
Opening Extract from...

Rebus's Scotland

Written by Ian Rankin

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IAN RANKIN

REBUS'S SCOTLAND

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
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To Giles Gordon to whom all things seemed possible

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Court and Spark

Once I had cut the ribbon, it was official: Ian Rankin Court existed.

This was the August of 2004. I'd been contacted earlier in the year by the housebuilder, asking my agreement in the naming of the street. I'd argued that Rankin Court or maybe even Rebus Court would be more seemly, but he'd managed to persuade me otherwise.

Friends who knew I was coming back to Cardenden for the ceremony had already alerted me to the six-figure prices attached to this new housing development, sited where a builder's yard had once stood. Six figures: and none of our parents had even owned their own homes. I was shown around the development. Some of the gardens backed on to a trickling stream. It ran through the Den, an area of overgrown wilderness we had all been taken to on primary school outings. Denend Primary sat just the other side of the railway bridge. I'd won my first literary prize of any

kind thanks to my primary school. In my final year at high school, I'd been sent back to Denend to 'shadow' one of the teachers – just in case it gave me a taste for the profession. (It didn't.) One day, however, among the morning announcements I saw mention of a nationwide poetry contest. I decided to enter, wrote a poem called 'Euthanasia' for the occasion . . . and won second prize.

Plenty of water had trickled through the Den since then, and a lot had changed in the town of my youth. I'd arrived ahead of schedule, driving from Edinburgh. With over half an hour to spare, I'd decided to revisit the cul-de-sac where I'd grown up. It's called Craigmead Terrace, and the Rankins had lived at number 17 from the year it was built (1960; also the year I was born) until my father's death in 1990. The front garden of our old home had become a parking space, but otherwise the street seemed little different. The same could not be said of the damp and unlovely flats in the streets behind, which had disappeared, replaced by terraced housing. Auchterderran Junior High, which I'd attended for a couple of my teenage years, was no longer a school. And my village had ceased to have its own postal identity many years before. As a kid, I'd known the place as Bowhill. It formed part of what old-timers called the ABCD – Auchterderran, Bowhill, Cardenden and Dundonald. The four distinct parishes had become one – Cardenden – in the early 1970s, as far as the authorities were concerned. This had been at a time, I seem to remember, when there had been further plans to split the Kingdom of Fife in half, with the

northern section coming under Dundee's remit, and the southern part owing allegiance to Edinburgh. A fierce local campaign was launched, with the blessing of famously anti-royalist MP Willie Hamilton, and Fife – 'the Kingdom of Fife' – was eventually saved.

You'll find Fife, one-time seat of the King of Scotland, on any map of the British Isles. Sandwiched between Dundee and Edinburgh, it is shaped like a terrier's head, an accident of topography which thrilled me as a child. That aspect alone gave Fife an individual identity: our county at least *looked* like something. Later on, I learned that Fifers were seen as being different from other Scots. One saying from folklore had it that 'ye need a lang spune to sup wi' a Fifer'. I think this means we are close-knit . . . or maybe just keen to hold on to what we've got. (The same thing is said, incidentally, and again in Scots folklore, of the devil.) The region of Scotland of which Fife is part was in ancient times known as Fib, which can, of course, also mean a lie, and Fifers have always been great storytellers, relishing the opportunity to make their tales fantastical or supernatural. At high school, I'd undertaken a geography project on the history of coal-mining in Fife, and had speculated that the word 'Carden' (from which Cardenden takes its name) might have related to a den of witches, since the Scots word for a witch is 'car'. Wishful thinking on my teenage part, I'm bound to say, but something I would come back to in my use of superstition and folk tales in my first published novel, *The Flood*.

That morning in Cardenden, still with time to spare

before the ribbon-cutting, I'd stopped the car by the roadside, unable for a moment to believe that the church where I'd been christened – St Fothad's – had vanished, a new house appearing in its place. St Fothad's had played a vital role in my early life. I'd gone to Sunday School there, leaving my mother and sister in the pew as I was taken downstairs with the other bairns to sing songs about building houses on sand and rowing boats ashore. Later, I'd won a prize by having a perfect attendance in one kirk year. Indeed, the stamps in my attendance-card had been wrongly assigned, giving me fifty-three attendances out of a possible fifty-two.

And now St Fothad's was gone. St Fothad's where, it was said, centuries back one visitor had marvelled at how the poor of the parish were offered not food but pieces of black rock to provide them with warmth . . . It seemed to me telling: if churches (and with them a large portion of their meaning and history) could disappear, then so could – and probably would – everything else. After all, there were no more coal-mines, and the 'bings' (our term for slag-heaps) had been flattened and landscaped. Heading towards Denend, however, I was astonished to find that one seemingly flimsy artefact from my childhood did remain. Near the primary school sat a narrow shack, constructed, so far as I could tell, from sheets of corrugated iron. This had been where, fully forty years before, June Jarvis, a close friend to my eldest sister, would cut my hair. Back then, it had seemed a building not meant to last, yet here it was. Practically every other shop and building in the town had

changed ownership, or been replaced with something more modern, but this hairdresser's remained. On arriving at Ian Rankin Court, I felt compelled to mention this to someone.

'Aye,' they said, 'and it's still June Jarvis that runs it.'

John Rebus grew up in Cardenden. In fact, he grew up in Bowhill, in the same cul-de-sac as me, if the books are to be believed:

> Rebus had been born in a pre-fab but brought up in a terrace much like this one (*Dead Souls*).

In *The Black Book* we learn that Rebus's father was born in a miners' row. My own father's family had lived in just such a house, built quickly and in long rows to identical designs. These were thrown up in order to get as many men into the area as possible early in the twentieth century, when the demand for coal seemed insatiable:

> Cardenden had grown up around coal, hurried streets constructed in the twenties and thirties to house the incoming miners. These streets hadn't even been given names, just numbers. Rebus's family had moved into 13th Street. Relocation had taken the family to a pre-fab in Cardenden, and from there to a terraced house in a cul-de-sac in Bowhill (*Dead Souls*).

This was my family's own trajectory, though I think my father had actually lived on 17th Street rather than 13th. I was born in a pre-fab in Cardenden, my parents moving us to Craigmead Terrace immediately after it was built. All the same, Rebus's past is inextricably linked to my own, and this can sometimes cause problems. For example, in *The Black Book* I say that Rebus went to school in Cowdenbeath. By the time we reach *Dead Souls*, some six years later, we find that he actually attended Auchterderran Secondary School, and left at fifteen to enlist in the Army. Both cannot be true, and comprise a conflation of my own education. I spent the first two years of my high school education at Auchterderran, then was offered a place at Beath Senior High in Cowdenbeath. (The brightest few kids were decanted from all the Junior Highs in the area: one friend, cleverer than me in most subjects, chose not to switch, a decision which surely coloured his whole life thereafter.) In using my own life as a template for some of Rebus's background, errors sometimes do creep in. I even had to be careful over the naming of Auchterderran: in Rebus's time, it was a Secondary School; by the time I arrived there, its status had been altered to Junior High – a blessing, in that the badge on the breast-pocket of the school blazer no longer bore the letters ASS.

Here is Rebus on the west-central Fife of the early 1990s:

> Like the towns and villages around it, Cowdenbeath looked and felt depressed: closed down shops and drab chainstore clothes. But he knew that the people were

> stronger than their situation might suggest. Hardship bred a bitter, quickfire humour and a resilience to all but the most terminal of life's tragedies. He didn't like to think about it too deeply, but inside he felt like he really was 'coming home'. Edinburgh might have been his base for twenty years, but he was a Fifer. 'Fly Fifers', some people called them. Rebus was ready to do battle with some very fly people indeed (*Dead Souls*).

I've said in the past that I started writing the Rebus books in order to make sense of Edinburgh, my adopted home. But Fife plays a major role in several of Rebus's adventures, and comprises the majority of his memories. I wonder now if all this time, I've really been trying to make sense of my own upbringing, in order better to understand myself.

Not that Rebus is me, of course, and the title of this book – *Rebus's Scotland* – is a trick typical of a novelist. Since Rebus is not real, how can the country where he lives be real? The only way to make sense of my fictional universe is to say something of myself, showing how my autobiography merges with his, and how my sense of Scotland and Scottishness becomes his. This then is a story of the relationship between Rebus, his creator, and the country called Scotland. It can't be a guidebook (I lack the skills), nor can it be a history book. There are plenty of excellent examples of both on the shelves of many bookshops, and I may quote from a few along the way.

I've already played another trick, of course, in that Rebus was born not in Cardenden but in a bed-sit at 24 Arden Street, in the Marchmont district of Edinburgh, in the March of 1985. I was a postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh. As well as doing research towards my thesis (on the works of novelist Muriel Spark) I was also kept busy teaching some undergraduate classes and reviewing books for a local radio station.

And trying to be a writer.

I'd had some success with my short stories, coming runner-up to the famed Iain Crichton Smith in a competition organised by the *Scotsman* newspaper. (The prize, a Sinclair Spectrum computer, had led to sleepless nights in Arden Street as I tried to complete the game 'Hungry Horace'.) I'd also won a contest run by Radio Forth, for a story based on a true incident from my family's history (concerning a hard-drinking uncle who had stripped off one day and wandered the Sunday afternoon streets of Lochgelly). A further anecdote, concerning an aunt who had fallen into a stream as a young girl, provided me with the opening chapter for what became a novel entitled *The Flood*. In March, just as I was finding out that *The Flood* had been accepted for publication, I got the idea for a story called *Knots & Crosses*, which would feature a detective called John Rebus.

The idea came to me as I sat by the fire in my student digs. My bed-sit would have been the original living-room of the ground-floor flat. It was spacious and high-ceilinged

and freezing. There was a single bed, and a desk and chair by the large bay window. As I sat staring into the fire's gas-flames, the pun 'knots and crosses' came to me, and with it the notion that someone might be sending someone else little teasing puzzles in the shapes of knotted pieces of string and matchstick crosses.

It didn't take me long to decide that the recipient would be a cop, the sender someone from his past, some nemesis bent on his destruction. I was no great reader of detective fiction, though as a teenager I'd gone through most of the *Shaft* books (being not old enough to see their cinema versions – I was eleven when the first film was released), and been hooked on the usual slew of TV cop shows such as *Kojak*, *Softly Softly* and *The Sweeney*. I was, however, interested in Scots Gothic and ballads, having been sidetracked slightly in my research by Muriel Spark's use of the supernatural and her borrowings from Scotland's dark history. I'd devoured *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. My novel *The Flood* had attempted to use some of these devices to make something mythic of my home town of Cardenden (renamed Carsden to reinforce the link with witchcraft). Now, I would be able to write about the darker side of Edinburgh, past and present, by using a detective as my hero.

The way I tell it in my diary of the time, Rebus appeared almost fully formed from the outset. I gave him a self-consciously playful name (a rebus is a picture-puzzle) because I was reading a lot of semiotic and deconstruction-

ist nonsense at the time as part of my studies. The plot demanded that his brother be a stage hypnotist, so I made his father a hypnotist, too. My own father, on the other hand, had worked in a grocer's shop most of his life, switching to an office job at Rosyth Dockyard in later years. Tellingly, Rebus's mother died when he was young. I'd lost my own mother when I was eighteen, and channelled my loss to him. From the start, it was clear to me that Rebus would share much of my background, growing up in the same place. In this way, we were both outsiders in Edinburgh – though at least no one muttered 'bloody student' in his direction when he entered and left a bar.

Knots & Crosses opens with Rebus standing by his father's grave in the cemetery at Cardenden. The date is 28 April, which just happens to be my birthday. Rebus isn't exactly thrilled to be back in Fife, 'where the old days had never been "the good old days" . . . how Rebus hated it all, this singular lack of an environment'. I wish I could have told the twenty-four-year-old me to lighten up. Cardenden might have been rough, as were most of the surrounding towns, but my own childhood was settled and safe. I would visit a friend's farm till dusk, returning home with the knees of my trousers stained green from playing football. There would be long walks into the wasteland around the coal-mine, to smoke furtive cigarettes in the long grass, and Saturday trips to Kirkcaldy to bluff our way into X-certificate films. Bowhill had its own cinema; in fact, it had two, sitting side by side, but only one ever seemed to be open. The Rex in

particular was like something from the Bauhaus movement, and these days would doubtless boast a preservation order. (It's long since demolished.) By the age of fourteen I was tall enough to pass for an adult, and for a time could be found there every week, glued to dodgy double bills of kung fu, horror, or English sauce. (It proved to be no hindrance that the woman who took the ticket money was a pal's mum, and hence fully cognisant of my real age.)

Betting shops, bars and barbers: this was the town of my youth. It was a scarred but rural setting. I don't recall ever seeing any bird-life more exotic than a sparrow or thrush; maybe a robin in winter. No chaffinches or magpies or blue tits, despite the long country walks we would take. Either they were steering clear of the pollution, or else I just didn't have the eyes to see. The total population of the ABCD was only around 7,000, and everyone really did seem to know everybody else. Doors would be left unlocked so visitors could walk straight in, this practice extending to complete strangers at New Year. Two doors away from me, at number 21, lived my Uncle Math and Aunt Lizzie. Across the back fence lived one of my father's brothers, while another lived elsewhere in the town. It felt like growing up in a tribe: comforting on the one hand, but potentially stifling on the other. At least three of my aunts were called Jen or Jenny, the pot of potential first names seemingly low, perhaps for fear that an 'odd' name would make one stand out from the extended tribe.

I gave John Rebus few such confusions. Their mother having died when they were not yet in their teens, Rebus

and his brother Michael were raised by their father. Rebus does not seem to have made friends easily. *Dead Souls* shows us Rebus in his final year at Secondary School. His best friend is called Mitch, and he also has a girlfriend called Janice. In returning to Cardenden in the present, to help Janice search for her missing son, Rebus is able to reflect on the town and his own past. He remembers his father drinking at the Goth (as my own father did with his circle of cronies). He also recalls a scarf with the Taj Mahal on it, which his father brought back from World War Two (as did my own father), and a scar on his father's knee which turned out not to have been a battle wound. Again, my own father sported just such a scar, and made up a story for me in which it became a memento of war.

But I had no friend called Mitch; and I didn't leave school at fifteen to join the Army. In fact, being almost a generation younger than Rebus, it would have been impossible for me to leave school at his age, the government having raised the leaving-age in the interim. I may share some of my memories with Rebus, but we are far from being the same person, and we do not inhabit the same Scotland. Doing the job he does, he tends to deal with victims and the families of victims, with criminals and the dispossessed, many of them in the least happy of circumstances. This leads Rebus to see Edinburgh – to my mind one of the best and most beautiful places in the whole world – as a series of crime scenes, and to be always mistrustful of the people he meets. His Edinburgh is not mine.

I have said that I started writing about Edinburgh to make sense of the place. When I was growing up, trips to the capital were few and far between. Maybe it's that my parents just weren't adventurous, or that, never owning a car, the train timetables were against us. I can't recall a single occasion when my father brought us to the city, though my mother managed to show me the Castle and the Museum of Childhood, and would, along with our Aunt Jenny, escort my sister Linda and me to a new film (*Oliver* was one) or Christmas pantomime. Later on, as a teenager at Beath High, I would travel through with friends to prowl the various record shops (including Virgin on Frederick Street), saunter down Rose Street in the mistaken belief that prostitutes might be found there, and head up the always rakish Cockburn Street towards Greyfriars and Better Books, where S&M 'art' magazines could be browsed. Eventually, towards the end of my school career, we'd be dressed as punks when we made these journeys, seeking out not obscure Van Der Graaf Generator bootlegs but twelve-inch picture-sleeve offerings by the Heartbreakers and the Ramones.

The Edinburgh I arrived in as a student was an extension of this. In my first few terms, I haunted the record shops, and spent Wednesday afternoons (kept free of lectures so that sporting activities could prevail) in a strip bar called Tony's and a soft-core cinema on Nicolson Street. My first term was spent sharing a room with a school friend in a motel on the outskirts of the city. By our second term, we'd

found a room in a basement flat facing Bruntsfield Links, and eventually clubbed together with three other school friends to rent a second-floor tenement flat on Morrison Street. These were not glamorous locations, and I was aware that in moving between the various flats and the university, I was seeing layers of Edinburgh and was being introduced to its underbelly. There was a bar near the motel on Peffermill Road. It was called something like the University Arms but was particularly unwelcoming to students. I would tell friends that I'd asked the barman why, being so far from the university, the place merited its name.

'Because if any students come in, we rip their arms off,' came the reply.

He never said any such thing, of course: I made it up, but most of my friends found the story credible. Fiction, after all, can sometimes tell truths the real world can't.

I chose Edinburgh for several reasons. For one thing, most of the kids in my year were going there. For another, the Department of English Literature would allow me to specialise in American Literature (my favoured option). Mostly, though, I think I just wanted to be within easy reach of Fife. I didn't know Glasgow, Dundee or Aberdeen at all, St Andrews was too stuffy (Milton was their idea of modern literature), and the thought of applying to universities south of the border never crossed my mind. Edinburgh was the 'safe' option, as well as boasting enough prestige to appease my parents. Their notion of university was that it led to a 'proper' career such as medicine or the law. I wasn't

able to tell them how a literature degree could compete with this.

Unlike his creator, Rebus never attended university. In the early books, he has a chip on his shoulder about this, and this chip only grows larger when he finds himself surrounded by younger and younger detectives, the vast majority of whom are college-educated:

> Institutes of higher education . . . made him feel stupid. He felt that his every movement, every utterance, was being judged and interpreted, marking him down as a clever man who could have been cleverer, given the breaks (*Hide & Seek*).

In interviews I've sometimes said that Rebus represents a way my life could have gone had I not been deemed 'clever' enough for higher education:

> In Rebus's youth there had been three obvious career choices for a fifteen-year-old boy: the pits, Rosyth Dockyard, or the Army (*The Black Book*).

I could have added a fourth: the police. I had friends who left school at sixteen or eighteen and joined either the police or one of the armed services. By then, of course, mining was no longer an option. One of my two sisters married an RAF technician, and both of her sons eventually joined up, too. My own father had served in the Durham Light Infantry

during World War Two, and I'd lost grandfathers on both sides of the family during World War One. Rebus, too, it is recorded in *Dead Souls*, lost both grandfathers in the course of that conflict. This just about squares with something I learned about Rebus in 1996 or '97, namely that he comes from Polish stock.

I spent the decade from 1986 away from Edinburgh, living in London for four years and rural France for six. On returning to Edinburgh, I found myself in a bookshop on Dalkeith Road called The Bookworm. Its owner, Peter Ritchie, who has since become a good friend, told me he drank in a pub called Swany's and invited me to join him there some Friday night. This I did, and was introduced to Peter's 'drinking circle', whose members included a gentleman by the name of Joe Rebus. Having startled me further by telling me he lived on a street called Rankin Drive, Joe proceeded to explain that the family name was Polish. I decided that night that Rebus would have Polish roots, too. After all, growing up in Fife, a good number of my classmates had sported East European-sounding surnames. There had been economic migrations to Scotland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to take advantage of employment opportunities in heavy engineering and traditional industries such as coal. It seems to me feasible that Rebus's father's father could have come to Scotland, found a wife, and sired Rebus's father before heading off to fight for his new homeland in the trenches.

All of this led me to the eventual writing of *Fleshmarket*

Close, in which Rebus has to deal with asylum seekers (genuine and otherwise) and the new market in illegal economic migrants. Scotland used to pride itself on having a welcome ready for visitors and the dispossessed. We saw ourselves as reaching out to Europe and Scandinavia (necessary for trade at one time, whenever we were in conflict with England). We sent our sons and daughters overseas to launch themselves on new continents, stretching from Nova Scotia to the southern tip of New Zealand. At the same time, we were a mongrel nation, pillaged and settled in turn by a variety of cultures, from Norse and Celtic to Anglo Saxon. It sometimes seemed to us (lazily, in retrospect) that we were far too busy with religious bigotry to have any time for racism. Certainly, those kids with the East European names were made welcome – they were Scots, after all, and they were white (and Protestant). I'm not sure a Catholic kid could have walked with so blithe a heart into my school playground:

> 'What in Christ's name is happening here?' he found himself asking. The world passed by, determined not to notice: cars grinding homewards; pedestrians making eye contact only with the pavement ahead of them, because what you didn't see couldn't hurt you. A fine, brave world awaiting the new parliament. An ageing country, dispatching its talents to the four corners of the globe . . . unwelcoming to visitor and migrant alike (*Fleshmarket Close*).

If my original project had been a greater understanding of the city of Edinburgh, those parameters soon changed, once I'd discovered that Rebus was a tough enough creation to lead the reader into an investigation of Scotland itself: a small, proud and ancient country with a confused and fragile sense of its own identity. This is the landscape I inherited, with Detective Inspector John Rebus as my guide. As a nation, Scotland has been called 'the arse of Europe' (by a Papal Legate in 1529) and a place of immense civilisation (by Voltaire, no less). Betjeman and Walpole have sung the praises of Edinburgh, while others (including some of its most famed citizens) have decried the suffocating pettymindedness of the place. A contradictory city makes a good capital for a country of contradictions. Growing up in Scotland, I was only ever aware of my Scottishness when our national team were playing football, or some sporting legend was winning gold, or when we ventured south of the border to places where my accent proved a challenge. At university, I studied *English* rather than Scottish Literature (the latter being available only as a one-year supplementary course at that time), and wasn't aware of Scottish writing of any contemporary vibrancy until Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* came along – at just the right time for me. *Lanark* was a teeming, confident novel about Scotland past, present and future, and came as a welcome respite from books which seemed always to be looking over their shoulder to historical mistakes and grievances. Suddenly readers were turning to the urban experience of Glasgow for insights into the

world, and writers such as Gray, James Kelman and William McIlvanney were happy to oblige.

While in Edinburgh, of course, we had *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, published as far back as 1961 and set in the distant 1930s. With that book, Muriel Spark had defined Edinburgh for a generation. But that landscape would soon change.