
James Irvine Robertson’s recent work, *Out of Atholl: Voices from the Shadow of Schiehallion*, is the loving and eminently readable true story of his great-grandfather’s family from the era of the Glorious Revolution of 1689 through to the latter part of the 19th century. The narrative derives mainly from surviving letters, which have passed down to Robertson from ancestors from the Stewart, Robertson and Irvine families –the main landholding families in the Atholl district of Perthshire. Robertson has previously used these letters as the basis for *The Lady of Kynachan*, a fictional recreation of the story of Jean whose husband, David, or Davie, the Kynachan Stewart clan chief, fought for the Jacobites in 1745/6. This was the story that inspired *Out of Atholl*, as the author notes ‘I have already told the story of David...as a novel but the protagonists deserve more than that’ (p. 4).

The story is set against the backdrop of Ben Schiehallion in Perthshire, and Robertson’s skill as a writer allows the family saga to flow in natural progression. From the first sentence, introducing us to the ancient castle of Garth and its inhabitants, to the last ‘and they lived happily ever after,’ (most apt for a novelist) Robertson weaves a tale of his family through their own words and deeds showcasing his story-telling abilities (p. 179).

After the brief introduction in which Robertson tells us where these people originated and describing the area that they inhabited, he recounts his archival search for evidence of ‘Davie’ and the social structure in which he lived. He then moves into actual family history, describing the sentiments of the Highland peoples, and the forces that swept them into either rebellion or support of the government in 1745. He covers little new ground in this area, but his admirably
successful recreation of mentality gives the reader a genuine insight into personal motivations of those who backed Prince Charles Edward Stuart. The story becomes compelling after the defeat at Culloden, as Davie’s widow, Jean, struggles to maintain the family holdings against the might and anger of the government towards those clans who openly opposed them. Davie’s young heirs and their widowed mother are in danger of losing everything, but Jean’s shrewd manoeuvre of suing her own minor son for ‘alimenteration’ - housekeeping money - saves them from certain ruin (p. 43). This strategy successfully outwits their antagonists, including the then duke of Atholl, allowing the family to flourish into the next century on their ancestral lands.

Following are the tales of several of Jean’s remarkable children and grandchildren. Covering a doomed newlywed couple’s journey to Australia, problems with financing a slave-manned plantation in the West Indies, and a preacher choosing to seek his fortunes among the brethren of his ancestors in Atholl, the story flows in a meaningful if winding way which offers a conspectus of the various options open to members of Scottish gentry in a post-Union Britain. A central character of the mid-eighteenth century is ‘The General,’ David Stewart of Garth, who after a successful military career became the lieutenant governor of St. Lucia in 1828. After holding the post for only eleven months, David Stewart, like many Britons in the West Indies, ‘succumbed to fever’ and died (p. 90).

At the time of the ‘General’s’ death, younger family members were receiving the best educations available resulting in them becoming a doctor, a merchant and a local parish priest. Carefully reconstructed accounts from letters and surviving journals provide the reader with an interesting look at the fashions, business practices and social climate of the times. Robertson’s family narrative concludes with Sophy - the Atholl based heiress of the Irvine ancestor of Robertson – discussing her upbringing and marriage, even touching on the historic visit of Queen Victoria to Blair Atholl in the late summer of 1844.

Robertson has woven these surviving materials into a narrative that not only demonstrates the effect wider-held beliefs and national politics created but also illustrates general principles about the Scottish people and their ability to adapt
to enforced changes. Included are photographs of the main familial characters and buildings they inhabited, some of which survive to the present, allowing us to put faces to authors of letters and locations from which they originated. Including five supplemental appendixes – one a satirical and highly amusing view of a university student room in the 1770’s - Out of Atholl is an absorbing and well-structured work recreating a vanished society that bridged the time between the last armed Scottish rebellion and the modern world.

Cheryl Garrett
University of Aberdeen