

A Grave Sin

We were heading West from Dumfries towards the Irish Sea and I was driving fast, hoping to reach our destination before the onslaught of the storm that was travelling up the coast towards Galloway. I wanted my passengers to see the Isle of Whithorn that evening, before the daylight faded. My earlier visits had been made alone, tracing my ancestors, but this time my wife and my three adult children were with me. I wanted them to love the place as I did.

We took the lower road along the coast of the Solway Firth and at last we reached the outskirts of Newton Stewart, where we turned south onto the peninsula known as The Machars, which has the Isle of Whithorn at its tip. I was watching the sky to the south-west, just as my forebears must have done; the weather always came from that quarter.

The view beyond the dry stone walls on either side of the narrow road was of undulating green fields with sheep and cattle grazing. My family had gained its livelihood from this land for hundreds of years. I was stepping back in time, as I always did once the trunk road was left behind. The horizon that I could still make out in the failing light was the extent of the world that my ancestors knew. I was imagining a life lived within those limits.

Ahead of us the sky was being overtaken by dark clouds. We passed Wigtown and the first heavy drops of rain hit the windscreen. The storm was going to reach Whithorn before us.

My researches into our ancestry, carried out sporadically over many years, had aroused some interest in my children and they had all been eager to make this trip. But this evening, after a long day's travel, they had other concerns. Andrew, the oldest, was worrying about mobile phone coverage in this extremity of the Scottish mainland. He needed to keep in touch with his workplace and the signal was already getting weaker. Janet was hoping that these few days would provide material for her exhibition of paintings later in the year, in London. Her landscapes were always bright and cheery and this weather was not what she had hoped for. Alex, the youngest, had joined us in Manchester after an all-night party and he was asleep. Grace, my wife, a reluctant traveller, was beginning to wish she was back at home in front of the television.

The Isle of Whithorn used to be narrowly separated from the mainland, but it is not easy now to identify where the division was. The harbour is a natural bay. This evening the tide was out and the boats were resting on the mud. Rain was falling heavily when we reached the bed and breakfast establishment at which we had booked, the only one on the Isle. The interior of dark varnished wood and gloomy wallpaper, together with the fierce aspect of our landlady, brought comments about 'Psycho' from my children, but I assured them there was nothing to fear – the Galloway folk were a dour race.

We installed ourselves in our chilly bedrooms and set off for the only pub, on the other side of the harbour. The sight of sandbags across the doorways of the cottages we passed was not reassuring. It was blowing a gale now and we clung onto each other, our combined weight matching the force of the wind. Grace had seen enough and was demanding, "Where's the station? I'm going home!" As we got nearer to the inn a burly man, clad from head to foot in oilskins, tramped steadily past us, leaning into the wind. He could see we were visitors and he shouted the encouraging message: "It gets much worse!"

Spirits were not high as we filed into the saloon bar, but that soon changed; it was a welcoming establishment. Our wet coats were spread over radiators, drinks were provided and we settled to hear a group of local musicians playing Celtic music.. Perhaps fortune was with us after all. Maybe this had been the most appropriate introduction to the Isle. I should let the holiday find its own course and not try to write the script.

That was my resolve, but once we were warm and comfortable in the bar Andrew said, “OK Pa, tell us what we’re looking for.”

“Tombstones,” put in my daughter. She reminded us of an occasion when Grace, asked about my absence, had replied: “John’s gone off grave-digging again.”

Searching the past was, in those days, mostly a matter of record books and gravestones; you couldn’t do it at home in front of a computer. I wanted to excite their imagination and later I would regale them with stories of smugglers and legends of witches, but now I answered: “You could say it’s a quest for a Saint and a Sinner.” I paused to let them take in that notion. “I suggest we split into two groups, go off in different directions tomorrow and then pool our findings in the evening. Who wants to look for the Saint?”

“What does it involve?” asked young Alex. The lashing of the storm had brought him back to life.

“Walking and weather, mostly.”

“That’s for me.” Alex was a walker; no distance would defeat him.

“Janet, you could do the Saint too,” I said, “You’ll find some interesting things to draw. Might give you a theme for your exhibition.”

“So if you two are the saints, then I’m the sinner,” said Andrew. “Who am I looking for?”

“Your great, great grandfather - bit of an old rogue from what I’ve gathered. I’ll come with you and we’ll drive up the coast to Stranraer. I’ve done the record office and picked up the dates and so on, but we could see what the library has. The local paper has been indexed and that might throw up something. Also, they’ve transcribed a lot of the graveyard inscriptions.” Andrew was the one with a mind for detail; the records would excite his interest. “It’ll be a nice drive and we can pass by the family farm on the way back.”

“What was his name, this sinner?” Andrew asked.

“Peter.”

“And the Saint?” This was Janet.

“Ninian – the first preacher of the Christian faith in Scotland. What about you Grace - fancy a trip to Stranraer?” I knew she wouldn’t join the walkers.

“No, thank you. I’m going to sit right here with a coffee and my book. That seat over there in the window will do me nicely.”

We had a meal and the wind had dropped a little by the time we returned to our lodgings.

The morning dawned overcast and drizzling. From our breakfast table in the bay window we could see the whole village. The tide had filled the harbour and the wind was evident as we watched the little boats straining against their moorings. After a good Scottish breakfast we got in the car and set off up the coast, leaving Grace to walk round the harbour to the pub. We dropped Janet and Alex, equipped with a map and a book about Saint Ninian, after about five miles and then continued along the shore of Luce Bay towards Stranraer.

In the evening we were back in the pub. Our coats, that had never properly dried out, were once more on the radiators. Alex, the keen walker, was the only one properly equipped for this weather. I looked at the faces of the others. The Saint-seekers looked uplifted I thought, though maybe it was just the bracing effects of wind and rain. My fellow searcher after sins seemed excited – we had some results to report. Grace, too, said she had gleaned some knowledge.

I reckoned that the misdeeds of our ancestor might sound even seedier if we first heard about the Saint, so I suggested that Andrew begin by summarising our findings from the record books.

“Well, Peter and his wife Janet, our great, great grandparents and their six children moved to Glasserton, just up the road here, from a farm across the bay in Kirkmaiden. That was in 1846. We discovered from the birth records that the mother of the youngest two, Andrew and Alexander as it happens,” here he smiled at his brother, “was his wife’s cousin Isabella. Janet brought them all up as her own. That’s not all, though. Two years before the move he fathered a child, Samuel, by a lady in Kirkmaiden. This boy died there, soon after the family had moved away. On hearing the news, Peter erected a monument to him, not back in the parish where he was buried, but right here in Glasserton, at the church that he and his family must have started to attend.”

“Good God,” my daughter exclaimed. “Poor Janet. What did she think about that?”

“Exactly,” Andrew continued, “And he had fathered another two way back before he was married. We called on the local Minister and he showed us the old records of the Parish Council. Unmarried people who misbehaved like that were made to sit in a special pew for several Sundays and it was all put in the book. The sinners were usually farmers’ sons and live-in maids.”

“Doesn’t look as if the disgrace reformed him much,” Janet said.

“No. Anyway that’s his story.”

“And how was the phone signal up in Stranraer?” Alex asked with a cheeky grin.

“Perfect.”

Before I could turn to Janet and Alex for their findings Grace cut in. “The landlord told me all about the saint. Ninian was the son of a local chief. He trained in Rome and then came back here to preach to the heathens. I’ve been to where he built the first church. It’s just up behind us here. A lovely spot – you can see for miles.”

“I know – the Candida Casa, it’s called,” Alex put in. “We’ve been to the cave up the coast where he used to retreat when he felt the need. It’s really spooky. Fresh water drips in from the roof and there are Christian signs carved in the stone. I sat there and meditated while Janet did her drawings.”

“You had a good kip, more likely,” said Andrew.

“We went on to the town of Whithorn – the Royal Burgh it’s called,” Janet informed us. “It’s about four miles from here. That’s where the Priory was. It’s about the deadest little place you could imagine. The road that runs through it is all there is.”

“I know, it’s sad. But it wasn’t always like that,” I told them. “I read in one book that it ‘went to sleep in the year 1581 and hasn’t stirred since.’ It seems that pious pilgrimages were forbidden at the time of the Reformation. But before that the place was booming, with processions of Kings and Queens and nobles and great figures of the Church riding into the Burgh to worship at the shrine of Saint Ninian.”

We had another convivial evening and were joined by a retired farmer, known as Mac, and by the landlord, Douglas. They had taken an interest in our discussions of saints and sinners. Douglas, having a go at Mac as well as our ancestors, said, “The farmers were all in on the smuggling, you know, back in the seventeen hundreds. If a cargo of contraband arrived from the Isle of Man they would all down tools and unload it – wines and spirits, tobacco, silks and suchlike. They would stash it into a cave and transport it later to the eventual buyers. A profitable business for all concerned. Don’t think your lot were all just honest tillers of the soil.”

“Aye,” Mac replied, “the people were all on the side of the law-breakers. I’ll tell you a true story that happened in the bay here.” We listened expectantly. “A lugger, laden with illicit goods was heading for the Glasserton coast. It was somewhere near the Mull when it was surprised by the Revenue cutter. The smugglers were ordered to heave to, but they ignored the order and set every inch of canvas, hoping to get away. The captain of the Government vessel, under as much sail as he could muster, set off in pursuit. He was gaining steadily on the smugglers. But then he saw them put into the harbour here at the Isle, so he shortened sail and came in slowly. He knew the chase was over. His prey was cornered. You can imagine his surprise when he found there was no sign of a lugger in the harbour. The narrow channel that used to divide the Isle from the mainland could be used by wee boats as a kind of rear exit from the harbour. No one dreamt that a lugger of that size would try it. But the tide was high, and with a fresh breeze and full sail the smugglers’ captain made a run for it and got away. The local seamen went to look once the tide was out. The keel of the lugger had left a deep track a hundred yards long in the shingle. There was some rejoicing in the bar here that night, I’m sure.”

The next morning Grace remained at the Isle and the rest of us piled into the car and headed for the church in Glasserton. Janet said, “I wonder if I could somehow integrate the idea of saint and sinner in the paintings. I’ll need to find some images to represent the sinner, though.”

At the graveyard we split up to search for the stone with Samuel’s name on it. It had stopped raining for the first time since we arrived. It was Andrew who spotted it and we gathered round. It was not a simple stone, but an obelisk. The base was still in place, but the other two parts were separated from it. An inscribed and heavy oblong block was on its side, embedded in the earth, and the tapered top of the monument was lying some distance away. The sandstone had weathered, but we could make out the words: “Erected by Peter McClure in memory of his son Samuel who died on 12th November 1846 aged 2years and 11 months and was interred in Kirkmaiden Church Yard.”

Andrew said, “Give us a hand, Alex. See if we can lift this.” The stone wouldn’t budge, but we found a stout fence post, and with that as a crowbar we got the block upright. As we scraped the mud away from the side that had been obscured we saw that there was another inscription. Alex slowly read out the words as they became clear:

“Also Janet Jamieson the beloved wife of Peter McClure who departed this life 18th August 1872 aged 69 years.”

“Good God! How shameful is that?” Janet exclaimed. “The old devil. Poor old Janet, she really deserved better than that. She brings up the children he fathered with her cousin; then, when she dies he doesn’t give her a stone of her own, he just adds her to the memorial for the boy he fathered with another of his mistresses.”

“There’s more.” Alex was still scraping and reading. “It says: ‘Also the erector Peter McClure’...it gives his details, age and so on, and then, here below: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.’ Redemption for the old sinner.”

“What’s that sign there?” Andrew asked, “down at the very bottom.”

Janet leant nearer. “Let me see.” She crouched on the wet grass. “Oh no! That’s the symbol in Ninian’s cave. It’s called the Chi Rho – they’re the first two letters of Christ, in Greek. There was something magical about it, when we saw it there, in that setting. But here.....”