

Sgeulachd Castle

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To the B in my name, my mum

Prologue

The inauguration of *Sgeulachd* Castle, now over twenty years ago, decided more than just my career; it cleared a path for an insatiable desire to tell the untold, to solve the unsolved. After all, my childhood dream of becoming a Lord of the House, a Lord of my own private castle, was smashed to smithereens by the numerous articles covering the rise and fall and rise of *Sgeulachd* Castle and its youngest owner in history.

Thirteen I was, when the restoration of *Sgeulachd* Castle took an end and Dougall MacDonald, who – not entirely accidental – turned eighteen the very day of the opening, led journalists and photographers over the footpath into the mouth of the majestic piece of constructed grey-brown stone. Realising one had to inherit a castle and its title and failing to find anybody in my family who could provide me with such a privilege, I abandoned the idea of castle ownership and started focusing on the circus that had surrounded the opening of *Sgeulachd* Castle. I fantasised a thousand times and more how Dougall MacDonald led me, a fellow MacDonald, through the corridors and told me and the other journalists about the history of the place, about his ancestors and their private tales, and I would write down these details because I love the seeming insignificance of the added joke or the irrelevant anecdote. They would complete the chronicle of hundreds of years of *Sgeulachd* Castle when it mattered and did not matter anymore, and suddenly started mattering again. I would find out the smallest triviality of the place and write the most comprehensive testimony on a castle nearly forgotten, had it not been for the great-grandfather of Dougall MacDonald, Dougall MacDonald Senior, the millionaire who bought the castle that had been in MacDonald hands for so many years until war and finally suffocating taxation laws forced this MacDonald branch to part from what they regarded as home.

I decided at that age I could either become a historian and conduct research into the subject or I could become a journalist and write about it. A few years of age allowed me to

contemplate these options more clear-headedly, so I voted in favour of the latter. I became a journalist.

I never let go of *Sgeulachd* Castle though. Keeping all the articles I had cut out as a young teenager and continuing to be ever watchful for the word “Sgeulachd” in both newspaper and book, I had gathered quite a collection by the time I turned eighteen and treated myself to a visit to the castle that five years of puberty only allowed to nearly grow beyond all recognition. I still remember the nerves accompanying me that bright summer day, when I drove all alone to the West coast of the Highlands. Every bend warned me to keep my thoughts to the road; every straight piece of road made my head spin. When I finally parked the car, my hands shook and great expectation materialised in a gigantic idiotic grin on my face. People must have thought I was a fool.

I turned the place upside down, not just once, but over and over again. I revisited the castle year after year, only to discover new quiet corners, formidable structures and breathtaking views over the water that would never fail to cover the only entrance to the castle. The going out of the tide after which visitors were allowed onto the tiny island, the coming of the tide driving people out of the building; nature’s small marvel generously bestowed on its previous inhabitants a mighty defence mechanism. The solid walls of the castle itself reveal the anxiety to keep unwanted guests out. I thoroughly examined every single room and scrutinised the function allotted by so-called authorities. Twenty years after the boy took an interest in one out of a hundred castles on Scottish soil, my obsession with *Sgeulachd* Castle turned me into a walking encyclopaedia on all things related to it. Still, some minor details kept me occupied. They prevented me from telling the full story I had had in mind for so long. I just had to finish this puzzle. Moreover, nobody else seemed to bother about filling in these final questions, and finding myself unable to move any further, I decided to take matters one step further.

I showed up at the castle, on a day that was part of the mystery.

“The castle is closed today,” I heard.

I turned around and recognised the face, more mature now than the eighteen-year-old version of twenty-one years ago.

“I know,” I replied, “it is so every year. Today and tomorrow, the thirtieth and thirty-first of May.”

Dougall MacDonald nodded slowly, his eyes somewhat betraying curiosity for what was to come next.

“I can understand, Mister MacDonald, why it is closed tomorrow. It is both your birthday and also the day that *Sgeulachd* Castle was opened so many years ago. But I can't figure out why it is always closed the day before.”

I got no reaction.

“It is not just on weekends,” I went on, “but always, every year again, whether it is in the middle of the week or on weekends, whether it is beautiful weather or not.”

I told no news to the man, who seemed unimpressed with what I was trying to do. He nodded again and turned away, face to his castle. If I wanted to achieve something, I would have to be more resolute.

“Does this have something to do with the missing generations?”

He stopped.

“Two generations to be more precise,” I continued, “and exactly those generations that must have occupied themselves with the restoration of the castle. Your great-grandfather bought the ruins and fifty-four years later you opened a fully-renovated castle, exactly on the day you became eighteen. It has even been suggested that work was delayed because the castle would be restored before that day. I believe that story. I think, had the castle been ready earlier, the authorities would have forced the previous owner or owners to open it with the same grandeur you displayed.”

Dougall MacDonald turned around. A vague smile appeared.

“You ask a lot of questions, Mr...”

“James MacDonald.”

We shook hands.

“I'm a journalist.”

Dougall MacDonald did not like that last piece of information.

“But I am not here in my professional function,” I quickly added.

“Ever since I was thirteen, I have had this huge fascination with this place. *Sgeulachd* Castle is the reason why I became a journalist.”

He smiled more easily now. His clear blue eyes, penetrating deep inside my mind, discovered I was not lying.

“But some things just don’t add up,” I confessed.

“No?”

He put his hands in his pockets and waited for further explanation.

“It’s not just those two days that bug me, nor the two missing generations, it’s especially that one room in the castle.”

“And what room would you be talking about?”

He knew what room I meant. He just wanted to find out what I had to tell.

“There is one room in *Sgeulachd* Castle, the room that in previous times must have been a dungeon. That room contains nothing but a big picture and a watch.”

He smiled broadly. He needed more convincing before he would shed any light on the situation.

“The picture must mean a lot because every couple of years a new version is hung on the same wall. Never, in all those years that I visited the castle, have I seen the picture in poor condition. But if it matters that much, why hang it in a dungeon? It would do the picture, the person in it and the photographer much more justice to hang it in one of the main rooms, maybe the ballroom, or the room closest to where the figure on the picture was standing, at least thirty years ago. The photograph shows the castle still in ruins. But the castle was inaugurated twenty-one years ago, before which it had been in scaffolding for nearly ten years. And what was that person doing up on the front wall, standing that high? And who is that person? Who was the person taking the picture?”

Dougall MacDonald seemed pleasantly surprised with my findings. I decided I could only surpass his expectations.

“And then there’s the watch. On the one hand, it must be important. It contains the MacDonald name on its cover. Maybe it’s an heirloom. It definitely matters enough to put it behind glass. On the other hand, the watch is severely dented. It could easily be repaired, which would make the watch more valuable, ... unless somebody wants to keep those dents, prefers the watch like that. Then the watch has a story to tell. Moreover, the watch is hung underneath the picture and is therefore completely dominated by it. You have an empty room with two objects in it. And to most visitors, these objects are displayed in the most curious way. I think there is a reasoning behind it.”

Dougall MacDonald said nothing. Maybe he needed some time to grasp the contents of my observations.

“And the odd thing is that nobody seems to know anything about all this. There is not a single guard in the castle who knows either the identity of the person in the picture or the story behind the watch. The guards that were employed twenty years ago were either extremely young or are not local. That just seems a bit too coincidental to me, Mister MacDonald.”

“You have a remarkable sense of perception, Mister MacDonald,” Dougall MacDonald said after a small pause.

“Please, call me James,” I countered, “and thank you for the compliment.”

Dougall MacDonald turned around and walked to the castle. He took the keys out of his pocket, opened the gigantic door and slowly swung his head back in my direction. Without saying a single word, he invited me in. I followed him through the corridors, straight to the room where watch and picture immediately put the spell on me they had done since I first noticed them.

The both of us stared at the picture for a while. I loved it, its mystery, its composition, its wealth in the absolute sobriety. You could just see a figure, not a face, standing on the front wall of the castle, and behind the figure the sun was setting. Looking at it, you could really feel the complete awe the photographer had for this dare-devil, fearing nor height, nor a walk on cracked walls.

“How high is that guy standing?”

Dougall MacDonald laughed.

“I am glad your sense of perception is not infallible.”

We looked at one another, he wondering what to do, I hoping that my journey had not been in vain.

“How much time do you have, James?” he asked after a break of several minutes.

“All the time in the world,” I replied.

“Then you have more time than I do.”

He sat down on a small brick wall facing the picture and watch. He bid me to join him.

I. The castle

Dougall MacDonald bought what was left of *Sgeulachd* Castle: impressive walls, chambers without roofs, at some places merely a pile of natural stone. He immediately had two eager supporters, notably his twin boys Connor and Duncan, at that time just ten years old. Other people were less enthusiastic and feared that the fifty-five-year-old millionaire who had become rich through his construction firm would turn the ruins into some modern theme park or other tourist attraction of that sort. But Dougall had no intention to make money out of the site and decided at first to leave the castle like it was, until he would have more time for his prized possession. Not long after his purchase however, he did start to have a house built at short of a hundred yards distance of the head of the castle's entrance. Living so close to the ruins would grant Dougall time to reflect more profoundly on its future, or so he thought. But Dougall MacDonald was a workaholic with his heart divided between modern houses and ancient castles. *Sgeulachd* Castle was his toy for his dreaded retirement.

The immediate vicinity of the castle did definitely release a nearly fanatic approach the two boys gradually developed. Connor and Duncan spent every free moment on the island, played games between its walls, chose their own favourite room and enjoyed acting as the lords of the house. A few years of age also illustrated the differences between the brothers. Whereas a more level-headed Connor preferred studying the castle on the ground, an impulsive and sometimes reckless Duncan loved climbing the walls to, standing on top of the front wall, observe its surroundings. Connor, afraid of heights, did not even dare to think of his brother's acts, let alone follow his example. But their own father reassured Connor.

“As long as Duncan doesn't climb that wall...”

Dougall pointed at the highest wall in the inner-courtyard, the shortest and steepest route to reach the highest point near the shaft.

“... he is alright. All the walls are quite safe. The stones are still firmly on their place, and your father should know, shouldn't he? Except that particular wall.”

Dougall shook his head pondering why this one wall would show that many flaws.

“Several stones will just throw you off.”

Dougall knew. Before he had let his sons on the island, he had searched the place for possible causes of accidents. He was fully aware of Duncan's liking for any surface above ground floor, so he had tried out all the walls. Duncan was warned for the one wall.

University drove Connor and Duncan temporarily away from their beloved castle. Connor studied history, Duncan archaeology. Their father realised his sons would be of invaluable help to restore the castle. But he had yet to learn how deep their passion for his castle had rooted.

Sylvester of the year that Connor and Duncan had turned eighteen saw the twins separated. The both of them stayed in the cities where they were studying, Connor to have a quiet drink with friends, Duncan to go out and celebrate Hogmanay in the wildest possible fashion. But impulsiveness got in the way of someone's plans.

It was not long past midnight, when the company was still vigorously singing 'Auld Lang Syne', that Connor started feeling unease swelling fast. The discomfort in his body soon manifested itself in an uncontrollable shivering. Connor, who was not the type to get cold that easily, reacted instantly.

“I've got to go.”

He parted from his startled friends and before the hour was gone, Connor was driving back home, the car heater constantly blowing on its maximum. Connor was cold for no apparent reason. He knew something was wrong. But the road was long and trying. It took Connor a full four hours to arrive at his parent's house. He immediately detected his brother's car, well out of sight when inside the house. Connor parked his car in the driveway and rushed towards the house where he impatiently banged on the front door.

“Dad, dad!” he shouted frantically.

His fists violently hit the door. The lights in the house went on and Connor already took some steps backwards.

“Dad, hurry up!”

A worn-out face appeared, but Connor’s compassion was growing thin.

“Duncan’s in the castle, dad!”

“What? But Duncan’s not here, Connor. He’s in...”

“He’s on the island, dad. For God’s sake, get the lights.”

Connor ran towards the still flooded footpath. His father was forced to see the urgency of the situation at once.

“Wait, Connor, you can’t go through that yet. There is ice underneath the water!”

The ice-cold water covering the well over fifty yard long footpath constituted an impassable border. And Connor needed to get across; he needed to get inside the castle. But it would still take an hour before the water had ebbed away.

“Duncan! Duncan!” he screamed out loud, “Duncan, you stupid idiot! Duncan!!”

Dougall came running towards the castle, armed with lights, ropes and heavy boots.

“Are you sure your brother is ...”

“Yes,” Connor interrupted, “Duncan is in the castle. I can feel it. He has been there since yesterday evening.”

It was freezing, it had been freezing that severely for the past days that the last of the flood water had turned into ice on the footpath. Only a total lunatic would then decide to spend the night outdoors, only a fanatic like Duncan would have himself captured on the island of his forefathers.

Dougall’s wife, Connor’s and Duncan’s mother appeared outside. Not a word came out of her mouth when she calmly but visibly angry took some wood back inside the house. The two men did not want to pay attention to that for now.

“We have to get him off now, dad.”

Still deliberating on how best to cross the water, Connor could no longer wait on his indecisive father and took a rope and tied it round his waist. He threw the other end back at his father. Wearing neither protective clothes nor his father’s heavy boots, Connor thought to have found a way to cross the flooded ice path. He lifted his foot and planted it down firmly

in the water, the ice cracking beneath his foot. Every step sent a new shiver through his spine. As the water reached as high as his knees, he could feel the blood in his veins rejecting further transportation of the vital oxygen under these arctic conditions. He speeded up a bit. The end was not as severely flooded anymore and only a couple of yards away from the gate, Connor untied the rope. He tied it at the gate and then rushed over the inner court, straight to the stairs leading to the room where he knew he would find his brother. The west-side of the castle offered some stunning views over the water. Bright days would seduce Duncan to climb the front wall overlooking both the castle and the tidal water; on other occasions Duncan would be content just sitting in his “master bedroom”. Did Duncan watch the last setting sun of the year?

“Idiot,” Connor sighed, when he found his brother close by the window, “you stupid idiot.”

A half-empty bottle of champagne stood beside Duncan’s motionless body.

“Idiot, idiot, idiot,” Connor murmured, as he kneeled down to check if his brother was still breathing.

He was. But he was not responding to anything Connor was doing.

“Come on, you big bastard,” Connor groaned as he lifted an unconscious Duncan on his back and shoulders.

He struggled to get down the stairs, dragged his frozen feet over the inner court, back to the gate. He relied on the fact that the weight would spontaneously break the ice this time.

Dougall took over for his son, as soon as Connor was close enough. Carrying him together they ran back to the house and laid Duncan down before the burning fire.

“Take off his clothes, Dougall,” his wife commanded sternly.

“And you take off yours,” she ordered her other son.

Being a nurse, she provided first aid to both her sons, paying specific attention to Duncan’s hands and feet, massaging them to activate the blood pumping through these closing veins. She had never made any secret of it that she utterly disliked the place, being removed from any doctor or other medical service or from all the comfort she had enjoyed

in the city. Moreover, she did not share her husband's nor her sons' passion for the adjacent castle at all.

By the time the doctor arrived at long last, Duncan had already regained consciousness and the consultant could only diagnose a young man back on his way to a quick recovery. But not all things were to mend.

The following morning found the only woman of the house with packed suitcases downstairs. A taxi was waiting outside.

"If you think I'm going to wait till that wretched castle kills one of you, you must be crazier than I thought," she said viciously, "I've had enough of this place. I'm going back to the city."

She never did come back. The marriage between Dougall and his wife had been over a long time ago, but the blow to her sons hit them hard. Whereas Duncan had still flippantly told his mother that night that there were worse ways to die than on the castle he loved so much, she could only see the threat it posed and annihilated every sense of beauty the men around her all seemed to attribute to it. But the loss of their mother only made Connor and Duncan grow more obsessed with the castle. Their mother had been the sole person able to distract the boys a bit. Her absence broke down all barriers. They either focused on their studies or on *Sgeulachd* Castle.

Shortly after their twenty-first birthdays, Connor and Duncan both graduated, at which moment they believed their father, who had retired the year before and now had his hands free, would support them to start working on the castle. Four years of separation was long enough and they were looking forward to spending all of their time on the castle. But Dougall had drawn his conclusion from the New Year's incident. He thoroughly disappointed his twins the day they came back home.

"I will not back you on this one, Connor and Duncan. Your mother was right. You have to find a job for yourselves first and prove to me that you have a life outside the island."