

# Letter from Scotland



## The giants of Benmore

On Monday morning I found myself walking down a little used track on the west bank of Loch Eck, in Argyllshire, when suddenly I arrived at a scene which took my breath away...an avenue of Giant Redwood trees. This turned out to be the entrance to Benmore Botanic Gardens, an outpost of my very familiar Royal Botanic Gardens at home in Edinburgh. Even the 16 year-old Explorer Scouts I was "supervising" stopped to stare.

These 50 metre high giants were planted in 1863 by James Duncan, a self-made businessman from Glasgow. He made his fortune from sugar refining, inventing several new and profitable processes for dealing with this essential but overused product. He became one of those Victorian philanthropists, giving 20 per cent of his income each year to good causes and introducing an 8 hour day for his workers. He bought the grand house at Benmore to display his collection of impressionist paintings and to establish a splendid botanical garden.

Then came the crash. The troublesome Germans started flooding the British market with even cheaper sugar and James Duncan had to close his large Clyde Wharf factory in London and sell his Benmore estate. The Younger family – the famous beer barons – bought the place and saved the botanic garden from the tree-fellers. They eventually gave it to the RBG in Edinburgh and the garden keeps on growing. Two of the Benmore staff have just returned from a seed gathering tour of British Columbia.

Meanwhile, more seed gathering has been taking place in a garden in Edinburgh. A family of white squirrels has been

attracting [media attention](#).

It looked to me as if they were albino animals – because of their light red eyes – rather than a separate species. Though I gather that “morphed” white squirrels are seen in America but only in urban areas where they are not easy targets for birds of prey.

It's half-term in Scotland. This might explain why I've been seeing children everywhere. On Blackford Hill they outnumbered the rabbits this afternoon. One young girl was lying on her tummy on top of the trig point pretending she was flying over the city and out to the Firth of Forth. Such is the sense of freedom the holidays bring.

But actually, like the nut gatherers, we are all preparing for the tough winter to come. The air feels cool. The leaves are dropping. Aye, and the nights are drawing in.

## ***INFLATION***

Inflation is catching up on us – now up to one percent, the highest for two years. House prices are up 4.5 per cent. Scotland's increasing army of self-employed – up 45 per cent to 300,000 workers in the last 8 years – are facing hard times with average earnings lower than 20 years ago. Most of these are the casualties of the Great Recession and the bloodletting policy of “austerity” rather than the new entrepreneurs the Tories are boasting about. The falling value of the pound and the gloomy predictions about Brexit are dark clouds gathering for the winter storms.

Perhaps we can cheer those winter evenings with a good book. Well, not according to a public vote organised by the BBC and the Scottish Book Trust. The top ten favourite books contain no fewer than seven what I could call “Scottish Noir” gloomy classics.

Ian Banks' “The Wasp Factory” is about a psychopathic teenager

living on a remote Scottish island. "Lanark" by Alasdair Gray, is a strange and nutty account of the worst of 20<sup>th</sup> century West Scotland. "Trainspotting" by Irvine Welsh, is an equally depressing account of the drug addicts' world in East Scotland. "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone", is a horror story for children by J K Rowling. "Knots and Crosses" by Ian Rankin, is a detective story about the strangling of two young girls. "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" by Arthur Conan Doyle, is a series of murder and robbery mysteries in mist drenched Victorian England. "Confessions of a Justified Sinner" by James Hogg, is an 18<sup>th</sup> century tale about a silly weak man from the Borders murdering his more likable brother.

Thank goodness for "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie," by Muriel Spark which came in at number five and John Buchan's "Thirty Nine Steps" which was fourth favourite. But even the winner "Sunset Song" by Lewis Grassie Gibbon is not exactly a book to cheer you up, being as it is, about a young woman coming to terms with a farming community torn apart by the First World War.

We must indeed be a mentally sick nation to have a favourite reading list like the above.

It's all very well saying joy comes through adversity. But I wish someone would write a classic about ordinary Scottish life and call it, say, "44 Scotland Street."