

" THE OUTLANDER LADY "

Jean Brittain interviews author DIANA GABALDON about Scotland

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"I am delighted that Diana is joining us in Edinburgh for The Gathering 2009 where I have no doubt she will enchant everyone who meets her," Lord Sempill says of his invitation to historical novelist Diana Gabaldon, who will feature beside Alexander McCall Smith at a major event of this year's Homecoming.

"I believe Diana's 'Outlander' series has been instrumental in raising awareness of the clan system which has been beneficial in complementing the hard work done by the clan commissioners to increase their membership in North America," Lord Sempill continues. "One of the great appeals of the clans is the romantic element of their history, and Diana's work captures that in a similar way to Dorothy Dunnett in *The Lymond Chronicles*."

The 'Outlander' series of novels has over 17 million books in print and is available in 24 countries. Her books average a thousand pages and each takes around two years to complete. "... I digress. (That's why I write such long books; I like digressions.)" – as the lady says herself, adding the interesting bracketed extra that has become a trademark of her written chat.

The books are set in the years of the Jacobite Uprising, the blood of the Battle of Culloden, the brutality of the Highland Clearances and their aftermath in Scotland and America. Diana's fictional hero Jamie Fraser is a man of *honour*, that defining essence of a true Scotsman, the word he lives by and would die for. Fraser also has a fine Scots turn

of phrase and a dour sense of humour, both captured rather well by an author who began as an outlander herself. Diana has no Scots ancestry whatsoever. It is purely her merit as a writer that has led to a personal invitation to The Gathering, and to investiture as a Lady of the Garrison by the 78th Fraser Highlanders in Quebec City.

Readers are pulled to the facts behind the fiction, to the country and clans of the characters, and to visit Scotland on specially-designed 'Outlander Tours'. Yet her choice of 18th Century Scotland as a setting came about only by a chance viewing of actor Frazer Hines playing the kilted Jamie MacCrimmon in a re-run of Doctor Who.

"I didn't really know anything whatever about Scotland at the time", Diana told me, "save that men wore kilts, which seemed plenty to be going on with. When I began writing, I had no plot, no outline, no characters, and knew nothing about Scotland and the 18th century. All I had was the rather vague images conjured up by a man in a kilt. Which is, of course, a very powerful and compelling image! Scotland grew on me quickly, as I did research and began to sense the personality of the place and its people."

From this standing start, Dr. Gabaldon wrote her first novel in 1989 whilst bringing up three young children and working full-time as a university professor. A PhD in ecological science, coupled with a brain the size of Benbecula and a schedule that left little time for sleep, stormed her through an encyclopaedic amount of fact-finding needed for authenticity.

When one of her characters was burned at the stake twenty years later than the last recorded witch-burning in Scotland, she fretted about deviating from historical accuracy. Considering that many novelists re-invent the history of the Scots, how much of a sense of responsibility does Diana feel about keeping the background facts true?

"Bear in mind that I fretted about dates and such when I didn't think *anyone* would ever read the book; I was writing it for practice," Diana said. "It seems to me that a historical novelist has considerable responsibility for accuracy – not merely to the contemporary readers, but to the people and times of the past. (And I was also a scientist by profession when I began writing, and had been one for some time; accuracy, clarity, and meticulous documentation were reflexive skills, not a struggle.)

"Beyond a sense of ethics, though, there's a very pragmatic reason for being as accurate as possible; maintaining a high degree of accuracy in the recognizable details of the story induces a high degree of belief in the reader. Which means that you lead them along by the hand, lull them into a willing suspension of disbelief – and when you jump off a cliff, they'll happily go right along with you. I can make people believe in the plausibility of time-travel and the inherent 'truth' of this particular story, in good part *because* the historical background and the smaller details of daily life are meticulously rendered."

Editor George Forbes and I often wonder why the history of our wee country should have such global uniqueness. Diana, without the bias that Scottish blood might bring, had a perceptive answer for us.

"It has very tough, very stubborn people with a vibrant social and oral tradition, would be my guess! Which is to say that I'm sure all cultures are unique in their own ways. However, one unique aspect of Scottish history is the massive emigrations of its people that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite the hardships, a huge number of those emigrants survived, and thus also insured the survival and global spread of their traditions, their stories, their culture, and their history – to all of which they clung tenaciously – in a way that few other cultures could match."

Interest in the worthies of Scots history grows year upon year. Diana's home city of Scottsdale in Arizona has its own Caledonian Society, one of the many organisations

around the planet who keep alive the culture and customs of Scotland's people. Why do Scots heroes and villains of times past have such enduring appeal?

"Well, the kilts have a lot to do with it, of course..." Diana said, "No, really, it's the high-stakes conflict, I think (most of the Really Interesting heroes and villains of Scottish history were not in fact kilt-wearers, being Lowlanders for the most part). Conflict is the heart of any story, and you'd be hard-pressed to find a place with more historical conflict per square inch (both on the collective and the individual level) than Scotland. Nowadays, everyone thinks of kilts and Highlanders as 'Scotland' – but of course this is not the case. The Lowlands and Highlands were very distinct cultural entities, and – 'Braveheart' and Mel Gibson notwithstanding – William Wallace did *not* wear a kilt, let alone woad. Ditto Robert the Bruce.

"Whether Highlands or Lowlands, though, Scots have always exhibited a flair both for individuality and color – they're story-telling cultures, both in terms of the Highlands' rich oral tradition, and the Lowlands' remarkable literary heritage of the 19th and 20th centuries. In this regard, I must tell a story about a trip to Edinburgh, soon after my third book had been published. I went into a Menzies' bookshop, and was delighted to find that my books were prominently displayed in the "Scottish Fiction" section. Scots being justifiably proud of their literary heritage, Scottish bookshops have 'Fiction'—and then they have '*Scottish* Fiction.' Anyway, (having introduced myself) I said to the manager that I was very gratified at this propinquity to Sir Walter Scott, Lady Antonia Fraser, and Robert Louis Stevenson. To which he replied, "Well, GuhBALDun is such an odd name, we thought it might quite well be Scottish!"

"It's actually a Spanish name—and my own, not my husband's. The point, though, is that if you did anything at all notable in Scotland, chances were that someone would immortalize you in song or story.

"Beyond that... I think it may have something to do with two prominent aspects of Scottish culture (particularly Highland culture) through the ages, these being Kinship and Doom. The clan system itself is particularly compelling, with its tradition of loyalty and self-sacrifice (and its interesting parallels to the Native American tribal cultures; there's a reason why Scottish immigrants often lived with and intermarried with Indians)—people are always intrigued by the notion of people living for something greater than themselves. At the same time—*vide* 'Conflict,' above—owing to the aforementioned stubbornness inherent in the national character, Scots have historically been unable to subordinate their own interests in order to work together. Consequently, the history of Scotland is rife with treachery, betrayal, murder, and a lot of other unpleasant things that make for excellent story-telling."

Diana's first 'Outlander' novel begins in the Highlands after World War II and in the year 1743. It's always a surprise to new readers that the author did not actually visit Scotland until the manuscript was accepted by a publisher. I asked Diana if anything in that book would be different had she come to Scotland before its completion.

"Well, I'd know what Loch Ness smelled like!" was Diana's intriguing answer. "With the advent of modern travel, Scotland is fortunately very accessible as well as very beautiful. Consequently, there's a huge quantity of visual as well as textual material easily available. So finding out what Scotland looks like – in great detail – isn't really difficult. By the same token, owing to the rugged terrain and relatively sparse population, Scotland's appearance really hasn't altered all that much over the centuries, with a few notable exceptions such as the hydroelectric dams and lochs done in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the reforestation projects. It's not that hard, in other words, to find out what Scotland probably looked like in the 18th century. Still, most 18th century accounts, such as Dr. Johnson's famous journal of his visit to the Highlands, don't go into

much detail regarding the olfactory components, with the exception of noting that most crofts are smoky; still less, the modern tourism material. And there are always going to be things that you find out on the ground (as it were) that you wouldn't think to look for in the research.

"That being so, when my agent sold 'Outlander' to a UK publisher, I said to him, *'For God's sake, tell them to get a Scot to read it; I've never actually been there!'* So they got Reay Tannahill – a marvellous historical novelist in her own right, as well as an excellent historian. Reay kindly read the manuscript and drew my attention to several small errors – nothing major, thank goodness – including my description of the smell of Loch Ness, which I'd based on the general impressions of bodies of water I was familiar with. Reay had, of course, actually been to Loch Ness, and was able to tell me what it really did smell like. Luckily, I was able to insert most of her corrections into the US version of the manuscript, though it had already gone through the copy-editing process.

"One error that I *wasn't* able to correct was the starting date of the book. In my general ignorance at the time of writing, I'd just checked for the official end of WWII, and plugged that date in at the beginning of the book: 1945. But as Reay pointed out, *'That may have been the end of the war for you Yanks, but the British armed forces didn't all just demobilize and go home the day after.'* She told me that war-time conditions, with rationing, etc. actually lasted for quite some time after the conclusion of hostilities, and that the conditions I was describing in the beginning of the book would have been much more characteristic of 1946 than of 1945. *'Great!'* I said, and called up the US editor with my list of changes. They let me make all the changes, except that one...

"Anyway, when my agent called to tell me that he'd sold my book and had got a three-book contract for me, I said to my husband, *'Well, I think I really must go and see the place.'* So we parked the kids with my parents, flew to London, rented a car and drove

north. I still remember standing on the Bar, in front of a white stone monolith that has 'England' carved on one side, 'Scotland' on the other, looking out over this vast, undulating green countryside, rolling up and up before me, and thinking simply, 'Home'."

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***Read the second part of our interview with Diana Gabaldon
in next month's feature "LOOKING FOR LALLYBROCH"
in which we hear of Drumossie Moor, the 'Outlander' tours,
and the talk of a book-based film***