

Remember Dundee!

I have a great affection for Dundee. While it is maligned by some and misunderstood by others, Dundee was the first city I ever knew and it still plays a big part in my memories and my dreams.

I was born in Dundee in 1945 but I only spent the first ten days of my life there. I was brought up on a farm in Angus and went to school in Forfar; so it was only as I grew older that I got to know Dundee. It was the nearest city and all sorts of things seemed to happen there that never happened in the countryside. I used to hear my parents' stories of going to school in Dundee; my mother went to the Harris and my father went to the Morgan and I never did find out why Dundee schools have the definite article at the beginning of their names. The way English was spoken in Dundee – eh want some chups wi' meh peh – made me wonder if Dundee had its own language. Then there was the politics – I heard that Dundee was being brought to its knees by the trade unions and that they were run by Communists; previously, I had thought (I was only about ten) that communists were always Russian but it seemed that they could be Dundonians as well. Dundonians came out to our farm to pick the tatties and I was amazed to hear them talk openly about sex. I have always fancied shorter men rather than taller men and I often wonder if I developed that taste from my fleeing contact with those braw wee men harvesting our tatties.

Things went on in Dundee that didn't happen in the other parts of my life. My first concrete memories of the city were of going to see Christmas pantomimes like Cinderella and Peter Pan. As I grew older, I used to catch a bus to go shopping; I have no memory of what I went shopping for but it was a chance to be independent for a few hours and increasingly I spent time watching the Dundonians around me. It was when I was a teenager that I realised that sometimes men were watching me in a way that had never happened anywhere else. I was becoming aware of sex and I felt that I was more interested in other boys than girls but the sex education books that I read made no mention of such feelings except to say that they passed away (a bit like the flu). I had heard that Oscar Wilde had been a homosexual and I read a couple of his books but my unsubtle teenage mind could not see any homosexuality in them. I was in Dundee one day when I finally realised that there were more people than Oscar and me who had homosexual feelings. I went into a gents toilet at the top of Union Street (or maybe it was Whitehall Street) and although there were other men in there no-one left while I was having my pee. I must have been curious enough to go back later and I found this same atmosphere; I stayed longer this time but no-one left. Over the months, I went back there and while nothing ever happened, I did realise that some of the men were looking at me and at one another. It was all very complicated and I had a Presbyterian conscience to struggle with but it was in Dundee that I first realised that I might be an object of sexual desire for another man.

I was always very interested in history but when I was at school and at university it was difficult to find out much about Scots history – and even more about the history of Dundee. I knew that there was a jute industry because my mum had lots of friends whose husbands had worked in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal; when they came back to retire in Broughty Ferry, they always gave their bungalows Indian names which must have seemed exotic to the local posties. Some Indians also came to live in Dundee in the 50s and 60s and there was a restaurant on the Perth Road with the well- assimilated name of Curry Oot. I went on to discover that women had been the backbone of the jute spinning industry in Dundee and were quite often the main breadwinner in their families. Sometimes, the men in their families were known as 'kettle bilers,' which might have been humorous but could have been derogatory. There were other men who set off across the globe on whaling ships and

spent long periods of time cooped up together at sea. There's a PhD waiting for someone to do about Gender Distinctions and Employment Patterns in 19th and 20th century Dundee. I also discovered that Edwin Scrymgeour, who represented Dundee at Westminster between 1922 and 1931, was the UK's only Prohibitionist MP. A visit to a few Dundee pubs on a Saturday night would suggest that he may not have been that successful in his mission.

I missed out on Dundee in the 1960s but I was busy elsewhere discovering the joys of gay sex – in Edinburgh (during the Festival), in St Andrews (where I was a student), in Tanzania (under the banana trees) and then in London (wherever I could). I tried looking for gay bars in Dundee in the 70s while I was making family visits. It was there that I learned the bus station rule. If you don't know where the gay bar is in a town, go to the bus station and you'll find one within a few hundred yards. I've tried it in several other cities and it always works. Pubs still closed at 10pm in those days and so if you hadn't managed to get off with anyone you still had time to rush to catch the last bus to Alyth or Letham or Cupar or Kirriemuir. I am told that car drivers used to cruise along the Riverside in all kinds of weathers but that was outwith my experience. The first bar I heard about that was near the bus station was the Glass Bucket. It was never an openly gay bar but it was a place where gay men could meet other men in the midst of a larger unsuspecting crowd. I once overheard a very coded conversation in there between two men who had had some sort of relationship with one another; they had not seen each other for some time and one was explaining to the other that he had got married and had a bairn; being an uppity gay liberationist from London, I thought it was heart-breaking but both of them spoke with a fatalism that might well have protected them from having their hearts broken. Later on in the 70s, I discovered the bar on the Seagate that seems to have been gay ever since; it has had various names in its time but I remember it best as The Gauger. The gender separation which used to be a key part of employment in Dundee was replicated in The Gauger; one side seemed to be full of short pool-playing lesbians and the other of alcoholically-fuelled men; I never did work out whether the men were the sexual descendents of the kettle bilers or the whalers. It was in 1979 that I had my only full sexual experience with a man in Dundee; we met in The Gauger and on the way back to Whitfield on the bus someone threw a lit cigarette into my bag and set alight my newspaper.

I visited Dundee a lot in the 90s while I was working in Edinburgh. 1994 was probably the year of my greatest involvement with Dundee. I organised a national conference in Dundee on the theme of racial equality; the conference title was 'Needs Not Numbers' and it was attended by about 150 people from all over the country. I also edited a book called 'Footsteps and Witnesses: Lesbian and gay lifestories from Scotland.' It was a busy time for lesbian and gay organisations in Dundee and people became involved in the gay helpline and other campaign groups. Lots of their volunteers came along to a reading that I did in the Wellgate Library and it was a truly wonderful atmosphere. Both of these events represented a kind of homecoming – maybe not a geographical homecoming but definitely a homecoming of some sort.

I live in London again and I keep in contact with Dundee as much as I can but it's mostly from afar. I am a great admirer of the music of Michael Marra. Who else but a Dundonian would write a song about a visit to Tannadice Park by Princess Grace of Monaco? Dundee can still make me smile. It's a city that never ceases to touch my imagination and make me feel good about myself.

<i>Reflection</i>	<i>Narrated</i>
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