

The Road to the Isles

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In this series:

The Stained Family Tree (2007-2008)

The Marlets' Nest (2008)

Also by this author:

Sgeulachd Castle (2003)

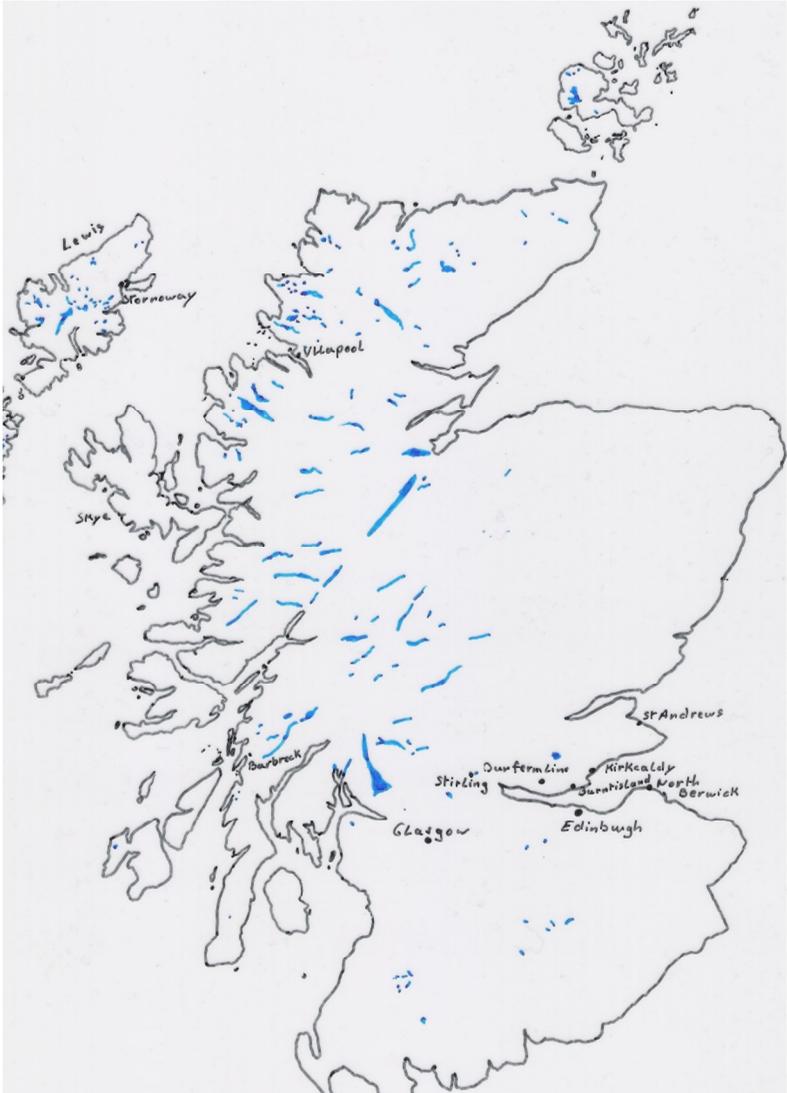
The Short Grioghal (2005)

The Beauty of Braemore (2007)

The Quarterer & the Lengor (2009)

The Heir to Pictavia (2011)

For my wife



The world of Alex and Kenneth

Tuesday, 4 November

Everything seems to have spiralled since I moved out of Alex and Julie's place two weeks ago, as if things have finally caught up with me, six years late, or twelve years late. When did this mess start really? When I sent that virus through the university mail and accused Alex of being a lesbian rapist? Or when my father murdered my sister Keira for coming out after which he told me she committed suicide because she had been raped by a lesbian? Or did it start even earlier? My mother can't blame her alcohol and pill abuse on my father, even though the hypocrite always silently condoned it. My mother's been an alcoholic for as long as I can remember. So where did things start?

I know when it changed though, like I realise only full well when and especially why I finally lost control. The moment I asked my neighbour if he could help me compile my family tree and he then turned to his "professor", I inadvertently handed my entire universe to the very person who would transform it completely. The formerly lesbian rapist made it explode and next an array of stars started to shine their lights on me: from Matt and Morris and especially Siobhan over black-belted Val to the entire spectrum of people circling around my leading lights – Julie and Alex. Alex tore down the shutters around my claustrophobic mini-world and Julie caught me when the panorama terrified me. Alex kept opening roads, building bridges and knocking down walls, until I had the entire world at my feet and I could roam at last.

Except I'm not ready to roam on my own; I don't even like roaming. I want a clear sense of direction... and a guide. God knows I need a guide. I need Alex' guidance, Julie's comfort, their parental advice. I feel that I lost all of that when I moved back into my own house in Dunfermline and since then the sequence of events keeps knocking me down, like domino blocks tumbling down and battering against my disorderly state of mind. I can't handle things anymore. I'm not handling things at all right now. Not my mother suddenly trying to worm her way back into my life by phoning at work; not the lousy situation at the office where I've been given the most shitty jobs for the past weeks, because I refuse to give them an interview with Alex, her uncle the Earl or her biological father Matt; not the sniggering of my boss when he threw my article on the murders on the Barbreck estate on my desk and said it was rubbish; not the pride of John when he announced he would be defending his doctoral thesis next

January... and that his boyfriend was moving in with him before Christmas; not even Siobhan's instinctive giggling when I asked her if she would move in with me now.

I'm not handling any of it, none of it. I'm angry with Mum for phoning me when drunk; I'm bored stiff at the office; I'm gutted the article about my ancestor is rejected; I'm envious of John for gaining his PhD in history, and frustrated beyond reason that I only have myself to blame that I am not; I feel like an idiot for asking Siobhan to move back to Dunfermline, when I know she's just fled the safety of her parents to stand on her own two feet. I miss being around Alex and Julie. I miss watching television with Julie in the living room and the time we spent talking in the kitchen. I really miss sitting in Alex' study, me reading one of her books or articles with her working behind her desk. Sometimes she would just forget I was there and start humming. I didn't mind her humming. Matt says she must be extraordinarily at ease with me, because people with both Asperger's and ADHD rarely relax to the degree they will forget the presence of those around them and focus on work alone. But she could with me. When she wasn't working or reading and making notes, she would lead me along the corridors of her mind. I'd lie awake half the night rewinding the conversation and wake up in the morning still trying to grasp the depths she can travel. She can make one think. I love the fact she makes me think. I need the belief she thinks I'm worth that. After an anaesthetising day at the office, Alex brought my brain back to life.

Now I seem to have lost all of that. I lost my guidance. I lost my focus too.

I look at my book. I've been reading the same paragraph for at least the past fifteen minutes and still I have no idea what I'm reading. It's something with two Malcolms in both south and north Scotland and one of them succeeded Kenneth III and Kenneth II after slaying one of them. I'm reading the passage again. No, I'm not getting it. What's so difficult about it that my brain won't process this?

The bell rings. Saved by the bell.

Although, it could be Mum. She phoned me again today. Yesterday I was so astounded I simply hung up as soon as I heard her voice. "Kennie, my prince." I hate it when she says that. I'm not her prince. And if I am, why couldn't Keira be her princess then? Moreover, she's drunk when she calls me like that. I'm sure she was drunk yesterday, like she was when she called me again

this afternoon. “Kennie, my prince, I need to talk to you.” I told her to sod off a few months ago, a few days after my father had got himself killed after trying to kill Alex and me. Mum was denying what he had done to Keira, like she did again this afternoon. I asked her if she remembered Keira. “She committed suicide.” I simply hung up. I won’t talk to her unless she admits what happened. Besides, she should get sober first, and remember my proper name. I won’t invite her in either. If it’s Mum standing at the door, I’m not letting her in. I don’t have enough alcohol to quench her raging thirst. I don’t even have brandy in this house. Like Matt has a lifelong abhorrence of whisky after his childhood trauma, the thought of brandy immediately slaps me in the face, like my father did, when I told him I had found a bottle of brandy in my bedroom. She even hid her bottles in my bedroom. The hypocrite defended her. He defended a drunk; she’s still defending a murderer.

I turn on the light in the hallway and slowly walk towards the front door. I hope it’s not Mum. I can even handle John chattering about his PhD better than my mother’s drunken speech and glazy eyes.

I open the front door.

‘Alex?’

‘Hi, are you in the middle of something? I don’t want to disturb.’

She never does. I look outside. Their new car is parked just in front of the house, but Julie’s not in sight. They’re not often separated.

‘Couldn’t miss me?’ I tease her.

‘I won’t intrude. I’ll be off in a few minutes,’ she replies at once.

‘No, you won’t, Aspie Alex,’ I counter and drag her in.

‘Wow,’ she grumbles, ‘Don’t let Julie hear you. You’re not to mention the word Asperger’s.’

She carries her rucksack inside my living room.

‘And don’t talk about the wedding,’ she continues, ‘I mean, hello, does she know how much time it takes to prepare everything? And she should know I can’t handle this like this.’

Alex found out about her Asperger’s when Matt blurted it out, and Matt accidentally diagnosing someone doesn’t happen all that often, Morris admitted. “No wedding talk until New Year,” Julie and Morris dictated, after which Matt obviously couldn’t help himself. “That’s not fair, especially for Alex given her Asperger’s.”

Morris was merely surprised. Something rarely slips past Matt's safety net. But Julie rolled her eyes. "I have Asperger's?" Alex asked.

'She has to let me talk about it some time,' I hear Alex protesting.

This could be fun. She's in a grumbling mood. Exaggeration will feed her language, spiced up by sarcasm. I close the front door and follow her into the living room. She immediately sinks into a couch and buries her head between her shoulders.

'Julie said she's always known you had autistic traits,' I try.

'Well, I didn't!'

'Really?'

'Well, well, I don't know. Aye, Julie told me a couple of times that I had autistic traits, but I didn't want to believe her. I mean, hello, I'm gay, I'm adopted, I have ADHD... It's like I'm greedy. I don't know. Sometimes I imagine it went like this, you know. "Right, we have a female here, tiny figure, weak constitution, will nearly drown after birth, but will be saved by her adoptive family among whom she will stand out all her life, gay, ADHD... and Asperger's." "Sorry, mate, but isn't that a bit much for one individual?" "Aye, well, we'll make up with a beautiful and loving partner." "Oh, right." "But once or twice a year she'll have enough of her." "Once or twice." "Give or take." "Like once a year and twice in a leap year?" "Uh, twice a year then." Whatever.'

She throws her hands in the air. My right shoulder still can't manage that. I have weekly sessions with some professional butcher torturing me under the pretext of strengthening the muscles in my semi-ripped off arm. When Alex accused her brothers of "scarring" me for life, I had no idea life would take this long. But Alex is the last I'll be complaining to. She feels bad enough about it without me telling her. Sometimes I will catch her watching me as I try to do something previously painless, back in the pre-Alex era. Knowing what this painful shoulder led to though, I still believe it's a small price to pay, painful at times, but still perfectly acceptable.

'Fine,' she complains, 'I've known for some time that I had autistic traits. But now that I know that I actually have another label attached to my fucking person, I would like to vent it, you know.'

'And today is twice a year?' I ask.

'Today is definitely the day when I wore Julie out completely,' she grumbles.

'No more running around naked today?' I try to make her laugh.

Apparently my presence in the house sort of got in the way of her doing that.

'No, not even my naked bum can bring a smile on her face. She wants to be alone this evening, have a quiet evening.'

I get up and turn my stereo on. She won't be off in a few minutes, so I might as well make it a bit more comfortable. She will usually put the music on... to keep focused, oddly enough.

'Want something to drink?'

I don't drink on my own, my mother's image constantly petrifying me. With Alex around me, I have more faith in myself.

'Uh, aye, a wee one. Just a wee one. Still have to drive, you know.'

It's always wee ones with Alex, whether she has to drive or not.

'You get the glasses. I'll get the bottle from the cellar.'

She gets up and opens the cabinet. Meanwhile I get my bottle of Tobermory.

'Well, I did wear her out,' Alex confesses when I arrive in the living room again, 'Since you moved out, I spent every evening with her. She's been taping a whole lot of programmes since, because you know I can't watch that stuff, but you can only do so much zapping, right? It's just that I'm so bloody unfocused for the moment. There's too much going on in my head.'

'Such as...'

I pour us both a dram.

'Well, everything, my adoption, Matt, you...'

'But, but you spent nearly all your time upstairs when I was around, and I only left two weeks ago.'

'Hmm, well, you had a positive effect on me. I don't know. I managed to focus. I don't know. All I know is that I've spent the past two weeks in the seat and I've been driving the both of us mad. I don't have any specific projects right now and with John's thesis all done and everything...'

'Aye, he told me he handed it in yesterday.'

'Aye, well, I hope he thoroughly proofread it for spelling mistakes because I told him I don't have the right eye for that. Moreover, I know his thesis nearly by heart by now, so I should take some distance. I will not look at it for at least a month and then correct it, in time for his oral exam. But he should do fine.'

'Don't you have any other students?'

‘Aye, aye, but I’m on top of everything. Worse, I wish they would move on a bit.’

I take a sip and settle a bit more easily in my seat. It’s the first time Alex is in my house on her own. It feels very much like her and me sitting in her study. Except for the books.

‘What is it with students these days? It’s like they’re on holiday the entire year. You give them an essay to write and half of them asks for an extension of the deadline. It’s fucking November! I don’t do extensions!’

‘When is the “first” deadline?’

‘Friday. Fifteen students and six of them already asked for an extension, can you bloody believe it. The academic year’s barely started. And the doctoral theses I’m surveying... God, what a mess. It’s not because I’m unfocused that they have to take advantage of it.’

She wants to drink, but then puts her glass down and throws her hands in the air again.

‘I’m expecting a whole bunch of work next week, but now there’s nothing.’

Alex always has work to do. It’s the order of events she can’t handle.

‘Why don’t you... I mean, I know you told me you didn’t feel the need to trace your own family tree, but maybe...’

‘Kenneth,’ she interrupts me, ‘one neat line right to Robert the Bruce... and beyond. What is there to research?’

‘Really?’

‘Aye, really. Straight line from Marjorie Bruce and Walter the Steward. Fuck it.’

A historian cursing his ancestral link with one of Scotland’s greatest figures. Only Alex can do that. But indeed, little research needed if Robert the Bruce himself is your forefather. It’s easy to forget Matt is the brother of Lord James Stewart, Earl of Ardnoc. I would like to see that family tree though. Must be quite impressive to go back at least eight hundred years.

‘So much for family trees,’ she mutters and picks up her glass.

‘Anybody else you can pester?’

‘None for the moment,’ she states.

‘What about Yeva?’ I try.

‘Two Russian connections: World War I and the Crimean War. Because of their Russian roots, they have their family tree nicely researched, both ends, right until the late seventeenth century. Very impressive, you know.’

‘Hmm, I bet.’

She sighs, stares into her glass, swirls the malt, inhales the aroma and then lets the fluid reach her lips.

‘They’re still doing okay, Val and Yeva?’

‘As far as I know. No, they should be fine. We haven’t heard a lot from them, but I... Well, never mind.’

‘What?’

She’s hiding something from me, like when she contacted Yeva for the tattoo, when she tried to get Val and Yeva together, when she deliberately didn’t want me to know.

‘Give it a month, a month and a half at most, Kenneth.’

Her mouth is halfway between a careful smile and a grave face. I don’t understand. I guess I’ll simply have to wait.

She raises her glass again and drinks some more.

‘So, what were you doing?’

She’s pointing at my book.

‘Wrestling with two Malcolms and Kenneths II and III.’

‘Oh, aye, you’re stuck around the first millennium?’

I had expected at least some hesitation, a few seconds of deliberation on where to place kings ruling Scotland roughly a thousand years ago. But without the blink of an eye she can situate them.

‘Is there anything you don’t know?’ I fake disgust, ‘I thought you were supposed to be specialised in post-Union history?’

‘Ah, well, hmm, early Scottish history was my other favourite period. But... well, when I had to choose, I thought I already had so much insecurity in my own life and everything. I wasn’t with Julie yet. I had no idea where I came from. Moreover, I don’t speak Gaelic or Latin, so... No, I thought it was a safer and healthier choice for me to go for the post-Union area.’

‘You know, there’s a thousand years in-between early Scottish history and what you ultimately chose.’

Between Scots and Picts, and the modern era, there’s a long list of kings, all neatly following one another, with charters readable in old English. What an odd choice to go for the other end.

‘Aye, I know. But I don’t like the Normans,’ she sighs.

I burst out laughing. God, I missed this. I was so bloody down, but ten minutes with Alex and I’m laughing again.

‘I had to be a bloody Norman,’ she grumbles and then I spot a faint smile breaking through as well.

‘Most would be pleased, you know,’ I tease her, ‘Descended from the greatest Norman families. They came and conquered. The Normans ruled half of Europe... and beyond.’

‘Aye, and does that look like me? I don’t like them. They came and within a few decades at the most, they had wiped out the local nobility to govern themselves. And ours were horrible. God, I don’t like the Stuarts, any of them.’

She takes her glass again.

‘I’m some bloody Norman,’ she mutters, ‘getting kicked out of my own house by my wife.’

‘Here’s to the bloody Normans,’ I raise my glass and we toast.

‘If it makes you feel any better, I made a proper fool of myself yesterday as well.’

‘Oh, aye?’

I tell her about my silly behaviour around Siobhan.

‘Aye, well, that might be a wee bit early indeed. Matt says she needs to find her independence first.’

Here’s the rub. While Siobhan enjoyed a happy, pampered life with her fathers, I readily fled my parental house to live on my own. When I temporarily moved in with Alex and Julie though, I discovered something that I had never experienced before: a proper home. The warmth and familiarity rejuvenated me, but it awoke the child in me as well. I hate being on my own for the moment.

Alex puts her glass down.

‘Another one?’

‘No, no.’

‘Tonic?’

‘If you have some.’

‘It’s not even in the fridge, Alex,’ I say and get up, taking the bottle of whisky with me on my way to the cellar.

One dram, look Mum, just the one drink. That’s how you’re supposed to do it.

Alex gets up too and starts pacing my living room. When I return with two bottles of Tonic, I find her in front of my iPod.

‘How’s work?’ she asks before I can say anything.

‘Same,’ I lie and turn around.

I don’t want her to see my face right now. She calls me a bad liar on a good day.

‘Okay, that’s... uh, good then.’

Terribly. I don't know how many more page elevens I can fill with the nonsense I had to invent today, but I surely won't tell Alex that.

I get two fresh glasses and by the time I get back into the living room, Alex has returned to her seat again, where she unzips her rucksack. She gets a big brown envelope out.

'Uh, what I really came for...'

'Oh, so you didn't come because Julie kicked you out?'

Before she can even respond, I continue.

'Or because you wanted to drive your new car?'

They ordered it five months ago, but it was only delivered last week. They collected it last Friday and the three of us had a drive after that. Julie wouldn't take the wheel, no matter how much Alex insisted. Julie said she would drive the car when it was less busy. I bet Alex will find a time less busy to force Julie behind the wheel.

'No!' Alex stresses.

I put a glass in front of her.

'Oh, you did really miss me.'

Says the one missing her.

Momentarily she doesn't know what to say. But I'm pushing her. And I shouldn't.

'I'm teasing you, Alex,' I say right before she prepares to get up, 'I'm teasing you.'

'I don't want to intrude.'

'You're not intruding. Trust me, you're not intruding. I was just trying to read my book, which wasn't really working anyway. Seems you're not the only one unable to focus.'

'I can't read in the living room,' she immediately says, 'My study's a better environment for that.'

Her study is definitely the better place. Then again, I have a desk upstairs. I could get a comfortable armchair too and install myself like I did when I was at Alex' place. Except that I'm a bit short on cash for the moment. I hadn't exactly counted on me needing physiotherapy and the money my father left me I used to the last penny to pay Alex back for all the stuff I had bought to settle back into Dunfermline. I'm too bloody proud to ask for money. I know she wouldn't mind, but I do. I will save money by writing stupid articles and when I have enough money, I will buy that chair all by my stubborn self.

'That's not such a bad idea,' I nod, 'I have a study upstairs too. Thanks.'

She holds out the envelope.

'Your article,' she starts.

I sent it to Alex, mailing that it wasn't good enough to be published. According to my boss, I don't have the authority to write this anyway.

'Do you... I mean, can I...'

She's weighing her words.

'Alex, it's yours. You can do with it what you want. You can throw it in the dustbin; you can keep it; you can use it for whatever purpose. I don't know. If you want the rest of my pictures, let me know and I'll burn them on a disc for you.'

Maybe I do hope she's not going to throw away my work. If she could not just throw away the only decent thing I've written in the past month. It'd make me feel a little less useless. God knows I could do with some good news.

She's staring at the envelope; then she tries to look me in the eyes.

'Is that why... I mean, well, you didn't put your name on it.'

'No.'

I look down. I haven't told anyone about this, but I've been playing with it for some time.

'No, that's because... I'm thinking of changing my name,' I confess.

'A drastic change or just the one letter?'

I look up, dumbfounded. How can she be so spot on all of the time?

'How... How did you know?'

I'm sure I've never mentioned this, not even hinted this. I've never talked out loud about changing my name. Unless I'm talking in my sleep. I know I dream a lot. God, I hope I don't talk in my sleep.

'When we were researching your family tree, you said you had the feeling all dignity was robbed from your family when Donald MacFadyen was murdered. He was the last member of your forefathers to have his name spelled like that.'

I nod.

'Then it changed into MacFadden. One line of hypocrites... until Keira was murdered. It's enough for me. I don't want to be a MacFadden anymore,' I mutter, looking down again.

Will she think I'm a baboon again? An irresponsible lad using silly tricks to hide my revolting past? I know it's an odd way of trying to come to terms with my family situation, but the idea

keeps popping up and its determination to linger and leave a bigger mark every time, is something I cannot deny.

‘Have you talked to Matt yet?’

‘Why do I need to talk to Matt?’ I burst out, ‘This is not a spur of the moment thing. I’ve been thinking about this for quite some time and I don’t want to talk to Matt like I need to be...’

When I look up though, I find Alex patiently waiting for me to cool down.

‘Can you get off your high horse now?’ she calmly speaks, ‘I just told you that I know you’ve been playing with the idea for some time and you react like a school lad who’s been sent to the headmaster. I just meant that you could talk to Matt because Morris is changing his surname too. So if you need advice on what to do, they should know.’

‘Oh, oh, right. Sorry about that.’

She drops the envelope in her rucksack. I’m still the same as when we met four months ago. She’s the trigger to a whirlwind of emotions. She’s the only one who does that to me.

‘I thought you liked talking to Matt.’

I prefer talking to the one getting me on my high horse so easily. I still shrug.

‘I misunderstood. Sorry. I didn’t know what you thought about the idea; that’s all. I thought you wanted Matt to talk me out of it. And I don’t... I don’t... want to be talked out of it. I hope... I was hoping you would maybe understand why.’

‘Well, I’m not against it, if it matters at all how I feel about it.’
Aye, it does.

‘I mean, it’s your choice, and yours alone. I’m a Higgins now and I’ll be one after Julie and I get married... if we’re going to get married, because Julie sure thinks she’ll be arranging everything in a few months. Julie’s not going to change her name either. I don’t want her to either. She’s been my mermaid for the past twenty years and I’d like to keep it that way. But Morris has his heart set on becoming MacMurtrie following the wedding, so there you go. Another member for the MacMurtrie clan.’

She gets up again. I obviously picked the wrong music for her active mood today.

‘You know that the MacMurtries are a sept of the Stewarts, so all in all, Matt kept his link with his brother, be it that he probably didn’t know that at the time.’

She walks towards the iPod again.