

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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## Diary

### DATA PROTECTION ACT

**Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.**

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**The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.**

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# THE SCPSW AUTHOR

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## **Editorial**

Paul Williams

For those who are interested, the Society is now on Facebook and there is a direct link from our webpage. It will raise our profile if as many people as possible can ‘like’ the society. If you don’t know what this means I’m sure your grandchildren will be able to explain it to you! Most other societies like ours seem to have a presence on Facebook and some engage in quite lively discussion.

Hitherto I was never much into Facebook, and I haven’t yet ventured onto Twitter, but something I have noticed is that even the most successful writers seem to make use of them and online literary groups, as (almost certainly) do the younger up-and-coming writers we need to attract if we are to survive and prosper. This ties in with Julian Fellowes’s observations as reported by Ethel Corduff in her Market Profile in this edition. Successful writers know that they have to go down into the marketplace, though one complication is that the marketplace is in a different location from where it used to be. Although some people (and not only older ones) are nervous of the Internet, it actually offers a lifeline as infirmity and reduced mobility encroach. This is especially so for writers and others with lively minds.

I do hope as many members as possible can attend the literary luncheon on 19 October. In a society like ours it is important to have such get-togethers from time to time, if only to assure ourselves that other members really exist!

## **Chairman’s Chat**

Terry Rickson

I began jotting down notes for this ‘Chat’ one evening a few days ago. It was very hot and I thought a glass of chilled white wine might help but I must have nodded off at some stage, so it’s a case of starting again.

I was pleased to read that Paul Williams, the editor, had received comments about putting *The Author* online. This is helpful, and thank you. Thanks also to those who have sent their email addresses to the Membership Secretary, Mike Smith, and to Ethel Corduff. This will help her keep as many members as possible informed of any late items of interest.

The Poetry Workshop met this year at Launde Abbey near Oakham, Rutland, for the annual Workshop weekend. The programme presented members with a wide variety of subjects to read, ‘workshop’ and discuss, not to mention a competition and a poetry slam – writing ‘on the hoof’, an exercise that concentrates the mind! Plenty of light-hearted moments plus, of course, the well-established Saturday evening quiz. I’d like to encourage more PW members to consider attending the ‘Weekend’, as I’m sure they would find it pleasant and rewarding.

At this time of year the Sunday Supplements are recommending ‘books for the beach’ or anywhere else for that matter. A wide variety I’ve noticed this year, from Authors such as Sarah Dunant, Stephen King, Hilary Mantel, ‘Robert Galbraith’ (of course!) to the brilliant Prof Mary Beard. One that caught my eye (first in a series of murder mysteries for under eevens!) Mondays Are Murder by Tanya Landman, set on a Scottish Island. Keep the bedroom door locked, parents and grandparents too!

I enjoyed reading Patricia Risen’s prize-winning story, *The Gift*, in the summer edition of *The Author*. I still have my very old teddy bear, who now sits in quiet retirement on a shelf in the bedroom, much loved in turn by my children and grandchildren.

I trust members have spent an enjoyable summer and that the coming autumn days will be rewarded with plenty of good writing.

### **Letter to the Editor**

Dear Paul,

I read the 2013 summer issue with interest and some concern. First let me congratulate Patricia Risen on wining the Lewis Wright Competition with her touching family story, *The Gift*.

So back-issues of *Author* can now be found on-line, and every Tom, Dick and Harriet from Timbuktu to Spitzbergen can look at our offerings. For me the trouble is, so can all the other publishers and competitions which I might be slipping my gems to in addition to *Author*. Some competitions and magazines will accept previously published work. Others will not. So now the cat is out of the bag, closing possible avenues of sales. Does anyone-else feel this way?

Speaking in generalities, a member commented to me that some articles in *Author* seem to be more of the nature of memoirs, rather than dealing with specific issues, events, or themes. I too had noticed this trend, and for my part I will in future try to make my articles relevant and to the point, rather than “look at me!” in style. An exception of course, is a personal experience or adventure, which is just that—personal.

Turning to the specific, can anyone explain to poor, simple me, just what is the point of the stories *Little Crystal Balls* and *The Man*? I am not being funny, just curious.

Over six decades ago I was an avid reader and collector of science fiction and fantasy magazines. I make no apology for this, since many of the stories therein were well written, cleverly themed, and often relevant to contemporary and social issues, a lot of which are still with us today, and, importantly, furnished welcome escapism for millions whose lives were humdrum and limited. A leading feature of several pulps was the readers’ letter section. These were always lively and relevant, with an abundance of views on authors and the stories.

I would very much like to see a letters section in *Author*. Space could be made by following the practice of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Planet Stories*. The stories section had seven hundred words per page, whereas the letters section, in smaller type, had seventeen hundred, which made for a very careful scrutiny of the physically smaller content.

I always read Ethel Corduff’s excellent Market Profile. Following her advice, I skimmed through an issue of *Yours* in a newsagent’s shop. What had me hanging on the ropes, mewling and feebly pawing the air, was the concluding statement, “All successful submissions are accepted on an All Rights basis that gives Bauer media exclusive copyright.”

In the days when I fleetingly penetrated the pro science fiction market, there were two dictums for authors. One was, never pay to have your work published. I have supplied detail to Ethel Corduff of a recent experience of mine, which I hope she may comment on. The other was, never relinquish copyright. Once you have done that, not only have you lost control but you forfeit all right to revenue from future sales. Publishers who buy all rights are preying on the anxiety of beginner authors to see their work in print. Just imagine how you will

feel if your work is a masterpiece; after all, someone has to write them, and you have forfeited all rights to colossal fees. It has happened on several occasions... My understanding is that ethical publishers will buy first publishing rights, or rights for one year, after which copyright is returned to the author. Of course, you may feel you have little chance of further sales, so you may as well submit to Bauer's tyranny. Those are my views, anyway.

Douglas Fulthorpe

Editor's Note. Most agents and publishers now look online for new talent, so it was considered a bonus (if very optimistic) to have back numbers available on the website. I would hope that members would see publication here as something to aspire to in itself and would not want our potential readership restricted. Now that we have a Facebook page there is another forum for more direct discussion, but letters to the Editor are always welcome. I would ask that they be as brief and succinct as possible.

### ***Trout Rising* by Mike Boland**

**Mike Boland** has published a new collection of poetry, *Trout Rising* (ISBN 978-1-78299-525-8). The collection contains 40 pages of poems, some long, some short, on a variety of subjects, linked together using the theme of the nature of time and its relationship to both nature and humanity. Copies are available, price £3.49 (ex p&p), either online from the publisher, FeedARead Publishing, through their website [www.feedaread.com](http://www.feedaread.com), or directly from Mike himself. The latter is the cheaper option, as Mike's postage costs are a lot less than the publisher charges!

### **Book Review: *The Best Medicine* by Vivian ('Georgie') Edwards**

Adrian Danson

It is always a pleasure to read the published work of one of our members and "Georgie" has been a member longer than most. However her recently published book was one of the most enjoyable that I have ever read.

If asked to name the most memorable books I have ever read these would include *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley, *Swallows and Amazons* by Arthur Ransom, *Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* by Eric Newby and *Moscow Tram*

*Stop* by Dr H Haape. To this list I must now add Georgie's entertaining and inspiring book.

Her book records the chauvinist attitude that prevailed in the world of medicine in the 1950s, how she was accepted into nursing but, on passing her SRN with flying colours and some fascinating experiences along the way, her desire to become a doctor was largely met with suggestions that she should go home and have babies and the like. Not only did her refusal to accept such advice succeed, but her perseverance resulted in entry into the very prestigious St Bartholomew's Hospital, where a string of further challenges are related to entertain readers of this delightful book.

I heartily recommend this book to all fellow members of our society, regardless of whether or not you have any interest in medicine, as a book of literary merit and inspiration.

(Ebury Press, ISBN 978-0-09-195136-8)

### **Literary Luncheon 2013**

The Society's annual literary luncheon will take place in the Civil Service Club, Great Scotland Yard, on Saturday 19 October 2013 at 1pm. Price £26 for three courses and coffee. A flyer is enclosed which should be returned, with payment, to Ethel Corduff. Please fill in your menu choices. Many of those attending traditionally meet for an aperitif in the bar at around 12.30. The guest speaker has not yet been finalised.

### **Children's Short Story Competition. Closing Date 31 October 2013**

The closing date for the annual Children's Short Story Competition is 31 October. This competition is open to both members and non-members of the SCPSW. Entrants may submit a story of up to 2,000 words. Please state the age range of the children it is intended for (there are not separate categories, the age of the children is requested so that the judges can assess how well the story has been written for its target audience).

The first prize is £75, second prize of £40. The winning story will be published in *The Author*, and the second prize may also be published in a future edition.

The entrance fee is £5 for non-members, £3 for members. New entrants who join the Society at the time of the competition will be eligible for a reduction of £2. Cheques should be made out to SCPSW.

There is no entry form. Stories should be typed on A4 paper, single sided. Only the pen name, word count and page numbers should appear on the manuscript. A covering sheet giving real name, address and pen name should be included, plus SAE for return of manuscripts. Entries should be sent to Nina Mattar, Competitions Secretary, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, SM2 6RT.

## **Market Profile**

Ethel Corduff

What have *Downton Abbey* and Winchester in common? Yes, they are both historical places, but that is not the reason. *Downton Abbey* is a hugely successful TV Drama watched by millions all over the world. Its award winning creator, Lord Julian Kitchener-Fellowes, actor, novelist, film director and writer, and his wife, Lady Emma, *Downton Abbey*'s story editor, gave the preliminary talk at the opening of the Winchester Writers' Conference in June. Julian's niece, Jessica Fellowes, journalist, author and public speaker, crowned it by giving the after dinner speech the following evening. She has written a television companion book and she described how she has to find the entertaining narrative in a jumble of research facts, all the time researching, interviewing and working closely with designers and producers.

Julian said that in his early days he was so determined to further his career that every twenty four hours he would arrange at least one thing to that end, such a phone call or a meeting. His film career grew in tandem with his acting. He won the Oscar for best screen play in 2002 for *Gosford Park*. He has also written two best sellers, *Snobs* and *Past Imperfect*. He advises us to further our writing by making notes, writing a few lines, researching, entering a



competition, or sending out a completed manuscript to a suitable magazine every day. With such determination there will eventually be some success, though it would be difficult to be as successful as the Fellowes family.

The Conference has been run for thirty-three years by Canadian-born academic Barbara Large, whose warm endearing personality brings together an eclectic mix of literary agents, publishers, editors and authors. It is a unique opportunity to have one-to-one interviews with several experts and get feedback on one's work, and if one is lucky it can lead to publication. I have attended the conference twice now, and was lucky to win the raffle for a free conference place next year.

There are also many workshops to attend. Self-publishing is being promoted now, especially if a book has got a specialist niche and the writer is prepared to spend time promoting it. I attended a talk by Veronica Heley, who has published about sixty books. She writes Clerical Crime novels and despite resisting it for some time, she has now had some of her books put into e-book sand has promoted them through social media. It will be increasingly the way forward, though I and many others like the book in our hand.

There was a huge emphasis on children's writing at the conference, though it is very competitive. Beverley Birch, a very experienced editor and author, did not have very cheerful news about the children's market which she said is changing all the time. Economics play a huge part in what is chosen for publication. Bookshops are struggling, and if books are not sold in six months they are sent back. Libraries, which have had many cutbacks, only take a few books instead of dozens as previously.

What sells now? No room for another Harry Potter or Vampire Diaries. An original new idea is needed. Reader wanting to have a go at children's writing could start with our children's short story competition, closing date 31st October. Details were in last *Author* or are on our website. Who knows what it might lead to?

## **Poetry Workshop Pages**

### **Bill Barnes Competition 2013**

Members of the Poetry Workshop should note that the closing date for this annual poetry competition (which is for **PW members only**) is **30 September**. Rules of Entry appeared in the summer issue of '*wavelengths*' and will be repeated in the new autumn issue. This year's competition is an Open one, i.e. any form or style of poetry, rhymed or unrhymed, is acceptable.

### **Poetry Workshop Weekend**

By the time this issue of '*The Author*' appears, the PW will have held its annual Weekend. The venue once again was Launde Abbey, Leicester and the vent took place over the weekend of 26-28 July. A report on the Weekend's activities will appear in a future issue of '*wavelengths*'. It is hoped that the autumn issue and subsequent numbers will include the text of talks given during the course of the Weekend.

### **Annual General Meeting**

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop was held during the Birmingham Weekend. The Minutes will appear in a future edition of '*wavelengths*'.

### **Waves 2013**

Details of this year's edition of the PW's anthology of member's work will be given in the current issue of '*wavelengths*'

### **Wavelengths #36**

The autumn issue of the Poetry Workshop's own magazine, free to all its members, is due out in September. Hopefully, it will include the text of one of the talks given at Birmingham, a report of the Weekend's activities plus the minutes of the AGM. It There will be poems by members of the Poetry Workshop, the Rules of the Bill Barnes Competition, and the PW Newsletter which gives full details of the group's coming events. There are four issues of "wavelengths" a year, each issue containing at least twenty pages. If you are not a member of the Poetry Workshop, you will not receive this lively magazine, so why not join the PW now?

## Poems

The Poetry Workshop provides its members with several outlets for their work. There is *'The Author'* of course, and the Poetry Pages edited by Terry James, which everyone is encouraged to support. Then there is *'wavelengths'* - poems to Mike Boland (a guide for contributors is given in each issue of the magazine), and *'Waves'*, our annual anthology. Rules for submitting poems to Waves 2013 will appear in the winter issue of "wavelengths".

## Membership

If you are interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. He will be pleased to provide you with further details.

The cost of membership is £7\* for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. Cheques or postal orders are acceptable, but **please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

\* cost of membership correct at time of submission, but may be subject to changes agreed at the AGM - watch this page and *'wavelengths'* for confirmation.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year - contributions of poems and articles on poetry are welcomed from PW members
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- access to the new e-folio
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend.

## **Dates to Remember**

- September 2013**      **publication of wavelengths # 36**  
**30 September 2013**   **closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes  
Competition 2013**
- 1 November 2013**    **deadline for wavelengths # 37**  
**December 2013**      **publication of wavelengths # 37**  
**1 January 2014**      **PW subscriptions due**

Until next time, best wishes from

*Mike Boland*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Poetry Pages**

### **Winter Soup**

Anne Grant

Let's make ourselves a pot of soup.  
Let's chop, chop, chop,  
let's drop, drop, drop,  
onions, carrots, turnips, leek,  
pulses and parsley,  
parsnips, chives,  
into our stockpot,  
plop, plop, dive.  
When soup is ready,  
warm white bowls,  
polish ladle,  
till it glows, pour and serve  
with bread and sticks  
(light)  
this rainswept  
chilly,  
wintry,  
night.

## **Daffodils**

AE Hobbs

When the Lenten lily starts to bloom,  
That's a daffodil to you and me,  
The golden glow in many a park or garden  
Is a cheerful sight to see.

Once hawked by flower girls,  
In a rather smelly London town,  
Daffs were an accessory  
On many a lady's gown.

Now we purchase from the florist,  
Our flowers all year round.  
Whilst during the winter months  
Daff bulbs sleep underground.

So, there could be a message here,  
The dark days will not last.  
We could look forward to a new beginning,  
Spent under skies not overcast.

## **State of the Art**

Norman Bissett

The room is gracious, spacious  
but I spend an hour or so  
with the remote for the TV  
attempting to locate the power.

Lighting involves a form of prestidigitation,  
manipulation of a snazzy hi-tech panel.  
Ditto the aircon and sophisticated room-safe,  
while to change the channel

requires a PhD in electronics.  
I'm in the cubicle before I realise  
the shower controls  
are from the Starship Enterprise.

I aim the snake and tentatively operate  
a cuboid, geodesic, louche,  
surrealistic, evolutionary tap that activates  
an unexpected, ice-cold, ceiling douche.

And what the hell  
Is body gel?  
Old-fashioned soap,  
I hope.

### **A Metroland Man**

Steve Glason

I sometimes work so very late  
In cramped conditions –Aldersgate  
My desk awash with dusty files  
Dreaming of those distant miles.

Oh Harrow – Pinner – Northwood Hills  
Homes – detached – for Jack and Jills  
A healthy life – fresh air so pure  
That little guidebook was the lure.

At weekends – our pace is slow  
Hedge to cut and lawn to mow  
Perhaps an outing – Austin car  
Chilterns are not very far.

On Sundays – wife prepares the lunch  
(I often choose a lovely bunch  
Her favourite flowers – when homeward bound  
By entrance to the Underground).

All over Europe – stormclouds brood  
To put us in a sombre mood  
Not another war – we pray  
Then that fateful autumn day.

And as the sirens – ‘All Clear’ – wail  
To foreign battle zones I sail  
Our idyll over – changed I fear  
As we fight another year.

## **Heavy Rain**

Nina Mattar

The heavy rain rattled our door and window, yet Herman sat by the fire silent.

Standing by the window, I watched his face, a passionate profile. Herman's black coat hung behind the door, his hat flung upon the chair.

Our room was large but sparsely furnished, wallpaper covered with pictures of large yellow daffodils, but the window was bare. Hence the outside world seemed to encroach upon our quiet life. The fire burnt in the grate, flames danced, glinted and glittered upon the walls and carpet, a ghost-like loitering, then it seemed to sway towards Herman, as he sat silent.

I linger in the background, the room seems to be full of recollections, then I seem to hear a voice calling, let us wander into our beautiful garden which is full of magnificent flowers, I have the key and can lead you. We can then search for the secret road that will lead us into the mystic garden.

Lo there is the path, it is lit with the pale light of the gardenia flowers, the fountain.

Echo of loud laughter, the trees engaged in a whispering dialogue and continuously waver in the breeze. I move closer to the window, the rain and wind still lash against the glass. The sky dark, and I can hear the thunder coming towards us.

The thunder and lightning lit the garden, flowers torn, leaves fell and the trees shudder in unison, again an echo of desperation. I turned from the window and walked towards the fire. The room was dark but warm.

Herman turned, stretched his arms up to the sky He seemed ignorant of what was happening, and with almost a note of defiance said: We have been waiting long enough.

Let us forget all, this is a turning point, and he began to sing our old love song.

## **Flora Botanica**

Terry Rickson

I am visiting a garden,  
the sort you are encouraged to visit  
by the NT and the RHS and that  
yellow-covered book which  
gives days and times of opening  
and whether teas are available.

It should be pleasant and it is, but  
I cannot escape, somehow, the company of two avid gardeners,  
who articulate their views and Linnaean knowledge  
in the accents of well-heeled Surrey.

I try the rose arbour, the sunken, rock  
and water gardens, to no avail!  
and now the herbaceous borders stretch  
ahead in rich and riotous colour.

Keeping a distance, I trail in their wake,  
bombarded by a stream of latinate particles  
like debris from the tail of botanical comet,  
whose perihelion is at the point of reaching its zenith.

“..... *campanula latifolia*, oh, and *cimifuga racemosa*.  
Have you tried them, dear? I’ve  
brought mine towards the front of the bed  
this year, set off against a border of *dianthus barbatus*.

I do think a warm south facing wall is right  
for *passiflora caerulea*, don’t you?  
Totty Marlow has trailed one over her gazebo;  
it’s created rather a smother in my opinion.

Robertson assures me the *fritillaria imperialis* will do well ....”

Bugger Robertson! They ought to have my problems!  
A rose arch that’s a picture; *convolvulus arvensis*  
competes vigorously with the ‘Paul’s Scarlet’ and  
a hundred suns shine up from the lawn in the  
Beaming faces of *taraxacum officinale*!



## **A Martian Tale**

Angus Livingstone

A pile of dung lay steaming  
at the back of a farmer's yard,  
and beside it stood three Martians,  
who looked at it real hard.

They were Captain Hakoof - the one in green,  
his first mate called Kwa-kwe-jez,  
and a short one, Zak, with yellow eyes  
and frayed a bit round the edges.

They sniffed, they peered and they prodded,  
with faces full of fears.  
Then they started speaking Martian  
which I hadn't heard for years.

"Karumf Karoo" the small one said,  
I remember that quite well.  
For I think karumf means awful,  
and of course Karoo means smell.

It seems to be what had happened:  
their engineer, Scottie Kashewal,  
had fallen in love with Zazig the maid  
and absconded with her and the fuel.

Now the rest of the crew were not techies,  
as Scottie said "They didn't know shit."  
Although that was quite true at the time,  
they knew now - they were looking at it!

But they knew the fuel they needed  
was hot and created much smoke,  
and guessed it must be similar  
to this pile they proceeded to poke.

So they found an empty wheelbarrow  
and replenished their fuel supplies.  
“Everything’s coming up roses” said Hakoof,  
“But where did we get all these flies?”

This Planetary Inner Galactic Spacecraft,  
Called PIGS for short by some,  
even with all hatches open  
still smelt like an elephants bum.

And so with the last of the PIGS real fuel,  
they took off at a gingerly rate,  
but had to crash-land just over the hill,  
and became part of a Barratt estate.

So if you argue with someone one day  
and they say, “Huh - Pigs might fly”,  
just say with a smile they won’t understand  
or the twinkle in your eye.

“It depends if Zazig has second thoughts,  
and Kashewal returns with the load,  
or failing that whether Hakoof and his crew  
can get manure to explode.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **The Silent Roar**

Lyn Potier

*(This story came second in the Lewis Wright Short Story Competition 2013)*

**T**he clattering dustbin woke Frank with a start. For a moment or two, his sleep-fuddled brain couldn’t grasp what was going on. Then he remembered. Those damned cats were out there again — only this time he was ready for them.

He threw open his bedroom window and peered out into the darkness. He could just make out the creeping feline shapes of his arch enemies below. He groped round for the bucket of water.

Afterwards, Frank reflected that he really should have turned the bedside light on first. As he blundered about in the dark, his bare foot connected with the metal bucket and over it went soaking his pyjamas and the bedroom carpet as it did so. He swore roundly as the pail ricocheted off the dressing table and rolled under the bed.

Struggling to his feet, he peered out of the window again, wondering if he still had time to go and fill another bucket but the noise he had been making had obviously been enough to scare the cats away because the garden was empty.

The following day he related the tale to his mate Sam over a lunchtime pint. It was a tale of woe that Sam was getting quite familiar with.

“I only planted them geraniums two days ago,” said Frank miserably. He took a long swallow of his beer. “Now they’re all scattered about *and* they’ve been taking my fish again. The blighters!”

“I told you before,” said Sam, “put a net over the pond.”

“I have,” said Frank, “It just seems to have made it more of a challenge! My missus won’t be happy,” he continued, “before she left she says to me Frank, she says, while I’m staying at me mothers I want you to deal with them cats once and for all. You know what women are like.”

Sam nodded wisely, but actually Frank knew that he didn’t. Marriage was an institution that Sam had never set foot in and picturing the ample form of his wife in an unhappy frame of mind made Frank wonder if Sam had had the right idea.

“When she coming back?” he asked.

“Friday,” said Frank.

“I know what you need,” said Sam, staring pointedly at his empty glass, “lion poo.”

“Lion Poo!” exclaimed Frank, “where am going to get that?”

“I dunno,” said Sam “from a Lion?”

“In Basildon?!”

“You could try a zoo,” suggested Sam, “or you might be able to order it over the interweb thingy — get it delivered.”

“How does it work anyway?” asked Frank.

“Obvious innit?” said Sam, gazing fondly at the fresh pint in front of him. “Little cats are afraid of big cats. So the moggies would come across the Lion poo, think there was a larger cat on the prowl and wouldn’t wait around to hear it roar... if you get my drift.”

A small voice in Franks head tried to tell him that he may come to wish he had treated the whole thing with more caution but, after three pints of Old Peculiar, Frank thought Sam’s idea had legs. Legs and some very sharp teeth most likely, warned the small voice, but the larger, more dominant one that, in the absence of his wife was currently feeling quite brave, said that anything was worth a try to rid himself of his nightly tormentors, not to mention keep his wife happy.

“Tell you what,” said Sam draining his glass, “We’ll go and see Alf.”

“Has he got a Lion?” asked Frank.

“No, but he has got a computer and he’s been having lessons on it.”

A few minutes later they were knocking on Alf’s door. The door opened as far as the chain would allow and Alf peered nervously through the gap.

“What can I do for you?” asked Alf, his eyes darting from one to the other. He reminded Frank of a small rodent, constantly on the look out for predators.

“We wondered if we could use your computer,” began Sam.

“Yeah,” said Frank, “only you’ll have to make it go `cos we don’t know how.”

“Er...I suppose so,” said Alf. He let them in and ushered them through to his dining room and there in pride of place on the table, sat the instrument of Frank’s deliverance.

Alf settled himself in front of the computer like a concert pianist preparing to play a concerto in the Albert Hall. He switched it on and they all waited expectantly as it whirred into life.

“Right then,” said Alf at last, “what is it you want me to look up?”

“Lion poo,” said Sam.

Alf studied them carefully, searching their faces for evidence they were making fun of him. He was well used to being the butt of people’s jokes but on this occasion they both looked deadly serious.

He typed the words into the search engine. They all gasped as a whole page of hits instantly appeared.

“Good lord!” said Frank impressed.

“What do you want to do now?” enquired Alf, pleased at the impression he had made.

“Buy some,” said Frank.

“Buy some?! Oh, er...I’m not sure, I mean, some of these sites do sell it but...” The mouse jittered up and down the screen under Alf’s wavering hand.

“Can’t you do it?” asked Frank.

“I thought you’d been having lessons,” said Sam.

“Well, yes, I suppose so,” Alf rarely impressed anyone and he’d been enjoying the experience. “The lesson about ordering things is next week...” He hesitated a moment longer and then seemed to come to a decision. He clicked on one of the sites and it opened up. Frank and Sam watched as he navigated slowly through the electronic pages.

“How much do you want?” he asked. He was finding it hard to concentrate with them looking over his shoulder.

“Not much,” said Frank, “just a dollop really.”

“It doesn’t say anything about dollops,” said Alf worriedly, “I’ll just put in one.” He typed it in and pressed the enter key, “that will be £50,” he said, “with delivery.”

“Cor blimey!” said Frank pulling his wallet out of his pocket and extracting his credit card, “I hope it works. When will it be here?”

“Friday” said Alf.

Friday. With any luck, Frank thought, he would be able to deploy it round the garden before his wife got home. On that happy thought, Frank then had the best two night’s sleep he had had in ages. The cats still made their nightly invasions but it no longer mattered — their days were numbered...

On Friday he got up early and went about his daily routine whistling. He wasn’t usually this cheerful on days his wife was returning home, but this time he thought he had earned a place in her good books for some while to come. He pondered whether to tell her how clever he

had been or wait until she noticed the cats had gone. He decided to see what sort of mood she was in when she arrived.

At nine o'clock Frank's doorbell rang and there was a man on his doorstep holding a clip board.

"Delivery for you," he said, indicating the tipper truck parked in the road. "Where do you want it?"

"Leave it on the garden path," said Frank.

"You sure?" asked the delivery driver.

"Yes," said Frank "I'll pick it up straight away."

The man shrugged. "You're the boss."

Frank signed the proffered form and went out the back to get his shovel. He thought he would put a bit round the pond, sprinkle some on the flower beds and if he had enough left, he would smear it around the gap in the hedge where the hated creatures came through.

When he reached his front garden he realised that having enough left was not going to be one of his more immediate problems. He stared in disbelief at the steaming, brown mountain that had been dumped just inside his gate. The smell made his eyes water.

"Ere," yelled Frank at the receding truck, "I only wanted one!"

"Yer've only got one," the driver shouted back, "one ton, just like you ordered."

Frank slumped down on the path and sat with his head in his hands. When he finally looked up his wife was at the gate, her mouth a perfect red-ringed 0 of total shock as she contemplated the enormous pile of extremely pungent heaven-alone-knew-what that had sprung up in her absence and was effectively preventing her from gaining access to her own home.

"What did she do?" asked Sam. It was Sunday and they were once again enjoying a lunchtime pint at their local.

"After a few choice words, she went back to her mother's. Said she wouldn't be back until I got it all shifted," said Frank.

"Do you want some help?" Sam asked, "we could bag it up and sell it as fertiliser. We might be able to get some of your money back."

Frank took a swig of beer and considered the matter. The thing was that once you got used to the smell, which had managed somehow to permeate every corner of the house, having a dung heap on his lawn had brought about some unexpected advantages. For instance, it had definitely reduced the amount of junk mail he had received lately. He hadn't seen a single cat on the entire estate for the last three days and his wife had returned to her mother's — indefinitely.

“No hurry,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Reckon we can have another pint or two first.”

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### **The Coronation Salute, Vienna, 2nd June 1953**

Roy D Stevens

I carried out my National Service Basic Training with the Royal Artillery at Park Hall Camp, Oswestry, from October to December 1952. After a month's course at Depot RA Woolwich I was posted, in February 1953, to 40th Field Regiment stationed at West Riding Barracks, Dortmund, BAOR 14.

In the Spring of 1953 a competitive shoot was held between the field regiments based in Germany. The winners would have the honour of firing the salute at Vienna on Coronation Day, 2nd June. 109 Battery, 40th. Field, of which I was a member (trained as Gun Number 3, Layer), emerged on top. A troop of four 25-pounders under the command of Captain DKR Clifton-Moore was selected for the Salute.

The first leg of the journey, in mid-May, was by train from Dortmund to Salzburg, following the eastern bank of the Rhine. What a breathtaking journey that was, with those incredible fairy tale Gothic castles perched high up on the slopes either side of that majestic river. I only wish in retrospect that my musical experience at that time had embraced Wagner! The splendour of the passing scene was only slightly impaired by the fact that rations for the journey had been under-estimated, with the result that we were hungry throughout. We detrained at Salzburg, and I well remember gazing up at the snow-capped mountain which seemed to rise sheer from right behind the station buildings.

For the second leg of the journey from Salzburg to Vienna we travelled in Bedford 3-tonners. As we moved up through the mountains the weather deteriorated with heavy snow, and there were several hair-raising incidents involving the lorries losing grip on the icy road. Descending from the mountains we put up tents and camped overnight in a meadow. We missed a rehearsal for the Coronation Parade held at the 1st Battalion, Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders at Netley Barracks, Spittal, on the 26 May, but were able to take part in a full dress rehearsal at Villach the following day. Unfortunately this was cut short by torrential rain.

I remember as we entered the town there was some kind of festival in progress with dancers in Austrian National Dress, a very colourful scene. From Villach we proceeded to Zeltweg, a mountain village on the road to the Semmering Pass and Vienna, where the 1st Battalion the Middlesex Regiment were based. They provided accommodation for us for a day or two in a large hanger on a disused airfield.

From Zeltweg we made the final journey to Vienna via the Semmering Pass. Up until now we had been travelling through the British Zone of Austria. Semmering marked the checkpoint before entering the Russian Zone (at this time Austria was occupied by the 'Big Four' Powers - USA, Soviet Union, Britain and France, and was divided up into four zones). Whilst our papers were being checked we had a chance to take a good look at our first Russian soldiers. I remember they were relaxing in the grass at the side of the road. They were mostly youths (like us) with close-cropped hair and tanned faces and were a tough-looking bunch. They wore field caps with an enamel red star at the front. Their uniforms consisted of peasant-type blouses belted at the waist, with baggy trousers tucked into long black boots. We eyed each other warily - we were, after all, opponents in a Cold War which could become a 'hot' one at any time.

Once past Semmering we were in the Russian Zone all the way to Vienna (Vienna itself was divided up into sectors controlled by each of the Four Powers, with free movement between sectors. The centre of the city, known as Sector 1, was administered a month at a time by each of the 'Big Four').

It was a long, hot, dusty drive to Vienna. The towns and villages we passed through had a uniform drabness about them. The people we



saw were unsmiling and there was no response to our waves. It was obvious that life in the Russian Zone was no picnic.

At last we arrived at our destination, Schönbrunn Barracks. This was the HQ British Garrison, Vienna, and close to Schönbrunn Palace, the old Imperial Summer Residence of the Hapsburgs. The main square was to be where the Coronation Parade and Salute would take place. The next few days were taken up in feverish activity working up our guns and gun drill to a state of near-perfection.

At last the great day arrived. The weather was ideal - warm and sunny with a cool breeze.

On parade was: 'A' Company, 1st Battalion the Middlesex Regiment, 'A' Company, 1st Battalion the Green Howards (stationed at Graz), 'A' Company, 1st Battalion the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, and our saluting battery commanded by Captain Clifton-Moore. The massed bands of the three infantry regiments were also in attendance.

At eleven o'clock General Sir Brian Urquart, GOC British Troops Austria, and Sir Harold Caccia, the British Ambassador and High Commissioner in Austria, started the celebrations. After the massed bands had played *God Save the Queen* and the Austrian National Anthem, General Urquart and Sir Harold escorted the President of Austria, Dr Korner, onto the square. Also present were the other three Allied High Commissioners, Cardinal Innitzer, Chancellor Raab, the President of the National Assembly, Dr. Hurdes and his ministers and the Diplomatic Corps. Members of the Viennese public packed the sides of the square.

As the massed bands played our National Anthem, the Royal Standard was raised accompanied by a twenty-one gun salute to the Queen from our burnished and gleaming 25-pounders. This was followed by a march-past of the troops on parade, the salute from the podium being taken by Sir Harold Caccia. Then the Cameron Highlanders put on a display of Scottish dancing. A nice touch, which delighted the Austrian spectators, was the massed bands forming a square and playing *The Radetsky March* by Johann Strauss. The whole celebration lasted about two and a half hours. It was a day never to be forgotten.

## Colette

Brian Jones

*This first-night crowd was a spectacle of general infamy. They leaned on the edge of their boxes, displaying their diamonds - the spoils of their crooked fortunes and their prostitution. All the gland marshals of vice were there, half undressed in the parade clothes, flanked by a mafia of scribblers and politicians, apprentice ministers or academicians of the future. In the stalls and the stage boxes sat the starlets and the part-time hookers gussied up in their vaporous gowns, little women of frail and tormented grace, with feverish, tiny heads weighed down by thick hair, all of them exuding an air of insolent pageboys and of obsessive and perverse charm. And to cap it off, the complete nullity of the men, their exhausted languor, the ugliness of their crooked eyes. What an orgy! (Jean Lorrain on Fin de Siecle Paris)*

Colette, the great French writer also depicted Paris at the turn of the century with a jaundiced eye. She much preferred the countryside of her native Burgundy. As a child she attended a primary School in the nearby village. The girls occupied two ‘unbelievably dirty and ugly’ rooms on the ground floor of the old Schoolhouse. In *Claudine at School*, Colette describes her fellow pupils as the daughters of shopkeepers, farmers, policemen, and labourers, ‘the whole bunch rather unwashed.’ Their first-grade teacher was the old Miss Fanny (Desleau), ‘an insubstantial phantom’, who liked to declaim passages from the Bible while rapping a ruler against her desk. She was replaced next year by Mme Viellard, the wife of a carpenter, who ‘wept at the indiscipline’ of her rambunctious pupils. They poked the schoolyard with holes where they buried marbles, climbed trees in their pinafores, flashing their legs. Colette was the ringleader of this mischief. But Mme Viellard treated her with the deference owed to a rich man’s daughter, and let her pay a poor classmate a penny or two to take her turn at sweeping the room.

Her parents were her beloved Sido and the absent-minded Captain Colette, who cared more for Biology and snails than for his two daughters. The man Colette would refer to with mock deference as M. Willy was already a celebrity by the time they met, although not yet as famous as her talent was to make him. He was fourteen years her senior and the figure she cut in his world were, at first, that of a morose

provincial schoolgirl with a five foot-long braid and flashes of uncouth charm. He, according to his friend Rachilde, was ‘a man of the world, and of the best world, the very model of a brilliant Parisian rake.’ He was also obese and bald.

When she was seventeen she married M. Willy. In Paris she wrote (with Willy’s help) *Claudine at School*, which was an enormous success. The book was written under M. Willy’s name. She also wrote *Claudine in Paris*, *Claudine Married* and *Claudine Takes Off*. In later years she wrote under her real name and not Willy’s.

These novels were of great importance. For the first time in literature a teenage girl was depicted with ruthless accuracy. The word teenager is of American origin. Before these novels little girls were either children or women. Basically if a girl was old enough to have a baby she was eligible for marriage. The important thing was not education but finding a suitable husband. Spinsters were held in low esteem in Nineteenth Century society.

Colette divorced Willy and had a career as a dancer on the stage. Her theatrical memoirs are described in *Her Apprenticeships*. She also wrote the story of a gigolo, now a dying breed, in *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri*, teenage love in *Ripening Seed*, her mother in *Sido* and the short novel *Gigi*.

*Gigi* was played on the stage by Audrey Hepburn and in the film by Leslie Caron. The film was the last of the great MGM musicals. Baldly, it is the story of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who is courted by a wealthy playboy. All ends happily in a marriage. *Gigi*’s relatives approve of the affair. The film also starred Louis Jourdan and Maurice Chevalier. Costumes were by Cecil Beaton.

Colette was attracted to both men and women. Her frankness was a great liberating force between the sexes. She died at the age of eighty.

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette was the first woman in the History of the Republic to receive a state funeral. At seven o’clock on the morning of August 7, 1954, her body was moved to the Tour d’Honneur of the Palais-Royal. The coffin was placed on a raised catafalque draped with the tricolour and flanked by a military guard in dress uniform. It was surrounded by a great embankment of flowers, most them blue. There were wreaths from the French Parliament, the Prefect of Police, and the Prince of Monaco.

## Odds and Evens

Angus Livingstone

**W**e all know that professional gamblers ‘know the odds’ and many of us imagine that, with our common sense and intelligence, we are not far behind them. We might even go as far as to believe that with a bit of luck we could beat them. Not so. Knowing the odds is a way of saying that gamblers have a practical understanding of the mathematics of chance, and in this branch of the subject, common sense tends to let you down.

For instance, a professional gambler might happen to be sitting next to you at a football match and at half-time casually ask you what odds you would give him if he wagered that two men on the field were born on the same day of the year. After checking there are no twins playing, you might ponder for a while and reckon the chances are about fifteen to one against, and sneakily offer him say seven to one. You might then be surprised and rightly suspicious when he quickly accepts the bet. For although there are only 23 men on the field, including the referee, and 365 days in the year, surprisingly the odds of a date match in this case are better than evens.

Not convinced? Well, the critical thing here is the number of possible pairings for 23 people. The answer is 252. So the actual likelihood of a date match is 365:252. In other words a match is more likely than not.

After that experience, you might be tempted to try the national lottery instead. Ask the gambler for his opinion on it first, and you will probably end up putting your money back in your pocket as the gambler tries to control his guffawing.

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## Chasing the Children

Tom Riley

**W**ell, I’d read *Children of Tempest*, by Neil Munro twice, and I was thrilled with the prose; Neil seemed to be writing in English but phrasing in the Gaelic idiom: who could resist ‘stretch your hand, honest man’ instead of ‘have another, mate’. I’d visited

Lewis several times before retirement, working on the Stornoway radar systems, but wondered if Neil's characters really be true; I'd had an unfortunate run in with the Shetlanders the last time I visited that outpost of Scandinavia, (see The Peerie Poets). I found the people of the Uists and Benbecula absolutely wonderful. One had only to ask a simple direction and you would find yourself still chatting twenty minutes later. As a bit of a writer and poet (just for fun, mind) I was curious how Neil built his characters and locations and whether present day actuality reflected the times of the novel, so with my bundle of O.S. Maps - all in Gaelic - and a good supply of Bell's eight-year-old cough mixture, Suzy and I set off on a 900-mile pursuit of the Children of Tempest: Ludovic the priest of Boisdale, Anna his sister, and the brothers Duncan and Col of Corodale.

On a Saturday afternoon in early September we crossed The Little Minch to Lochmaddy and made ourselves comfortable in our little self-catering house, Tigh Alasdair, on a little grassy strip between the shores of Loch Euphort and Loch a Ghoil. We looked out to the slopes of Mount Eaval and red deer herds.

Sunday, as a little square notice in practically every shop window admonished us, was the Lord's day, and we were quite happy to hand it to him after our long drive. We rested, and only exerted ourselves to the extent of walking eastward until the road ended, where we found a lovely bronze statue of swans flying over little islands.

Monday, and mammon must be served, which meant an interesting trip to 'Solas' in North Uist, as the C.O.O.P. there was the only fount of our tickets to heaven, the national lottery. There was a good short cut across the moors which obviated the long drag round the coastal bulge and we were soon on our way to Benbecula and South Uist. We marked Kirkibost as a future beachcombing session, but more of that later. We observed one preserved example of the old black houses but alas, with the walls all whitewashed. At least, a hundred yards from our beloved Tigh Alasdair, there is a lovely ruin of the genuine article, with an outhouse still black thatched. But we had work to do and headed southward for Boisdale (Baghasdal), the hub of the novel.

We looked for lunch at the little town, Balivanich, literally attached to the airport at Benbecula, but found the prices were horrendous. I would recommend the restaurant at the airport, open to all, good food and reasonably priced. The proprietor of Gillivray's store gave us useful tidal

information should we attempt Triallabrec Mhor, which pointed towards Friday as a good day to find that romantic location.

I love walking and greatly admired Col's walk home (p20), and consequently examined the nearest route of this 20 kilometre hike as we motored south. Askernish and Mingary were noted, the usual light sprinkling of well-insulated low houses along the road, but Col would have to leave whatever counted for a road in those days about the height of Loch Ollay and Ormacleit to cut across round the ends of Beinn a Charra and Maola Breac for Glen Dorochay and the pass of Hellisdale. A leg-testing climb over the top, then down Glen Hellisdale to the coast, then a left turn into Corodale. We had hoped to do the bit over to Corodale but with no road or marked tracks we continued south.

Boisdale - now there was a surprise, not a black house in sight or even the remains of one. The usual confetti of modern houses along the road for about a kilometre, and the land between the road and the coast, all farmed, with a healthy crop of barley ready for the Combine - I wonder if any of it went into the local cough mixture, or to Barra, to produce 'Flying Jib-boom's cargo for the mainland and the Excise Men? Looking very lonely, there was a ruin of sorts about half a mile from the sea and the binoculars declared it a church and burial ground: we had struck gold, or so we thought. Taking a closer look, the latest date we could decipher from the tombstones was 1915 so the church was likely to be in full commission round about Neil's visit. The church was on a little eminence much as described by Father Ludovic's charge in the novel, but nowhere could we find a name.

The two little islands just offshore were too low to be seen from the church but the map shows that a bit of work between Traigh na Doirlinn and Orasaigh could have provided quite a serviceable little harbour.

Disappointed, we drove on toward Eriskay, but at the last house in Boisdale there were three men working with the owner, converting the house for self-catering. Well, I thought, there's no harm in asking, so I put the question to the first of the helpers. Did he know the name of the old church? In true Para Handy fashion, here was a chance for a gas and tools were downed immediately, all four men gathered round talking in an alarming mixture of Gaelic and English. It seemed that the church had been built on the ruins of an older church and consequently had several names but they could not recall even one of them, but the owner, using his mobile, phoned his grandfather and a long conversation in Gaelic ensued with no better result. They were very sorry they couldn't help and

to cheer them up I told them I was researching for an article I might write about a novel largely set in Boisdale. I produced the book. The effect was astonishing.

I opened the book at page 20, Col's journey, as therein many local names were mentioned and interest was immediate; the book was gently lifted from my hands. There then followed another animated polyglot discussion, the book passing from hand to hand with the discovery of familiar names and places being excitedly pointed out to the other three. I managed to get the book back, with the youngest of the quartet noting all the publishing details and declaring he would order the book as soon as he arrived home.

One would expect the village to be clustered round the church, and as the farm buildings looked fairly recent, I suspect old dwellings had been cleared for the fairly extensive arable activity. There is a sign a mile or so north of Boisdale pointing east to a shrine prominently labelled - *To Our Lady Star of the Sea*. I'm sure Neil would have known about it and used the very appropriate and beautiful name for his church; so, there we have Father Ludovic's little community. On our way home we attempted to get some photographs of Col's approach to Glen Dorochay and Hellisdale but the visibility was very poor, with Benmore and Hecla each pulling a thick cloudy cap down over their eyes.

The tidal information showed Friday as the best day to continue our researches, so leg stretching and photography was indulged in on Tuesday. Suzy wanted a session of beachcombing on Wednesday so we headed for Kirkibost beach where we were caught in lashing rain driven by a fierce wind. Soaked to the skin we returned to Tigh Alasdair and, nothing daunted, showered, changed and the inner man fed, we toured the peaceful land as far as Berneray. It's worth noting Borve has a first class toilet and shower on the harbour front.

It was Wednesday night that little Tigh Alasdair showed it was firmly wedded to terra firma as the gale reached force ten. Although inordinately fond of standing on my hind legs and reciting, I easily resisted the temptation to follow Ludovic's example and hurl poetry into the teeth of the wind. We rested easy. The morning wind was still force eight, so the day was spent in modest indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh and mind, open to two fairly conservative and elderly persons, Gordon's and Bells being notable names in helping us to produce a decent sonnet in praise of the noble little house. Suzy, a talented artist, entered our effort into the visitor's book in a fine stylish script, as below:

### *The Little House*

Perched on a grassy plot between two Lochs,  
The little house scorns Eaval's stony stare.  
But nesting where the watchful Lapwing flocks,  
It smiles upon the ridge where red deer fare.  
While oft the salty seal from Euphort peers  
And otter scouts the shore of Loch a Ghoil;  
Within its pale, the white sheep have no fears:  
We transient tenants rest from care and toil.  
On nights, when shrieking gale blows 'cross the lawn,  
There sounds the noise of skeletal carouse.  
Where ghosts of yore hold ceilidh till the dawn;  
Just down the road in crumbling old black house.  
But night and day, the little house so fair,  
Gives comfort, and its name? – 'Tigh Alasdair'.

Friday, and the first on the list was old Dermosary's last resting place, Trinity Temple (Teampuill Trianaid) in North Uist, and we were surprised to find the approach to the ruin was across the fabled 'Ditch of Blood', advertised by a large notice. As the land thereabouts was very marshy - plank walkways having been provided now by some benevolent authority - the fighting there must have been very trying indeed. We could hear the breakers left by the gale smashing on Eachcamais: a melancholy sound.

Now for Benbecula, and Creggans Inn: the 'Sergeant's' seat of skulduggery. Sadly, the only location I could accept for the inn was in the middle of Benbecula Airport, which would have been a bleak spot in any case and may very well have been an empty landscape at the time of Neil's visit: ideal for the plot. The choice of the name puzzled me for a day or two until I realised that a Creggans Inn would have been visible to Neil on a good day as he walked out of the front door of his birthplace, Crombies Land, Inveraray: although separated from him by the width of Loch Fyne. I noticed the Creggans Inn at Strachur - opposite Inveraray - while leaving Cairndow after a night stop at the Stagecoach Inn; I might add that Creggans looked a fine Inn and is not to be compared with the 'Sergeant's' lonely outpost.

Trialabreck (Triallabreac) was very difficult to find; the site of that wonderful awakening of the irresistible chemistry of love between the night stranded, Anna and Duncan. We could not get very close to the sea and wasted many frames taking pictures of possible islands from the



jumble of islets but I was not happy with any of them. We progressed homeward but paused beside a cottage where an elderly person was feeding his chickens; a magnificent speckled rooster strutted haughtily about the yard and eyed us with grave suspicion: he would certainly 'rule the roost'. I asked the old gentleman if he could point out the location of Trialabreck and to my astonishment found it was almost directly opposite his cottage. While Suzy busied herself with the camera I chatted quietly with our informant. He offered to take us down to the shore but although the tide was well out, bearing in mind the warning of quicksand in the novel, we declined. There wasn't much shelter on the island as it had a flat green top, and the couple would have had to shelter on the beach below the grass level but, of course, Neil provided the romantic pair with a fine rocky shelter in the novel. It came to me later that I was standing in Gramisdale, and the cottage stood almost exactly where the comforting beacon was lit for the stranded couple.

For anyone visiting, I might point out that Creagorry in Benbecula has the best stocked C.O.O.P. in the Islands. Saturday, unfortunately for me, is ceilidh day on the islands, our travelling day, with one held on the day I arrived and one on the day I left, so my wee bit poetry and stories never got an airing.

Our day at Inveraray was very wet and somewhat disappointing. We enjoyed the big schooner and Para Handy's 'Vital Spark' at the quay, and the skirl of the pipes from the Castle was a thrilling sound. We visited Neil Munro's birthplace in Crombies' Land with the memorial plaque above the front door. What we wanted to do was to climb to Neil's monument, but although we could see it on the hill we could not find the start of the path even after driving nearly fifty miles in the search. We then tried to find Neil's last resting place but found this an almost impossible task. We finally found two graves with a Neil Munro remembered at the top of the stones. We could not decipher the dates, which should have been 22 December 1930. Puzzled, I stood before them and recited the prayer of the fishing ladies as old Dermosary's cortege passed over the ford.

'O Mary! Mother of Christ.  
A soft path for the far traveller.'

## July 1944

Deborah Lewis

The welcome home banner swayed in the gentle breeze on a sunny July morning. The banner hung from the front porch of the white bricked house in the close-knit community of Richmond, Virginia. Today this plain house stood out amongst all the others, brought to life by the colourful banner, which glistened like a rainbow. This was home to William and Ruth Johnson. The couple both in their late forties had been born and brought up in Richmond. Ruth, the local seamstress was a tall, slim woman; always immaculately dressed she wore her straight brown hair with a grip in each side. William, a mechanic by trade was a tall, thin man with dark brown hair, closely cropped. A workaholic, he was something of a perfectionist. William had painstakingly put together the banner which was in honour of their son Billy who was coming home following a tour of duty with the 1st Infantry Division. Billy had been injured during the D-Day invasion of Omaha Beach and had been discharged from the military on medical grounds.

Ruth had spent all morning cleaning the house from top to bottom. She wanted everything to be perfect today. Not only was her son Billy returning home, their friends would also be gathering for a celebratory tea. Ruth wanted her home to be in tip-top condition and couldn't afford for a speck of dust to be on display. If anyone did notice it would be Alice Kelly, who along with her husband Henry ran the local store. The store had been in Henry's family for as long as Ruth could remember and had been passed down through the generations. Alice and Henry had never had children so running the store filled the void in their lives. Alice was a very elegant woman. Tall and slim, she wore her greying hair in a bun. She was so upright in the way she carried herself it looked as though she had an imaginary pile of books on her head. Henry was the total opposite. A short chubby man with curly red hair, he always walked with his shoulders hunched. Alice was obsessed with cleaning. The locals used to joke that she flat ironed the bills.

"Hey Ruth, do you need some help around the house?" Ruth turned around to see her best friend Helen standing in the kitchen by the back door. Helen was a couple of years younger than Ruth. A short plump woman with blonde wavy hair, she was the head teacher at the local school.

"That's kind of you but I'm nearly done here. Sit yourself down. Can I get you a glass of soda or do you fancy something stronger?"

"You'll get me in trouble with the old man. I think I'll stick to the soda."

The two friends laughed. The old man was Frank, Helen's husband and together they would soon be celebrating their silver wedding anniversary. Frank had just turned fifty. A short stocky man with receding mousy, hair he had worked in the construction industry all his life.

Ruth and Helen had grown up together, lifelong friends whose friendship had carried on through their sons. Helen's son Tommy was also in the military but was serving with the Eighth Air Force. The two boys had been best buddies from the first day they started at school and were inseparable. More like brothers than best friends. Ruth fetched the family photo album from the front room. The two women sat at the kitchen table and reminisced as they flicked through the album, drinking the homemade soda.

Ruth picked out one particular photo in the album. "Remember when this photo was taken? It seems like only yesterday."

"I can't believe how small they look. It's hard to believe that they're all grown up and serving in the military. Where has the time gone?"

The photo they were fondly looking at was taken on Billy's tenth birthday. The boys had been taken on a camping expedition by William. It was their first big adventure and even though they had only trekked to the back of Billy's garden and spend the night in a makeshift tent, it was the greatest night of their young lives. The same couldn't be said of William, who had hardly managed a wink of sleep. The boys were so excited they had kept him awake half the night with their constant giggling.

"Get some sleep boys. It's going to be an early start."

"Oh Dad, we're explorers - we don't need any sleep."

"If you don't get any sleep you'll be too tired to go hunting rabbits in the morning."

"Mr Johnson, sir. You can do that for us. Why do you think we brought you along?" joked Tommy.

They all fell about laughing and eventually the boys fell asleep.

"I'll never forget the look on William's face the next morning. He looked done in. He wouldn't admit it but he had a real good time. He loved being a child again."

"Tommy didn't stop talking about it for weeks! Well I'd best be on my way and leave you to get ready. Thanks for the chat and the soda. I'll be over with Frank later, but you must let me know if you need my help with anything.

"Thanks, I'll see you later."

Ruth turned the wireless on whilst she washed up the glasses. Glen Miller's *Moonlight Serenade* played out and she hummed along as she tidied the kitchen. Listening to the song, she finally started to relax. The housework was nearly done and there wouldn't be a speck of dust for Alice Kelly's eagle eye to home in on. William walked in to the kitchen. "Honey, I'm just popping over to see Henry. Is there anything you need me to pick up from the store?"

"No thanks. I think I have everything we need. Don't forget I need you back by two."

The store wasn't far from their house. The two men had been friends for years and Ruth knew that when they got together time went out of the window. They were worse than women when it came to talking.

"Hey Bill, how you doing. I must say you've done a real good job with that banner. It's real neat."

"Thanks. I never thought that I'd ever get it finished. I thought I was gonna break my neck when I was hanging it up."

"When Billy's settled back at home I'll have to get the guys round for a game of poker. A good game of Texas hold 'em is what we need."

"Yeah, it'll be my turn to clean you out."

The poker games had been far and few between in recent times. They had been the highlight of the week. Friday night at Henry's was something the men looked forward to after a hard week's work. Frank was also one of the regulars along with his father Charles, and Jimmy who ran the gas station. Jimmy had arrived in Richmond a year earlier. He was a very eccentric character, not the type of person you would expect to run a gas station. Jimmy was always turned out in his Sunday best, and wore a different coloured bow tie every day. The years had been kind to Jimmy, considering that he'd had a troubled past. He was never keen on getting his hands dirty, always leaving the manual work to one of his employees. In recent times, following the rationing of gas, business had not been as good, but he never let it get him down.

The stakes were never too high during the poker games, though there was one occasion when Henry had drunk one too many scotches and joked that he was going to use the store as collateral. Heaven forbid if Alice had overheard that conversation. She had never been keen on the poker nights, but turned a blind eye as the men needed a chance to let off steam and relax. Charles always insisted on cleaning up after the poker game. He wanted to keep on Alice's good side. He was a sprightly man in his seventies and looked like a shrunken version of his son, Frank. Charles had

been widowed the previous fall and the poker nights got him out of the house.

“Before I know it you’ll be trying to put me into one of those old folks’ homes.”

“Don’t be stupid Dad. You know that we’re only looking out for you.”

Ruth felt very pleased with herself as her home was now spotless. She could take a little time out to relax and get herself ready before the visitors and her beloved son Billy arrived. She poured herself a glass of soda which she took upstairs. She walked into Billy’s room, placing the glass down on the bedside cabinet as she sat down on his bed. The linen had been freshly laundered. The room had been left just as it was the day when Billy left home. Ruth couldn’t bear to change anything; even the suggestion by William to give the room a lick of paint was out of the question. As she looked around the room she remembered all the good times. She smiled to herself as she thought about the time when Billy was old enough to understand what Christmas was all about. He would look out of his bedroom window on a Christmas Eve, waiting for the short fat man in a red suit with a white beard to appear on the roof of the house.

William would say “He knows you’re awake. He’s not going to turn up if he can see you looking out of your window. He’ll give your presents to another child”. It was the only way they could get him to go to sleep. Birthday parties, playing with his toy soldiers, cowboys and Indians, there had been many good times. Billy had been a good child. Apart from the odd tantrum, and his first day at school there hadn’t been many bad times.

It only seemed like yesterday that Billy had been born. It was hard to believe that he had been fighting for his country in a war that was taking place thousands of miles away. In a few hours he will be home and I’ll never let him out of my sight again. It was exactly five weeks to the day that they had received news that Billy had been injured. That morning Ruth had just finished putting the breakfast dishes away when there was a knock at the door. On opening the door she was faced with Bob, the mailman, who handed her a letter which was franked with the War Office seal. He nodded to her and then went on his way. Ruth felt a shiver run down her spine and couldn’t bear to open the letter. She walked round to the back of the house where William was working and gave him the letter. He took a deep breath and as he opened the letter, his hands were shaking.

“Ruth, he’s OK. He’s been injured, but our Billy is OK. They say he’s badly broken his legs. They’re sending him to an Army hospital in Washington to recuperate and then he’s coming home. They’ve discharged him from the military.” Ruth and William hugged.

Ruth finished the glass of soda, stood up and walked out of Billy's room. As she was walking down the stairs William walked through the front door.

"Just going to have a wash and get myself ready. I won't be long. Are you sure there's nothing you need me to do?"

"No honey, everything is done."

Ruth went into the kitchen, washed her glass up and then went upstairs to change. William was now dressed in his Sunday best. I've never known him to get ready so quickly she thought to herself. William went downstairs and poured himself a drink. Ruth soon joined him and suggested that he wedge open the front door. Henry and Alice were first to arrive, shortly followed by Jimmy. Charles arrived with Helen and Frank. The house was soon full to the brim.

It was 3 o'clock when a car pulled up. Ruth rushed outside, followed by William. The driver got out and opened the back door.

"Sir, can you give me a hand?"

"Sure." William walked up to the car. Billy was sitting in the back.

"Hey Dad, what's up with you? You're wearing a suit."

"If I had my way I'd be in jeans and a t-shirt, but you know what your mom's like."

The driver had fetched two walking sticks from the trunk. Billy shuffled forwards as his father and the driver slowly helped him out of the car. Tears were rolling down Ruth's face. She hugged her son.

"My, I've got my work cut out fattening you up."

They made their way slowly into the house and when Billy appeared inside there was a massive cheer. William helped Billy into the front room and into a chair.

The celebratory tea was slowly turning into a party with William grabbing Alice Kelly by the waist and twirling her around the front room.

There was a knock at the door. Ruth opened the door to find the Bob standing on the front porch, holding a letter.

"Are the James's with you? There wasn't an answer when I knocked."

"I'll just get Frank."

Frank appeared at the door and Bob handed him the letter. Frank slowly opened the letter as Glen Miller's 'In the Mood' played in the background. The letter read 'The US Air Force regrets to announce that your son Lieutenant TF James has been killed in action.....'

**Harry**  
Elma Lombard

Audrey was delighted with her new retirement flat. She had continued living in the large rambling house for two years since her husband's death, but she had felt so isolated and lonely. Since her arthritis had set in she could no longer do the cleaning or cope with the garden and paying for help was costing more than she could afford.

'You really should move.' Her friend Sarah told her.

Audrey refused to consider the idea until one day, without telling her beforehand, Sarah drove them into the car park of a newly built retirement home.

'Just come with me. I want to see it anyway.' Sarah said.

Reluctantly, Audrey followed. She met the warden, a delightful man, who showed them round the communal lounge, kitchen and garden. They looked at the remaining flats for sale and Audrey stood quietly while Sarah asked numerous questions.

'Thanks for coming with me,' Sarah said, 'I liked them, didn't you?'

'I loved them,' replied Audrey excitedly.

From that moment Audrey realised the many advantages there would be for her to move, sheltered accommodation with an emergency call system, nearby shops, buses, and folk to talk to. It wasn't easy selling her house, clearing the clutter of years and being prepared to accept a different lifestyle but with the support of family and friends, six months later she had moved.

Sarah was pleased to see that Audrey had settled in and was already making new friends.

'Is there anything that you miss from your old lifestyle?' She asked her.

Audrey replied, 'I do miss Timmy my Yorkshire terrier, sadly he died last month.'

A week later a large heavy parcel arrived for Audrey. She hadn't ordered anything as far as she could remember so she was curious what it would contain. Inside the layers of protective packing she found a life size model of a Yorkshire terrier. It was perfect in every detail and when she lifted it free from the box, it sat looking up at her with such a realistic expression on its face.

'This must be from Sarah,' she thought, 'how kind she is.'

During the morning, Audrey felt that her dog was following her with his eyes.

‘I must give him a name,’ she told herself.

After gazing at him all morning, she decided to call him Harry.’

Audrey busied herself cleaning and tidying the flat, stopping occasionally to smile at Harry. She found that without realising it she was beginning to talk to him. Although silent, he seemed to understand what she was saying. Having run out of coffee, she popped out to her local shop which was only a short distance away and was soon walking down the aisles. Audrey found herself drawn to the tins of dog food but she quickly pulled herself together and scuttled swiftly past.

On her return she opened her front door and just managed in time to save herself falling over Harry. He was standing inside just as though he had been waiting for her. Audrey knew that her memory had started to play tricks but no, she was convinced that she had left him by her bookcase.

Audrey set about preparing her evening meal. She had treated herself to a piece of fillet steak that she cooked carefully, with potatoes, vegetables and gravy. As she sat down at the table to eat her meal, she caught the eye of Harry who seemed to be saying, ‘Spare some for me.’ She turned her chair so that she couldn’t see him.

The next morning Audrey was due to go to the dentist nine. She rushed to get ready on time and barely had a moment to notice Harry. Fortunately, the routine inspection showed that no treatment was necessary and she returned to her flat feeling relieved. Glancing up at her window as she approached her building she was surprised to see the curtains moving and what looked like a hairy face peering out. ‘I must have been looking at another flat,’ she thought, although she knew no one else kept an animal. Audrey was pleased that there was no dog tripping her up as she entered her room. Her calm swiftly evaporated when she saw Harry asleep in her armchair.

‘You bad dog’, she shouted, ‘You’re not allowed to get into my chair.’

Then she had to grab hold of the table for support. ‘I’ve finally gone mad,’ she thought. ‘Tomorrow I will take Harry to a Charity shop.’

That night Audrey went to bed relaxed in the thought that she could get rid of the china dog in the morning.

‘It’s all been too silly’, she said to herself, ‘I expect I was just overtired and let my imagination run away.’

As she snuggled under the covers she heard a tiny whimper and instinctively put her hand out. There was a sudden bump on the bed and she felt a warm tongue gently lick her fingers.

‘Alright, you can stay for a few more days,’ she said.