
Opening Extract from...

Gallowglass

Written by Gordon Ferris

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GALLOWGLASS

GORDON FERRIS

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For Sarah

Gallowglass (Gaelic: *gallóglaigh*):
An elite Scottish mercenary warrior

'The merciless Macdonald,
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him, from the Western isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied.'

Macbeth, Act I, Scene II
William Shakespeare

PROLOGUE

He was dead. It was announced in his own newspaper, the *Glasgow Gazette*. Instead of the usual crime column, there was a brief editorial. It described the tragic death of their chief crime reporter and staunchly defended him against the unproven charge of murder. It was a brave stance to take, given the public outcry and the weight of evidence against him.

Finally and conclusively, his death was confirmed in the tear-streaked faces of the women by the fresh-dug grave. It was spelled out in chiselled letters on the headstone, glistening oil-black in the drizzle:

Douglas Brodie

Born 25 January 1912
Died 26 June 1947

'A man's a man for a' that.'

In the circumstances there were only four mourners: two women and two men. Of the black-garbed women, the taller held an umbrella aloft in two hands. Only the tufts of blonde hair on a pale neck showed beneath the hat and veil. She sheltered her smaller companion: a veiled and stooped figure clutching a bible and dabbing at her face with a lace hankie.

Alongside was a human water feature: one man clutching the handles of a wheelchair while rain cascaded off his hat on to the rubberised cape of the man in the chair.

Bit players lurked off stage. A man and a boy leaning on their shovels in a wooden bothy, staring despondently at the mound of earth as it grew heavier and more glutinous by the minute. Further down the green slope, a man in the dog collar of the Church of Scotland, scuttling for home, dreaming of a hot toddy after his desultory oration by the graveside. It had taken some persuasion even to get Douglas Brodie consigned to this cemetery. There had been an embarrassed debate with the kirk and Kilmarnock corporation about using a Christian burial site for the interment of a man who'd committed two mortal sins: murder *and* suicide. But Agnes Brodie's quiet insistence was not easily denied.

The two women had had enough. They turned and started to shuffle their way back down the path towards the metal gate in the high sandstone wall. They clutched each other for support on the wet gravel. The standing man birled the wheelchair round and fell in behind the women. Pusher and passenger struggled with brake and shoe leather to keep the chair straight and stop it careering down the slope. Behind them the straight rows of stones marched towards the horizon of lush green Ayrshire hills.

Their transport was waiting, chugging out a pall of grey smoke into the dank air, wipers thumping back and forth like a metronome. For the needs of the mourners, they'd hired a converted Bedford van, painted black, with windows and two rows of facing seats. It took a while and considerable manoeuvring to get the four ensconced on the benches and the chair crammed into the rear. Once seated, they were off into the steady downpour. They closed the window between themselves and the driver and were free to talk.

'Are you all right, Agnes?' said Samantha Campbell. 'It's over now. We can get on.'

Agnes Brodie sniffed and wiped her nose and eyes with her hankie.

'Ah never thought Ah'd see the day. It's not right for a son to go before his mother.'

Sam patted her hand and turned to the men sitting facing them.

'You're drookit, the pair of you. I hope you haven't overdone it, Wullie. Can you get that cape off him, Stewart? Dry out a bit?'

She reached to help him pull it over his head and drop it on the floor. The smell of wet rubber tanged the air. His face was blanched and he took in two shuddering breaths to settle himself.

'That's better. Thanks, hen.'

'I said you shouldn't have come. You're barely out of hospital.'

'I'm fine, lassie.' To prove his fitness, Wullie McAllister, sometime doyen of crime reporting at the *Glasgow Gazette*, reached into his jacket, pulled out his pack of Craven A, lit up and drew luxuriously on his cigarette. Stewart, his companion, slid a window open an inch.

'Ah should have brought a half-bottle,' Wullie said wistfully. 'Will you be having a wee bit of a wake? Raise a glass to him? Even though we're so few.'

Sam and Agnes exchanged glances.

'Surely we should get you straight home? Get you into dry clothes?' asked Sam.

'Inner warmth. That's what Ah need.'

Sam smiled at Agnes and lifted an eyebrow. 'Of course, Wullie. A dram it is. And I've got some soup on the go as well.'

They were quiet for a bit, then Agnes spoke.

'Such a poor turnout, as well.'

'You can hardly blame them, Agnes. We asked for privacy in the *Gazette* and the *Kilmarnock Standard*.'

'Ah suppose so, Samantha. A' the same.'

Wullie flourished his fag at the thought. 'He wouldnae have wanted a fuss. You know what Brodie's like.'

Stewart joined in. 'They all wanted to come from the *Gazette*. Wullie talked them out of it. Said he'd represent them.'

Sam nodded. 'And I was approached by half the synagogue at Garnethill. You know what Douglas did for them. I said it just wasn't right. It would have felt wrong somehow.'

Agnes persisted. 'Not even his old regiment. There should have been a piper.'

Wullie blew out smoke. 'Mrs Brodie, funerals are dreich enough affairs without "The Flowers of the Forest" making our ears bleed.'

Again, silence left them with their thoughts all the way across the sodden Fenwick Moors and back on to the rain-lashed streets of Glasgow. It was only as they began the climb up to Park Terrace and Sam's home that Wullie spoke.

'Ah'll fair miss him, so Ah will.' He unfurled a huge white hankie and gave his nose a good blow.

Sam pursed her lips. She reached out and touched his hand.

'Wullie, I have a confession—'

'Wheesht, hen, Ah know you blame yourself.'

She hesitated as the car drew to a halt by the kerb. She nodded.

'You're right. It would never have happened if he'd got through to me that night.'

Agnes shook her head. 'You cannae blame yourself, Samantha. Douglas wouldn't have listened to you anyway. He was as stubborn as his faither.'

'I might have persuaded him. It could have turned out differently . . .'

ONE

It was as if I'd had a blood transfusion. Or perhaps it was just the warm June sun on my brow after the longest, coldest winter in Scottish records. Rising with first light, strolling through Kelvingrove Park down the winding paths lined with new-minted leaves. Then across to the Western Baths Club to carve out spluttering lengths in the great echoing hall. Something was making my blood sing, as though – and I scarcely dared hope – I'd finally emerged from festering anger and self-pity.

They say the best blades are toughened by heat and hammering. Time and again over the past eight years I'd been fired in the furnace, pounded flat, and quenched. In blood. I was at last rising from the dust of the African campaign, the damp of the Ardennes, and the soul-shrivelling scenes from the death camps. Last month, in merry May, a line had been drawn in my personal ragged history when the death penalties had been carried out on the Nazi overseers of Ravensbrück. It was as if the hangman had performed an exorcism with every pull on his lever.

Or maybe it was the couple of sessions I'd had with a head doctor. Sam had cajoled me into seeing the husband of an old pal of hers: Dr Andrew Baird. There was no couch, no tweed and pipe, no inkblot tests or unravelling of my childhood. Baird – about my own age, intense and engaging – was even prepared to come to me. We sat in Sam's library,

each nursing a glass of whisky, while he gently plied me with questions.

'When the war ended you were commanding a company of Seaforth Highlanders?'

'I'd been given Acting Major. We'd fought our way from Normandy to Bremen.'

'But you didn't come home with them?' he said casually, taking off his specs and cleaning them on his tie.

'Sam's briefed you well.' I smiled. 'No, I studied languages at Glasgow before the war, French and German. The top brass found out and I was assigned to sift Nazi goats from Wehrmacht sheep and send the former off to military courts.'

'Harrowing?'

'They weren't nice people. They'd done bad things.'

'You saw?'

'Yes. Belsen.'

He nodded. 'When did they let you come home?'

'November '45.'

'Back here?'

I shook my head. 'Couldn't face it. All too . . . normal, somehow. I just needed time off. I was demobbed in London and hung around there for a few months.'

'Doing?'

'Drinking mainly.' I hefted my glass and swilled its golden contents. 'Then I began pulling myself together. Started getting work as a reporter.'

'When did the nightmares start?'

'Oh, mid '45, I suppose. It figures, doesn't it?'

'Yes. Very typical. I'm seeing a lot of men like you, Douglas. They called it shell shock in the Great War. Now it's combat stress, or battle fatigue. But you know what I'm talking about?'

'I was fine during the battles, Doc.' I smiled again.

'That's how it works. We're only just appreciating how deep the trauma runs when a man is subjected to horror on a

continual basis, such as war, or recurring acts of violence. Seems like you received more than your fair share.'

We met for a second time a week later and I told him about my recent experience of getting dragged into the hunt for the war criminals who'd used Scotland as a staging post to South America.

'And this January you ended up in Hamburg with Samantha. Back in uniform?'

'Ridiculous, wouldn't you say?'

'Asking a lot of a chap, I'd say. And the nightmares began again.'

'They never really stopped.'

'While the drinking got worse.'

'Never really stopped either, Andrew. But, yes, I suppose I was hitting the bottle a bit harder.'

'Is that when you . . .?'

'Cracked up? I'm not afraid of the term. I've seen it in some of my men. I was exhausted. We'd been in Hamburg for weeks. A city of rubble. An ice city. Minus thirty degrees. I was questioning the same swine about the same foul deeds. An endless loop. Into the bargain, I lost a good man. A soldier. Between the booze and the . . .'

'Trauma?'

'Is that what it was? I suppose so. But, yes, I fell apart for a bit. But I'm through that, Doc. As you can see.' I raised my glass in a toast.

He looked at me over the top of his specs. 'So it seems, Douglas. So it seems. Good for you. But I must warn you that even the toughest finds it hard to shake it off completely. It could take a while.'

'Months?'

'Years. They saw a lot of this after the last war. Some chaps never got it back together. Nothing to be ashamed of. It's like a leg wound that never quite heals.'

'That's comforting. Are you saying I could crack up again?'

'Let's say you should avoid situations that could trigger a relapse.'

'Makes sense. No more chasing war criminals. I'm all for the quiet life.'

He gave me one of his looks again. 'That's another thing. Douglas, you've been in action of one sort or another since you went to France in '39 with the British Expeditionary Force. That's nigh on eight years of fighting. And before that you had a tough job as a Glasgow policeman. It is astonishing what the mind can get used to. How many jolts it can take. It becomes natural to the point where the mind misses it when things are quiet. Begins to *need* it.' He paused. 'Do you get bored easily?'

'Wish I had the chance!'

'Watch out for it when you do. Let's keep in touch, Douglas.'

I promised I would, but in truth I was feeling more and more that I was back in control of my life. Sure, grief and anger still rose in me like bile when I walked across Glasgow Bridge into the Gorbals and passed the Great Synagogue. But as my loss moved to the background like a nagging toothache, I found myself sleeping better, and drinking and smoking less. I'd been given new responsibilities at the *Gazette* and even my relationship with Samantha Campbell seemed to have moved on to a surer footing. Sam was winning most of her cases at the bar, although it took her to Edinburgh every day and some nights. More, her chambers had hinted at some relaxation in their stance on married women taking silk. Perhaps I could make an honest woman of her before we were both too old for it to matter.

Capping it all, my erstwhile mentor and drinking pal Wullie McAllister had broken from his dwam, like Rip Van Winkle, and was now his former cantankerous self, albeit wheelchair-bound while his unused muscles – mental and physical – got working again. I heard that the ward sister in the Erskine convalescent home had come to his room

wondering what all the noise was and found Wullie roaring and shouting and banging his bedpan. As though some Scottish Frankenstein had jolted a monster back into life. The day we got the phone call from Stewart, Sam and I leaped into her Riley and drove out to Erskine. We found him sitting up in bed behind a newspaper, fag in mouth, with a pile of discarded papers on the floor. After our squawking reunion had subsided he demanded to know everything that he'd missed.

'What was your last memory, Wullie?' I asked across his ash-stained blanket.

'Getting hit ower the heid by that bastard – sorry, hen – Charlie Maxwell. His goons grabbed me from behind and chloroformed me as I was coming oot the pub. See, if it had been a fair fight . . .'

'You'd have slaughtered them, Wullie. I know. Sam and I found you in the stables at his castle. They gave you a good hiding. Do you remember that?'

He screwed up his face. 'Bits. Those sods – the twa sidekicks of Slattery? They were there?'

I nodded. 'They got their come-uppance. I'll fill you in when you're out of here.'

He was like a child, his red eyes dancing with unslakeable curiosity.

'Aye, aye. You surely will. But Stewart was telling me you've been fighting Nazis again?' He turned to Sam. 'You as well, lassie?'

Sam nodded. Neither of us wanted to pick at this still raw wound. Sam gave him a crumb.

'I was asked to help prosecute some of the guards from Ravensbrück. In Hamburg.' She turned to me to carry on.

'And I was trying to catch a thief. Someone was burgling Jewish homes in Glasgow. Some of the loot they stole turned out to be Nazi gold, taken from the poor Jews just before they gassed them. I followed the trail to Hamburg with Sam. It led back here. *Ratlines*.'

He leaned forward and grabbed my hand with his claws.

'Did you get them? Did you get the bastards?'

'Some. It's a long story. And there was a price.' I held up my hand to say enough. 'Later. Don't want to send you back into a dwam, Wullie.'

I didn't admit that it was as much for my sake as his. I'd taken on board some of Andrew Baird's advice; I didn't want to stir up old nightmares. Wullie fell back on his pillows.

'Christ, Brodie, Ah leave you for five minutes and you kick off World War Three. Whit are we tae dae wi' you?'

'Give me a quiet life?'

He chewed his tobacco-streaked moustache and squinted at me.

'A quiet life? That's no' in your stars.'

TWO

A month later Wullie blundered into the newsroom of the *Gazette*, a tetchy Boadicea in his chariot, causing mischief and hilarity and wanting his old job back. As I was now occupying it, I was filled with a mixture of delight and bolshiness. Glad to see him back but not ready to give an inch. Eddie Paton – our editor in chief – had ducked the decision as usual and simply assigned me to broader duties as well as covering the crime circuit in tandem with Wullie. It suited me fine; I was happy to spread my wings and give rein to my opinions on politics and world news, though in the lightest possible way to avoid reader indigestion over the porridge.

Whatever was driving my good mood these days I wasn't going to question it. I'd vowed never again to take for granted a sunny day or a good night's sleep. On the wireless this morning I'd heard a new song by Sinatra and couldn't shake the dratted thing out of my head:

What a day this has been!
What a rare mood I'm in!
Why, it's almost like being in love.

There's a smile on my face
For the whole human race.
Why, it's almost like being in love.

It might have earned me funny looks from my fellow Glaswegians if I'd tried to serenade them first thing on a workday morning. So I stuck to just whistling the tune as I stalked down Mitchell Street and climbed the stairs to the newsroom.

I strolled to my corner desk across the office. The room was already filling up. The early secretaries were clashing and tinkling away at their typewriters and a few of my fellow journalists were sucking on first fags and mugs of tea, hoping for inspiration to arrive with the nicotine and the caffeine. The small and increasingly rotund figure of the editor was loitering with intent over one of the desks. Bum in the air, elbows on the desk and fag hanging from his lips, Eddie was hunched over the vacant desk of Jimmie Livingstone, the paper's football reporter. Eddie was picking away at the scraps of paper – Jimmie's handwritten notes of the weekend's results – seeing if there was any mileage left in any of the triumphs and disasters. Between them, Eddie and Jimmie could milk a full week of polemics out of an iffy offside decision at Parkhead. Eddie lifted his head and removed his fag.

'Morning, Brodie.'

'Good morning, Eddie. No sign of the wild man yet?'

'Your pal, McAllister? Wheesht, Brodie. To speak his name is to summon the de'il. Let's enjoy the quiet for as long as we can.'

'Can you no' just remind the man he's supposed to be retired?'

Eddie stubbed out his fag, drew himself erect to his full five feet two inches and pulled down his tartan waistcoat. I noted it was filling out nicely again. Soon he'd be back to his former stature and we could start calling him 'Big Eddie' again. At least in circumference.

'It's no' that easy, Brodie. McAllister took an awfu' hammering in the line o' duty, so to speak. We cannae just throw him on the scrap heap. And technically, of course, he didnae actually get round to retiring before his heid got bashed in.'

‘Well, it all adds to the gaiety around here. Is he really knocking out a column or two? I mean, how does he get the stories? Has he commandeered his own tram?’

I knew his companion-cum-brother, Stewart, had a full-time job as a teacher and was nobody’s Man Friday.

Eddie visibly shuddered. ‘Taxis. He’s got a deal with one o’ the taxi boys. Costing us a bloody fortune, him whizzin’ aboot like a dervish. Chasing crime, he says. But if you’re worried about being edged oot of a job, Brodie, dinnae fash yersel’. Wullie is just part time for a while until he works oot his notice. Once we gie him it, of course. Besides, you’ve got this new column to play wi’.’

World affairs, was how Eddie had explained it. The bosses of the paper thought it was time to raise the profile and quality of the paper and expand the readership by tackling the big events in the world outside Glasgow. Outside Scotland even, if that wasn’t too big a step. The *Gazette* had taken an ad hoc approach to it in the past; when something big happened, like dropping the first atom bomb or the Nuremberg trials, they’d run special columns. Now they thought there was enough incoming material from the wireless and ticker tape to merit a section on its own. Snippets, they said. A round-up of major news items from across the continents. I was their guinea pig. When I’d asked why me, Sandy Logan, our lanky sub-editor, chewed on his inner cheeks for a while and then explained:

‘You’re seen as somewhat more worldly, Brodie. If you take a glance over the last twelve months or so, I think you’ll agree that you’ve been at the centre of some of the more *outré* events round here. Is that fair?’

‘Do I detect a wee hint of accusation, Sandy?’

‘Naw, naw. I wouldnae say that. Just that you seem to be singularly good at attracting exotic headlines. Usually violent.’

‘You mean the hunt for Nazis in Glasgow?’

'There's that. Then there's the number of senior polis you've managed to get banged up for corruption. Not to mention the councillors that began dying like flies just as you began delving into their wicked ways.' Sandy shook his long head. 'You're not so much a reporter of news, Brodie. More the instigator.'

'And that's what the bosses want from me? For this new column? Someone to stir things up?'

'Good God, no. Just report, laddie. Just report. You've got a broader world view than some. And then there's your degree. Other than the fair Elspeth you're the only man on the staff wi' one. The bosses like a man of letters. As for your writing . . .' He paused, took a pull on his fag. ' . . . I've seen worse.'

'I've had more ringing endorsements for my talents, Sandy. But it sounds interesting; it should be fun.'

'Fun? You've got the wrong idea, Brodie. This is a serious column. But of course not *too* serious. And absolutely nae Latin. We don't want to lose our old readership. Think of it as an everyman guide to foreign parts and foreign doings.'

'No big words.'

'You know fine that good journalism is about simplicity. Just tell the story. Like that fella you rate, Hemingway. Though I'd encourage the odd adjective or two to gie your piece some colour.'

'And what about the crime stories? Are you taking me off those?'

'Not a bit. The management want to give Wullie a few months to see out his time properly. Besides,' he sighed, 'there's enough crime oot there to warrant the attention of the pair of you for a while.'

I made my way to my desk where I was working up stories that neatly covered both camps. On the larger scene, I was trying to find something exciting to say about America's Marshall Plan. In terms of newsworthiness, the timing could hardly be bettered. The plan was coming into being on this

very day, 5 June 1947. But high finance and international economics had little relevance to the average *Gazette* reader struggling to muster enough ration coupons to feed her family on powdered milk and Spam.

The details had still to be hammered out with participating nations like Britain, France and Germany but essentially it was an aid programme for the reconstruction of Europe. The idea was George Marshall's, the US Secretary of State. One of their better generals – and a visionary. It wasn't altruism. America recognised that her own prosperity and democracy would only thrive if the other Western nations did. Moreover, America wanted a solid bulwark against Communist expansionist plans across Europe. They were even offering aid to the Soviets, but Stalin didn't want to be in anyone's pocket. Not if it curtailed his plans to fulfil Churchill's prophecy of installing an iron curtain across the Continent 'from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic . . .' The endless machinations, double-dealing, back-stabbing and power grabs by the Communists made Glasgow councillors seem like models of fair-mindedness and graciousness.

More parochially, I had a column half written about the resurgence of gang warfare in Glasgow; the walking wounded were still trickling into the Royal after the Old Firm match on Saturday. But there was nothing new in that. I needed something fresh.

At lunchtime, I took my paste sandwiches to my favourite bench in George Square to enjoy the sunshine and admire the girls in their summer frocks. It lightened an old man's heart. But as I sat there, trying hard not to gawp too much, I was treated to one of my favourite acts from Glasgow's repertoire of street theatre. It was a one-man show with unwitting audience participation. I only knew this strolling player by his nickname, Sticky.

Sticky didn't get his name from the adhesive quality of his manky donkey jacket and greasy bunnet. Brutally and

inevitably, as per the mores of the streets, he was named for his most prominent feature: the loss of both legs above the knee in the Great War. A medal for courage under fire was scarcely fair exchange, but Sticky wore it proudly on his threadbare breast pocket. His chosen method of propulsion was a pair of sticks: cut-down brooms that kept the stubs of his thighs just a couple of inches above the pavement at the apogee of his swing and allowed their leather pads to take his weight as he rocked forward on to them. A human crankshaft.

Sticky's physical loss had made no dent in his humour or his enterprise. He made a living from his own form of green-grocering. He'd pester stallholders in the Barras until they filled his knapsack with their over-ripe, about-to-be-jettisoned produce and then Sticky would click and stump his way to wherever punters gathered. Today it was George Square at lunchtime.

I heard him clacking towards me. He rocked past, pistoning away, and chose a sheltered spot by the Scott column. He settled down and produced an old rag from his inside pocket. He spread it carefully in front of him. Then he dug into his knapsack and laid out his wares on the suspect cloth, and waited. His eyes flicked across the passers-by until he spotted his prey. He went still. A middle-aged woman was hirpling towards him, carrying a string bag filled with her messages. Not too filled, Sticky would be hoping.

'Hie, missus,' he called out. 'Has yer man still got his ain teeth?'

The wee woman froze in her gait, alarmed by this seer's insight. Sticky knew his clients, knew their afflictions.

'Naw, he husnae a wan.'

Sticky nodded in sympathy, carefully surveyed his cornucopia, and selected two squidgy handfuls.

'Then, hen, these pears are for him.'

His performance deserved applause but I knew Sticky would appreciate a more tangible tribute. I walked over to him.

‘Any apples left?’

He squinted up at me. ‘I’ve been keeping one back. Just for you.’ He grinned and held out a mottled Granny Smith. I took it and gave him a florin. He began sifting through his small pile of coppers.

‘Naw, that’s fine.’ I smiled at him. He flung up a smart salute. I reciprocated, then left him to ply his trade.