

# "LOOKING FOR LALLYBROCH"

(un-edited version)

## Jean Brittain looks at the effects of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* novels on Scotland

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It is a sign of authors' success when folks look for places they only know from novels. Rosslyn Chapel, Tolbooth Prison, Greyfriars Kirkyard and the ports of Para Handy have been host to 'literary tourists' for many a year. Even the back room of Edinburgh's Oxford Bar has risen to fame as Rebus's pub in the books of Ian Rankin.

Historical novelist Diana Gabaldon invented a home for the Fraser clan and called it 'Lallybroch'. The place has no more substance than the ethereal Brigadoon, yet readers come to Scotland hoping for a magical glimpse of its likeness. Homage is given at Culloden's Fraser stone by visitors whose only bond with the clan is the compassion stirred in them by Diana's *Outlander* series. Such is the worldwide phenomenon of Diana's writing that her readers now fly to Scotland to see Culloden for themselves, to tread in the footsteps of the fictional characters and to lament the true casualties of that battle.

"I was lucky enough to see Diana at the Fergus Highland Games in Canada in 2007, and I would say she was one of the main attractions for visitors," said Lord Sempill, who has invited Diana to next month's Homecoming Gathering. "As she gave talks and signed copies of her books, I could see the amazing rapport she has with her readership."

I asked the author what her own feelings were the first time she stood on the real Drumossie Moor.

"It's a silent place, Drumossie. Even on the busiest, most tourist-packed day of summer, the silence of it will break your heart," said Diana. "My husband and I went through the Visitors Centre (the old one), then out onto the field, and walked the whole of it, barely speaking. On the way back, we stopped and sat on a bench near the clan gravestones for a bit, just contemplating them. After a bit, my husband said to me, 'So... where's Murtagh buried?' (Murtagh being one of the characters from the books, who died during the battle at Culloden.) 'Over there,' I said, nodding at the Fraser clan-stone. He sat in silence for a minute, then said, 'I can't believe I'm getting all choked up over somebody who doesn't even exist!' To which I replied, 'No – but there are a lot of men who did – and *they're* over there.' "

The couple returned nearly twenty years later, this time by personal invitation of the National Trust of Scotland for the dedication of the new Visitors Centre. "It's a remarkable accomplishment," Diana told me, "One of the most moving and evocative museum presentations I've ever seen."

Several Scottish and American companies now run tours specifically designed for *Outlander* fans in the homeland of the books' hero Jamie Fraser.

"This is great for Culloden," said Deirdre Smyth, Manager of the Battlefield & Visitor Centre. "The books have helped spark an interest in this period of history and many have

visited the centre through having read the books," which she said are "bestsellers in Culloden shop."

"I'm very flattered that the books should have aroused so much interest," the author replied when asked how it felt to be the core reason for such trips, "And very humbly pleased that they've perhaps brought a fresh interest in the history of the Rising and its aftermath."

The tour guides tell of the wide-ranging effects that the *Outlander* novels are having well beyond Drumossie.

"The series has been very instrumental in awakening a curiosity about Scotland," Judy Lowstuter told me, from Celtic Journeys in Virginia. "Because of Diana's rich tapestry of Scottish history, fantasy, and reality, guests are in love with Scotland before the plane leaves the runway. They come to walk the path of the characters, to see and feel the history, to meet these strong and resilient people who have survived for centuries in the face of unfathomable adversity. Every traveller comes home with a deep sense of connection with Scotland, one that has transformed from the fictional Jamie to the reality of the country's beauty, warm and kind people, and dramatic history."

"Tourists who would not otherwise come to Scotland are coming because they have read the books," said Alastair Cunningham of Scottish Clans & Castles Tours, based in Nairn. Alastair's 'Diana Gabaldon Tour' takes guests to places such as Castle Leod, Strathglass, the Great Caledonian Pine Forest, and to a Fraser gravestone pock-marked by bullets in the years following Culloden.

Partly inspired by the *Outlander* novels, Samantha MacKenzie came to Scotland and married her own Highlander, Scot AnSgeulaiche. The couple now host the 'Jamie and Claire Tour' for other fans. Samantha said Diana's books have "made people into amateur geographers of the country, looking for the factual places amongst the fictional. Tourism is opening up in normally well hidden or ignored places. People are spending their time and money in these small places, which helps to sustain the permanent residents of those areas. I actively promote that. And it's not just Scottish descendants. Clients who do not have an ounce of Scots blood in them are dreaming of and planning their 'Outlandish' adventures."

A top request from their guests is Scot's traditional Highland storytelling, bringing alive the tales of silkies, clans, legends and place-myths. "I use a number of excerpts borrowed from historical fiction authors to illustrate things on my tours," said Scot. "As a historian, I have a great respect for the contribution that fiction writers make to understanding history."

Another happy by-product of Diana's writing is the upsurge of attention received by the Gaelic language. Alastair Cunningham told me he has certainly seen an increased interest in Gaelic because of the series. Diana has been helped with her translations over the years by brothers Iain and Hamish Taylor, native speakers from the isle of Harris, and now by Catherine-Ann McPhee, the noted Gaidhlig singer from Barra.

Hearing and learning Gaelic is in high demand by guests of Samantha and Scot. "Considering that Diana doesn't speak Gàidhlig, she has managed to bring our language alive to readers who don't speak it, in ways Communn nan Gaidheal [The Gaelic Board] would be proud of," said Scot, who already helps learners around the world. By making available some of the more difficult words used by Diana's characters, he hopes for a "greater use of Gàidhlig language in English and American fiction in the future."

Judy Lowstuter, who has been running her *Outlander* tours for five years, offered some poignant tales of the power of the pen.

An octogenarian from California came on a tour and was able to visit his cousin in a nursing home in Inverness. A lady from Idaho, recently widowed, had found an escape in

Diana's books and made the trip with her daughter. A year later she was determined to return to her beloved Scotland and Culloden Battlefield, although this visit had to be made in a motorised wheelchair. She died in Elgin that week.

Another of Judy's guests said the books "don't only give you a visual concept but an emotional one as well – a feeling of why the Scots fought for their country as well as a way of life." Seeing the Celtic Journeys display at a festival finally prompted Joan Watkins to make the journey to her ancestors' country with people she'd never met – "We were strangers with a common interest in a book," she said.

There is now talk of Hollywood making an *Outlander* movie.

"Staff at Culloden would not be surprised if a movie was in the offing," Deirdre Smyth commented. "Movies bring new subjects to people and I'm sure a film would bring a whole new audience to our Jacobite history."

Lord Sempill said, "When the film *Braveheart* hit the big screen, it had a huge impact, increasing attendance at Highland Games and interest in the clans and Diana's books have had a similar effect in stimulating people's imagination."

The screenplay has been written by Randall Wallace, the man who wrote *Braveheart*. As epic a film as that was, folks might worry that Scottish history will be similarly re-invented.

"Bring it on!" said Alastair Cunningham. "I don't think our heritage was irretrievably undermined by Mel Gibson as a painted Pict in the 13th century. The present Culloden Battlefield Exhibition will always be there to correct the worst of the myths."

I asked Diana if she hoped the moviemakers would stay true to the historical facts. "Fat chance," she replied. "Historical accuracy simply isn't a matter of concern to moviemakers. That's not what they're about. They see their job not primarily as entertainment, but *solely* as entertainment. As one of my agents said to me, the first time we were offered a film option, 'If you care what they do to your book—don't sell it to them'. That said, there are certainly film-makers who are more inclined toward fidelity toward the original work, and those who merely want the rights to a book because it's a bestseller; they don't care what the original story (let alone the history behind it) is, because they intend to write their own. That's why we've been extremely careful, over the years, in our dealings with film people.

"We get a *lot* of inquiries about the option rights to the books, but have actually sold an option only four times.

"At the moment, we do have an option in effect with a production company called Essential Entertainment. We (my agent and I) like these people, and think they both appreciate and respect the book—but that doesn't mean the eventual film would necessarily be either faithful to the book or very accurate in terms of historical fact. They'll do what they think they need to, to make a good (well, profitable; the terms aren't necessarily synonymous) movie. But we'll keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best."

If the film is made, the author will become the Dan Brown of Rosslyn Chapel or the J K Rowling of the Glenfinnan Viaduct. How would that feel?

"I try not to imagine it", said Diana, "Because the fact is that—in spite of the fact that I will have virtually nothing to say about either the script or the casting of a film (the production people do politely ask my opinion now and then, but they aren't legally obliged to pay attention to it)—many people will assume that I have complete control over everything, and will complain vociferously about 'How could you let them *do that*?!'"

A century hence, the works of contemporary Scottish authors such as Rankin and Rowling will be part of Scottish history. Diana Gabaldon, now an honorary Scot by invitation, is bound to join them. I asked her how that felt.

"Awesome," she said, "In the original sense of that word. Though if I get a monument on the Royal Mile, I hope they will have solved the pigeon problem by then."

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