

Letter from Scotland 21 June 2014

LETTER FROM SCOTLAND 21.6.14



Arthur Conan Doyle's childhood home, the Bank House, Cameron Toll, Edinburgh.

Arthur Conan Doyle might have called them "Mid-Summer Mysteries." What were all the political party leaders doing inside one tent ? Whatever happened to the Robert Burns Airport ? And why have Buckfast bees been found at Holyrood ?

But first, a little about the extra-ordinary author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. This weekend one of his "spiritualist" letters goes on show at the British Library as part of a First World War exhibition. It's little wonder he began to believe he could communicate with the dead after losing both his soldier son and his brother in the great flu epidemic that broke out at the end of the war. Many shared his belief at the time and, to this day, there is a Conan Doyle Spiritualist Centre here in his home city of Edinburgh.

I live not far from the Old Bank House near Cameron Toll where the young Conan Doyle was sent to live with the Burton family in the 1860s to escape the increasing alcoholism and madness of his father. He attended Newington Academy not far away and came under the powerful influence of Mrs Mary Burton, a suffragette and social reformer. He went on to Edinburgh University and qualified as a doctor. One of his fellow students was Robert Louis Stevenson and I wonder if he was infected with the writing bug by him.

He also acquired Stevenson's sense of adventure. His first job

as a doctor was on board a whaling ship sailing from Peterhead and his early short stories included a mystery tale about the deserted ship, the Mary Celeste.

Conan Doyle went on to pioneer the sport of Alpine ski-ing. He was an exceptionally good football player – he played in goal for Portsmouth. He also played first class cricket for the MCC. And he even, for a short time, played the adventure sport of politics. In 1900 he stood as a Unionist candidate in Edinburgh and in 1906 he tried again the Borders but he was beaten both times by a Liberal.

Which brings us to the tent. Labour's Johann Lamont, the Conservatives' Ruth Davidson, the Liberal Democrats' Willie Rennie and the SNP's Bruce Crawford were challenged to a tent-pitching race at Holyrood by a team from Scouts Scotland. It's not hard to guess who won. All too soon it became obvious the politicians came from different camps. Earlier in the week the three opposition parties tried to pitch a common tent on top of Calton Hill by announcing a joint pledge to increase the powers of the Scottish Parliament in the event of a No-to-independence vote on 18th September. It has to be said it was a pretty vague pledge and it comes fairly late in the campaign.

"We now pledge to strengthen further the powers of the Scottish Parliament, in particular in the areas of fiscal responsibility and social security."

The aspiration to make Scotland a more equal country suffered another blow this week. In the biggest study ever done into poverty in the UK, researchers from eight universities, including Glasgow and Heriot Watt, found that the numbers living below the poverty line had increased from 14 per cent of the population to 33 per cent in the last 30 years. It's not that the poor are lazy because it appears that unemployment has little to do with it. The Church of Scotland's Poverty Truth Commission has found that more than

half of those living in poverty are in working households.

Police Scotland marked mid-summer by announcing that police officers will no longer stop and search youngsters under the age of 12. There have been more than 200 instances of children under 9 years of age – some as young as 6 – being stopped and searched for knives, drugs or stolen goods with their “consent”. It follows weeks of controversy over Scotland’s high rate of “stop and search” – four times the rate in England. Up till now the police have defended the tactic as an important weapon in the fight against crime and say that 10 per cent of searches result in illegal goods being found.

Poor Robert Burns lost out this week. The campaign to have Prestwick Airport re-named in his honour has gone agley. The Scottish Government, which bought the airport for £1 last year, said it would “create confusion” to re-name the airport. However, Prestwick is to have a Burns theme and it’s already been given £15m of public money to re-launch itself as a going concern. We should never underestimate the power of Burns to make money. His hand-written copy of “Ye Banks and Braes” sold this week at auction in London for £35,000.

Finally, those bees. It’s a little known political fact that MSPs have installed a couple of bee hives in the grounds of Holyrood. Strangely they have attracted Buckfast bees. Although they are not named after the fizzy wine from Buckfast Abbey, MSPs do not have a healthy relationship with Buckfast. For years they have been trying to outlaw it by one method or another because of its reputation for causing drunkenness and disorder among the younger classes. It’s one of the mid-summer mysteries why the Buckfast bees have sought to enter the political debate over such a sensitive issue.

