

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *A Scattering*

By writing *A Scattering* I wanted to explore an aspect of my own history. Some of my ancestors were from the Scottish Highlands, living through the dramatic period of history known as the Highland Clearances. Despite this, I knew little about it. I hadn't been taught about it at school, nor had I heard any stories at home.

The novel required a lot of research, many trips to Scotland, plus learning to speak some of the Gaelic language, one of the great pleasures of writing this novel. I wanted to tell the story from more than one point of view. I hadn't written anything historical before this and I've lived in England all my life, so I knew it would present a challenge. I thought I might need a mentor and, after some research, enrolled in the TLC Mentoring Scheme.

Lesley McDowell, my mentor, was extremely helpful, suggesting important changes to structure and plot and contributing ideas along the way. I found the bi-monthly submissions helped me to keep the focus on my writing.

At the end of the year I had six months to write a new draft, before submitting to a different reader. Again, the deadline was useful. My new reader was Kavita Bhanot. Her feedback was very encouraging; she believed in the subject matter of the novel and gave helpful feedback on the areas that still needed work.

Throughout this time Aki Schilz has been extremely encouraging and supportive. She engaged an editor, as well as providing her own editorial notes. The mentoring process has taught me a lot and I have become more confident as a writer.

Extract from *A Scattering* by Emma Cameron

Catriona walked along the path beside the kirk carrying a bunch of spring flowers, passing the ancient yew tree, grooved and twisted, as old as time. Lifting the latch she pushed open the gate to the churchyard. It was the anniversary of Duncan's death. Ten years. In some ways it seemed much longer, a whole lifetime, in other ways like yesterday. There was a time when she thought she couldn't go on, the crushing feeling when she woke in the morning and realised he wasn't just away in the field.

Despite her fears she had survived; she'd had to, for Ewen's sake. She was proud of that and, though she missed Duncan greatly, some things were better without him, though she would only ever admit that to herself. She'd found a way to manage the work and to earn money as a weaver.

The churchyard was by the loch. The dead had fine views. Leaning on the wall she looked out across the water, which was still and quiet, feeling the soft earth beneath her feet and the sun on her face. She shed tears remembering the feel of Duncan's arm around her and how, when they were young and first married, she wanted him to hold and kiss her every night, so that sometimes he laughed and said, "I'm lucky to have someone who loves me as you do."

She cleaned lichen from the lettering on his grave and laid the flowers on the grass. Close by was another grave, smaller in size. She averted her eyes until she could bear to look at the inscription. Elisabeth and Ann. Children of Duncan and Catriona MacGregor. Elisabeth died 12 Dec 1828. Ann died 16 Dec 1828.

Elisabeth – eight years old, hair the colour of autumn bracken, purple stains around her mouth from eating blackberries, helping card the wool, running through the heather so light she could bounce on the top of it then suddenly the illness came upon her and she was choking and wheezing. At first they thought it would pass but then she grew paler and one night she breathed her last breath and then Ann was the same. Catriona had clung onto Ann and prayed and prayed, though she no longer believed in God because after all what was he there for, if not to save her children?

She sank down against the wall, though the ground was wet, remembering those dark times. Other families around the loch had also lost children to the disease. Coffins being walked along the lochside to the kirk were a regular occurrence. Then the sickness had passed and the township returned to a semblance of normal but for Catriona there was no normality. She no longer wanted Duncan to touch her; it would only lead to more children and more sorrow. He was patient with her though sometimes he would walk the hills and when he returned she could tell he'd been crying.

One night several years later, there'd been a huge storm which threatened to destroy their roof. They'd fought to hold onto the heather and make sure that the cow and calf were not too frightened. In the early hours of the morning the wind abated and they went to bed exhausted but elated that they'd saved the house. At that moment she realised they were joined together. He was her friend, the one she'd chosen. She'd reached for him and though he'd been surprised and tentative at first, they had not forgotten their passion for each other.

Nine months later Ewen was born. She watched over him like a hawk, keeping him close beside her at all times until Duncan said, "Ewen needs to come to the field with me now, Catriona. The danger has passed."

On her way home she heard voices and rounding a bend saw two men coming towards her. One was tall, the other a head shorter. The smaller man looked familiar; someone she hadn't seen for many years. Anthony Menzies. The other man was the one she'd seen at the kirk. She carried on, assuming they would walk straight by, but instead they stopped. Mr Menzies raised his hat and said a cheerful, "Good Morning. Mrs MacGregor, isn't it? I think I have you to thank for trying to save my father."

She nodded in agreement. "I heard him calling in the Black Wood and ran to fetch help."

"Thank you for your diligence. I am your new Laird, Sir Anthony Menzies. This is Mr MacGillouvry."

She wanted to say, 'I know how you are,' but stopped herself.

MacGillouvry stared at her. There was something chilling about it, as if he could see right through her, his eyes as dark as his horse. He nodded and said, "Good day." His accent was not one she knew.

Feeling awkward in her old green dress and shawl in front of their fine suits she said, "I am pleased to meet you. Good day to you both," then she hurried on.

Anthony Menzies had filled out since she'd last seen him. His face had become fleshy, though his dark curly hair still gave him a childish look. He was now the owner of a castle. If he hadn't made a hole in the boat it would have been his older brother who would have inherited. No wonder he looked pleased with himself. He would have a good life, all the deer and salmon and wine he could ever want. Still the Castle was huge and isolated. She would not want to live that way. She needed her neighbours, Jessie and the Frasers, Màiri, all the children.

She carried on walking home, past the farm at Ardlarich, stopping to say hello to Sophie MacDonald, who was sweeping the path to her house, rounding the last bend before coming to the turning to Torr Uaine. On the other side of the road was the Hanging Tree, an old oak, very tall, which spread out across the loch and the road. The largest branch was fifteen foot above the ground. Jacobite fighters were hanged from the tree by Cumberland's men after the '45.

Sometimes she let herself stare at it, as if by doing so she could nullify its power; that day she barely glanced at it until a movement caught her attention. A black horse under the tree. It raised its head to look at her for a moment then shook its mane and returned to rooting amongst the leaves.

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There were days of sunshine, interspersed with heavy bursts of rain. Wind blew across the hillside at night, whistling through the heather roof. In Catriona's field neat rows of potato leaves pushed up through the mounds of earth. Kale was growing thick and full. Ewen and Seònaid settled into the new house. Seònaid made rush mats for the floor and decorated the windowsill with wildflowers.

Ewen came by nearly every day to bring water from the burn. One morning when she had finished milking Brèagha and was starting the days baking there was a

knock on the door. It was the Priest, John Macleod. He had been at their church for several years now. Catriona tried to like him but found him to be a humourless man whose sermons were too long.

"Good morning, Mrs Macgregor, I hope you are well?"

"Good morning Sir. I am. I hope you are too?"

He nodded in assent. "May I come in? There is something I must discuss with you."

"Certainly."

They spoke in English as he did not speak Gaelic, having been educated in the south.

Catriona opened the door wider and he followed her in. They sat on the bench under the window. Light shone on the side of his face, highlighting the paleness of his skin.

"As you know we have a new Laird." His tone was serious and gloomy.

She nodded, waiting.

"The old Laird let many aspects of estate management lapse and there is urgent need for improvements. MacGillouvry, the new Factor, has instructed me to inform you that in order to pay for these, the rents will need to be raised."

His words, though not a complete surprise, were still a shock. For all his friendliness when they met Anthony Menzies must have already decided that they should pay more. She wondered what man would ask a priest to do their work for them.

"I have already informed the other tenants, Seumas Cameron, Daibhidh MacDonald and Alexander Fraser, Robert Kennedy."

"And Màiri Ross?"

He coughed and looked aside. "Not yet. In fact you would do well to tell her."

Catriona suppressed a brief smile. The Priest was scared of Màiri and anyway she would never let him in her house.

"Is there a figure for the increase?"

He coughed again and looked down at his papers. "The rent is to be £8 per quarter."

She took a sharp inward breath. An increase of £2.

"So much?"

He nodded, lips pressed together.

"You may need to make some –" he cleared his throat "– adjustments, but I am sure you will come to realise it is in your best interests. The Factor has assured me that there will be great benefits."

"And do you know what these might be?"

The Priest shut the book with a slap and stood up. "At present I'm not at liberty to share that information. Now I must be going. I have many duties to perform this morning."

He tipped his hat and left. She followed him out. As he was walking away Ewen passed him on the track and they nodded at each other.

"Was the Priest visiting the house mam?"

"Yes son. He wanted to remind me about the funeral of Eliza Stewart next week." She couldn't bear to tell him about the rent increase just yet.

Ewen washed his hands in the pail outside the door.

"I have something to tell you."

"Is Seònaid well?"

He nodded, smiling. "She is going to bear a child."

For a moment Catriona didn't react, disturbed as she was by the Priest's words, then she collected herself.

"I am delighted son."

A child, a new life, so unexpected, its fragility pulled at her heart. On another day she would have welcomed it joyfully. Now, because of the encounter with the Priest, she sensed that she and her son were standing on uncertain ground.

"The baby will be born just before Christmas – a wonderful time."

"Yes, it is. Màiri and I will help when the time comes. She will be pleased to hear the news"

"I am very happy, mam. It has come soon but I am ready. I will work hard to make sure the baby is healthy."

That evening she stared into the fire and her eyes filled with tears. A baby was wonderful but what a time to be born. So much uncertainty. It seemed as if the new Laird was going to bring nothing but trouble to their lives. She wished that she could have done more to save the old Laird.

Early next morning she went to visit Màiri. In rowan trees nearby birds were singing. Màiri was pinning washing on a line. She looked cheerful.

"A beautiful morning Catriona. I love this time of year."

She waited until Màiri had pegged the last piece of clothing. There were two pieces of news to tell her. She told her about the baby first.

"He will be a good father. There is a strength in him. You gave him that Catriona,"

"I have some difficult news too. The Priest came to see me yesterday. Our rents are to be increased by two pounds a quarter."

Màiri's expression changed. "They are high enough already. If he wants money all he has to do is to buy less wine. We have nothing to spare here." She picked up the basket and waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the castle. "Let him try to raise them. He will be in for a shock."

About the Writer

Emma Cameron originally trained as a visual artist, making wall-hangings, abstract paintings and also creating banners and murals – before starting to write. After working on a memoir about her life as an artist, she moved on to writing fiction. She completed an MA in Creative Writing at City University in 2011. During this time, she was a member of a writing group in London, tutored by Jacob Ross. She recently completed mentoring with The Literary Consultancy during which she wrote her novel, *A Scattering*. She has a letter, 'The Hawthorn Tree', in the anthology, *Letters to the Earth*, published by Harper Collins in October 2019. Another poem/letter was performed by Alison Steadman, to mark Earth Day, April 2020. She lives in Worthing where she writes, makes art and is involved in climate activism. She is currently working on a new novel about the ecological crisis.

