

Literary Travels in England, Scotland, and Ireland

July 5- August 10, 2006

Part Two: Scotland

Glasgow

We left Windermere by train the evening of July 20, crossed the border into Scotland, and arrived in Glasgow that same evening before nightfall. Glasgow wasn't planned as a literary destination, but rather as a convenient place for us to meet my husband Don, who was flying in the next morning, before heading north for a week in the Scottish Highlands. Compared to the small-scale charm and beauty of the Lake District, Glasgow is a busy, industrial city. Its monuments stand a bit grim and blackened by soot and pollution, and its public places marred by litter and graffiti.

Glasgow University



That said, Glasgow is also a very welcoming, friendly place with a world-class university, art museum, Gothic cathedral, and national monuments that attest to the Scots' love of poetry, art, science, and engineering. We stayed in an area called Kelvingrove (named for the river that flows through it), a short walk from Kelvingrove Gardens, Glasgow University, and the newly opened Kelvingrove Art Museum, which we explored the day after our arrival. The University Museum had a special exhibit dedicated to Lord Kelvin, the Glasgow physicist (who was also named for the river). Among his quotes, which were part of the exhibit, this one offered a glimpse into the Scottish mindset. It also struck me as a worthy philosophy for life:

“When you are face to face with a difficulty, you are up against a discovery.”

The great cathedral in Glasgow, St. Mungo's, has a dark, Gothic presence both inside and out. The interior is lit by low-wattage lights which mimic torchlight or candlelight, and amid the crypts and underground chambers, the cathedral felt more haunted than holy. Adding to the Gothic mood, behind the cathedral across a small bridge, rises the necropolis. We climbed to the top, winding up past monuments and mausoleums, the girls posing among the dead, and all the time



wondering whose tomb it was that so clearly dominated the summit. It turned out to be John Knox, founder of the Methodist revolution.

Though we'd been in Scotland less than 24 hours, already we could see that their independent, rebel spirit is what they aim to celebrate, whether that spirit found its expression in Romantic poetry and story of Scott and Burns, Protestant revolt against the Pope, or Catholic rebellion against Protestant British rule. And perhaps, having lost their war for independence, it was safer to build their monuments to honor religious figures like Knox or literary figures whose work prompted the spirited revival of Scottish folk history and language.

Knox dominates the necropolis, but the largest monument in Glasgow's town center of George Square is to Sir Walter Scott. In fact, everywhere we went in Scotland, if we found ourselves staring up at a tall, imposing monument or figure on a pedestal, it was invariably Scott looking down at us. It is hard to imagine a writer more beloved or one whose work is better known among his countrymen, except perhaps the poet Robert Burns.

George Square, Glasgow



Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum



Alloway, the Birthplace of Robert Burns



Burns Memorial and Gardens, Alloway

Before heading north to the Great Glen and the Scottish Highlands, we picked up a rental car and journeyed south of Glasgow, to the area called Ayrshire. There we visited the birthplace of the ploughman-poet Robert Burns. Ayrshire, coincidentally, is the area where my own Scottish ancestors lived—the Hillhouses.



Burns Memorial



Auld Kirk, Alloway

I had mistakenly imagined Burns as an elderly gentleman farmer, rather like Scott or Robert Frost, and so was surprised to learn that he died at 37—the youthful, handsome darling of Scottish and English society dames. (We would learn much about Burns’ legend here in Alloway, and more about his real-life escapades when we arrived in Edinburgh.)

Brig-o-Doon, Burns Memorial Garden



Two centuries after Burns’ untimely death, we arrived in Alloway, which was in the midst of bagpipe recitals and wreath-laying ceremonies to commemorate the anniversary. And as I strolled through the gardens that surround the Burns monument, I met the president of the Robert Burns Society, a tiny, white-haired gentleman with bright blue eyes there to officiate at the graveside ceremony that evening. He gestured toward the nearby bridge, asking me if I knew the story of the Brig-o-Doon. Then he recited the climactic scene from Burns’ poem “Tam O’Shanter” in which Tam’s mare, Meg, loses her tail in a desperate flight over the Brig-o-Doon (Bridge over the Doon River) to escape the seductive witch, Nannie.



Prior to arriving in Alloway, I knew only Burns' wee mousie, "Auld Lang Syne," and his red-red rose. Tam O'Shanter was only a kind of beret with a pom-pom on top. And Brig-o-Doon was the fictional name of a disappearing Scottish village that Gene Kelly wandered into.

At the gift shop at the Burns National Monument and Park, we were treated to the Tam O'Shanter Experience, a hokey, but generally fun audio-visual dramatization of the famous narrative poem in Scots dialect; we saw

the life-size statues of the poem's main characters in a chamber below the poet's monument; Caitlin and Annelisa danced in the auld kirk, the setting for the scene when Tam first sees Nannie at a witches' midnight frolic; walked in the gardens and rooms of the cottage where Burns was born; and visited the museum with paintings of Tam story, manuscripts, personal possessions, recordings of Burns' poems set to music, pocket editions of Burns' work. It didn't take long for all of us to gain an appreciation for how important Burns was and continues to be to the Scots—writing in the Scots dialect, and celebrating the humble life of the sheep and the plow. Though he died before the Romantic movement swept the British literary scene, he was the very model of the Romantic poet.

Burns said of his early inspirations, "My mother would sing... an old maid of my mother's had, I suppose, the largest collection on the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, contraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons.... This cultivated in me the latent seed of poetry."



Burn's brother, Gilbert, saw Robert stop his plowing at the moment he discovered the wee mousie that inspired the poem he later wrote, and commented "Holding a plough was a favorite situation with Robert for poetic composition."

Seeing the enormous esteem the Scots have for Burns, I can understand why Wordsworth felt so deeply honored when Burns' sons bestowed on him one of the portraits painted of Burns, and that Keats felt moved to include Alloway on his pilgrimage north from the Lake District to the Scottish Highlands. Little wonder also that Burns, like Scott, appears in so many paintings and statues, as well as on the Scottish pound notes. My sister purchased a CD of a Scottish folk singer's arrangements of Bobby Burns' poems, and we listened to this as we made our journey north into the highlands.

The Scottish Highlands, Loch Ness, and the Falls of Foyer

Levishie House, Invermoriston



After supper at a café called The Poet’s Corner across the street from Burns’ cottage, we headed back to Glasgow and north toward the highlands, Scott and Stevenson country, according to my literary map, and Jacobite country. Our route took us along the shores of Loch Lomond, through Glen Coe (setting for the film *Braveheart*) and along the feet of the towering Ben Nevis, Scotland’s (and Britain’s) highest peak. Sir Walter Scott’s novel, on which the film was based, is likewise set here in the highlands, and his portrayal of the rebel hero did much to inspire the Jacobite movement, which was essentially an attempt to restore the

Stuart line and an independent Scottish monarchy.

Just as dusk was falling, we arrived in Fort William and the southern end of the Great Glen Way. Our destination was the little village of Invermoriston, halfway up the Great Glen on the banks of Loch Ness, where we had rented a country house for a week.

In the summer of 1818, John Keats had traveled this way, though back then the route would probably have taken him up the east side of Loch Ness, hiking from town to town, averaging about



twenty miles per day. His month-long

hike through the country is often perceived as preparation for his epic intentions of "Hyperion." He and many other writers of his day had found the landscape of the highlands inspiring. Burns and Samuel Johnson wrote of their visits to the Falls of Foyers that spill into Loch Ness. William Wordsworth also journeyed here with his sister Dorothy, who kept a journal of their travels in the highlands. Coleridge kept them company for a time, and while in the country, the Wordsworth brother and sister also paid a visit to Sir Walter Scott.

One of my favorite Wordsworth poems was based on an experience the poet had in the Scottish Highlands of hearing a country girl singing at her work in the fields. The poem inspired several of Keats’, and was possibly the inspiration for

Coleridge’s “damsel with a dulcimer” from “Kublai Khan.”

Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness at Drumnadrochit



The Solitary Reaper

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,

Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.
Will no one tell me what she sings?--
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;--
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.



Cawdor Castle

On the day my daughter Allison was scheduled to arrive at Inverness Airport, we made a visit to Cawdor Castle. It is west of Inverness, not far from the Battlefield of Culloden where the Scottish rebellion met its bloody end. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was given a castle here for his deeds in battle, and in that play, it is at Cawdor that the thane and his wife murder the old king. It has been restored, like many castles in Scotland, and is now a tourist destination. Because *Macbeth* is Don's favorite play, and one he teaches every year, we got a picture of him and Allison at Cawdor gardens with the castle behind him. We spent our time there picnicking and hiking a little in the "Rooky Woods," not so ominous or foreboding under the blue July skies as in *Macbeth*'s famous speech.

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

From *Macbeth*, Act II, scene ii



Inverness is the chief city in the highlands, where the River Ness empties into the Moray Firth. But as our goal was primarily to see the landscape of the area, we chose a long ramble in the woods and walks along the banks of the Ness. There are several small islands connected by footbridges and paths with playgrounds and an outdoor theater, and the view down the river to the city itself is very picturesque.

Pictured below is the River Ness and one of several footbridges that span the water. In the background is the edge of the city of Inverness. The photo was taken during our afternoon walk on the River Islands trails.

River Ness looking toward Inverness



The Highland Glens and the Isle of Skye

So far north in the highlands, the days are long this time of the summer. Under clear skies, it was fully light by 4 AM, and the daylight stretched on till nearly 11:00 PM. It was never dark enough to see stars. One morning we awoke to thunder rolling up and down Glen Morriston, accompanied by pale flashes of lightning and downpours of rain. But by 7:00 when the household began to stir, the storm had passed, leaving clear skies, the river singing loudly, and woodlands steaming with warm mist rising.

That morning, we packed a lunch and headed to Drumnadrochit, the town halfway up the Great Glen Way which comes closest to being the home of the Loch Ness Monster. She has two exhibits here, and this is where one comes to book a cruise on the Loch. It's a charming village, if you can set aside the stuffed Nessies at every turn. We'd driven through the town several times already on our way to Inverness, and on the evening Allison arrived, we had taken a boat ride on the Loch. Our guide was full of Scottish history and lore. It was from him that we learned there are more speakers of Scottish Gaelic in Nova Scotia than in all of Scotland. He also explained the meaning of Jacobite, which we saw everywhere we went in the highlands, even in its commercial derivations: a bicycle rental shop called Jac-o-bike, and a fast-food establishment called Jac-o-bite. "Jacob" is Latin for James, and the clans which remained loyal to the Stuart line



hoped to see a restoration of the descendents of James Stuart on the throne of Scotland.

On this morning, we had planned a hike into the hills behind Drumnadrochit to Glen Affric, which holds one of the last remaining stands of primeval woods in Scotland. The woods were still steamy from the morning rain. There we found blueberries, wild roses, thyme, clover, and every variety of mountain heather. The river Affric, like all the inland waters in Scotland, runs icy and smoky-gold (whisky-colored, the guidebooks say) from the peat in the surrounding landscape, which also makes the ground springy underfoot. Under summer skies, the dark waters mirror the deep blue overhead, as pictured here in the view west down the glen toward the high peaks of Glen Sheil, and in the deeper distance, the mountains of the Isle of Skye.

After the disastrous battle of Culloden, when the Scottish war for independence was lost, the Stuart heir, Bonnie Prince Charlie, went into hiding in the highlands, and they say what was left of his loyal clansmen stayed for a time here in Glen Affric.

“Affric” is a Pictish/Gaelic word for the river goddess or water goddess. It is also translated as “dappled ford.” So different is the written language from the spoken one, it’s difficult to trace word origins and various interpretations are possible. I chose to believe that “Affric” refers to the spirit of this ancient woods with its sapphire water deep at its heart.

Glen Sheil between Invermoriston and Skye



The highway from Invermoriston, located on the shores of Loch Ness, to the Isle of Skye on the western coast runs through Glen Moriston and Glen Sheil, pictured above. In the high country, what appears at first as rocky peaks with a thin summer grass reveals itself at closer look to be a rich carpet of clovers, heathers, meadowsweet, buttercups, bog cotton, wild orchids, and scotch broom. Since visiting the countryside outside of London, I had been noticing the local wildflowers, and after arriving in Scotland, I had taken to using my pocket Bobby Burns poetry book to press the ones I found on our day trips and hikes, and pasting them into my journal at night, when I would search a wildflower field guide for their names.

One of the most common wildflowers, both in England and in Scotland, is a tall stalk with small lavender flowers. It is especially prolific along the roads and train tracks, and looks like a purple version of the plant I know as “fireweed.” On one of my daily walks from Levishie House to Invermoriston, I picked a sample, and then asked the grocer in the village if she knew the name. “London Pride,” she said, and told me that the flower was the first thing to grow in the bombed

out buildings of the blitzkrieg of World War II, filling the blackened ruins with new life and brilliant color, which is how it got its name. “But we’re in Scotland,” I noted, *sotto voce*. “There must be a Scottish name for it.” She smiled and nodded. “We call it Rosebay Willowherb.” When I looked it up, the field guide noted a tendency for the plant to grow in areas devastated by fire, confirming the grocer’s story, and perhaps explaining how its pinker California relative came to be called “fireweed.”

Since the Scottish Highlands are not readily accessible by train, it quickly became apparent that our choice of a rental car was the ideal way of accessing the landscape and avoiding the tourist traffic, which is confined to the one highway along the western shore of Loch Ness. We drove up into the glens and out to the coast twice during our week, the first time in search of a tartan-weaving factory on the banks of Loch Carron, and the second time en-route to Skye.



View of the Isle of Skye and three different types of heather.

Village of Plocton near Loch Carron



The tartan-weaving factory turned out to be a challenge to locate. We ended up on a single-track road that didn’t even appear on our detailed highland map. Off the main highways, most of the roads are “single track,” meaning one-way-at-a-time, wide enough to accommodate only one car. Every 1/8 mile or so, there is a turn-out so that one car can pull over to let the other pass. The single track roads and the disorientation of driving on the left require vigilance. Still, to see the country, renting a car is a must, and well-worth the extra effort. Off the side of the side road, we found a local dairy where

we stopped to sample the cheese and cranachan, a cheesecake-like dessert served with raspberries and oatcakes. We also accidentally ended up in a charming village called Plocton where we were surprised to find palm trees growing along the harbor and on the islands that dot the fishing bay. We did eventually make it to the village of Lochcarron where we witnessed the tartan weavers at work on their looms, and tried on the wool kilts, ties, and sweaters for sale.

The coast of Scotland is sculpted by deep lochs which open to the sea. Three of these lochs come together at the seaport called Kyle of Lochalsh and the nearby Eilean Donan Castle. The Skye Bridge now crosses the straits of Lochalsh and takes you across to what the Vikings called Cloud Island (“Skye” being the Nordic word for cloud).

Eilean Donan Castle



Above the village of Elgol on the Isle of Skye



On a day when Caitlin and Annelisa chose to stay in Invermoriston, Allison, Annie, Don and I headed out to Skye. Once over Skye Bridge and onto the island, we approached the town of Broadford, then took a narrow road south past Ben Blaven, a high, rugged cliff face sculpted by glaciers, and across a peninsula between two narrow lochs. The road seemed about as remote as any we’d traveled, but when we came to the end, we found ourselves in a traffic jam. The final point of land, the village of Elgol is also the boat launch for tourist boats and the regular travelers from the mainland to the residential islands off the coast. Every twenty minutes or so, a boatload would arrive and the travelers would board a blue bus which would take them down the road back to Broadford. Meanwhile, those townsfolk disembarking from the bus would fill the boat, and off it would chug into the glassy waters of the loch. Here we climbed the bluff above the boat launch and picnicked with the local cows. Later, in the hills above a tiny fishing village and an old cemetery, we hiked through a woods reported to hold the ruins of a haunted village, left behind when the local landlords cleared out the tenant farmers to bring in sheep and cattle. Somewhere in these hills is an ancient standing stone circle as well. The woods and becks were lovely, but we never found the haunted village or the standing stones.



Harry Potter links to Scotland

Admittedly not in the same league with Shakespeare, Scott, Wordsworth, Keats, or Coleridge, J.K. Rowling and her *Harry Potter* series have been a source of summer reading and entertainment for our family for many years. We had noted in Oxford and in the Village of Lacock in England the halls, dungeons, and cottage used to create the interior settings for Hogwart's School and Harry's childhood home.



Jacobite Steam Train

Loch Morar



On our final day in the Highlands, we took an outing to Fort William to ride the Jacobite Steam Train out to the coastal village of Mallaig—an 84-mile ride, described as one of the great classic railway journeys of the world. It is also the train used in the filming of *Harry Potter*, most dramatically as the train crosses the stone viaduct at Glenfinnan. The landscape around Loch Morar was also used as part of the outdoor setting for Hogwarts. The train ride is so popular, especially in summer, that most of the seats are reserved months in

advance. But a few are held aside for same-day sale, and if you arrive to the Fort William train station before 9:00 am, you can sometimes get a seat. Traveling as a family, we were able to claim a six-seat carriage, with a sliding door to close us off from the walking passage, and travel just like Harry, Hermione, and Ron. No dementors bothered us, but Annelisa did take the precaution of sipping hot chocolate enroute.

Glenfinnan Viaduct



Allison and Annelisa in Mallaig



Edinburgh

After a week in the highlands, we turned again south to the capital of Edinburgh, a city with a long literary heritage, and still at the cutting edge of music, art, literature, and theater. My sister and I traveled by train from Inverness, and Don and our three daughters followed in the rental car. We met up at our guest house, appropriately called The Braveheart, not far from the public gardens that you see pictured here at the foot of Edinburgh Castle.

The center of Edinburgh is a volcanic rise that slants down for a mile from the castle at one end to Holyrood Abbey and Palace at the other. Along this mile is an unexpected cultural mix of tourist attractions, the historic castle and the Scottish crown jewels, the National Museum, the Writers' Museum, and an assortment of pubs and cafes. The University of Edinburgh is here, too, along with student dorms, tucked among the various "closes," or courtyards, that branch off the Royal Mile.



From the park beside Holyrood Palace rises another summit, once the hunting ground of the royal family. It is called Salisbury Crag and Arthur's Seat, and the day we hiked the bluffs for the spectacular view, the hilltop trails were full of visitors, despite the rigorous climb.

Among the cafes just off the Royal Mile is the one pictured here, the Elephant House Café (Edinburgh Castle can be seen through the window behind us). This café calls itself the birthplace of Harry Potter

(the book) since its author, J.K. Rowling, penned the first few chapters here.

Edinburgh was gearing up for its two-week music and theater festival, the alternative Fringe Festival, and the Tattoo—a marching pipe and drum competition among Scottish clans and groups from all over the world. We could feel the city bracing for the onslaught of tourists and guests, but while we were there, we walked the streets of Edinburgh in the calm before the storm.

One of the largest monuments in Edinburgh is, naturally, dedicated to Sir Walter Scott. And in the small Writers' Museum in the Lady Stair Close,



Princes Park below Edinburgh Castle



along the Royal Mile, we also found manuscripts and personal artifacts that brought Scott to life for us. The other two writers Edinburgh claims are Robert Burns (who lived at least two years here) and Robert Louis Stevenson.

The Writers' Museum in Lady Stair Close

One evening we took a literary pub crawl of the city, starting in the area known as the Haymarket, which is where the coaches used to arrive in the old days, where the stables were located, and where the wildest pubs still provide much of the local entertainment. Our two guides were both actors, one playing the part of the more pedestrian pub aficionado, who believed the literary figures of Edinburgh achieved greatness because of their down-to-earth love of the common folk and a good brew. The other actor took on the role of literary scholar, representing the upper-class, more gentrified view of literature as springing from the higher aspirations of the human spirit. The presentation took the form of a friendly argument, punctuated by recitations of Burns's and Scott's poetry and excerpts from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll* (pronounced Jee-kuhl) and *Mr. Hyde*.



One of our stops was to Lady Stair Close, which, besides housing the Writers' Museum, also provides the back-entrance to Deacon Brodie's Pub, pictured here. Deacon Brodie was a man of the cloth and a public official who, by night, enjoyed the life of a burglar. He was eventually arrested and, ironically, hung on the very gallows he had designed. It is said this real life case of double-identity was the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's famous story of the respectable doctor and his lecherous and murderous shadow.

Our guides pointed out that Edinburgh itself, with its rowdy life in the old town at the foot of the Royal Mile and its more elegant 18th Century Georgian "new city" built to the north of the old town, may have been just as much the inspiration for the kind of split personality of Dr. Jekyll. Our pub crawl continued along the Royal Mile, and then descended across the bridge and the Princes Park over to the Georgian "new town," where we were shown the houses and upper-scale pubs that hosted the literary salons of the more genteel Edinburgh society.

Stevenson wrote his famous story in the course of one week, but admitted he had spent years prior to that considering the conflicting aspects of the personality, his own included. As a student at Edinburgh University, Stevenson adopted a wide-brimmed hat, a cravat, and a boy's coat that earned him the nick-name of Velvet Jacket, while he indulged a taste for haunting the byways of Old Town and becoming acquainted with its denizens. Whatever the source, Stevenson clearly tapped a nerve with his portrayal of the dark side of human nature, and though he set his story in

London, not Edinburgh, the dark alleys and the winding closes described in Mr. Hyde's drunken wandering more accurately depicts his home town. The resemblances weren't lost on the Edinburghers of his day.



In the Writers' Museum, I came upon a review of Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by the journalist J.A. Symonds: "You see I am trembling under the magician's wand of your fancy, and reveling against it with the scorn of a soul that hates to be contaminated with the mere picture of victorious evil." Stevenson was certainly reacting to the morbidity of his religious education and to the stiffness of his family's middle-class values. He never apologized for unmasking the seedier side of Victorian society, but he did find it increasingly difficult to live such a duplicitous life.

He eventually left Edinburgh for travels abroad, first in France where he met Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, a married woman, an American, and ten years Stevenson's senior. Fanny eventually divorced her husband, and Stevenson traveled to American where she had moved. Stevenson had always been frail and prone to illness, and his trip across the country by train from New York to Monterey nearly killed him. Once he did recuperate, he and Fanny were married in San Francisco. They spent some time living on Mt. St. Helena in Sonoma County, where one can still visit what remains of their little cabin in Robert Louis Stevenson State Park. They continued to travel, living in the South Seas, mostly in Tahiti and the Hawaiian Islands. Stevenson died in Samoa of a stroke at the age of 44.

The Writers' Museum and the Literary Pub Crawl were two terrific ways to experience Edinburgh's literary history. But in a quieter and equally inspiring way, I appreciated the plaques set into the pavement outside the museum in the Lady Stair Close. Here are some of those:

"Weird hou men
Maun eye be makin war
Instead o things they need."
—Tom Scott (1918-1995)

"And yet—
and yet, this New Road
will some day
be the Old Road, too."
—Neil Munro (1863-1930)

"Knowledge is high in the head . . .
but the salmon of wisdom swims deep."
—Neil Gunn (1891-1973)

