

Chapter 1 - Hoots man

He was a funny man my Dad. As in peculiar.

A man of changing passions, gusting over him, and us, in passing phases. When I was eight he decided that he was Scottish. The fact that he was Belfast born and bred, Irish for generations back, was a minor detail. Never let the truth get in the way of a good story. And being Scottish was the latest story my Dad wanted to tell.

We were on a family holiday at the time. He started speaking with a Scottish accent, singing Scottish songs, playing Scottish music and reading Robbie Burns. ‘Och aye the noo’ and ‘hoots man’ peppered his conversation.

The holiday wasn’t even in Scotland but on a caravan park in north-east England. It was packed to the gunnels with Scottish families. A day trip to Edinburgh tipped him over the edge. He found a coat of arms for the MacCullochs in a tartan shop just off the Royal Mile and decided that our Irish name, McCullagh, could just as easily be this Scottish one. On our return to Ireland he gave it pride of place in the hallway.

He also brought back a leaflet from a kilt manufacturer. Over the next few years he was to become one of their best ever customers, tissue wrapped tartan arriving by mail order at our home in Coleraine, County Londonderry.

The first one came on a Saturday morning in November 1973. I was playing ludo with my best friend Clare in the sitting room when my Dad came in. ‘What do yese think lassies?’ he said in his Scots accent.

Clare had asked me about the accent before but I’d pretended I didn’t know what she was talking about. But this time there could be no pretending. He stood before us in black brogues, cream knee socks and a green, blue and black tartan kilt. A black beret with a bluish feather perched jauntily on the side of his head and a brown leather sporran swung before him as he twirled a couple of times to give us the full effect.

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‘Eh, Constance? Clare? What do yese think?’

I couldn’t think. All I could do was stare.

Luckily Clare replied, ‘It’s very nice Mr McCullagh. Nice, erm, check.’

‘Aye, it’s the MacCulloch tartan,’ he said. ‘Our family tartan. We’re one of the auldest and most noble o’ all the Scottish clans.’

‘So ye like it Clare? What about you Constance? I’ve no heard your verdict.’

I wanted to shout, ‘Have you completely lost your marbles?’ Instead I said, ‘It’s really... really great.’

He nodded briefly. ‘Aye, that it is. But hoots man, I’ve no time to be spending the morning chatting. I’ve things tae do.’ And with that he was off.

One kilt proved not to satisfy his taste for tartan. The following month another special delivery arrived. This time it was the Bonnie Prince Charlie package – an 8-yard kilt in MacCulloch Ancient tartan, black velvet dress jacket, white pleated shirt, seal skin sporran, dancing pumps and a jewelled dagger to wear down his sock.

He enlisted the whole family in his new identity. He bought my mum a knee length kilt for daytime and a full length one for the weekly Scottish dancing classes he enrolled them in. She drew the line, however, at inserting ‘och aye’ into every fourth sentence.

I too received a kilt and was expected to support Scotland over Ireland at football and rugby. My sister, Joanna, was already tartanned up. She was in her Bay City Rollers phase and had a pair of white Les McKeown baggy trousers with tartan stripes down the side and a tartan-lined bomber jacket. My Dad completed her look with a thin MacCulloch tartan scarf to tie round her wrist. Simon, my brother, was enrolled as a junior member of the Scottish Nationalist Party.

On evenings out, dressed in his kilt and sporran, his velvet jacket and his frilly

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shirt, his dagger and his dancing shoes, my father would slip into his Scots accent, ‘Och hen, cannie I get ye a wee dram?’ Some people were taken in. On New Year’s Eve, as my Dad sang ‘Flower of Scotland’ at the Coleraine Rugby Club dinner & dance, a man asked my mother ‘Why did your husband ever leave Scotland, when he obviously loves it so much?’ But in a town as small as Coleraine, I think most knew the truth and I’d change the subject if anyone ever mentioned Scotland.

My father’s Scottish identity determined the destination of our annual summer holiday for several years. Not by holidaying actually in Scotland, but by returning to the place where he’d discovered his Scottish identity. Haggerston Castle caravan park put my Dad close to his obsession but it ruined my own passion of the time. The Wombles.

I loved the Wombles. Huge great grey furry creatures, they were the highlight of my day, weekdays before the BBC News. I made sure to finish my chores so that I could watch it without being called upon to lay the table or wash the potatoes. Underground, overground, I was their greatest fan. Uncle Bulgaria, Madame Cholet, Tomsk, Tobermory, Orinoco – I loved them all. The family I really wanted. But over the course of our second Haggerston holiday in 1974, I lost them.

Our preparations for Haggerston began weeks in advance with my mother sifting through our clothes and setting aside those we would be taking. Food began to be stockpiled, as if England still operated under a rationing system and we needed enough supplies to last the fortnight.

The day before our departure my Dad wheeled the trailer round to the front of the house for loading. By accident he put it down on his foot and as a result he could not participate in the loading. Instead he shouted instructions to my harassed mother and the rest of us over ‘I belong to Glasgow’, which was blaring out from the record

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player.

‘Och Maisie. Jeesus Christ. I didnae tell ye tae take that yin. I tellt ye tae take that other yin there.’

‘Simon, do ye know ken how tae load properly? Ye’re wandering aroon like some great fairy.’

‘If it wasnae for this bad foot, I’d hae finished this in half the time it’s taken yese.’

Eventually the loading was complete and he limped outside to secure the tarpaulin in place.

We set off the following evening. My father wanted to wear a kilt for the journey but my mother persuaded him that it might get dirty on the boat. He made do with red tartan trousers, black polo shirt, red v neck and green tartan tam o’shanter.

The ferry was packed but eventually we found somewhere to sit and settled down to share a flask of soup and some corned beef sandwiches my mother had made. It was a bad start – I hated corned beef and the soup was lukewarm.

I was soon bored, sitting with my family, listening to my Dad singing Scottish songs under his breath and my mum tutting at a group of Belfast kids running up and down the gangway, shouting and screaming. It was a relief when Scotland was sighted up ahead. My father took us out on deck.

‘Aye, it’s oor homeland. Isnae it beautiful?’ he said.

It was some time before we finally docked and even longer waiting in the hold of the ship to disembark. As we drove off the ferry my father insisted we all join in on a rousing chorus of Scotland the Brave.

We drove into the night and I fell asleep sitting upright between my brother and sister. I woke briefly when we parked up in a lay-by for Dad to get some sleep, then slept through till dawn. We peed behind a hedge, then ate more of the corned beef

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sandwiches before setting off on the last part of the journey.

By quarter past nine we were unloading the trailer into our Haggerston caravan and soon we were settled down to sausages, bacon, fried biscuits (one of my mother's specialities – on this occasion rich tea) and toast.

It was a great first day. I messed around with Joanna in the playground, came out ahead on the camp slot machines and cheered my Dad on to victory in the talent contest at the camp dance that evening. He had the voice of Joseph Locke and Scotland the Brave went down a storm.

He was in a good mood the next morning.

'Ah it was some night, eh?' he said, as we sat down to our shreddiees.

I nodded.

'Where's my toast, Maisie?' he called. 'This is my celebration breakfast.'

He turned back to Simon, Joanna and I and sang:

'Land of my heart forever

Scotland the braaaaaaaaave.'

'Aye, some night indeed. But next Saturday's going to even be better. Do yese want to know why?'

No-one answered.

'I said do yese want to know why?'

'Why?' my sister said.

'Well next weekend, not only will I be winning, but one of you will be too.'

'One of us?' I said.

'Aye, you're all entering the junior competition. Sure if you've even half my talent, you're guaranteed victory. Just think what Pat and Seamus will have to say to that.'

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Pat and Seamus were our next door neighbours, the O'Briens. They were joining us for the second week of our holiday in the next-door caravan.

As the week progressed I still did not know what I was going to do. My mother suggested that I recite a poem but I did not think that would be much of a crowd-pleaser. Joanna had decided on an Irish jig but Simon was refusing to enter at all.

'Ach ye've no talent anyway, ye great jessie,' my father said. 'I dinnae need you. My wee lassies will win it for me. They will nae let me doon.'

All entrants had to register by midday on the morning of the competition. There were two categories - eleven and over and 10 and under. Joanna and I joined the queue trickling out of the dance hall. I was going with my mother's suggestion of a poem, one I'd learned about mice. The first line was:

I think mice are rather nice

I knew it was not a winner but at least my Dad would know I'd tried. When my sister went forward and gave her name: Joanna McCullagh; age: 12; performance: Irish tap dancing, I was still with the mice:

Their tails are long their faces small

They haven't any chins at all

Joanna got her slip of paper and left me to register on my own. The bleached blonde taking the names beckoned me forward. And instead of giving my details as Constance McCullagh; age: 8; performance: reciting Mice are Nice, I'd transformed into Constance McCullagh; age: 8; singing Remember You're a Womble.

I don't know what made me do it, where the idea even came from. I'd thought of singing but had not been able to think of the right song - Twinkle Twinkle Little Star was not going to propel me to stardom. So I left the hall thrilled by my last minute stroke of genius.

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I decided not to tell my family of the change of plan, kept my slip of paper to myself. It would reinforce my moment of triumph if no-one knew it was coming. My only disappointment was that I did not have a grey furry outfit. Still, I knew people would love the song so much that the lack of a costume wouldn't count against me.

All day I secretly practised. In my head during lunch, out loud when I went on my own for a walk, back in my head when the O'Briens arrived just after three o'clock and out loud again when I went to buy sweets from the camp shop. When I got to the chorus, Remember you're a womble, I could hear the audience joining in with gusto.

I started to get nervous as I changed into my best dress, a long pink gingham.

'Don't worry,' I told myself. 'Everyone loves the Wombles. You're going to win.'

It was a warm summer's evening and I carried my cardigan as we walked up to the hall with the O'Briens. There were 6 O'Briens – Mr and Mrs, Patrick, 14, Gerald, 13, Mary, 11 and Joseph, 10. We were early for once and found two tables together near to the front with a good view of the stage. Mr O'Brien bought me a fanta and I sipped it through a straw while I waited for the competition to start.

I was fifth on. I'd always liked the number five and took this as a good sign. Soon it was my big moment. I walked forward and handed my slip of paper to the MC, a large, slightly sweating man in a gold lurex dinner jacket.

'And now we have Constance McCullagh, aged 8 with,' and here there was a slight pause and a definite smirk, 'Remember You're a Womble. Take it away Constance.'

I was singing unaccompanied – the band did not have the music for Remember You're a Womble. I took the microphone in my hand and began to sing. The audience was silent as I began the first verse but I knew I'd have them with me come the chorus.

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‘Remember you’re a womble,’ I sang out, clear and sure, ready for their answering ‘Remember you’re a womble’. Only it didn’t come.

I began to lose confidence as I began the 2nd line of the chorus, an octave higher than the first.

‘Remember you’re a womble,’ I squeaked, half waving my arm in a vain attempt to get the audience to join in. By the time I got to ‘Remember, member, member, what a womble, womble, womble you are,’ my voice was beginning to break.

I looked towards my family for support. Quite why, I don’t know. Other than my mother they’d always been a bunch of bastards. My mum was engaged in a whispered conversation with Joanna and the rest of the table were openly laughing. I was on my own.

There were three more verses to Remember You’re a Womble. They were bad enough. But the choruses in between were pure purgatory. By the final one even the MC was urging the audience to join in. A few people did, but not enough to make a difference.

I returned to my family table where they were still laughing at my performance. My mother asked, ‘what made you choose that song?’ But I had no answer so I stayed quiet.

I was quiet for most of the evening, spending long periods hiding in the toilets. But there was no escape on the way home. I didn’t like the walk from the dance hall to our caravan at the best of times. I was terrified of the dark and the barely-lit path took you past an old, abandoned building. I was sure that there were dead bodies buried there. I’d dreamt about them a few nights before, rising up out of their graves and swooping down to attack me in my bed. Normally I’d stick close to my family but tonight I walked ahead, tuning out their chatter. As I approached the building, I began

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to slow. What if the ghosts were in there? What if they got me?

I heard my Dad call my name. I looked round. 'Remember you're a womble,' he sang in a screechy, tuneless voice.

I wanted to run, away from him, away from everything. But I was scared – of the deep shadows, the ghosts ahead, and of how much trouble I'd be in if I ran.

My feet didn't move. Instead I turned my head away. My family had caught up with me by now. I started to walk. Every few steps one or other of my father, my brother, sister or the O'Brien children would call, Constance, and then sing-song 'Remember you're a womble,' at the top of their voices.

It was a relief to get back to the caravan and the relative sanctuary of the bunk room that I shared with my sister. I slipped into the lower bunk, shutting the night and my family out.