joining the train.

'Take care,' I said to the guard.

'See you around,' he replied.

She lit up my journey

Andrew Hook

2011

Good news of any kind is in short supply these days. Two areas of our life in which negative reports prevail are the behaviour of today's teenagers, and the state of what David Cameron insists on calling our 'broken society'. All the more reason then to write about any experience, however minor, which suggests that not all teenagers are feral, surly, uncommunicative, and irresponsible – and that not everyone in our society has forgotten what consideration for others means.

Late in the summer, I was travelling with two American friends from Oban to Glasgow. The train we were on was very busy. So it was no surprise that the fourth seat at our table was soon occupied by a fellow-traveller: a young girl probably about 16 or 17. She seemed unconcerned about being surrounded by elderly companions and did not retreat into earphones. In fact, in no time at all, we were all engaged in animated conversation. She turned out to be in fifth year at high school and we soon had to concede that she was surrounded by no fewer than three professors of English.

Quite undaunted, she told us she wasn't particularly academic – not the brightest bulb in her class as she put it – but she was determined all the same to make something of her life. She had been a keen football player but found when she became 14 she could only play in all female teams – and unfortunately there was no such team within a reasonable distance of where she lived. (I suggested she check out *Gregory's Girl*.)

What was she going to do after school? Well, nursing was an attractive idea, but she was not certain her academic qualifications would be good enough. Still, she would try her hardest to get there. Were there any other possibilities? Yes, she really enjoyed cooking. That could be good we agreed – people with cooking skills always seemed to be in demand in the catering industry. Keep it in mind we said.

In all of this, her conversation was bright, quick-fire, lively and entertaining. There was no suggestion of an act to impress heavy-duty professors. She had been to Disneyland in Orlando but that had been a long time ago. She was a huge fan of the Scottish actor Gerard Butler. Had we heard of him? Yes, and I'd seen him in '300'. But no, I didn't know he'd studied law at Glasgow University and certainly hadn't taught him.

Our young friend left the train at Dalmuir and we were unanimous and serious in wishing her the good fortune she so clearly deserved – in what we all agreed were difficult times. A year or two younger, she reminded me of many of the Dartmouth College students who come over from America to study for a term in Glasgow: the same combination of light-hearted enjoyment of life, with a kind of seriousness of intention to do something worthwhile, to be positive, to make a contribution. How reassuring to discover that such teenagers do still exist.

And that our society is not entirely broken. A few days ago, extracting some cash from a machine in Glasgow's West End, I somehow contrived to lose from my wallet a library card and some business cards. I'm still puzzled how I could have done this without even noticing. Anyway, an hour or two after getting home, the telephone rang. A gentleman told me he and his wife had noticed the cards on the pavement, picked them up, and was now phoning to be sure I was the person named on them. It was no problem, he lived not far away, and would post the cards back to me. Next day they arrived – first class. Amid my confused thanks I had not caught his name – and there was no name with the envelope. But thanks are indeed due to my anonymous fellow citizen, who proves that here in Glasgow civil society does still exist.

Running away? Where not to go

Catherine Czerkawska

2011

So there I am, reading this rather good book, by a well-regarded author, a contemporary story with a bizarre twist in the tale. And I'm enjoying it.

Then I come to the part where two of the characters are running away and need to disappear. What do they do? They go off and live in a 'remote Scottish village' and even though their names and faces have been emblazoned all over the media, nobody spots them for the best part of two years.

Sorry?

If you happen to live in a remote Scottish village, or even a not-so-remote Scottish village, in fact if you live in any kind of village except perhaps those places in the home counties which consist largely of empty holiday homes, you will have encountered the 'flight to the country' in fiction, in film and television, more times than you can shake a stick at. And you will, like me, have become increasingly irritated by the idiocy of it. Recently, *Corrie's* accidental murderer, the hapless Stape, planned to flee to the remote Highlands with his lovely but credulous wife, Fizz. I have deep suspicions that the writers have sent him there anyway, since in the current storyline, he too has disappeared.

I can only assume that the perpetrators of these bits of nonsense have never spent any length of time living in a small rural village. But I can illustrate my objections with a tale of my own. Some years ago, my husband's car, parked on the village street, outside our cottage, caught fire in the middle of the night. It was a slow-burning electrical fault and about three in the morning, the vehicle started to emit a few flames. We were woken by an elderly neighbour who emerged from the next house-but-one in her nightie, and hammered on our door shouting, 'Alan, Alan, your car's on fire!'

Simultaneously, the neighbour over the street rushed out with a fire extinguisher and doused the flames. By the time the fire brigade got there, the fire was out and the car was smoking slightly. Even now, I find myself relating this story with a certain amount of disbelief. But it happened.

The fact is that, in small villages, people still notice everything. They notice the delivery men who come and go, they notice the cyclists and motorists who pass through; above all, they notice the people who don't belong. And almost everyone is deeply, passionately curious about 'incomers'. I have friends who I swear would obviate all need for torture were MI5 to employ them, so adept are they at worming life histories out of strangers, albeit in the nicest possible way. So whether you are writing a novel or a piece of television drama, for pity's sake don't make your characters attempt to hide in a 'remote Scottish village', unless you want them to be discovered that very same day. Because, strange as it may seem,

people in Scotland actually read newspapers and watch television. They don't hide out in their crofts with the occasional foray to the trading post to exchange furs for pemmican.

Instead, why not send them to London, Birmingham, or Manchester? Try Glasgow or Edinburgh, if you're dead set on Scotland. Send them somewhere where people regularly ignore their neighbours. Let them hide in a crowd. But please don't send them to a remote Scottish village where – believe me – there will be nowhere to run, and definitely nowhere to hide.

A perfect summer day in Scotland

Sally Magnusson, Tom Devine, Ian Jack, Katie Grant and David Donnison
2013

Sally Magnusson

As long as the sun is shining, I'm going nowhere. And since we're talking perfection here, the sun is positively beaming on this day from a flawless sky, with just a wisp of breeze making the horse chestnut leaves rustle.

From the garden, I can trace the hazy hump of the Campsie Fells. A few cows are pottering around the neighbouring field. A teeny black and white wagtail lands near my chair now and then, bobbing its tail with that air of slightly frantic busyness that always makes me laugh. Behind me, I can hear the contented hum of a bee and beyond that the eager bustle of the burn. This being a perfect day, I expect to turn round and see our local heron standing in the water, looking, as ever, faintly foolish.

Yes, I love the sea, the islands, the mountains and the great wild moors. But give me just one (sunny) summer's day and this is the Scotland I want – a garden beside some emerald fields, with wild flowers keeking from the hedgerow and butterflies flitting among the nettles and Glasgow shimmering in the distance and the intoxicating smell of grass. And not a midge in sight.

Tom Devine

Awake early in our house in the wilds of the Ross of Mull. The sky is already entirely blue. One of those heavenly Hebridean days is anticipated, when the islands are surrounded by calm and sparkling azure seas. While the kindred sleep on, I go for one of my frequent two-hour treks across country to Shiaba, the extensive ruins of a township set in idyllic scenery on a clifftop overlooking the Sound of Mull. It was cleared in 1847 on the orders of the Duke of Argyll. The remains of dwellings, barns, dykes and countless cultivation beds evoke feelings of melancholy, doubly so on such a perfect day.

On the way back, I spot one of the area's two resident golden eagles, hovering above in the search for prey to feed the young, born only a few weeks ago. Also in the distance are a herd of feral goats. Local tradition has it they are descended from ancestors released during the Clearances.

Do not meet another human being from the beginning to the end of the walk. By the time I reach the house, C and some of the children and grandchildren are already on their way to one of the three secluded Caribbean-style white sandy beaches for a barbecue lunch. Afterwards, everyone is in the sea and, despite the cold waters, having great fun – it is also a temporary relief from the burning sun above.

Basking sharks are seen in the shimmering distance. We are entirely alone. The day ends

with a 30-minute drive to a very special local restaurant. Despite its apparent remoteness, the Ross boasts one of the best eateries in Scotland. It is run by a husband and wife team; he a Scottish crofter-fisherman and she a gifted Canadian chef. The perfect dinner and a post-prandial dram or two bring to an end a perfect day.

Ian Jack

A family tradition: on the last Thursday in August we take the Waverley from Rothesay to Millport and there hire bikes and cycle anti-clockwise around Cumbrae. We eat lunch at the excellent Dancing Midge on Millport's pretty esplanade, stop to look in at the aquarium at Keppel, and against all good judgement always have tea and maybe a fruit slice at the Fintry Bay cafe, where we once asked for a glass of tap water and were told it was only available to customers 'having a meal'.

The views across to Bute and Arran and north towards the Arrochar peaks are magnificent, especially when the sky is blue, which happens more often than you might think. Then, the bikes returned, we stand on the old wooden pier waiting for the steamer and listening to the pipe band tuning up, because this is the Waverley's last Millport call of the season and always gets a warm send-off. On board, we might splash out and buy champagne and drink it on deck from plastic cups, looking at Largs and debating whether next year we'll get off and have a fish supper at Nardini's and come home via the last ferry back from Wemyss Bay, which we never do.

Katie Grant

For me, a perfect day starts at the end since although perfection may look promising at dawn, it may have evaporated by noon. So I'd start with cocktails, a fine dinner and a long night at the Isle of Eriska Hotel. I might even risk starting with the drive to Eriska, one of the few journeys my husband and I can make with serenity. Timetabled travel makes me horribly anxious, so the car, with thermos coffee and picnic lunch, is a more harmonious bet. A holiday picnic can be perfect even in gloomy glen and torrential rain.

The Eriska Hotel stands alone on the island – not a true island, thank goodness, since I'd fret about missing the ferry. You just drive over a small tidal causeway. But the feeling is islandish: sky, mountains and water; old-fashioned tea; badgers in the porch; odd people to scrutinise. You don't have to speak.

A stay at Eriska is rich – just as well since it's not cheap. Nor does it stifle. Thoughts can fly off in unexpected directions: surprisingly perfect, I'd say.

David Donnison

Awoke on an Orkney farm: the most beautiful cattle around us, cropping the greenest grass you ever saw. Sunlight burning its way through clouds swirling over Hoy island. Hen harriers patrolling the slopes below, hunting, hunting...while lapwings, oystercatchers, fulmars and more wheel about in the wind.

Down to a splendid breakfast provided by a beautiful elderly lady – wise and loving sheet anchor of her large family. Then away to explore ruins of houses, harbours, religions... built 5,000 years ago by people who lived here long before the Vikings. Next a walk along cliffs, the sea boiling into turbulent inlets – till we seek refuge inland lest the gale lift us right off our feet. Then to Kirkwall and St Magnus Cathedral – awesome assertion of raw spirituality; uncluttered by decorations later added to religion by feudal high culture.

Finally, an evening walk to the harbour and a splendid pub; reminding us we are among people who do things well. Stone walls so beautifully built. Fishing boats freshly painted – their decks washed clean, their ropes neatly coiled; none of the rusting junk you'll see in other harbours. The whisky, malts with names familiar worldwide. The best beef you'll ever eat. Unforgettable ice cream. What a place. What a people. What a day.

The bus to Delphi

Morelle Smith

2014

According to myth, Zeus sent out two eagles from the ends of the earth, east and west, and Delphi was the place where they met, marking it out as the centre of the world. You can reach the centre of the world by public transport: it is possible, once you have hazarded a plan and surrendered your will to that of the gods.

I was living near the small town of Nafpaktos, on the Gulf of Corinth, and one day in early spring I explored the edge of the old town where two main streets converge. Across from the pedestrian area where a group of men in black leather jackets were standing near a cafe with a beige awning, I saw a sign for the Sanctuary of Asklepios. This was a flat grassy area with a path at one side leading up among high rocks, dotted with pine trees and cacti. At the entrance, there was a bust of Asklepios himself. If I hadn't stopped to explore the sanctuary, I might not have noticed the sign just beyond it for the ticket office for buses heading east.

I had already tried, without success, to find out the times of buses to Delphi, from the main ticket office in Nafpaktos. But this office just behind the Sanctuary was for buses heading into a different area, and the young man behind the wooden counter spoke English, was very helpful, and wrote down the times of buses to Delphi. There are two each day.

The next morning I take a local bus to Nafpaktos and alight at the terminus next to the To Mesaio cafe, the kiosk, and the assembled men in leather jackets. I then cross the busy road and skip past the Sanctuary of Asklepios to the KTEL ticket office. The bus is not direct I'm told, I will have to change at Itea. I am, as it turns out, the only person to alight at Delphi and on the return journey, I am the only person to get on there, too. The centre of the world is not a truly popular destination for local travellers, but as it is on the way to Athens, which is, I'm in luck.

Itea is a small town by the sea, with a few souvenir shops on the promenade, and a long stone pier. Next to the ticket office there are two cafés where some old men are sitting peaceably, smiling. The sun shines over the water and there is time for me to have a coffee before my next bus arrives, the bus to Athens.

From Itea in the plain, the road sweeps up hairpin bends, rising higher and higher, up the foothills of Parnassus which is glimpsed in the distance, capped with snow. The view becomes more and more overwhelming. I get off just after the small town of Delphi. The land tumbles down into the valley and the air is scented. I make my way to the ruins of the temples of Apollo and Athena, pay the entrance fee, and start up the path.

When it comes to ruins, I feel ambivalent. They capture the imagination and turn it to

thoughts of past civilisations, their wonders and magic, their mysteries, culture and artefacts. It is exciting to view objects or fragments from the past and glimpse the routines and rituals of daily life, and thrilling to know that you are placing your feet in the footsteps and on the same ground as so many did thousands of years ago.

Yet I sometimes feel an accompanying sense of loss and nostalgia for something that was once whole and is now broken, no longer a living entity, but the debris of a civilisation. I don't feel that with all ruins: there are some places where the presence of the past is a rich and joyous experience, but in Delphi I had this wistful feeling of *sic transit*, so it passes and passes, though the stones or fragments remain.

The land itself has a feeling of concentrated power. The approach from the sea, the road winding and rewinding itself up the steep slope, coiling and uncoiling, with a view back down to the level plain, a flat semi-circle round the bay, like a piece of card stuck onto the sea, some irrelevant label. Then the land rises up abruptly as if declaring its real nature, tired of dissimulation, stretching effortlessly up towards the sun which hangs in the sky, high above mountaintops, making everything possible.

The ruins – of temples and oracle, altars, treasuries, theatre – lie on the mountain slope, facing the sun. Apollo was, after all, a sun god. As you climb the path through the ruins, you look out onto the mountain opposite. At some places, at some bends in the path, you can see right down into the valley. But for most of the ascent, it is hidden from view, so you are as if suspended in air, not truly part of the human world, with its bargains and conditions, its trade and compromises, its sense of incompleteness, its search for what will make it whole.

The path is scented with herbs and flowers and the sun beats down on the hill slope and its shapely litter of stones, taken from the earth and worked on, carved and polished, and now, all these centuries later, lie in fragments on the earth.

I was lucky to have visited this place on a sunny morning to really appreciate its grandeur, for in Nafpaktos, further west, it had rained for several days. And by the time I get back there, waiting for the last bus of the day, it's getting dark, and a ferocious downpour forces me to shelter under a shop awning.

But as I wait for the bus, the rain thudding on the awning roof, I think about the Sanctuary of Asklepios, just a few minutes walk away. The setting of the ruins at Delphi is truly magnificent and the columns of Apollo's temple indicate the grandeur of the architecture. But it was his son Asklepios, the god of healing dreams, who was the kindly and compassionate one. His symbol of staff and snake can still be seen today outside hospitals in Greece, and, only slightly modified, a snake curled round a receptacle, outside many chemists in Greece and other European countries too. So in that way, his presence is still recognised, his influence and his values have never been lost.

And I like the fact that, in offering dreams, Asklepios is never didactic, in contrast to the Oracle's messages which were always, apparently, interpreted by Apollo's priests. Asklepios gives you the possibility of greater understanding through the images of your own dreams,

rather than emphasising your dependence on unpredictable gods who rule your fate. He leaves room for your own insight, he hands you responsibility.

Another reason I like Asklepios is that he is down here on the ground, among us, not perched high on some pedestal, suggesting that he is superior to mortals. His aims are helpful and compassionate. He is here, overlooking the marketplace of human life, accessible to all.

My favourite place to get lost in the crowd

Alan McIntyre

2014

The 'city that never sleeps' usually conjures up images of New York as a crowded and bustling metropolis. Whether it's Times Square on New Year's Eve, or just cramming into the #4 subway heading downtown to Wall Street on a normal Monday morning, adequate personal space is often at a premium in this city.

But New York is also one of the best cities in the world to be alone and just get lost in the crowd. There are countless places amidst the hubbub to have those anonymous private moments that put a smile on your face and leave you feeling just a little bit more alive.

For a single person's basic human needs, most New York diners have stools at the counter reserved for one. Sometimes a thick Rueben sandwich, a bottomless cup of coffee, and a warm slice of cherry pie are all that's required to kill an hour and elevate a day from mediocre to above average.

For more refined cultural appetites, there are few better places to spend an afternoon alone than the Museum of Modern Art. It's easy to lose track of time when you're part of the Brownian motion of people drifting around those sunlit spaces appreciating the collection of Rothko's, Pollock's and Warhol's. But my favourite places in New York to be alone in the crowd are the jazz clubs of Greenwich Village.

When I first moved to New York in the early 90s, I lived an easy walk from the Blue Note, the Village Vanguard and Smalls (which appropriately only held 50 patrons). As with so much else in my youth, I failed to fully appreciate the opportunity to turn off the TV on a Wednesday night and wander down the street to hear world-class jazz. Having been introduced to live jazz via Bobby Wishart at the Halt Bar on Woodlands Road in Glasgow in the mid 80s, I should have been more attuned to living in a musical nirvana. I listened to a lot of jazz over those five years in New York, but sadly there were still many Wednesday nights when the TV stayed on and the world of live music went unexplored.

Now, as a suburban father of four, my schedule tends to get dictated more by basketball practices than the New York gig guide. But occasionally I'll find myself in the city for a business dinner and decide to stay over rather than commute home. When that happens, I invariably go online to see who is playing downtown. Occasionally, I persuade work colleagues to join me, but typically I just take one of those high stools at the bar designed for the single music lover. It doesn't really matter who is playing. Part of the attraction is just being able to reach out and dip a cup into this endless river of great music again.

One Thursday night a few years ago, I found myself seated at the bar in the Blue Note on West 3rd Street. When considering my options for that night, I'd been intrigued that the late show was a tribute to Jaco Pastorius, an electric bass player who had died in 1987. Jaco

played with the band Weather Report in the 1970s, and one of my first experiences with jazz was sitting in my 8 feet by 8 feet bedroom in Renfrew in the early 80s playing the album *Heavy Weather* over and over again.

Jaco was the undisputed master of the fretless base. Unconstrained by the sonic intervals on a normal bass, he would create weird and virtuosic solos; artistry that established him as a revered figure in the world of modern jazz. Over 20 years after his death, a group of friends and ex-bandmates had decided that they were going to celebrate his life and music with some one-off shows in New York, and that is where I had ended up, perched on a stool with an overpriced Jack and Coke in hand.

Despite its legendary status, the Blue Note is not a big space, and that night the small stage was packed with musicians. A full front line of brass and woodwind instruments were backed by drums, percussion, piano and two bass players – presumably on the premise that Jaco was twice as good as most journeyman guitarists. Despite the intros, I didn't recognise many of the players, and the start of the set was just a serviceable run through of some Weather Report material and other solo stuff that Jaco had done in the 80s. Nothing too exciting, and frankly a bit self-indulgent in places.

As I considered whether a soft hotel bed trumped another drink and staying for the end of the set, I noticed some movement way back in the corner of the room that wasn't just the raising and lowering of a glass. A tall African American figure with wrap-around sun glasses (definitely a style statement at 11pm in a dark club) and long hair tied up in a purple headscarf was hunched over an electric bass making some adjustments to the tuning. As he tinkered, he wasn't paying much attention to what was happening on-stage and he continued to look down through the end of that song and into the next; a loose jazz funk piece that I wasn't familiar with. But a couple of minutes into the song the mystery figure stood up and wandered across to the stage. Acknowledging neither the band nor the audience, he slipped in between the drummer and one of the other bass players, plugged into an amp and started to play along.

What happened next will stick with me as one of those unforgettable moments that make live music so exhilarating. As he plucked and slapped at his strings, his bass line started to emerge like a boat from the mist. It wasn't disruptive to the rest of the band (which carried on like he wasn't there), but his contribution was clear and distinctive, like an old imam singing Arabic harmonies over the Vienna Boys choir.

He had my attention now (and that of almost everyone else in the room) and it wasn't long before the mystery was solved. After a few minutes of this musical counterpoint, he casually stepped to the front of the stage and subtly nodded to the rest of the band. On that signal, the horn players rose as one line and seamlessly transitioned from whatever it was they were playing into the bright, urgent staccato ta ta ta ta ta tah ta intro to James Brown's *Sex Machine*. At that moment, the barman leant over and announced to everyone in earshot that we were now in the presence of Bootsy Collins, James Brown's legendary bass player from the 1970s and a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee.

Blue Note crowds don't normally dance. They will whoop, they will holler and they will applaud enthusiastically, but in all my visits I had never seen a rear-end leave a seat. Yet within seconds of Bootsy dropping the musical veil, the whole place was on its feet as the band locked into the jagged stuttering rhythms of this soul/funk classic. Without a singer on hand, the tenor sax carried the vocal line to pretty good effect. If you want to get a sense of the energy of the James Brown original, I suggest the black and white 1971 Rome performance on YouTube which has a very young looking Bootsy Collins on bass.

For the next five minutes or so, there was no need for the famous James Brown invocation 'I'm ready to get up and do my thing,' as the crowd were clearly doing just fine on their own, resulting in a knocked over table and a general mood that had gone from laid back and chilled to pretty raucous.

After this surge of energy, what fascinated me was how it wound down. Rather than grandstanding and bringing it to a dramatic finish to milk the applause, Bootsy just started to drift backwards again into the band. As he physically receded, so did *Sex Machine*. Bar by bar, it faded back into the soul funk soup from which it had emerged. At some point, the ship had clearly slipped back into the mist, bums were back on seats (a little reluctantly) and Bootsy reached down and unplugged. As the band played on, he wandered off the stage and returned to his seat in the corner. Without a word having been spoken, the musical tribute of one great bass player to another was clear and certainly memorable.

Not long after Bootsy left the stage, I drank up and slipped out, with another quintessential New York moment to file away and savour. I'm sure these types of things happen elsewhere in the world and probably with some frequency, but the density of them in New York always amazes me. From standing behind Steven Spielberg in Balducci's market buying cheese, to watching Bootsy Collins plug in and set the Blue Note alight for 10 minutes, New York is always a city of surprises and many of them can be appreciated solo.

That being said, I took my 11-year-old sax-playing son Grant to his first jazz concert a few weeks ago in New York. We went to see Joshua Redman, a tenor sax player I had first seen at the Village Vanguard in 1993 and a career I've been following for over 20 years. I'm not sure Grant will get bitten by the jazz bug, but it was nice to have someone to share the music with. No spontaneous *Sex Machine*, but a memorable evening nonetheless.

A journey to Yorkshire via Saltcoats

R D Kernohan

2014

It's a long way to Yorkshire. It's a long way to go, especially if you go via Saltcoats. I had meant to see Canterbury again, with a bus trip from Edinburgh bypassing London. I paid but hardly anyone else wanted to go. I took credit instead of a refund, looked at the last-minute offers, and opted for Yorkshire.

But this trip too hadn't been popular in Edinburgh and Glasgow: only 24 fairly senior citizens of Saltcoats stood between us and another credit or refund. Having secured a route diversion, they now waited beside Saltcoats Station, even less delighted than the rest of us when the driver declared a half-hour break to seek the local comforts and attractions.

It's a long way from there to Yorkshire, especially when the next comforts offered are at Gretna. But it was worth it: Yorkshire I mean, not Gretna, now spruced up but over-priced.

Leeds

My memory of Leeds was of the vast town hall mixing classical and baroque styles which rightly pleased John Betjeman but which unkind critics from England's Deep South called 'the epitome of northern city bombast'. It still makes its statement of Victorian self-confidence but I hadn't realised how much Leeds had changed, both through city sprawl and substitution of cosmopolitan metal, glass, and concrete for solid northern stone, some of it rising high enough to remind me how Edinburgh and even Glasgow skylines have been spared from the worst ravages of modern slabs, giant darts and cylinders.

Changes have brought hard times for the *Yorkshire Post*, which I always regarded as England's greatest regional paper, given that *The Guardian* went metropolitan even before leaving Manchester. It saw itself as 'Yorkshire's national newspaper'. I didn't see it or even advertising for it as much as I expected and some more local Yorkshire papers seem to be doing better, although the Halifax and Scarborough evenings have gone weekly. The *Post*'s online version has picked up after a bad patch but its print figures are awful: circulation in the 1950s about 120,000; today 31,000.

I found rubble, holes in the ground, and a forlornly surviving tower where the paper was based till recently but apparently everything has moved to more modest premises, with the Johnston Press now printing near Sheffield.

Bradford

But if Leeds has changed, see Bradford. I don't know what J B Priestley would make of his native city, already diversified by his day through Irish and German (often Jewish) immigration. Those immigrants came in thousands; today's Asians have come in tens of thousands.

Officially Bradford has a population of 522,000, more than a quarter 'Asian or British Asian'. But the metropolitan borough includes not only suburbs but large nearby towns and stretches of rural Yorkshire.

A passing visitor forms impressions, not opinions. The impression left by Bradford is of an untidy centre where surviving Victorian buildings don't blend in with new ones and are surrounded by an Asian inner city of more than 100,000 people (served by conspicuous Hindu and Sikh temples as well as mosques, though with a Muslim majority) who have distinctive styles of retail trade and services along miles of small shops. It's not hard for even the visitor to see where this Asian Bradford begins and ends, giving way to the more traditional Yorkshire that gave us J B Priestley, many building societies, Morrisons supermarkets, and (in its early stages) Marks and Spencer.

Saltaire

Our itinerary stipulated a visit to Saltaire, 15 miles up the Aire from Leeds and officially part of Bradford, but the driver wasn't encouraging when he delivered us: 'If it was me I wouldnae bother'.

Anyone visiting Yorkshire should bother. Saltaire, a world heritage site, is the New Lanark of enlightened capitalism, built on a grander scale more than half a century later for the age of railways and canals, yet with enough amenity and space – more like Edinburgh's 'colonies' than New Lanark's tenements – to be adapted to suburban living and find new roles for fine public buildings.

Its founder, Sir Titus Salt, moved business and workers from Bradford into this model village and the vast mill which now houses galleries, including a stiff dose of David Hockney, small businesses, shops, restaurants, and bars.

Salt wouldn't have approved of bars and some Hockney pictures, but his Congregational church (now United Reformed) still flourishes. It was built in a still fancier Italianate style than the nearby mill, baffling those who know English nonconformity only through clichés. It's an English equivalent of the architectural independence which 'Greek' Thomson asserted in Scotland in co-operation with the semi-congregational United Presbyterians when almost everyone else was carried away with Gothic.

Haworth

Haworth, the gateway to *Wuthering Heights*, is mainly about the Brontës, though it still has the flags and bunting out for the celebration of this year's successful Yorkshire leg of the Tour de France. You can drink in the pub where the failing artist Branwell Brontë drank too much and wander round the parsonage, at first sight austere and spacious, where his sisters wrote their novels. But in the 1840s the rooms must have been dark, cramped, and smoky, ill-suited to young ladies whose health had suffered from time at a bleak boarding school and who faced chill winds off the moors when they stepped outside.

I'm all for authentic literary shrines like the Haworth parsonage but I have a couple of

doubts and a mild grumble. It might have been rather quiet on a weekday but for the parties of schoolchildren, not quite sure whether to be bored or excited. And I worry that Charlotte Brontë is not quite getting her due, even in an age of feminism. I'm not sure she's been forgiven for letting Mr Rochester off too lightly, though she was a more rebellious spirit than Jane Austen, now so widely and rightly venerated.

My grumble is that Yorkshire is inclined to claim all the credit that ought to be shared a bit with Ireland. Brontë is really Brunty, itself an anglicisation of a Gaelic name. Charlotte was daughter of an Irishman and (in her brief married life) wife of another. Even her speech is said to have had traces of her father's accent. It may have been the Rev Patrick Brontë's Ulster peasant stamina that enabled him so sadly to outlive his wife and six children, but there may also be something of Ireland (and Ulster) in his daughters' mixture of determination and imagination.

York

Yorkshire people can be blunt about each other as well as outsiders. 'You'll be ripped off today when you go up to York,' said the waiter in our Leeds hotel, hoping to sell a packed lunch.

But it wasn't bad. Lunch in the shadow of the Minster cost about the same as admission to that marvel of applied piety. I hate tickets for churches and we could have gone in free by saying we only wanted to attend a midday service. It seemed more seemly to pay, and at least in York the service was in a central transept – better than Westminster Abbey where I once went to a lunchtime service crudely squeezed between door and ticket office.

Long ago the *Economist* suggested York should replace London as the capital city. I'm glad no-one took up the idea. It might have been good for Britain but would have been terrible for York, still struggling more or less successfully in keeping its character in face of congestion and expansion. It's a character formed not just by the medieval survivals within the walls but by some good Victorian brickwork, attractive riverside buildings both ancient and modern, and the grand railway station which Baedeker incomprehensibly assesses as 'without architectural pretensions'.

Skipton

We had meant to round off the pleasures of Yorkshire in upper Wharfedale with some strolling around Grassington in the National Park. But West Riding rain can be as determined as West Highland rain and we're better off in Skipton taking shelter in the museum, whose exhibits include a Bradley Wiggins cycling helmet and (all the more welcome for being so unexpected) a *First Folio* Shakespeare whose pages are regularly turned. It's said to be one of only four on permanent display, the others being in Stratford, Washington, and the British Library.

Before we head northwards, I stumble on an unexpected affinity with Scotland: a sweetie shop of the variety and quality to compete with the one in Moffat which, back in days when

I did a lot of driving, often determined my route home from the south. I'm usually wary of what the English call fudge: it can be good but sometimes tastes like sweetened plasticine and is no match for Scots tablet. Moffat draws a proper distinction between the two but in Skipton the 'fudge' in the window is tablet, and splendid tablet too, just right in texture and flavour.

I get back to the bus with the tablet in a poke – another word that Yorkshire doesn't seem to share with Scots, though it's quite at home with canty, kist, chunter, skelp, and even jaloose. But our Ayrshire companions are more heavily loaded. They have no mere pokes but bulging bags to add to those they brought back from York. One of a bus tour's attractions is apparently the chance to buy the usual things from different places.

And so to the road home, by way of Saltcoats. This time we have no ramble round the resort, but our revels are not quite ended. The driver has legal limits to observe and devices that check on them. We therefore enjoy a half-hour of Harthill before an almost empty bus rumbles into Edinburgh, a long way from Yorkshire.

A sardine for dinner: to Barcelona in search of Orwell

Kenneth Roy

2016

Although this piece was published in SR in 2016, it recounted a visit to Barcelona about a decade earlier

I.

Arriving from England to fight as a militiaman, George Orwell was startled and overwhelmed by his first sight of Barcelona. Down the Ramblas, the central artery of the city, loudspeakers blared out revolutionary songs all day and long into the night. Nobody called anybody else *Señor*. In the interests of abolishing servile forms of speech and behaviour, the universal form of address had become 'Comrade'.

Orwell received a lecture from a hotel manager for offering a lift-boy a tip, and in barbers' shops there were notices explaining that the man cutting your hair was no longer to be considered a slave (if indeed you had ever thought of him as one). Private cars had been banished and conventional forms of dress abandoned in favour of rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls, or some variation of the militia uniform. Despite a chronic shortage of food, morale among the people felt high. All this, towards the end of 1936, Orwell found extremely moving.

'It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags... every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties... almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt.'

The quality of the reporting in *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell's account of his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, has never been in doubt – the narrative has a compelling immediacy. But the quality of the judgement is less convincing. The reporter-cum-activist gets carried away by his own romantic idealism. It never seems to occur to him that the well-to-do bourgeois had not been run out of town, but were simply disguising themselves as proletarians.

Even the faults of the Catalan, few as they were, Orwell found endearing. Nothing from a meal to a battle ever started on time. He noted that a train which was due to leave at eight would normally leave at any time between nine and 10, though, perhaps once a week, thanks to some whim of the engine-driver, it would leave at half past seven. Orwell decided that this chaos was preferable to the northern 'neurosis' about punctuality. If he had stopped to think about it, he might have pondered whether a people whose favourite word was *mañana* would ever have been likely to win a war against fascism.

II.

Before he went to the front, Orwell was billeted in the Lenin barracks. Every morning, the comrades were marched out to the public gardens on the hill behind the Plaza de España. 'Down every path and alley-way, amid the formal flower beds, squads of men marched stiffly to and fro, trying desperately to look like soldiers.'

After drill, they flocked thirstily to a little grocer's shop halfway down the hill, where George Orwell and his mates bought cheap wine and cigarettes. I went looking for the shop.

I found the hill easily enough – I would have been hard pushed to miss it. Montjuïc is not so much a hill as a vast open space containing, as well as many formal gardens, five museums, a nightclub, an Olympic stadium, an amusement park, and two cable car stations – to say nothing of a complete village, the Poble Espanyol, devoted to Spanish architecture. The revolutionaries could scarcely have envisaged a nightclub or an Olympic stadium. But the central feature of Montjuïc, the Palau Nacional, housing an outstanding museum of Catalan art, predates the arrival of Orwell. It was built for the International Exhibition in 1929. I shouldn't complain that it fails to rate a mention in *Homage to Catalonia* – whatever else this book may be, it certainly isn't a guide to the tourist attractions of Barcelona.

When I read the book, I could visualise the grocer's shop, its shelves groaning with Rioja. I could smell the tobacco and the sweat, hear the chatter of young men high on revolutionary passion. But I should have left it at that. For this was not the hill that Orwell had planted in my imagination; and the little grocer's shop had gone, leaving behind not so much as a commemorative plaque.

III.

Despite this unpromising start, I hadn't given up on George Orwell. His restless, cerebral presence was sure to be lurking somewhere, if not in the long-lost grocer's shop. Wandering the back streets behind the Ramblas, I finally stumbled on a square bearing his name. It was encouraging to have visible proof that Barcelona had not, after all, forgotten its greatest admirer and publicist. But the Place de George Orwell, which materialised as if from nowhere, was nothing to write home about; the guidebooks didn't write about it at all.

Earlier in the day, I'd lazed in the sun in the Italianate square of the Place Reial, having been promised by the same guidebooks the company of 'punks, bikers, Catalan eccentrics, tramps and bemused tourists taking a coffee at one of the pavement cafes'. I was happy to play the part of the bemused tourist, but the other members of the cast failed to show. The nearest to a Catalan eccentric was a man with a perfectly obedient white cat perched on his shoulder. On the balcony of one of the fashionable apartments overlooking the square there appeared from time to time a pretty girl in a red dress, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

It seemed the tramps and eccentrics had forsaken the Place Reial and were now colonising the Place de George Orwell. Outside the Bar Lisa, a joint seedy enough to wipe the enigmatic smile off the odd passing Mona, a comradeship of punters occasionally broke

into a half-hearted song, while their alsation roamed with a faint air of menace among the rotting piles of rubbish. As it was in Barcelona, so it would be somewhere this afternoon in every part of the civilised world, from the finest cathedral city in England to the deepest dive in Amsterdam – lots of people, not quite old, not quite young, not quite washed, not quite sloshed, with no brave causes left to fight for, content among the squalor.

Suddenly, from a balcony of George's square, there appeared, not a pretty girl rubbing the sleep from her eyes, but a bull-headed middle-aged man reminiscent of an Auschwitz guard.

IV.

When he returned to Barcelona after three and a half months at the front, Orwell was dismayed to find the atmosphere transformed. As he put it, the tide had rolled back: it was an ordinary city again, with no outward signs of working-class predominance.

Everyone was wearing smart summer clothes and driving sleek cars. The men looked fat and prosperous, the women confident and elegant. The civil population stared, with no great approval, at the dirty and unshaven men back from the fighting. 'This war – terrible, isn't it?', people muttered. 'When is it all going to end?'

The war was barely six months old, but already Barcelona had grown tired of it. Either this was a city of schizophrenic temper, or Orwell's initial perception was flawed – distorted by the high-octane stimulus of the occasion. What followed was even more confused – and confusing.

On 1 May, nothing happened. A queer state of affairs, the author thought. Barcelona – the revolutionary city – wasn't celebrating.

He fell into a depressing routine. He would feel slightly unwell, go to bed for half a day, get up, eat too much, and feel ill again. He had been joined by his wife Eileen and they settled themselves comfortably enough in the Hotel Continental at the top of the Ramblas.

Soon there was street fighting, 'the whole huge town locked in a sort of violent inertia, a nightmare of noise... the sunlit streets quite empty... nothing happening except the screaming of bullets from barricades and sandbagged windows'. Who was fighting whom? At first Orwell couldn't work it out. Then it became apparent that the comrades had fallen out and were fighting each other.

Orwell, who remained loyal to his own faction, the POUM, was despatched with a few colleagues to the roof of a building on the Ramblas. This building, a cinematograph as Orwell described it, stood opposite the Cafe Moka, where the assault guards had barricaded themselves in, having been ordered to seize the cafe as a preliminary to attacking the POUM offices next door. From the roof of the cinema, Orwell kept watch, occasionally exchanging pleasantries with the enemy across the street.

He sat on the roof for days, 'reading a succession of Penguin library books,' and thought he had never been more bored in his life. Eileen stayed at the Continental with 'the most extraordinary collection of people': foreign journalists, political suspects of every shade,

communist agents including one fatty nicknamed Charlie Chan, who had a revolver and a 'neat little bomb' attached to his waistband, and a gang of French lorry drivers whose consignment of oranges had been held up by the fighting. Periodically, Orwell returned from his vigil on the roof, to breakfast with his wife on goat's milk cheese and a surplus of French oranges. He found this diet very trying.

If the hill with the grocer's shop was much bigger in reality, conversely the geography of the Ramblas was much smaller. The key locations in the chaos of May 1937 were within shooting distance. George on the roof of the cinema and Eileen from the balcony of the Hotel Continental could have blown goodnight kisses to each other. George being George, I don't imagine they ever did.

The cinematograph was called the Poliorama. It was a cinema no longer. Was it ever? Not according to the box-office manager, who informed me that it had always been a live theatre. On the night I was there, a small audience had gathered for a comedy about Spanish education since the Second World War.

A plaque outside the theatre made no mention of Orwell or the POUM or the Spanish Civil War, and it was clear that the box-office manager was not accustomed to strange questions about the Poliorama's past and unaware that George Orwell had once read library books on its roof.

The Cafe Moka, where the assault guards quickly ran out of drink, remained a popular eating place on the Ramblas. 'Cheaper than its glossy appearance and old-fashioned, formal service would suggest,' said the guidebook. But again the guidebook was mistaken. Though relatively cheap, it was far from glossy and not so formal as you would notice. A blackboard on the street announced the day's culinary highlights: beans with clams; eggs Majorcan style; pork escalope au gratin; custard; bread and drink.

'Bread and drink' had a certain revolutionary purity, but I settled for coffee in the crowded interior. The cinema posters plastering the walls were not in the spirit of documentary realism; rather they celebrated Hollywood at its most decadent. The Cafe Moka had evidently forgotten about its colourful past – or chosen to disregard it.

And the POUM headquarters next door? In the lobby of the building, there was a stall selling trinkets. It was a great place for trinkets, the Ramblas. You could also purchase any quantity of cage birds and live chickens. I started to climb a dark, crumbling stair; maybe, somewhere in this inky blackness, I would stumble on a small pool of ghostly light illuminating Spanish militias plotting great plots, dreaming great dreams. Nerve failed. I turned back.

I managed to book the last room in the Hotel Continental. 'It's tiny,' they warned me. It was. There was just enough space for the bed. The hotel was not at all the grand establishment evoked by Orwell's account. He loathed 'the little snob of a hotel manager' who would have barred the orange-carrying Frenchmen had they not had a private store of bread; and he complained that, one night, the main dish at dinner was a sardine (just the one). He had little good to say about the waiters, even less about the guests, and was

appalled by the high price of the wines. In some ways, he was a fairly conventional socialist.

The Hotel Continental had been knocked about a bit. There was a photograph in the hall of how it must have looked in its civil war heyday – of the dining room in which George and Eileen were horrified to be served single sardines (she got one too). I never located the dining room, any dining room; only a breakfasting room, which also served as a residents' lounge, in which the guests were invited to make their own boiled eggs, an arrangement which would not have appealed to George Orwell. And there was no-one around who looked remotely like Charlie Chan: just the usual overweight American business executives and a few Japanese tourists preparing for another busy day taking photographs.

'Did you know that George Orwell stayed here?', I asked the woman at reception.

'Ah, Mr Orwell!', she replied.

I waited for more. But that was it. Mr Orwell had come; Mr Orwell had gone. Just another guest.

'Tell me, do people ever ask about the Orwell connection?'

She paused.

'Occasionally,' she said with a note of finality.

V.

One evening, I went to the railway station to check whether the proud Catalan custom of running the trains at any old time had been maintained and honoured. It was a wonderful station with a majestic booking hall. But it appeared that even lazy, disorganised Barcelona had been infected by the northern neurosis of punctuality. Had I been running for the night train to Paris, I would have missed it by seconds. As I arrived at the platform on the stroke of half past seven, it was slipping noiselessly away, bang on schedule.

A celebration of Europe

Magnus Linklater, Catherine Czerkawska, Michael Elcock and Morelle Smith
2016

Magnus Linklater

Europe means more to my generation, I believe, than it does to my children, and even my grandchildren. When, as a student, I went to live in Paris, squatting in the seediest of hotels on the Boulevard St Michel, in love with everything that city stood for, and possibly in love too with Juliette, the girl I met on a pilgrimage to Chartres (there's nothing like singing hymns together to encourage romance), it never occurred to me that my country, Scotland, was anything other than bonded with Europe – culturally, historically, and by blood. I met, at his very posh club on the Champs Elysées, one Colonel Monro, with the légion d'honneur in his buttonhole, and an impeccable French pedigree, accent, and outlook. But his face was pure Scotch – pink of complexion, bulbous of nose, the kind you might meet on a ramble in Perthshire, who would shout at you: 'Get off my land!' I felt umbilically connected then to France, to Europe, to everything about our shared heritage. It is a connection that, for me, has never been broken.

Catherine Czerkawska

In the late 1960s, I visited my Great Uncle Karol (Charles) Kossak and my great aunt Wanda, in a small Polish spa town called Ciechocinek. I went by train across Europe, an exhausting journey through West and East Germany. At Marienborn, guards came aboard with guns and dogs and terrorised the passengers.

I remember Ciechocinek in late summer sunshine. I don't know how Karol and Wanda had washed up there after the war that changed everything, but Karol, an artist from a family of celebrated Polish painters, was a man of some consequence in the town. He must have been 80 by then, tall, still handsome and charming. Wanda was small as a chaffinch, obviously in love with him.

Their belongings, including a large piano and a small fortune in pictures by Karol's illustrious forebears, were crammed into a shabby apartment on the ground floor of what must once have been a comfortable town house. She fed me home-made soft cheese and plums from the overgrown garden. He took me round the town, kissed my hand, bought me coffee and cognac in a succession of cafes, sketched caricatures of ghouls and goblins on paper napkins for me.

The town had horse-drawn droshkis instead of taxis and all the droshki drivers would salute him as he passed by. He would examine the horses and offer advice or criticism. Wanda's brother was my grandfather, killed by Stalin during the war. He had been one of the last of the Polish lancers and both families, Czerkawskis and Kossaks, had been expert

horsemen and women, the Kossaks known for their equine studies. Somewhere, there's a beautiful sketch of a young Aunt Wanda astride a horse, no side-saddle for her.

Even then, young as I was, I could see that they were a relic of a world that had long gone. Preserved in the amber sunshine of rural Poland. When, years later, I saw a production of the *Merry Widow* in Vienna, I wondered why Count Danilo seemed so familiar. He reminded me of Karol. I still miss him.

Michael Elcock

The Rossfeldstrasse is the highest road in Germany. It offers tremendous views down to Salzburg and Berchtesgarden. Across a valley, perched on a shoulder of mountain, stands the Kehlstein, Hitler's Eagle's Nest.

The path along the Kehlstein's knife-ridge was crawling with visitors, and colourful umbrellas on its cafe terrace sheltered tourists from the hot sun. There was hardly anyone on the Rossfeldstrasse where we were. The mountains stretched to infinity, and paths promised high country walks in bright sunshine. We took one to a small Gasthof that looked down on Berchtesgarden. On the Gasthof's terrace, an elderly man came up and began talking to us.

He looked fit, with deep blue eyes and crow's-foot lines on his face from squinting in the sun. He lived near Karlsruhe, he said. He and his wife would come to the Obersalzburg on their motorbike several times a year. They had a sidecar he could attach to it if the weather was bad, and his wife could travel in comfort. They climbed most of the mountains we could see, hiked the trails, and explored the high alpine passes. But she died six years ago, he said, and he missed her terribly. He had sat around for two years feeling sad.

Now he comes back by himself to those places where they had such special times; where they'd lived out their love for one another.

'These are the places where I can touch her soul,' he said. 'Places we can be together again.'

He no longer comes here on his motorbike, he explained. He has a small caravan instead, so he can live cheaply. He finished his glass of beer, stood up, shook our hands and said goodbye.

A falcon flew past and lit in a nearby tree. Behind it the land fell away to the beautiful valley and its rim of mountains; the old man part of it all. The strange thing about the encounter was that the man from Karlsruhe had no English, and after '*Ich spreche nicht Deutsch*' our German was non-existent. But he'd added gestures and mime when he'd needed to, and we'd understood virtually every word he'd said.

Morelle Smith

Several years ago, I worked for an aid organisation in Albania. My work colleagues came from various parts of the globe – USA, UK, Australia, France – but the bulk of the workforce were local staff, Albanians. These people were well-educated and highly-

qualified, but there was a desperate lack of jobs for them, one of the reasons so many young people go abroad to study and work.

I had a particularly bright and talented young Albanian working in my office. He was studying for a law degree, his English was excellent, and he was also fluent in French and Italian. After finishing his first degree, he went on to do his masters and succeeded in getting work in Bruges, Belgium. When his contract was up he returned to Albania and found a job with another non-government organisation. But his great ambition was to work as a lawyer in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. There were various hurdles he had to clear, including securing a visa, never a simple or assured process for Albanians. But a few years later, he succeeded.

I visited him in Strasbourg about three years ago and he showed me round the Council of Europe and the Court of Human Rights. I liked the decor of the buildings, their grand glass frontages, the way they are bordered by the river, the flags of all the European countries flying in front of them and most of all, the ideals that they incorporate. And I am proud of my friend for not giving up on his ambition, to play a part in putting the ideals of human rights into practice. His name is Ylli, which in Albanian, means 'star'.

These were among the contributions on the theme 'A celebration of Europe' which appeared in summer 2016

American journey

David Torrance

2016

Anchorage, Alaska

Shortly after arriving in Anchorage, Alaska, I started hearing and reading references to 'the lower 48'. It took me a while to figure out that this meant the 48 mainland states, Alaska and Hawaii (which only joined the union in 1959) being physically separate to the north and west respectively. Indeed, it is a source of some mirth locally that, used to seeing how the two states are depicted on maps of the US, some Americans apparently believe Alaska – like Hawaii – to be an island.

Yet Alaskans certainly consider themselves to inhabit a place apart, which is understandable considering the former US 'territory' formed part of the Russian empire until 1867. Although to an outsider Anchorage (a compact city ringed by charcoal-black mountains) feels resolutely American, at the same time it does not, a bit like visiting Northern Ireland, which is simultaneously British and un-British. The night after I arrived – via a scenic flight taking in Iceland, Greenland and Canada's northwestern passages – I ended up getting drunk with an eclectic group, some local and others 'seasonal' workers to the north of Anchorage. 'I'm not American,' a young female artist told me. 'When I go there it feels weird.'

Later, we ended up snogging (as the kids say) in Anchorage's only gay bar, Mad Myrna's, something I only properly recalled on finding two strips of passport-photo booth pictures in my hotel room the following morning. My unlikely companion – we had parted affectionately before I went home – had also told me it irritated her to hear Donald Trump state his ambition to 'make America great again.' 'It's already great,' she said, 'and he diminishes it by saying that'.

It's safe to say the voters I've encountered thus far do not regard this presidential election as a positive experience for American democracy. In Anchorage and elsewhere pleasantries fell into two parts. 'What brings you to the United States?' someone would ask cheerily. 'I'm a journalist...' I would begin in response, prompting a positive reaction (unlike in Scotland). 'I'm here for the election,' I'd then continue, at which point faces would fall and subjects swiftly changed.

Seattle, Washington

I got much the same reaction in Seattle, a Pacific northwestern city in the state of Washington that first imprinted itself on my teenage consciousness via the comedy series *Frasier*, which concerned a radio psychiatrist played by Kelsey Grammar. Its opening credits included an animated skyline of the city, in which most prominent was the 'Space

Needle,' an observation tower constructed for the 1962 World's Fair. I visited at sunset on Saturday evening and it didn't disappoint.

Waiting in the queue I got chatting with two native Washingtonians, one of whom made a point of self-classifying as 'white trash'. I asked them about the election and they both admitted to being in a quandary: they were evangelical Christians and therefore inclined towards the Republican candidate, but also acutely conscious that he wasn't exactly a God-fearing church-going sort. But then he wasn't Hillary Clinton, and that seemed to be enough. One told me Mrs Clinton was a 'socialist... a communist,' and she didn't mean that in a good way.

I asked if they'd be watching Monday night's debate to which they replied with alacrity, 'yes!' And did it stand, I added, any prospect of changing their minds? 'No,' each replied, with comparable certainty. Finally, I asked if they thought Trump had any chance of victory on 8 November. They pondered this at length before one, armed with a quote from scripture, quietly informed me that 'God will decide'.

On the 'link' light rail service from Seattle's airport to the waterfront downtown an African-American passenger intoned, mantra-like, 'Donald Trump says,' while indicating his intention to back the Republican nominee. This caused obvious bemusement among the younger, hipper, passengers, but spoke to an unexpected aspect of Seattle life, that of homelessness and obvious poverty. There were what Americans would call 'bums' everywhere, some claiming (on hand-written bits of cardboard) to be aging 'hippies', while others simply revelled in bucking the system and championing individuality. I spoke to one gay guy who volunteered the unlikely fact that he'd be voting for Trump. 'His military plans, tax code, and passion to protect the US,' he replied when I asked him to explain why. 'I have two kids [and] I want them to know freedom their entire life.'

Portland, Oregon

In the US, it seems that violence of some sort is constantly in the background. On arriving in Anchorage a state of emergency had been declared in Charlotte, North Carolina, following another police shooting, and I reached Seattle just days after a lone gunman had taken pot-shots at shoppers about 50 miles north of the city. Finally, on arriving in Portland, Oregon, on Monday afternoon, news was breaking of another shooting near a shopping mall in Houston, Texas.

All of this, naturally, was pushed down the running order by the first presidential debate at Hofstra University in the State of New York that evening. I'd arranged to attend a 'watch party' hosted by the Oregon Democrats in the eastern half of Portland, a city with an even more pronounced housing problem than Seattle. Outside my hostel in the Pearl District there appeared to be more people living on the sidewalk than in the hostel itself, and not just a few individuals, but whole groups, topless (it was hot) and listless, nesting among plastic bags stuffed full of what passed for belongings. Depressingly, few passing by batted an eyelid.

The Democratic and Republican nominees attempted to address such issues in their 90-minute debate, but neither did so very adequately. Otherwise it went much according to how screeds of pre-debate analysis predicted it would: Secretary Clinton came across as steady and 'the Donald' rambling and verging on unhinged. By any rational measurement Hillary walked it, but of course that doesn't count for much in the modern political age. Outside the 'watch party' venue was a lone protestor looking slightly embarrassed. 'The Democratic Party,' his placard proclaimed, 'Supports Israeli Genocide'.

Most of those watching inside, meanwhile, would simply have come away with their pre-existing prejudices reinforced, and certainly they regarded Trump as a pantomime villain and their preferred candidate the all-conquering heroine, whooping when Clinton uttered a smart one-liner and groaning when the Republican nominee uttered something, in his own words, 'semi-exact'.

I sat next to an ebullient French-born US citizen who told me she'd seen the recently-deceased golfer Arnold Palmer play at Turnberry back in 1963. Did she know who now owned that course and hotel, I asked innocently. 'Yes! That asshole!' replied Christine, gesticulating at the screen in front of us. 'And the worse thing is,' she added, 'that idiot's mother was from Scotland'. She then added darkly and quietly, 'and his father was a German'.

Abroad in Trumpland

Katie Grant

2016

Arriving at Boston's Logan Airport from Heathrow's terminal five feels like arriving in an old country. Boston's terminal building is tired despite the high-tech immigration booths flashing like serried ranks of daleks. The officials still needed to supplement the daleks slumped behind glass and the cleaners slumped on benches.

The airport shuffles along in eazifit clothes, neither welcoming nor unwelcoming, just not very interested. At least not interested in us.

White, middle-class, BBC English, suited and brogued, even if the photos the daleks took 'for the authorities' made us look like ancient relics, we were as likely to cause trouble as Alan Bennett to write *Filth*. We were nervous, all the same. 'New passports this way', said a sign. We found this mysterious and asked a vaguely uniformed lady for clarification. She swept us on. We were willing to be swept. Eventually we were swept towards our luggage, then into the arms of our waiting children and out into the Boston night.

If you dislike foreign travel, beware of encouraging independence in your children. I regret not extending our highly successful rugby aversion therapy to travel overseas since we now have two children in the States. Not only that, with one in Massachusetts and the other in Texas, they live almost as far from each other as they do from us. The distance isn't just geographic. From an MIT lecture on climate change to a rodeo in the old stockyards of Fort Worth, we viewed Trumpland in various guises from north(ish) to south(ish). Strangely, in all my visits to the US, I've never yet seen a mountain. To me, the USA is a large pancake.

What was it like, people asked on our return. Does Trumpland feel different from Obamaland? How can I tell? America is the unfamiliar familiar. Electricity, for example, is ramshackle, all loose plugs and hairdryers in bathrooms. Those great highways with swinging traffic lights are pitted and potholed. Clapboard houses look temporary and not nearly up to the weather. Shops of any old kind spring up any old where. Public transport – what's that? There's the Boston T, but you'd die waiting for a bus. Many cars are Japanese – 'we wouldn't buy an American car, it would fall to bits' – so from the air, even in Dallas the car flow looks quite European. I can't see any of that changing.

And reactions were as expected. At liberal, socially progressive MIT, notices declared 'no to fascist America'. The only surprise was the absence of anti-Trump posters. Way beyond gallows humour, the current jokes are in coffins, lids about to close. Real, unbridled unhappiness. Black gloom. Genuine grief. Guts have been punched so hard people often sound a bit breathless.

In Texas, they're breathing more easily, though forget the redneck stereotype. Trump

may have won all 38 electoral college votes and his cleaning up of 94.6% of the votes in Roberts County may have been the highest margin in the whole USA but Hillary Clinton won Fort Bend, the first Democrat to do so since 1964, and she reduced the margin of Republican victory in Texas by roughly 7%. America isn't mad, it's simply fed up of being a first world/third world country and the trigger-happy rednecks, the America First evangelists, the gun-toters; and the glassyeyed bible-bashers are simply a mirror image of the tyrannical liberals who promote progressive values through frowning disapproval and wagging finger.

If you want a real shock, go to the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. You'll need to go twice. The first time you'll be overwhelmed by JFK's assassination. The clothes, the cars, the footage may be dated but the tension is absolutely contemporary. You know the shots are coming, yet you can't quite believe it. When they do come, you feel them with that 1963 hammer-blow. As the motorcade turns into Elm Street, your heart races. I closed my eyes and suddenly found I'd become our old nanny. Twenty times she saw *The Sound of Music* and each time hid her eyes in case the Von Trapps didn't make it. Anyhow, once you've got over that awful exploding head and the whole 'now alive, now dead' frisson, go back and compare JFK's clear, powerful call to the whole of America to Trump's angry meanderings. JFK to Trump in under 60 years. That's the disconcerting story of America.

It's not the whole story, though. We ate our Thanksgiving dinner with no sense of irony. Trump may be unexpected and, to many, unwelcome, but he will pass. Had he survived, JFK would have been neither as good as his supporters hoped nor as bad as his detractors expected. Trump will be the same. Flying out of Dallas in November 2016, my overwhelming impression is that America isn't as confident as it once was, and that the next four years will be an uncomfortable bout of hiccups.

Afterwards – and there will be an afterwards – whatever else changes, I hope the US retains the quirkiness that finds the world's largest collection of Robert Browning memorabilia in Waco. Browning amidst the whacky cults! Browning amongst the remains of Waco's 24 Columbian mammoths! Remember the song Browning gives to Pippa in his verse drama *Pippa Passes*?

*The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven –
All's right with the world!*

Well, clearly not quite, not now, not ever. But just after take-off, when human America faded to dots and we had a God's eye view of the great expanse, I thought of springs and dew-pearled hillsides and larks and snails. The only larks in the US are 'horned larks' who prefer bare ground to sky. Birds, eh? They seem so familiar, then it turns out you really know nothing about them at all.

A week in a quiet country

James Robertson

2018

In the last week of May, my wife and I were in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia. I had been invited to the 10th annual Tallinn Book Festival, as one of my novels has been translated into Estonian. Neither I nor the publisher are likely to become wealthy as a result – Estonian is spoken by just 1.1 million people, a tiny market in publishing terms – yet in many other ways the experience was enriching, and some of the new friendships we made seem set to continue into the future.

Estonia is a small, northern European, peaceful, democratic, independent republic which appears to find no contradiction between its sense of national identity and its membership of the EU: the kind of country, in short, I would like Scotland to be. About half the size of Scotland and having a population of 1.3m (one-third of whom live in Tallinn, with Tartu, the next biggest town, home to about 90,000), Estonia has a familiar mix of densely populated urban and thinly populated rural areas. Much of the country is flat and heavily forested, the coastal areas are rich in marine and bird life, the forests full of moose, elk, lynx, beavers, boar, brown bears, endangered flying squirrels and an estimated 150 wolves. (Another Scottish writer, learning that Estonia has 'too many' wolves and not enough deer, mentioned that we have too many deer and no wolves, and suggested that a swap might be a good idea.)

Estonia has a buoyant and diverse market economy, low unemployment, very little public debt, efficient and transparent political and legal systems, and low levels of crime and corruption. While it has close ties with Latvia and Lithuania to the south, and with Finland and Sweden across the Baltic Sea, relations with its eastern neighbour and former occupier, Russia, are decidedly frosty. There are also, as in most countries, some significant regional and social variations in terms of wealth distribution and economic activity, but on the whole Estonia is doing pretty well.

It is easy to make simplistic comparisons – positive or negative – between Estonia and Scotland, but each has arrived at its present condition by a different route stretching back over history. However tough life may have been for many Scots in the last century, Estonians have had it tougher. For centuries a battleground for the imperial designs of Russia, Sweden and others, Estonia emerged from the collapse of Tsarist Russia to declare itself an independent country in 1918, only to be immediately occupied by Germany. Then, following the end of the First World War, it had to defend its new freedom against a Russian invasion and later an attempted Bolshevik coup.

During the 1920s, it established a progressive political system, including a very enlightened legal framework enabling and protecting the cultural, linguistic and political

rights of ethnic minorities, but in the 1930s a more authoritarian regime gained power, albeit one benign by comparison with what was happening elsewhere in Europe. In 1938 Estonia declared neutrality but was powerless to resist when, as a result of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, it was annexed into the USSR. The Soviets ruthlessly eliminated the incumbent political, military, legal, business and intellectual leadership of Estonia in 1940, executing many and sending thousands to Siberian labour camps, from which few returned.

When Hitler turned on the Soviet Union in 1941, Estonia was directly in the path of the invading German armies. Thirty thousand Estonian men were forcibly drafted into the Red Army: most did not survive the ensuing bloodshed. As the Russians retreated, they exercised a scorched-earth policy, leaving nothing for either the Germans or the surviving Estonians. The Nazis quickly annihilated the country's Jews, brutally repressed any resistance and forcibly conscripted Estonian men into their military. In 1944, the Red Army came back, further terrible fighting took place and Tallinn was bombed into rubble before the Germans were finally ejected. It is estimated that Estonia lost some 25% of its people through death, deportation, flight or emigration during the Second World War. Yet its troubles were far from over.

Estonia's forests have almost mythical status as sources of national identity and resilience: in Estonian folklore people go into the forests to commune with the trees and with the creatures and spirits that live among them, and come back stronger. In 1945, thousands of Estonians went into the forests and waged a war of resistance against this second Soviet occupation and renewed annexation. This war continued into the 1950s, but Soviet repression eventually wore down the opposition. Other deeply resented policies included farm collectivisation and Russification.

Between the 1940s and 1980s, huge numbers of Russian-speaking people were settled in Estonia from elsewhere in the USSR, and large numbers of Estonians were deported. The percentage of the population which was Estonian fell from 94% to just over 60% in this period. Rapid industrialisation took place, including high-volume mineral extraction (especially of shale oil) which caused substantial environmental damage. The historical legacy of these policies is a Russian population comprising about 25% of the total, with many Russians currently in lower-paid jobs or living in more economically deprived areas. You get a strong sense that there is not a lot of interaction between Estonians and Russians, although divisions appear to be less marked amongst younger people.

As the Soviet system crumbled in the late 1980s, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania jointly and separately seized opportunities to reassert their desire for independence in what became known as the 'Singing Revolution': collective and public performances of national and popular songs symbolised the survival of identities that the system had tried to destroy. In August 1989 – a few months before the Berlin Wall, that for so long had kept people apart, was breached – a human chain of two million singing people stretched across the three Baltic countries.

In March 1991 Estonians voted for independence in a national referendum (78% of the voters were in favour). Six months later, the Soviet authorities recognised Estonia's independence, and three years after that the last Russian troops were gone. Estonia joined both the EU and NATO in 2004, and adopted the Euro in 2010.

With this kind of history, and in the centenary year of the country's first declaration of independence, an outburst of flag-waving, anthem-singing patriotic fervour would hardly be inexcusable – but while there is no doubt a general appreciation of their political freedom and a keen awareness of their national history, the Estonians we met were remarkably calm and measured in the way they discussed these matters. Pragmatism seemed more highly prized than ideological passion.

They understand, perhaps, that such a small country, placed where it is on the map, must find other ways than through military muscle or heroism to survive in the 21st century. They are clever, flexibly minded people – one of the most technologically savvy societies on the planet – who use soft diplomacy to make sure that the rest of the world knows who they are and that they intend to have a future.

The Tallinn Book Festival is part of that international engagement. Over four days writers, translators, storytellers, singers, musicians and publishers from the three Baltic countries, from Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Basque Country, Scotland, England, Brazil, Argentina, Italy and yes, Russia too, read, performed, talked and exchanged ideas. I met the translator of my novel, Jüri Kolk, himself a well-respected writer of fiction. Along with Krista Kaer, the festival director, we discussed the state of Estonian literature and language.

Some younger Estonians are tempted to give up their language in favour of English because, they believe, 'there is no word for X or Y in Estonian. But there almost always is,' Krista Kaer said, 'they just don't know it'. We spoke about Scots and Gaelic, and how their loss would diminish Scotland and the world. We acknowledged our similarities whilst not forgetting our differences. I felt that it would not take long to get to know this small, clean, quiet country.

Estonians conduct themselves with a certain self-deprecating charm. Over the course of a week we heard many tales told against themselves. They guard their personal space well – with trees if possible; they are not Mediterranean when it comes to hugging and kissing; they prefer the seat on the bus next to them to remain empty. How do you know if an Estonian likes you? You don't. What's the difference between an Estonian introvert and an Estonian extrovert? The introvert looks down and inspects his own shoes. The extrovert looks down and inspects yours.

Tallinn is a magnet for tourists, and its old town (reconstructed after the Second World War by Poles, who know a lot about how to put things together again) reminded me of Edinburgh's – overwhelmed by large groups of visitors following their guides up and down the narrow, cobbled streets.

On our last afternoon, we were sitting outside a cafe in a pedestrianised area, watching

the crowds go by, when suddenly a space opened around two police officers. They were clearing the way for a line of 10 ducklings who had become detached from their mother and were in danger of being crushed. One officer commandeered a basket and blanket from a shop and with great care and skill rounded the ducklings up, while her colleague got on his radio. Ten minutes later, a fire engine eased its way to the scene of the incident. The basket was handed over and the firemen took the ducklings away, to safety we assumed. Ten minutes later, the fire engine was back, to return the now empty basket to its owner. It was a satisfyingly gentle emergency. Tallinn has witnessed far worse in the past.

From Checkpoint Charlie to Checkpoint Cheesy

Islay McLeod

2018

Wednesday

'Car good, but brakes bad.' My taxi driver shoots me a sideward glance to see if I got his joke. I give him a polite smile: 'Yes, very funny!' He speaks little English and I speak no German, but we attempt to make conversation on the half-hour journey from Schönefeld Airport to the city centre of Berlin. It's 6.30pm and the streets are busy with cars, trams, cyclists, buses, taxis, and lots of people.

I'm staying in the Mitte district at Hotel Melia, a stylish eight-storey hotel at the top of Friedrichstrasse. It's surrounded by cafes, restaurants and high-end clothes shops – Lagerfeld, Armani and Gucci – pristine and minimalist. Not so long ago, this was East Berlin.

A heatwave is sweeping across Europe and Germany is at the heart of it. Temperatures are reaching 28C. I'm grateful for the air-conditioning in my swish room which overlooks the street from the fourth floor. An office block across the road has a life-size cardboard cut-out of a figure at the window. At first I think it's someone admiring the view but it's still there, statue still, some eight hours later.

I'm starving, so order room service. The obvious choice is the local fast food delicacy – a 'Currywurst'. The dish consists of a long pork sausage covered in a thick curried tomato sauce and comes with a side of chips, bread and butter. It isn't the prettiest-looking dish but tastes great and leaves my lips tingling with spice.

Go out for a walk in the evening to get my bearings for the days ahead. The streets are clean and I can't spot a shred of litter anywhere. Oddly enough, I don't see many bins either. People pass by swigging from beer bottles and live music throbs from unknown venues. Not far down the street a huge picture of Angela Merkel has been painted on a wall. She is hanging precariously from the rooftop in her signature red blazer. Under her feet are the words '*Der satchel an regierungssitz*', which means 'The sting at the government seat'. I'm guessing it's a caberet theatre of political satire and appreciate the humour. Somehow, I can't imagine Theresa May hanging from the side of the Comedy Club at Leicester Square.

Get back to the hotel and lock myself out of my room, as I do at every hotel I stay in. Problem solved, I return to my room, feeling just a little paranoid that the reception staff think I'm an idiot.

Thursday

The plan today is to hit the tourist trail. I walk along the Spree River, which is already teeming with large white cruise boats, and soon come to the Reichstag – a magisterial

building and home to the German Parliament. It has a glass dome at the top which I hear gives spectacular views but also has a spectacularly long waiting list for tickets.

Soon reach the Brandenburg Gate. I've been looking forward to this and it doesn't disappoint. Sitting in a large fair-stoned square, it's a popular meeting point for tour parties – there are people everywhere and most are taking photos. It's quite tricky to get from one side to the other without photobombing several hundred snaps and selfies. At the other side, I make a beeline for a tour bus rep. She has a large advertising banner attached to her back, which flaps about awkwardly and hits the branches of trees as she directs me to a bus stop at the top of Strasse des 17 Juni.

Within minutes a red bus appears and I'm given a map and pair of earphones. A running commentary is available in 10 different languages and the English version is given by an American female who sounds curiously like Doris Day. Will a song burst out? We pass the typical sites of the city. The Siegessäule, otherwise known as Berlin Victory Town or 'Gold Lizzie'; the huge TV tower which looks like a giant lollipop with a needle on the top at Alexander Platz; the Tiergarten, which is the largest park in the city; countless statues, and many, many more.

There are embassies sprinkled around, each different in character. The Saudi Arabian one is a round, showy building, with ornate laser-cut patterns on its sides. The Mexican one has stone columns which appear to curve as you pass by them. The American Embassy is the only one I pass which has obvious signs of tight security, with burly officials patrolling the entrance.

However, as we make our way across the city one thing is apparent... Berlin is under construction. In practically every street we turn into, a new set of roadworks greets us. At any given moment there are said to be 100,000 in operation, and, given the number of cranes, makeshift walkways and diversions, I believe it. Indeed, the Turkish Embassy was 'under construction' when we passed it. I understand now why the bus tour, which covers a relatively compact area, takes 90 minutes.

We come to a stop in traffic and hear raised voices. A heated argument is taking place and to the great amusement of my fellow passengers and me, it involves our bus driver and a cyclist. As soon as we move off again, there's a strange sound of bells in the air. The noise isn't the traditional melodic peal, more of a cacophony of arrhythmic clanging. It seems to be coming from the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church which lost its main spire during a bombing raid in 1943. The spire was never rebuilt and its absence gives a reminder that nothing was sacred or safe during wartime Europe. The sound sends a shiver up my spine.

Jump off at Checkpoint Charlie which my Lonely Planet guidebook describes as 'a tacky tour trap'. Probably the most famous crossing point of the Berlin Wall during the Cold War, US and Soviet tanks once faced off here from their respective democratic west and communist east sides. Now, the junction is jam-packed with gift shops selling prints of old newspapers, key rings, fridge magnets, T-shirts and other expensive souvenirs. There's even a man dressed up as an official at the guard post, and people are queuing up to have some

form of memorabilia stamped by him. But by far the tackiest spot is 'Charlie's Beach' – an open-air bar. I have to agree with Lonely Planet, the place should be renamed Checkpoint Cheesy.

Almost everyone here seems to speak English proficiently but I find the exception. Ask for a coffee in a cafe and am presented with a huge chocolate chip cookie. 'No, no, sorry, cofffeee, not coookiee.' The server then reaches for a long white baguette crammed with ham. I eventually get my coffee – a 'latte machiato', which I order for the duration of my trip.

Take a walk to the Holocaust memorial. It sits in a square opposite Tiergarten and makes quite a statement. Signs advise tourists to be respectful and refrain from smoking, drinking, loitering and basically being unruly. Designed by Peter Eiseman and finished in 2005, it consists of over 2,500 grey concrete blocks and slabs, built on uneven, sloping ground. Representing six million Jews murdered during the Second World War, it would take seven years to name and give a short biography of each victim. Walk though the tightly-aligned avenues of concrete. Although you are close to others you don't seem to hear or see them until you practically bump into them. The design promotes a claustrophobic feeling and I'm relieved to get back out.

Friday

Get up early and follow the river round to Museum Island. This is a UNESCO world heritage site with five world renowned museums – the Pergamon, Bode, Neues, Old National Gallery and Old Museum – which came together in 1930. It's barely past 9am and already there's a long queue snaking round a corner for the Pergamon, which, inevitably, looks under construction. They are being entertained, whether they like it or not, by a young man playing *Greensleeves* on a recorder.

My museum of choice however, is the Neues, or New, museum. It consists of several floors stuffed full of Egyptian relics, hieroglyphics and sarcophagi. The showpiece is a bust of ancient Egyptian queen Nefertiti. The building was bombed during the Second World War and remained a ruin until 1999, when British architect David Chipperfield rebuilt it. Ashamedly, I start to lose interest in the displays after an hour and wonder if the people around me are really as intrigued as they look.

Admit defeat and nip to the in-house Allegetto Cafe. Can't help but giggle at an ageing waiter who has managed to take every tray of food and drinks to the wrong table. Having put down at least one item and been informed of his error, he smiles apologetically and moves on to another unsuspecting table.

My next stop is the Spree River for one of the popular cruises. The top deck is full and I sit sipping iced water in the blinding sunshine hoping that I don't get sunburnt. We sail towards Museum Island, then turn back and head to the Reichstag and beyond. I lose count how many bridges we pass under but most have colourful, artistic graffiti under them. It looks like it belongs there. A long banner hangs by the side of the river: 'Goodbye UK and

Thank you for the Music'. It's been put up by a local radio station and is the first time I've been reminded of Brexit during my stay. Although benign, it makes me feel a bit glum. Will anyone miss us?

Jump on my next bus tour – the 'Wall and Lifestyle' tour. This time the bus is green and the commentary is provided by a male Australian double act. Brown metal poles stick out of the ground where the wall once stood. More selfies are being taken by tourists. Jump off at the east side gallery. Here the original wall still stands, running for 1,316 metres, and has over 100 paintings by artists from all over the world. The one I am most familiar with is by Dmitri Vrubel of two men – Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker – kissing. Above and below it are the words in Russian: 'God! Help me stay alive. Among this deadly love'. Could spend hours here analysing each exhibit.

Grungy, scruffy sellers sit in front of the paintings. They have rugs spread out with carefully arranged jewellery – lots of peace symbols and CND signs. Walking along, I notice that several of them are frantically stuffing their stock into bags. In the distance two grim-faced policemen are coming along the street and appear to be checking each seller for a permit or licence. From what I can see, not many seem to have brought one with them.

Decide to walk back to the hotel, it can't be that far. Pass an unexpected sight. An anarchist camp. It looks like a compound tucked in a bushy area off the road. A sign warns me not to take photographs. Judging by the several men that I can see walking around inside, I decide to follow the instruction. Soon become lost in an area full of hostels. Can either consult my map or phone. Opt for my phone. 'Where am I?' I appear as a blue blob on the screen on Kopenicker Strasse – miles away from where I want to be. Ironically, I am stopped by several people looking for directions. Maybe I look like a Berliner?

By the time I get back to the hotel a new wave of activity is washing over the streets with people going out for the night. Exhausted, I retreat to my room, tend to several blisters, and sleep like a log.

Saturday

There's a party atmosphere in the streets today. A grey tram passes with a cocktail glass on its side. There are only two carriages but they are full of people drinking and dancing. Unfortunately, I'm waiting for a taxi to the airport. I don't feel like I've even scratched the surface of Berlin – there's too much to see and do in a city of memories. A return trip may be necessary.

Walking an island

Morelle Smith

2018

'Keep the sea on your left, and you won't get lost.' That's what my friend said to me before I set out to walk the circuit path on the island of Kerrera. The tiny ferry to Kerrera leaves from just south of Oban, on Scotland's west coast. It has room for one car and 11 passengers. It reminded me of the Irish ferry to Bere Island which had room for two cars, a few pedestrians and one cow.

There were quite a few people waiting to get on, standing at the top of the jetty slope. I moved down the slope and was aware of people behind me also moving down as if at a signal. I stood behind the car and two people at the side of the car, talking to the driver.

When the ferry laid its pale green ramp onto the jetty the car drove on and we started to walk on. Only 11, said the man-in-charge, with yellow oilskin and cap, and to those left on the jetty – I'll come straight back for you. The captain-conductor came round and took our fares and the crossing lasted only a few minutes. I wondered if there was an invisible boat driver or if the captain went into the front of the boat, for which there is probably some technical term, started the engine and set it on its course, which would not be too hard really, always the same, here to there, there to here, no change or deviation. In these automated days it is probably a simple enough task to set a boat's course, probably due west or due north, or somewhere in between, north-west, I'd say that was the direction the boat would be set to, and the opposite, south-east, coming back. But I still like to think there was some mysterious invisible person up front who started the engine and navigated, steering the tiller and cutting the engine a few metres from the shore, with the boat's impetus sending it gliding on. And the green ramp, like an unfolded card table, hitting the concrete jetty with a little bump, and so the boat stops.

I had a small map of the southern part of the island, with the path marked on it. It circled south from the ferry terminal, skirted the south shore, brushing past the tower of Gylen Castle, then coming back up the northern shore, turning inland and crossing the island's low hills, and so returning to the ferry.

Keeping the sea to my left as instructed, even I could not manage to lose my way, but I did not always know where I was on the map, and there were those pesky forks in the track which always make me think of the Yellow Brick Road. Most of the track was wide and clear. I could not find the point where you could leave the main path to head down to the reddish-brown stone of Gylen Castle – the map did not match the terrain. But I continued on the main path and found it later. I simply had not been as far along the path as I thought.

The tall castle-tower looks out to the western sea, with faint shadows of distant islands or

mainland promontories showing as thickened lines, blotches on the horizon. There's always, so it seems to me, a sense of longing, yearning, in such outposts looking west. West – in this part of the world – is not the direction of nostalgia or looking back, but the direction of future, of escape from too much history and time that still lies around in the present, possibly packed into bales and stored in some attic or barn, like contraband that no-one knows quite what to do with, reluctant to pay duty to transfer it to that 'foreign country' (as L P Hartley called the past) where it surely must belong. And where it should have stayed, instead of cluttering up our present and embarrassing us so.

East, south-east, is the direction of nostalgia for what is known, loved, and is possible to be returned to. If you follow the line of south-east, you reach the heart of the world – or at least Europe, located on a shifting grid of light – somewhere in Greece.

Far from Greece, on this misty promontory, the gloomy dark brown needle of the castle gazes out into a misty future. I walk a short way along the shore and meet up with the main path. There's another bay, some lush green grass, a house with a meadow in front of it and a few trees. And how the heart leaps at the sight of trees on an island like this, where there are so few.

From the shore the path heads north-east. It is stony now, climbs a little, and a view uncurls out across the sea like unfolding fingers, metal bars of land, green and gold, and from the water, round green hat-boxes with a candy stripe or two of pinkish-red, and a quiver of lemon-yellow feather-grasses, and burnt purple ribbon. If that's the box, what might the hat inside be like, I wonder. Then remember that it's submerged, underwater. Still, the view is colourful, speckled with purple buddleia, yellow star petals, thick fists of off-white flowers, with a heavy, dragging scent, and deep pink roses.

The lime green starry moss that looks smooth and patterned, stitched and solid, as puckered clouds you might look down on from a great height – this moss sinks gently underneath my feet. I discover it was floating like a patterned plate on swampy peat-brown liquid, which flows over my sandals and oozes darkly between my toes.

Sea inlets, lochs, indented fissures of broken edges of land, peninsulas and points, fingers and fists of land, and then these mountains, whose slopes may well continue underneath the water to unimaginable deep furrows of dark places that don't at all resemble land. Land is all broken up with fissures of water, so that what is mainland and what is island and separate, what are fingers and what are estuaries, cannot be distinguished. Land and water are so closely intertwined, locked together, like unrepentant horns.

In olden days, before roads were dug out of the earth and stones were laid on them, before they were flattened, to make land highways, the coastal lakes, the sea inlets, curling round the islands or the promontories, these were the ways of travel. The sea routes were the highways, and the coastal strips, the beaches, the valleys between mountains, and the low islands, were the settlements. These were the places where people stopped, lived, worshipped, grew crops, herded their flocks, taught, made music, recited their stories, built churches and low dwellings, gathered in conversation, collected stones and stories, built

cairns, coloured their histories with plant dyes, deep blues, russets and yellow, pale as a winter sun, grew herbs to heal the sick, and balms to cool the fever.

Today is murky and cloudy, but it does not rain. Ascending to the heights of the island after walking for a few hours, there's a view of large ferries from such islands as Mull, Islay and Colonsay, sailing gracefully in and out of Oban harbour. The path slopes back down to the shore, where the little ferry is waiting. No queues to jump this time, just about half a dozen passengers returning.

The artists of Dieppe

Morelle Smith

2018

The British artist Walter Sickert spent a lot of time in Dieppe, living in *le quartier Pollet*, the old town. One of his most well-known paintings is of Dieppe's l'église Saint Jacques. A small information board in front of the church tells you that you are standing in the exact spot he stood in, when doing this painting – the reproduction of it is in tasteful terracotta shades with splashes of yellow, which also fits with this day of hot sun and cloudless skies.

Other well-known painters who fell under the spell of this small seaport town include Eugene Delacroix, who rented a house on the quai Duquesne. While he was here he painted one of his major works *La mer vue des hauteurs de Dieppe*, which now hangs in the Louvre. Among the French impressionists there was Renoir, Monet and Camille Pissarro. The latter was particularly taken with Dieppe, spending the summers of 1901 and 1902 there. He called the town 'an admirable place for a painter who enjoys life, movement and colour'. Like Sickert, he too painted l'église Saint Jacques, though from a different angle. He also painted a series of 18 views of the port.

Clearly Dieppe's charm has not diminished in the past century. Its steep cliffs with their dark shadows falling on the beach, the pale greenish sea with changing moods, that combination of water and land, with its constant relationship, its rustle and whisper, and the hazy horizon with its visible slight thickening at the edge – at least on this clear and sunny day – which might be England.

This town had an instant effect on me as soon as I stepped out of the train station and walked alongside the Bassin Duquesne, lined with fishing boats. Yes, it was a hot and sunny summer day, and I was by the sea which I always like, but there was something special, so I felt, about this town. The small shops and cafes on the other side of the Bassin Duquesne are slightly shabby, but there are plenty of people there. And further on, there are arcades, the cafes and restaurants underneath them even more populated as they are in the shade. The main central street, boulevard Henri IV, is pedestrianised and packed with market stalls, lined with more shops and restaurants, and lots of people.

Inside the church Saint Jacques, I discover that it is one of the starting points of the Chemin de Saint Jacques, the pilgrimage routes to Compostella. This particular route is called *la voie des anglais* and continues to Rouen and Chartres. There's an intricate and ornate sculpture wall (*Le Mur du Tresor*) decorated with all kinds of carved figures, faces and vegetation, though most of these are too high up to see in detail from ground level. To the left of the door there's a pillar entwined by a twisting spiral, similar to the Apprentice Pillar in Scotland's Rosslyn Chapel, though a much more slender version. Above the

doorway and to the right, higher up, there are several *coquilles de Saint Jacques*, the pilgrim shells associated with the saint, which mark the travellers' route.

Dieppe is such a contrast to the glitz and glamour of Mediterranean resorts. It is homely and friendly, utterly unpretentious. It is lively and laid-back too, and makes no claims to sophistication or fashionable elegance. Strangers will speak to you, there's a sense of camaraderie, of acceptance of you, whoever you are. I felt immediately at home here.

Crossing the swing bridge over the narrow neck of water at the end of the Bassin Duquesne, the main harbour is a mass of white boats and the buildings on the far side display colourful facades. I head over to Le Pollet, the old quarter, and climb up a flight of steps between houses, which ends abruptly after turning a corner. But a faint path continues, through rather derelict-looking waste ground, bordered by tall grasses.

I continue doubtfully, thinking it may just be a dead end, but eventually it comes out onto a flight of smooth and well-tended steps, which lead up to the top of the cliffs. The view from the cliff-top shows the harbour and boats in the foreground, the whole spread of the town marked by church spires and towers, and the guardian cliffs beyond them, on the other side of town. A short walk from there, still on the clifftop, is la Chapelle Notre Dame de Bon Secours, and inside there's an exhibition of paintings.

I speak to the artist, Pascal Voisin, who has thick white hair and a deeply tanned face. He tells me he used to be a fisherman, he has crossed La Manche many times, visited English ports, and has been to Dublin too. He paints streets, houses, boats, seascapes and waterfronts. His paintings are firm and compact, as if he has caught his subjects, grasped them and placed them firmly on the canvas. As you might expect from a fisherman, he is not going to let them get away. They are dense with life, with lines, colours, edges and definitions. One or two are black and white, reminiscent of old photos, with the same near-nostalgic charm. Energy bounces off Monsieur Voisin and this energy is visible in his paintings too, with their thick colours, heavy skies and restless seas.

So Dieppe continues to inspire painters. Of course, I'm seeing it at its best in this glorious summer weather. I wonder what it's like in winter. Perhaps it will be like Pascal Voisin's paintings, with their dark and threatening skies and deserted seafront. When the long shadows cast by the sheer chalk cliffs will devour the beaches and extend thin dark fingers into the sea.

My package holiday to the Gambia

David Torrance

2018

Now I'm no longer freelance, I've had to become more creative in order to complete my ambition to visit every country in the world. My quota of annual leave doesn't leave much room for spontaneity, but when an Edinburgh-based friend – similarly constrained by his employment – spotted cheap return flights to the Gambia, we separately secured a few days' leave and booked our tickets.

As I've recounted in a previous travelogue, West Africa remains relatively untouched by my wanderlust. The Gambia, a small sliver of a country surrounded to the north and south by the former French territory of Senegal, simply wasn't on my radar, and I was more than a little surprised to discover that Thomas Cook shuttles tens of thousands of British tourists there every year.

The flight out was a trial. Not only did it depart two hours late due to surplus luggage, but a fuel shortage at our destination necessitated an unscheduled stop at the Canary Islands. I passed the time by chatting to a Scottish doctor who had volunteered two months of her time to work in tropical medicine, and a Gambian-born lady who was returning home to visit her family. The latter dealt with the longer-than-anticipated flight by surreptitiously drinking a bottle of duty-free gin.

We arrived late at the sprawling Senegambian Beach Hotel, which was full of British (and other European) tourists. This was comfortable enough, but very much a package-holiday set-up, something I usually avoid as zealously as checked baggage. I don't relax readily, either at home or abroad, but I do enjoy reading and swimming, and indulged in both to the point of near-relaxation.

I made a point of finding out why the country is known as 'the Gambia', rather than simply 'Gambia'. There are two reasons: first, it's named after 'the' River Gambia, while pre-independence, Gambia formally requested a definite article (one of only two countries in the world to use it) from the UK-based 'Permanent Committee on Geographical Names', so as not to be confused with Zambia.

Most of our fellow guests seemed unwilling to leave the comfort of the resort or, at a push, the brightly-lit but rather seedy Senegambia 'Strip', a few streets stuffed full of money changers, taxi drivers, restaurants and bars. But, eager to break the pleasant monotony of sunbathing and swimming, my companion and I arranged a beat-up cab to take us into the capital of Banjul.

Our first stop was the curious 'Arch 22', which straddles Independence Avenue as you approach the city from the west. Rather than commemorating independence or a great battle, this was erected following a 1994 military coup, although the basic museum on its

top floor covered the pre- and post-colonial history of the Gambia. Independence came in 1965, although the Queen remained head of state until 1970, a sort of transitional period on the journey to full sovereignty.

The modernist Banjul International Airport building to the south of the capital spoke to the heady optimism of those years, although a prominently-displayed quote from the first president of the Gambia (who had opened the airport) also suggested quixotic expectations. 'Independence is not a magic formula,' he had said on the new nation's first anniversary, 'which will transform our groundnuts into diamonds'.

There were more traces of empire at the modest but engrossing Gambian National Museum. Upstairs was a standard-issue portrait of Queen Elizabeth from early in her reign, while lining the walls were photographic portraits of former governors – many of them Scots – in varying states of disrepair. The building had once been the British or 'Bathurst' Club (Bathurst having been the colonial name for what is today Banjul). Faded maps showed the crown colony's borders following the course of the Gambian River, a profitable trading route in the late 19th century.

At the Gambian-Senegalese border the next day, a narcotics officer told us about the short-lived Senegambian confederation of the 1980s, a constitutional experiment that had passed me by. Prompted by concerns over security, the two countries agreed to gradual unification but, fearing a loss of identity from the larger Senegal, the Gambia withdrew in 1989. Perhaps with this in mind, the clearly well-informed officer questioned us closely about Brexit – and even Scottish independence.

The border itself was peaceful and relatively unbureaucratic, but early last year it was full of thousands of Gambians escaping what a display at Arch 22 called a state of emergency declared by the 'deposed (but refusing-to-leave) dictator', a reference to former president, Yahya Jammeh, who ignored defeat in a 2016 election. The crisis took the Gambia to the brink of civil war, and thousands of British tourists had to be flown swiftly home.

My travelling companion and I were just in south Senegal for a day, a quick and relatively cheap way of ticking another country off our global bucket lists. That morning I had read the *New York Times*' obituary of former president, George H W Bush, which included an account of the first Gulf War. Fittingly, we rattled around in a Land Rover which hailed from that conflict. Abdul, our guide, said it was one of three purchased by a Gambian tour company more than 25 years ago.

It was pretty beat-up, but did the job. We stopped by a packed but friendly market full of tuna fish which, as we saw further along the coast, dominated the local economy (as it does in northern Senegal). Nothing was wasted, even the scales being dried and used as fertiliser. On Boune island, we met members of a self-sufficient community comprising 50 or so people who had sought refuge from earlier conflicts in Senegal. Today they gather oysters and grow cannabis in neat rectangles, the product of which probably ends up all over the world.

At Banjul International Airport the following day, I eavesdropped as British

holidaymakers enthused about their visit to the Gambia. 'It's much better than Spain,' remarked one to a fellow passenger. 'Spain is now more English than England.' I resisted the temptation to tell him that within hours of my arrival I'd been offered a copy of *The Sun* on the beach at Kololi.

Sunrise in Bagan was a tonic for the soul

David Torrance

2019

I was last in Myanmar almost exactly seven years ago, shortly after visits from the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and just before the then Foreign Secretary, William Hague. That diplomatic seal of approval added to the sense of a country just opening up to the outside world, albeit gradually. The Wi-Fi connection at my cheerful hostel was more theoretical than real, while the train that took me from Yangon to Mandalay had seen better days – in about 1956. Icons of Aung Sang Suu Kyi – aka 'The Lady' – had only recently been permitted for sale on street stalls.

This time round I made it to Myanmar's new capital, Nay Pyi Taw (which translates as the 'Abode of Kings'), it having moved north from Yangon in 2005/06. While Yangon is a recognisably colonial city, NPT is ostentatiously new. Dominated by the Hluttaw, Myanmar's Parliament, it looks less like a city than it does a motorway interchange, so ubiquitous are the generously proportioned roads and highways, the most famous of which extends to 20 lanes.

I've always been fascinated by relatively new cities, especially those in unlikely locations. Canberra, for example, all municipal concrete and triangular grids, or Kazakhstan's new capital Astana. Even Washington, DC, was contrived to avoid inter-state feuding. So it was interesting to see the still fledgling Nay Pyi Taw taking shape. It has the large 'public' buildings sorted – parliament, city hall, concert theatres – but what felt absent were the palimpsests of older urban environments like Yangon – the accumulated layers of character that come with building and rebuilding, alleyways and distinct neighbourhoods. I guess that will come with time.

Curiously, the travel writer Norman Lewis – whose account of his travels in post-independence Burma remains fresh in 2019 – didn't bother with Bagan, Myanmar's ancient capital to the north-west of Nay Pyi Taw, making only a passing reference to 'Pagan' in his acerbic yet sympathetic account of his often-challenging journey to the far north. I'd missed out on Bagan – famous for its thousands of temples – during my 2012 trip, so was determined to see it this time round.

It was immediately clear that Bagan was the sort of town that holds pedestrians in contempt, regarding them as eccentric barriers to the constant flow of cars, motorbikes and e-bikes – basically scooters with battery packs. For half a day, I somewhat tentatively followed a guide up main roads and sandy paths on one of these to take in but a fraction of the area's temples and stupas – many of them dating back to the 11th century. Near one, there was a dozen or so families with their ox and carts – for centuries it's been a tradition to transport these from the nearest village every January. Last year, however, there were three times as many, so it's a tradition in decline.

In the evening, I managed to walk the 20 minutes or so to the Irrawaddy River to watch the sunset over New Bagan. A century ago, this wide stretch of water would have been full of Glasgow-built ships owned by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. So strong was this Scottish commercial and administrative presence that several accounts refer to Burma as 'the Scottish colony'. One colonial administrator, Sir George Scott, introduced football to the country (where it remains popular to this day), while in 1936 Archibald Cochrane, hitherto a Scottish unionist MP, was appointed governor just as Burma was elevated from a province of India to a colony in its own right.

The most famous chronicler of those days was George Orwell, who spent several unhappy years in Burma, and his books remain ubiquitous. I saw copies of *Burmese Days* in several different languages for sale at a newish pagoda from which I watched the sun rise the day I was due to head back to Nay Pyi Taw. Usually I find such things underwhelming, but this tourist fixture was well worth the early start and chilly wait. Just as I was getting bored, the sun crept above the distant mountain range and hot air balloons glided across the horizon. It was a tonic for the soul, recently battered by a break-up.

From Nay Pyi Taw, I made my way back to London via Bangkok, the ancient capital of Siam, and Tashkent, the contrived capital of a contrived country. The reaction to my Facebook check-in was interesting, prompting more shocked-face emojis than the usual thumbs-up, but the Uzbek capital conformed to my (general) rule that the most obscure and apparently scary cities can be the most interesting and safest. At times, it felt as if Gorbachev was still in power. At the 'State Museum' of fine art I was initially baffled by an insistence that I buy a ticket through a tiny external window rather than from a member of staff inside. Upstairs in the brutalist concrete building, two ladies scrubbed an Italianate sculpture with brushes and detergent.

The Tashkent Metro was also subject to a specific routine. Little blue tokens which looked like they had been in circulation since the Soviet era had to be purchased from an attendant sitting behind a lace-curtained 'Kassa' window, after which my bag was submitted to a perfunctory search. Then there were the stations themselves, all but a few grand, and occasionally, downright quirky. My favourite was Kosmonavtlar, a homage to Uzbek cosmonauts and full of futurist glass and metal, punctuated with roundels featuring friendly-looking helmeted space travellers. Until recently, photography of these had been banned.

Once I'd exhausted the sights of Tashkent, I took a day trip to Samarkand, at one time a major city on the old Silk Road. On the train I was surrounded by a trio of elderly Uzbek ladies, all chiffon and headscarves. No sooner had the train departed (right on time), video screens started playing a propaganda film featuring the current president boarding trains and getting off planes. Most passengers watched this with rapt attention.

Samarkand itself was exhausting and sprawling. Its many ancient 'ensembles' of mosques and mausoleums, meanwhile, looked suspiciously new – either rebuilt by the Soviets or under the direction of President Islom Karimov, who died in 2016. A statue of Karim stood

close to the imposing 'Registon', which dominates the centre of the old city, while later I visited his ostentatious mausoleum, contrived to resemble one of the ancient Muslim burial tombs at the nearby Shah-i-Zinda complex.

A few hours later, I boarded a high-speed train back to Tashkent. These, like the ubiquitous national carrier Uzbekistan Airlines, are clearly sources of considerable national pride and modernity. Indeed, the white 'Talgo' put ScotRail or Southeastern to shame, covering 167 miles in little more than two hours. There was even complimentary tea and sandwiches.

Discovering Bunk'art: an immersive theatre of the past

Morelle Smith

2019

When I lived in Albania several years ago, I was struck by the plethora of small bunkers scattered around the countryside, by the beaches, and within the towns and cities too. When I asked my Albanian colleagues about them, they answered with a touch of embarrassment, that they had been built during the communist era, to protect the country against possible invasion.

Made of concrete, they are not easy to get rid of, but over the years, many of them have been dismantled, dislodged or broken up. But the warren of underground bunkers that nestle into the hillside at the foot of Dajti mountain are of a different order. On the outskirts of Tirana, they were built to house the government and the nomenklatura of the communist era in case of an emergency, an invasion by some hostile power, or a nuclear attack. This complex of corridors with rooms branching off them is now the site of Bunk'art, a multi-media museum cum installation.

I'm staying in a delightful old building in the city centre (yes, there are still a few old buildings left in Tirana, despite the feverish erection of multi-coloured and multi-shaped high-rises that's been going on and still is, for the past two decades). I say I want to visit Bunk'art.

'You can get a bus there from just outside,' said Elton. 'But which bus?' I say, 'which direction?' 'From the other side of the street', he replies. Olsi is sitting in front of the computer, hears our exchange and has a better understanding of my need for more information. 'Not an orange bus,' he says. 'Just ask for Bunk'art. Or the Teleferik.' 'Not an orange bus' means a blue bus or possibly a white one. So I cross the courtyard, go out of the gate, and cross to the other side of the street. Two or three people are standing on the pavement so I join them, and when a blue bus comes along, I call out 'Bunk'art?' The conductor nods. I get on, hardly able to believe my luck.

Traffic is congested along the Rruga Dibrës, but by the time we pass the Medresa and turn right along the wider street past the huge bazaar which I'd visited earlier and bought a couple of my favourite hard-backed notebooks, the traffic is flowing more easily. There are a couple more turnings before Rruga Kongresi i Manastirit, which has a long wall running along one side, painted in blotchy patterns of camouflage colours of cream, terracotta and khaki. It's too high to see over and I'm curious about what lies behind this fervent wall.

The streets, like Rruga Dibrës itself, are full of small shops, selling *byrek*, *sufflaq* and *piça* – clothes, pots and pans – and some with indiscernible interiors. Finally, the conductor remembers me, calls out 'Bunk'art', and I get off. There are fewer shops here, it's become a residential area, with smart new houses. I follow the signs, which fortunately are numerous,

and walk uphill about half a kilometre. The houses end here and there's a clear view of Dajti mountain.

The entrance is a tunnel, with a set of traffic lights above it. I walk into the tunnel. Ethereal electronic music is playing, and there's also the slightly unnerving sound of dripping water, so I'm aware of ambivalent reactions, mixing the relaxed and the unsettling. From the tunnel you emerge into open countryside, and a wooden hut – the ticket office. Pointed in the right direction, I set off on an uphill track surrounded by trees and woodland. Past a sentry at his post, but he doesn't challenge me. It's a warm sunny day, a few birds sing – it's all very peaceful.

The bunker itself is a vast complex of tunnels and rooms. The main theme is defence and weapons. There are plenty of photographs and archive footage, particularly of the victory parade after the retreat of the occupying German forces – line after line of tanks rolling up Tirana's main boulevard, the cheering crowds celebrating liberation.

There are different sounds, both in the corridors and the rooms themselves. Sometimes it is recordings of a romantic song in Italian, sometimes marching feet, sometimes choral singing in Albanian, which sounds celebratory, like a national anthem. Then there's the sound of breaking glass, and air-raid sirens. These different sounds mingle together, producing a dream-like effect as if I'm walking through a mind with different memories in each room, only the sounds echo and overlap – is it my own memories? Someone else's? They are certainly my responses, and they veer between the pleasant, the uplifting, the troubling and the deeply menacing.

Hoxha's personal bunker is simply furnished: a bed, a desk, a bookshelf, and his recorded voice plays from an old radio. There is even an old-fashioned phone which you can lift up and listen to his voice through the receiver.

The main focus in this impressively well-researched display – a mixture of museum exhibits and installations – is on the defences of the communist era, though one room is dedicated to the show trials, the killings and executions. The installation in one room portrays the border, covered in barbed wire, where so many tried to escape, and so many failed. In another room the installation shows a video on a loop. It's of a passing train seen through a window, and then suddenly, shockingly, the sound of a shot, and a bullet hole appears in the window. (This is where the sound of breaking glass comes from.) The idea is that windows are exactly what a bunker should not have, for it can be a crack in the defences.

These vast underground bunkers were created for the nomenklatura, the political elite, for use in a time of national emergency. They were never used, and it's very unlikely that the general populace knew of their existence – apart from the people who had to build them, political prisoners and other 'volunteers' who had to work underground in dreadful conditions. One room is dedicated as a tribute to the hundreds of people, we are told, who died in the process of building them.

Just before the exit, there's a room with a different perspective, showing the humour and

irony that Albanians are so good at, even in the darkest times. What about the tens of thousands of small bunkers built for defensive purposes in case of invasion, that still litter the countryside? It seems that they do serve some purpose after all. They have provided homes for several species of bats which have found their dark interiors the perfect places in which to take up residence.

Bunk'art is a superb creation, stepping into an immersive theatre of the past, a macabre and threadbare carpet of history soaked in an atmosphere of menace and paranoia and the brutality that arose from it.

It is good to leave it behind and emerge again into the sunlight and warmth of an autumn day. I sit for a while outside, on a rusted old bench, in the shade of a fig tree. The sky is clear and blue. There are no other people around and the woodland is peaceful – just the humming of insects, an occasional bird call, and a dry leaf falling onto the ground.

The forgotten homeless of Denver

David Torrance

2019

I arrived in Denver just after a cyclone. Although the city itself was dry and just above freezing, the surrounding Colorado countryside was still blanketed in snow. This is not normal, but then this part of the United States is accustomed to freak weather – even in spring. Most Americans I know are consequently battle-hardened and prepared for every eventuality. All I had done was bring a scarf and gloves.

It wasn't my first time in Colorado; I had driven – or rather been driven – through the south-western corner of the rectangular state during an epic road trip a couple of summers ago, but I felt compelled to return as I can't stand the thought of an unvisited city. And what a city Denver turned out to be, stuffed full of Art Deco architecture, a particular passion of mine. Poet's Row featured a whole street of modernist blocks named after famous scribes, Thomas Carlyle among them.

I was also reminded of the wonderful informality of State Capitol buildings in the United States. Once you've conquered security – never particularly onerous – you're allowed to roam freely. Colorado's was the first I'd visited which was actually in session, yet I was still allowed to wander in and out of the Senate and House galleries unmolested, and could even take photographs (no flash), something the UK Parliament doesn't even allow when its two chambers aren't sitting. The House was debating counselling for school students, and representatives divided along predictable lines: Republicans argued against 'strangers' being allowed to deal with their children; Democrats warned of the need to prevent suicides. The Bill passed – a modest victory for liberalism in Trump's America.

Although Denver appeared affluent, once again I was struck by the extent of homelessness in the US, particularly in its western states. I had first noticed it during a trip to Seattle and Portland ahead of the 2016 presidential elections, when I saw whole street corners taken up with makeshift encampments. I wrote at the time that it was the great unmentionable of American politics: homeless people most likely don't vote, so candidates for high office don't waste time (and votes) talking about it.

The striking Denver Public Library building a block or so from the State Capitol illustrated this, its bathrooms taken over by those without anywhere else to wash up; its public areas full of citizens with nowhere else to shelter from the unseasonable cold. North of downtown, where I tracked down some more Art Deco buildings, it was even more pronounced. At the modernist home of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, several of its target audience were sunning themselves outside, and on the buses I took around the city, I looked out of place with my clean clothes and rucksack. Middle-class Americans don't take public transport.

Walking back to my Airbnb one evening, I passed several people either passed out on grass verges or flailing around, clearly intoxicated. At Denver's splendidly-restored Union Station, I watched as security guards ousted gently-dozing drunks from comfortable leather armchairs. In Boulder, a smaller city to the north-west of Denver, it was like another world. Everything along Pearl Street, its main thoroughfare, was manicured and gleaming, while it was populated with either students from Colorado State University or young professionals working in tech.

The same contrast was evident in Phoenix, Arizona, which was my next stop, not only in temperature – it was 30 degrees hotter than neighbouring Colorado – but in the gap between rich and poor. Although I spent a couple of nights in an affluent suburb full of palm-lined streets, as soon as I got into the city centre, it was like a scene from *Black Summer*, a new zombie series I'd recently begun watching on Netflix.

At a Starbucks within an expensive hotel, a homeless guy – who'd politely asked the staff for some iced water – had clearly overstayed his welcome and was being directed back to the street by a security guard. Elsewhere in downtown Phoenix, others were changing their clothes, sleeping, drinking or staring into space among grand civic buildings which evoked a very different period in US history. Some of them probably wondered who this strange person was taking photographs of faded Art Deco buildings.

This used to be known as 'white flight', although the homeless I saw in Phoenix were overwhelmingly white, so it was more an economic phenomenon than racial. And sure enough, once I had ridden the light rail to Tempe, which is to Phoenix what Boulder is to Denver, I could have been on the east or west coast. Home to Arizona State University, compact Tempe emanated youth and intellect, in stark contrast to the hopelessness evident on the streets of its larger neighbour.

Not far from Tempe, and adjacent to Phoenix's main airport, was the Pueblo Grande Museum, which is one in the eye for those who claim 'America has no history', a tiresome trope (believed by many Americans) you often hear from superior Brits. Showcasing pre-Columbian ruins, this was once a major settlement of the Hohokam people, who started constructing a remarkable network of irrigation canals in the area 1,800 years ago. There isn't much left, although a ballcourt and platform mound were clearly visible. A modest exhibition celebrated this pre-1776 heritage with scholarship and affection – the first time I had ever visited a museum before boarding a flight.

Eating ice cream and looking for Kafka in Prague

Gilleen Somerville-Arjat

2019

Zmrzlina. Czech for 'ice cream'. Although it was still March and cold, I decided I might need it. I like ice cream. But how to pronounce it? Google provided the answer in both Czech and Slovak. *Zi-mir-zi-lina*. Simple. A moment's reflection reminded me of a Russian phrase: *Dyed moroz*. Father Frost/Father Christmas. Three of those frosty consonants are buried in the Czech word.

Preparing for a short trip to Prague, I couldn't hope to acquire any fluency, but I thought a few basic phrases might help. *Dobre dyen* and *Dobre vecher*, 'Good day' and 'Goodnight', for instance, just as in Russian. *Prosim* for 'please' and *Dikuyi* for 'thank you'. Not like Russian. I found a lively, flirtatious young tutor called Monika on YouTube. 'It's not really so difficult,' she declared in her charmingly accented English. 'You can even use *Dik* for thank you,' she said. I decided to pass on that one. Introducing yourself: *Ja jsem z Skotska*. The 'j' becomes a 'y' in the first word, and an 'i' in the second. Then just zizz the z. 'Goodbye' was straightforward when broken down by syllable: *Nashle da nou*. And if all else fails, 'I don't understand': *Nerozumim*. Monika's enthusiasm was so infectious I got my husband to watch. He was entranced. So entranced, I don't think he took much in.

Greetings are useful. Faces brighten if you use them, even if you then immediately launch into English. Tourist signs in the city centre are in English. You can generally rely on hotel and tourist information staff, most shopkeepers, even the man in the main post office who sold me stamps (I still send postcards rather than post photos on Facebook) to speak enough English to get by. Otherwise Czech seems as impenetrable, as full of consonant chains as Polish, to which it is related. At the airport the information boards flick regularly between Czech and English. Unaided, one might be baffled by *Prilety* and *Odlety* for 'Arrivals' and 'Departures'. Up the Vltava without a paddle for sure.

I didn't know what to expect of the city, given its turbulent 20th-century history. 2018-19 encompasses several significant anniversaries. Czechoslovak independence from the former Austro-Hungarian empire in October, 1918. The introduction of its own currency, the korona, still used today, in 1919. 1938-39, Hitler's Nazi takeover. 1948, the communists' turn. 1968, Alexander Dubcek's short-lived, liberalising 'Prague Spring'.

January this year marked the 50th anniversary of the suicide of Jan Palach – the student who set himself alight in protest at the passive response of the Czechs to the Soviet military re-invasion. A plaque with a tribute poem in Czech by Miroslav Holub memorialises this at the spot on Wenceslas Square. Vaclav Havel, satirist and playwright, imprisoned for dissent, emerged as the first leader of the post-communist Czechoslovakia in the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989. Unlike Dubcek, he wasn't in thrall to a political ideology. He disliked

the formality of office so much that he used to navigate the corridors of power in Prague Castle on a scooter. We liked that subversive, quasi-surreal humour. Very Czech.

A friend who visited with a group in 1978, when it was still under communist rule, recalled an impression of shabbiness and a repressed, unresponsive populace. It's all changed today. You could be anywhere in Europe. Wenceslas Square, an avenue despite its name, is still a broad vista, with the national museum and the imposing statue of the saint on horseback at one end. The rest exhibits the usual high profile capitalist takeover by Starbucks, Costa Coffee, McDonalds, Burger King, and the like, interspersed with hotels, casinos, tourist information kiosks and bus shops, money exchanges, street food stalls and souvenir shops. There's an M&S and an H&M and some other fashion stores. It has, however, two bookshops, including a very good academic one, where they wrap up your purchases, speak excellent English and sell stamps.

Souvenir shops are legion, peddling the fridge magnets we love and despise wherever we go. The Prague shops feature Bohemian glass, porcelain, puppets and items in wood. Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* tankard of foaming beer in one hand, pipe in the other, featured in various forms and sizes. I was intrigued by the high visibility of absinthe and rather pretty absinthe spoons.

We were also surprised to find thin bars of cannabis chocolate on sale everywhere. A trader in the Havel'ska Market assured me that it was herbal, not narcotic. It's actually hemp seeds. Perfectly legal. You can buy packets of them in Holland & Barratt. We were amused by rows of mass-produced witch puppets on speed who flash vampiric eyes and cackle fit to burst if the trader claps her hands. I nearly bought one, but the remorseless high voltage merriment would soon drive you nuts.

You can't avoid the crowds. Cheap air travel, abundant accommodation and there we all are. A veritable Babel city. Groups of Chinese tourists led by guides with flags. Packs of clamorous Italian schoolchildren, more or less under control. Crowds massed around the Astronomical Clock in the Old Town Square, smartphones clicking, to witness the parade of apostles on the hour.

On the square's main concourse the entertainers were out. A giant panda, much hugged and photographed for the price of a coin tossed into his bucket, was doing a roaring trade. A giant gorilla was less popular. Likewise, a polar bear hopping hopefully from one foot to the other. Different characters coated in metallic paint posed, impossibly airborne. 'Don't you get tired?' I asked one. 'Maybe later,' he admitted a touch hoarsely. With all this distraction on hand you scarcely notice the massive black statue to Jan Hus, the Protestant reformer burned alive for his beliefs in 1415 that dominates the north end of the square.

Later, we took advantage of the generous seniors' discount to climb the clock tower and enjoy a four ways view of the city, its spires and green onion domes. My stomach lurches looking down from that height, so I'm glad there's something preventing me from pitching into the void. There have been too many defenestrations in Prague over the centuries. People looking antlike fed Orson Welles's character's scorn while high on the Ferris wheel

in Vienna in the film of *The Third Man*. I wanted to pick everything up and have my own Lilliputian city to play with.

Among the crowds, the gorilla had disappeared and the panda was worming himself out of his costume. It fell away from him in coils and out skipped a thin young man in red from head to foot, lithe as a whippet, like a devil from Dante's Hell. Carefully he folded up his costume, laid it on the ground and strolled off for a comfort break.

You could only escape the crowds if you turned off the main streets and squares into side streets and alleyways. I found a wonderful puppet shop on Jilska Street, on our way to the Charles Bridge. The real deal, its walls hung with individually carved characters. Pinocchio and Charlie Chaplin figured prominently and some very ugly witches. A little girl with her mother wanted a dog puppet, but there weren't any. The lady seller tried to interest her in a three-headed green dragon instead.

Prague is a city of music. Dvorak, Janacek, Martinu and Smetana. There's an opera house and a large museum to Smetana overlooking the Vltava. That symphonic movement of his from *Ma Vlast* ('My Country') that celebrates the river, known alternatively as the Moldau as it enters Germany downstream, has a haunting beauty. The churches in the Old Town hold concerts nightly. We were always being handed flyers. We attended one on our last night in the former Jesuit church of St Salvator by the Charles Bridge, a vast, baroque, chilly edifice. Fortunately the pew cushions heated up and they played Smetana.

The musicians on the pedestrianised Charles Bridge soon have you tapping your feet, and artists display their wares, overlooked by the sooty patinaed statues of the city's long-suffering guardian saints. Beneath the arches that have witnessed floods and been repaired many times since they were raised during the reign of Emperor Charles IV in the 14th century, the tourist river cruises ply their trade. We kept encountering beggars, posing turtlelike, still as statues, at pavement edges, hooded heads bowed, hands grasping the cups they hope you will fill. My husband, intrigued by their uniformity, asked a young Czech guide about them. He was dismissive. 'They're junkies,' he said. 'They've no shame. They just want your sympathy. They can make a lot of money in a day from tourists. More than we earn from doing a proper job. It's a form of prostitution.'

We took a tram up to the castle. Over 70s go free. Even us, as long as you have ID. The Gothic St Vitus Cathedral impressed with its dizzying height, its vivid stained glass windows, the baroque silver memorial to St John Nepomuk and the sombre chapel to St Wenceslas. Visitors were kept moving. The pews cordoned off. Nowhere to sit down. 'It's because of the Italian schoolchildren,' said one of the guides with a shudder. 'They take their food and drink into the pews and make a noise.' Behind stands an older, more modest Romanesque cathedral to St George (Jiri in Czech). Here there were fewer visitors and you can sit down in the pews.

Before you leave you have to visit Golden Lane. A street of tiny cottages, originally built in the 16th century to house the Emperor Rudolf II's palace guards. Goldsmiths exercised their trade here in the 17th century, the source of its present name. Later the houses were

rented out to small-scale entrepreneurs. Some of them remain as museum pieces, a seamstress's house, for instance, and a fortune-teller's. She was executed for criticising the Nazis. There's even a torture museum, not the only one in Prague, should your taste run to that. Others are shops, including No. 22, rented by his youngest sister, Ottilie, where Kafka wrote during 1916-17, seeking peace and quiet from noisy neighbours down in the city.

Speaking of Kafka, I found his traces somewhat elusive. If you look up Wikipedia on Czech literature you won't find his name. My Berlitz guide has only a brief paragraph. Born in 1883, when Prague was still part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, he was Jewish and wrote in German. His father, who disparaged his literary ambitions, ran a successful retail business in women's fashionwear on the edge of the Old Town Square. The family moved frequently, but always within a short radius of the business. Kafka worked, reluctantly, as a lawyer dealing in workers' insurance and continued to live mainly in the family home. A book I bought, *Kafka in Prague*, has endpaper maps of the city centre. At the front, you have Prague in the dying days of the Austro-Hungarian empire, all its streets and landmarks in German. At the back, they're all in Czech.

Publishing little in his lifetime, Kafka wanted his unpublished works burned after his death, but his close friend, Max Brod, refused to comply. He died in Germany in 1924 of TB, tended by the last of his lovers. His body was returned to Prague for burial in the Jewish cemetery. A tombstone shaped as a crystal in stone marks the family grave. His three sisters were later victims of the Nazi Holocaust. One was, apparently, last heard of in the Lodz ghetto in Poland, while the other two perished in the concentration camp of Terezin/Theresienstadt, now a museum, north of Prague.

We found the premises of the Franz Kafka Society in Siroka Street in the old Jewish Quarter, facing the Jewish Cemetery. Established in the 1990s to celebrate the heritage of German literature in Prague, it combines bookshop, a conference centre and a replica of the contents of Kafka's library. In 2003, it funded the surreal statue of Kafka by Jaroslav Roná outside the Spanish synagogue and each year it awards a prestigious international literary prize. Distinguished recipients include Margaret Atwood, John Banville, Vaclav Havel, Amos Oz and Harold Pinter.

As we wandered past the synagogues and bourgeois apartment blocks in the Jewish Quarter, I said to my husband, 'Imagine you live in one of those apartments. Your life is comfortable and stable. Then one day soldiers come knocking, loudly and brutally, and take you away. Your whole world is turned upside down. You are deprived of everything, herded like cattle. You starve, you fall ill, perhaps you die. How will that feel?' Ever since I read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, that dreadful fate has haunted my imagination.

During our few days in Prague, we didn't have time to visit the Kafka Museum on the castle side of the Vltava, or to view the large metal kinetic sculpture by David Cerny of Kafka's head that twirls in mesmerising slices outside a shopping mall, representing the turmoil inside the author's mind. I did, however, drop into the basement experience of Franz Kafka World, just a step from the Old Town Square. Here you follow a journey,

through the ruins of two Romanesque houses, into a multi-screen theatre that enacts imaginary Kafkaesque journeys, episodes from history and real life dramas. I spent a confusing but not unpleasant hour there. Would I recommend it? Perhaps not.

We bought a clutch of mementoes but my best souvenir is a puppet. Not one of the mass-produced, mad-eyed, cackling witches, but a Little Red Riding Hood with an expressive face, hand-carved and painted in wood. She's small and isn't on strings. Her scope for movement is dictated by a handle that turns her head in various directions and expands her neck. I saw it in that puppet shop in Jilski Street and loved it, but it was expensive and we were on budget, so I held fire. However, when I got home I ordered it online and am delighted with it. There's a wolf too, dark grey and evil-eyed, with toothy jaws that open wide. I'll leave him for now though.

And I did have some ice cream, as our last two days were like summer. We found a small cafe near the Old Town Square, staffed by young girls barely out of school who spoke good English. The *zmrzlina* accompanied a plate of sweet pancakes drizzled in chocolate and decorated with strawberries. Every mouthful was as delicious as it sounds.

An unexpected Scottish connection in Yangon

David Torrance

2019

I first visited Yangon almost eight years ago, but it did not, I'm now ashamed to admit, make much of an impression. I remember it appearing irredeemably filthy and feeling rather oppressive; tourists were only just beginning to trickle in, although today it remains surprisingly low-key (two friends had no idea where it was; one thought it was in China). A return visit last weekend, however, found the city belatedly get under my skin.

It's still in bad shape – I lost count of the giant rats I glimpsed scurrying around – but then overly-clean cities can be quite dull. Although Myanmar still has its problems, there is now obvious economic activity, not least in a city which – for a period in 1927 – became the largest immigrant port in the world, surpassing even New York City. Today it retains a recognisable ethnic mix of Barmans and Indians, the latter doubtless descended from the labourers who arrived almost a century ago to work along the Irrawaddy Delta.

There are even signs of what would, in Brooklyn or East London, be called 'gentrification', a term I passed on to a young Yangonian who spent a few hours showing me around what remains of the colonial city. We passed barbers and coffee shops which would not have looked out of place in Hackney or Williamsburg, mostly in repurposed buildings dating back to the early 20th century. The previous day, the general manager of the Pegu Club had also shown me around what had once been Burma's most exclusive colonial club, guests of which included the future 'King Emperor' Edward VIII.

I knew Myanmar – only a British colony in its own right between 1937-48 – had strong connections with Scotland, but I hadn't realised the extent to which the latter's largest city had influenced the fortunes of another imperial metropolis on the other side of the planet. Every other building I encountered during my walking tour had once housed a Scottish company of some sort, with their presence particularly strong on what is still known as Merchant Street.

The present British Embassy inhabits what was formerly Graham's Building, the Yangon branch of the Glasgow-based shipping and insurance firm J and F Graham & Co (it became the 'Chancery' following Burmese independence in 1948). Next door was the General Post Office, originally built for the Scottish rice company Bulloch Bros & Co, while a few blocks away was A Scott and Co – a name still visible on its modest lintel – a general merchant which later diversified into banking and shipping. It was probably best known as an exporter of cheroots, the Burmese version of cigars (which I enjoyed on a brief trip to Mandalay), most of which were sold back in Scotland.

Occupying a dominant position on Pansodan Street, meanwhile, is Myanmar's Inland Waterways building, an intriguing piece of continuity with its previous status as the

Rangoon HQ of the Glasgow-based Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, which once controlled the Clyde-built steamships with 'paddles chunkin from Rangoon to Mandalay', as immortalised by Kipling. Even the firm's Burma-based skippers, engineers and managers generally began their working careers at Denny's shipyard in Glasgow.

In his book *Seaports of the Far East* (1923), Allister MacMillan likened Rangoon to a commercial 'suburb' of Glasgow, and it's not hard to see why he reached that conclusion. The old Rangoon Chamber of Commerce was dominated by Scots, who grew extremely wealthy from the teak-logging industry. Indeed, it was the Chamber who agitated for the Third Anglo-Burmese War, which led to the defeat of the last Burmese monarch and the annexation of 'Upper Burma' in 1885. As Richard Curle observed in another contemporary publication, 'Rangoon society is essentially Scottish'.

Even Yangon's grid layout reminded me of Glasgow, its City Hall every bit as sumptuous as that in Scotland's largest city and overlooking its own version of George Square (although the Myanmar version boasts a striking independence monument). Indeed, Rangoon was originally laid out by a Scot – Captain Alexander Fraser – with the offices of trading firms later occupying sites near the quays essential to their livelihoods. The city's civic architecture also bears Scottish influences: iron posts at the Yangon Division Court – one of downtown Yangon's most atmospheric buildings – were produced by the Falkirk Iron Foundries.

A century ago, it seems unlikely many Scots would have lacked awareness of Rangoon and its commercial importance to the British Empire. A regular steamship connected the Burmese capital with Glasgow and Liverpool, while the 1924 and 1938 Empire Exhibitions (the latter at Bellahouston Park) featured elaborate Burmese Pavilions. Burmese students also enrolled at the University of Glasgow shortly before the First World War, while emissaries from (the later-deposed) King Thibaw visited Edinburgh Castle and Glasgow's Chamber of Commerce.

I've noted before the invisibility of similar imperial connections in Scottish discourse, although historians have recently got to work in documenting these links, many of them uncomfortable, most notably in the Caribbean. What struck me was the attitude of the industrious Yangon Heritage Trust, which is committed to protecting and restoring the city's colonial heritage, celebrating its buildings and design if not the philosophy which created them.

Almost eight years after my first visit, Yangon is catching up with Siem Reap and Hanoi as a standard backpacking destination, and I saw many young travellers during my few days exploring the city in interminable heat. And given its nascent gentrification (predominantly white), tourists can now eat, drink and sleep largely segregated from more than five million locals – a very 21st-century form of colonialism.

Culross: a remarkable reminder of an authentic Scottish past

Andrew Hook

2019

I've known for years that Culross, on the Firth of Forth in the Kingdom of Fife, is reputed to be the best-preserved example of a small Scottish town in the period from the late 16th to the 18th century. But until very recently, unlike millions of people worldwide, I'd never been there. That is to say that I've never watched a single episode of the hugely successful US TV series *Outlander*. *Outlander*, based on the novels of the American writer Diana Gabaldon, is set in Scotland, switching in time between the 18th century and the contemporary world, and frequently features scenes filmed in Culross.

Having finally spent a couple of days in Culross itself, my first report is that the royal burgh has successfully absorbed its new-found fame. Walking its narrow streets and lanes, one is reminded more than once of the *Outlander* connection, but the tone is measured and the actual impact seems very limited. No exploitation of the TV link – or indeed of earlier films featuring the town, such as *Kidnapped* and *The 39 Steps* – has occurred. There is nothing here of the Scottish kitsch which disfigures so many of Scotland's most popular tourist sites. Culross remains what it has always been: a quite remarkable reminder of an authentic Scottish past.

It's difficult to pin down what it is that makes Culross so special. It's a small place with a current population of around 400. Its houses and cottages are of no more than two storeys high. With their frequently white walls, they are attractively neat and unpretentious, and seem to display a natural, uniform elegance. Crow-stepped gables and deep red roof tiles are much in evidence. The streets and lanes – sometimes called wynds or vennels – are narrow and often roughly cobbled. Traffic is minimal. Visitors approaching from the Kincardine Bridge direction all park in a spacious riverside area before Culross itself is entered. This means that the prevailing atmosphere is astonishingly quiet and still. Apart from the odd car, occasionally a double-decker bus passes through on its way to Dunfermline. Taller than the houses on either side, its size makes it seem spectacularly out of place – like some elephant suddenly appearing in your High Street.

Crucially, there seems to be no shops. I was accompanied on my two-day visit by Diane, my daughter-in-law, and India, her nine-year-old girl. On the first morning, we went out to pick up my unmissable *Guardian* – and found ourselves driving a few miles to the next village to find a shop selling it. No shops, but Culross is no kind of carefully-preserved but no longer functioning living space. It has a primary school, and clearly its homes are occupied by families who have been prepared to give up aspects of contemporary urban living in return for a more tranquil way of life. Still, it is hard to exaggerate the difference

the absence of rows of shops and shop windows seems to make. The sense of finding oneself stepping back into a different and quieter time is underlined.

Yet there is a telling irony here. In its heyday in the 17th and 18th centuries, Culross was in no sense at all a sleepy centre of calm tranquillity. Rather it was a thriving, thrusting and spectacularly modern royal burgh. In the late 16th century, Sir George Bruce, its leading merchant, had developed a coal mine that extended out under the water of the Firth of Forth – apparently the first of its kind in the world. Then it had a bustling trading and fishing harbour – of which nothing remains but a rickety slipway out into the firth. It was also a salt-panning and manufacturing centre, producing iron girdles for baking and cooking.

Today's Culross has no industry just as it has no shops. However, in the mid-18th century its almost 1,700 inhabitants supported 11 alehouses. By 1885, only two survived. Now its population – and its visitors – get by with just the Red Lion, an inn dating from the early 17th century, full of character and providing excellent food and drink. Two or three small cafes cater for the many visitors. Otherwise, what is enjoyable is just being there – walking and looking and experiencing the atmosphere.

Of course, there are places to visit. Sir George Bruce's own mansion house, built and extended in the early 17th century, at some point acquired the title of Culross Palace, despite never having been any kind of royal residence. Its many rooms and garden have been beautifully restored by the National Trust for Scotland. The past comes vividly alive inside, while outside the garden with its mixture of fruit trees, flowers, bushes, vegetables, and free-ranging hens, is a real delight. In one corner, bags of potatoes and apples are on sale at £2.50. Please leave your payment in the box provided. (Subsequently we passed cottage doors offering passers-by home-made toffee or bottles of rose-hip syrup sitting in baskets attached to their doorknob. Again, just leave your payment in the basket. An older world indeed.)

The beautiful apartment we were living in was part of what had been a small chapel. No other church is in evidence. However, high above the town, and approached by a lengthy and steep lane, lies what is described as Culross Abbey. Built in the early Middle Ages, the original abbey did not survive as a result of changes in the style of its Cistercian order – and the impact of the Protestant reformation. Only a large range of impressive ruins are to be seen. On the other hand, the original Abbey Church eventually became a Church of Scotland parish church, and that remains its status now.

Alongside the abbey is an ancient cemetery full of gravestones, the names and dates of which have long mouldered away. Some have masonic symbols and other similar indicators of the former occupations of their owners. Standing among the abbey's ruins, and looking down across the town and out across the Firth of Forth, one senses here – as in so much of Culross – the reality of a different world and a different time.

Culross may have become a star of TV and film. The real thing is better still.

Contributors

For **contributors to 6.5.99: a day in the life of Scotland** see Kenneth Roy's introduction to the sequence.

Alistair R Brownlie is a retired solicitor and the author of a number of books

George Chalmers is a retired bank robber

Roddy Charles is a Scot living and working in Japan

Paula Cowan is a Reader, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland

Catherine Czerkawska is a poet and writer

Sir Tom Devine is Professor Emeritus of Scottish history and palaeography, University of Edinburgh

David Donnison was an academic and social scientist. He died in 2018

Michael Elcock is a writer and former CEO of Tourism Victoria, Canada

Jock Gallagher is former BBC producer, editor and programme head

Rose Galt is a former President of the Educational Institute of Scotland

Katie Grant is a novelist and a Consultant Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund

Gerry Hassan is a writer and commentator

Andrew Hook is an Emeritus Professor of English Literature at University of Glasgow

Tom Hubbard is author, editor or co-editor of over 30 academic and literary works

Walter Humes is an Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Stirling University

William Hunter was a *Glasgow Herald* journalist. He died in 2004

Ian Jack is a journalist, writer and former newspaper editor

R D Kernohan is a journalist and writer and former editor of *Life and Work*

Magnus Linklater is a journalist, writer and former newspaper editor

Fiona MacDonald is a former deputy editor of the *Scottish Review* and currently runs the Young Programme charity

Neil McFadyean at the time of writing was a 20-something Scot who had recently returned from Beijing

Alan McIntyre is a Senior Managing Director and Head of the Global Banking Practice at Accenture. He is Patron of the Institute of Contemporary Scotland

John McKendrick is a British lawyer, author, and the Attorney General of Anguilla

Ian Mackenzie was Head of Religious Broadcasting at BBC Scotland. He died in 2006

Islay McLeod is editor of the *Scottish Review*

Maxwell MacLeod is a writer who formerly worked in education

Sally Magnusson is an author and BBC presenter

Barbara Millar is a funeral celebrant and daughter-in-law of Robins Millar (below)

Robins Millar (1889-1968) was a leading Scottish journalist and playwright

James Robertson is a Scottish novelist and poet

Kenneth Roy was a distinguished Scottish journalist and founding editor of the *Scottish Review*. He died in 2018

Tom Shields is an author and former *Glasgow Herald* diarist

Christopher Small was *Glasgow Herald* chief drama critic and literary editor from 1955 until 1980. He died in 2019

Morelle Smith is a poet and author

Gillean Somerville-Arjat is a writer and critic

Hannah Summers is a London-based journalist

David Torrance is an author and contemporary historian