

DISTILLING EDINBURGH

By Sue Jackson

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On our first evening in Edinburgh we lucked on a great restaurant – *Room in the Town* - right in the heart of the New Town. Tucking into my vegetarian haggis, I couldn't help overhearing the loud exchange between a trio of young Scots at the next table.

They weren't discussing the next day's Rugby Union World Cup match, Scotland versus the mighty All Blacks, at nearby Murrayfield. No, what had them fired up was a battle of a completely different sort: the strategies used in Blar Chuil Lodair (the Battle of Culloden) - the defining clash between the British Government and the Highland Scots in the spring of 1746. Current events may come and go, but in Edinburgh history is always present.

After all, Edinburgh's New Town was so named to distinguish it from the ancient Old Town, so crowded and smelly – 'flowers of Edinburgh' was the ironic nickname for the local stench – that the wealthy determined to relocate. This was in 1767 – predating the brief history of 'white Australia' - but a blink of the eye for the locals.

The New Town is a delight; so well-preserved that I half-expected to see residents in Georgian garb step out of the front doors and climb onto their horses from the wide double-stepped pavements especially designed to make mounting easier. There are gaslights, foot scrapers and 'rustification' of the lowest stories, where the servants lived 'below stairs'.

Beautiful Charlotte Square, where Queen Victoria erected a monument to her beloved Albert, has been home to numerous famous residents. It was there that one of them, Alexander Graham Bell, received the news from Western Union that his telephone was “an interesting novelty without any commercial possibilities”.

Edinburgh is full of examples of the unbroken line from the past to the present. I’m still slightly astonished that Ian Rankin’s popular anti-hero, Inspector Rebus, plies his trade in Edinburgh’s dark underworld – it’s hard to believe that this genteel city would have one. But Rankin is on to something; he is, in fact, part of a long tradition of local writers who have made Edinburgh’s dark side their focus.

One of Rankin’s novels, *Resurrection Men*, is unabashedly inspired by the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, written by another famous local, Robert Louis Stevenson, and first published in 1886. Stevenson had based his Jekyll and Hyde on the real-life figure of William Brodie, a man who knew all about Edinburgh’s proprieties – and how to flout them.

In the eighteenth century, this highly respected Old Town councillor and deacon spent his days fraternising with his fellow citizens, while at night he took delight in robbing them blind. Although Brodie was eventually unmasked, captured and hanged, he was, and still is, a local hero. As we sipped a decorous cup of tea in Brodie’s old home, now the Deacon’s House Café in the famous Royal Mile, I imagined his amusement at playing host all over again to respectable, and paying, guests.

At the top of the Royal Mile is the stunning Edinburgh Castle, with its meandering parapets, massive oak gates and drawbridge. This ancient fortress dominates the sky-line and provides the ultimate backdrop. No wonder the famous Edinburgh Military Tattoo has been staged there annually for over fifty years.

Near the entrance to the Castle's forecourt stands an old cast-iron water fountain known as the 'Witches Well'. Spotting it, I realised the Tattoo was not the first spectacular to have been staged on Castle Rock.

In the sixteenth century, Edinburgh was the most enthusiastic city in the whole country in ridding itself of 'witches'. The nearby Nor' Loch was once the site of the 'Trials by Ducking'. The 'innocent' women sank and drowned, while the survivors, deemed guilty, ended their days on Castle Rock. Just as the Tattoo's fireworks light up the night sky, so did the flames from the witches' pyres.

My friend Justin is mad about terriers, so I'd promised to visit Greyfriar's Kirkyard, near the George IV Bridge, to convey Justin's respects to Greyfriar's Bobby, the celebrity terrier. After the death of his master in 1858, Bobby sat by the graveside for fourteen years until his own death. There are websites dedicated to this loyal dog, who was also the inspiration for several films. Bobby was regularly fed during his vigil by patrons of the nearby *Last Drop* tavern, so we decided to stroll over there for a wee dram – purely for research purposes.

The charming façade of this ancient pub belies its grim past. The *Last Drop* was so named because of its proximity to the public hangings in the Grassmarket. Drinkers could drain their glasses while watching their fellow

citizens 'drop'. The tavern still offers a potent mix of strong cider and ale, called the 'Executioner Cocktail'. I gave it a miss.

One group that provided plenty of entertainment was the 'Covenanters'. During the seventeenth century, numerous dissenting Presbyterian ministers and their followers paid with their lives for their religious convictions.

Many were buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard, their plots enclosed in ornate stone and ironwork cages. Even dead, the covenanters were kept behind bars, protected in these 'mortsafes' from the 'resurrectionists', including the infamous 'body snatchers' Burke and Hare, who made their living supplying the Edinburgh Medical College with corpses.

Over in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh you can find one of Scotland's best known paintings, 'The Skating Minister', by the portraitist Sir Henry Raeburn. It features the Reverend Robert Walker impeccably dressed in top hat, frock coat and dog collar, skating nonchalantly. The picture is gorgeous 'in the flesh', but given the fate of the covenanters, the Reverend was possibly skating on very thin ice.

This city has a well-earned reputation for cultural excellence, yet there are plenty of nonconformists who don't take it too seriously. I was amused to see the grand columns at the entrance to the imposing Royal Scottish Academy - hosting an Andy Warhol exhibition - encased in huge Campbell's tomato soup cans. And Edinburgh is home to the *Really Terrible Orchestra* founded by the writer Alexander McCall Smith.

Edinburgh is scenically spectacular. From the Parthenon, on Calton Hill, there is a wonderful view right over the Firth of Forth to Fife - try saying that with

a few drams of whisky under your belt. And yes, I did say 'Parthenon'. In 1822 the city fathers commissioned a replica of the Parthenon for the 'Athens of the North'. But public subscriptions fell short, so the Parthenon remained incomplete, and was duly dubbed 'Scotland's Disgrace'. Picnickers and sightseers love it.

Several times during our visit we were wished "Lang may yer lum reek", translated as "May your chimney smoke for a long time". This was a particularly felicitous greeting in a city whose climate Dr Samuel Johnson concluded "is such that the weak succumb young...and the strong envy them". Few rely on open fires for heating these days, yet the ancient greeting endures. This is no surprise because, in Edinburgh, the past is always present, and a fine old blend it is.

MORE:

The *Lonely Planet Guide to Edinburgh* is a great factual resource.

For a fictional view, you can't beat the numerous detective novels and the BBC series featuring Ian Rankin's Inspector John Rebus.

There are no direct flights from Australia to Edinburgh, but the long haul is certainly well worth the effort.