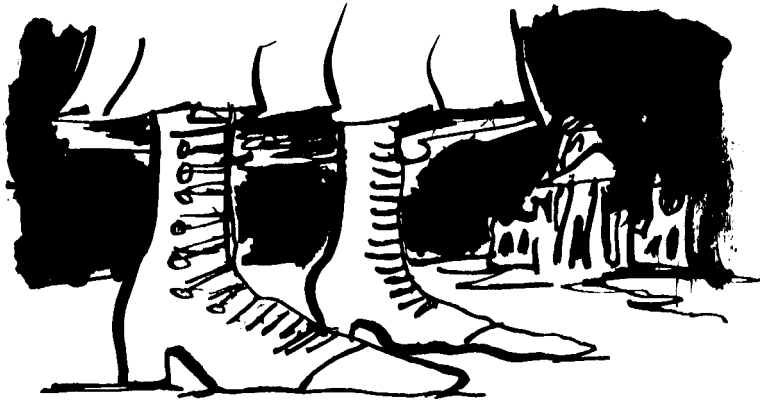


ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

Historical fiction by the winners of
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020





DEEDS, NOT WORDS

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Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
16-19 category

Author's introduction

This story was inspired by a visit to the ruined Delaval Mausoleum in Seaton Sluice in Northumberland, a short distance away from Seaton Delaval Hall. Although the Hall is a National Trust museum, the Mausoleum is completely abandoned, with the roof fallen in and the walls disfigured by graffiti and weeds. It's built on a 3-metre high wall with no staircase or method of reaching the Mausoleum (aside from getting your friend to give you a boost, which is hard in a short denim dress and a 5-year-old pair of Doc Martens, and even harder when you have a grumpy old Miniature Schnauzer with you. All in all, not something I could imagine an 18th Century lord doing). There's no plaque or headstone commemorating a lost loved one – indeed, there is nobody buried there at all. Once we'd made it inside the ruins, we were very curious as to why the Mausoleum existed, mouldering in a farmer's field. Intrigued, we researched the Mausoleum's history and discovered that it had been built for the son of the Hall's owner, Sir John Hussey Delaval. According to the Shell Guide, his son (also named John) had died in 1775 "as a result of being kicked in a vital organ by a laundry maid to whom he was paying addresses". It didn't take a genius to work out which organ it was. Of course, we found this very, very funny, and spent a long time leaning against the graffitied Mausoleum walls, wheezing with laughter. When I tried to research the laundry maid's story, I couldn't find any information about what happened to her after the event, so I decided to make up an answer for myself. As for young John, his father couldn't agree a consecration fee for the Mausoleum with the Bishop of Durham, and so his rather impressive burial chamber instead provides a canvas for budding graffiti artists. That's what you get for bothering laundry maids.

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They said the scream had been heard by the fishing boats, miles out to sea, but they were, admittedly, prone to exaggeration. They also said that she was a witch, and that she had cursed young Sir Delaval, and that was, of course, completely false. Well, the second bit was. Cursing took a lot of time, a lot of power, and, most irritatingly, a lot of ingredients. To enact a curse nearly so effective, she would have had to have spent weeks gathering bitter white roots under moonlight, burying teeth under the loose flagstones in the wine cellar, and stealing young Delaval's hair from his bedsheets. All she needed for what she actually did were strong muscles in her legs and a good pair of solid boots, both of which she possessed.

But that tale could never be told in the village. Because every woman around these parts possessed legs muscled from making the daily trek to the Hall, and every woman around here had a decent pair of work boots. Better to say that she was a witch, that she had unattainable powers, that she was something beyond their understanding. Better not to let them think that they could do what she had done.

They said she disappeared immediately after it happened. They probably said she did it in a puff of smoke, or rode off on a broomstick, or turned into a plague of locusts. This was, of course, as ridiculous as the curse rubbish. She just used the servants' staircase. Maids in the Hall were like the second woman already hidden inside the wooden box, waving their legs while the beautiful assistant was sawn in half. If the audience saw them, it spoiled the magic. As far as the Delavals were concerned, their laundry spawned naturally, fresh and clean and pressed, growing inside their wardrobes while they slept. It used to bother her, that they were so ignorant of the people living beneath their noses, keeping their beds clean and their food hot, but she quickly learned that things got far worse if they found their way into the servants' quarters. Far worse both for her and for them.

Young Delaval had something of a reputation for less-than-appropriate behaviour, especially when it came to serving maids, and her own reputation wasn't exactly spotless when it came to keeping her temper. There were several young men in the village who could have given him a much-needed warning, but then he would have missed out on a much-needed lesson. Women have minds of their own and boots of their own,

and if you cross the wrong one she will leave you with less than you started with. Of course, young Delaval didn't have much time to reap the benefits of his new outlook on life. He died not long after from internal haemorrhaging. *The Newcastle Journal* would later report the cause of this as a severe kick to a "vital organ", and despite their phrasing, everyone knew which organ they meant.

There were no reports or records of what happened to the laundry maid who did the deed. I know, though. She stole a fishing boat and rowed all the way down the coastline to Bamburgh, where she lived out her days in a small cottage, watching shipwrecks from the sand dunes, and made it to the ripe old age of seventy-three before all her teeth fell out and she died on her kitchen floor. She didn't let that stop her, though.

The very day that old woman with solid work boots dropped dead, a baby girl was born fifty miles away in Seaton Sluice, and she was born angry. She already had three teeth, and she bit. She grew more teeth, but the biting habit never left her, and when she was a beautiful nineteen-year-old a young man made the mistake of a Delaval and she sank her teeth into his face. They caught her, this time. They threw her in a jail cell in Newcastle, and a judge said she was the most wild creature he had ever seen and that she should be kept out of polite society. Not two days later she was put on a ship bound for Australia, but she never lost that wild edge, and by the time her feet touched foreign soil there was a warning not to touch her painted in bruises on men's bodies. It was too hot in Australia for a Northumbrian lass, but out there nobody stopped her from taking a bite out of anyone who crossed her, and so she was happy enough until the scurvy set in and she lost all her teeth, and then she threw herself off a cliff onto the warm rocks below. The men of England did not know it, but they were praying that she stayed down there this time. But either God didn't listen, or she was ruled by something else, because a day later Seaton Sluice was once more graced by a baby girl.

She hoped things could be better this time, because she was born with a woman on the throne, but she quickly learned that optimism would only lead to disappointment. She broke her first nose at nine years of age, and by the time she turned seventeen her parents had had quite enough of her antics. They tried to marry her off to three different men, but each one left with a different embarrassing injury, and so they gave up and had her committed to the Northumberland County Pauper Lunatic Asylum. Nobody ever really believed that she was insane. There was nothing

insane about any of the things she did. But insanity was an excuse to keep her locked up, and as long as she was locked up, she couldn't bite or kick. They quickly found out that she could stab, however. Orderlies were soon banned from bringing needles into her cell; she had to take all her medication by mouth. There was one doctor in the asylum who took an immense liking to her, and so she took an immense disliking to him, and when she eventually jumped from the third floor window, she took him with her.

The next baby girl born in Seaton Sluice was quieter. She had learned from her past three rebellions, and she knew how not to be noticed. She worked hard, but more importantly she worked quietly, and by the time she was twenty-one she had enough money to catch a bus to London, where even fewer people noticed her than before. She kept her head down and she kept quiet – so quiet that she managed to burn down three buildings in the name of women's suffrage before anyone noticed that she might be guilty. She wasn't quiet, after that. In prison she was very, very loud indeed. She kept on screaming until her body could no longer take the effects of her hunger strike, and then she died. Her corpse's face would give the officer who found her nightmares for the rest of his life, and she found that immensely funny.

When she came back again, she thought she might actually be peaceful this time. It wouldn't just be a mask for her misdeeds. She would be calm, and she would be nice. The war was over, and all that hard work screaming and starving in prison had paid off, because even once-laundry maids from Seaton Sluice could vote now. A cloud drew briefly over her life in 1939, when the men in charge proved that they weren't like her and couldn't learn from their pasts, and another war broke out. But, as cruel as it felt to say so, it was easier when all the young men went off to war. She had tried ever so hard not to kick or bite or stab or scream this time around, and without the creeping eyes and wandering hands she had no reason to break her oath to herself. Nobody bombed Seaton Sluice. There simply wasn't anything there. She lived her wartime years in peace, and then the men came home. They were worse, now. Something had been done to their minds out there, something that had made them so much more comfortable with the idea of ending a life, and once you were comfortable with killing you were comfortable with almost anything. And so she had to give up on peace and become worse herself. So far, her record had been taking one other man down with her. This

time, it was three. Arson. Her least favourite way to go yet, but also her most satisfying.

In her next life, she passed the gutted ruins of the burned pub on her way to her wedding. She didn't want to get married, but the guy was rich and her mum was sick and she was struggling to care for her and to pay the bills. It seemed that being rich made this man arrogant, and he hit her on their wedding night, and so a week later she drove their car off a cliff with both of them in it. She knew she'd be back.

Her next life was her shortest one yet. She only made it to 9 years old before a man bundled her into his car while she was walking home from school and she was never seen again. They never caught the man. They never even knew where to start. She did, though.

This time, she only had one purpose. She remembered the car registration, and she remembered the man's face. Admittedly, this wasn't much to go on, and so it took her twenty-two years to find him, but find him she did. She could have called the police, but she didn't have any evidence besides memories of a past life. And by this point she had realised that she wasn't very nice at all. She wanted to do it herself. She brought a gun with her, but she used her bare hands. It was satisfying, but it also felt like an ending. She had completed her purpose in that life. When the police caught her, she didn't fancy the idea of fifty or so years in a jail cell, and so she ran at them with the gun until they shot her dead. That was in 2002.

I bet you think this is a proper dark story. You probably think I'm nuts. It's all true, though. You can check, easy. Google "John Delaval mausoleum". That's what we're standing in, after all. I bet you're wondering why I'm telling you all this. I'm surprised you haven't worked it out by now, but you never were the brightest, were you? Bright people don't go round treating women the way you do. Even young Delaval learned not to try anything like that. A bright person might also have realised that there's something suspicious about a woman who hates you agreeing to go into the woods with you at night. Did you think I was the stupid one? That's hilarious. I'm not stupid. I'm angry. I think it's what keeps me alive. I've been angry for nearly 250 years, and I don't think I'm going to stop tonight. Call the police if you want. Or fight back, or whatever. Even if you win, you don't really win. Every generation, there's going to be a baby girl born in Seaton Sluice, and she is not going to be

nice and you are not going to be able to stop her. So think carefully about how you treat women. You never know if it's me. You never know if she's going to kick, or bite, or stab, or scream, or burn, or crash, or bludgeon, or... Wait. I haven't even told you how I get my revenge in this life. I think you're going to like it. I know I do. Don't worry, I'll stop rambling on now.

I'll just show you.