

THE WINNING ENTRIES FOR

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*The Young Walter Scott Prize 2015*

*A collection of work by young writers with a history to tell*

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## INTRODUCTION FROM THE DUCHESS OF BUCCLEUCH

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As a young girl growing up in the Scottish Borders by the banks of the river Teviot, my favourite pastime was riding my pony Shamrock on the wild, misty green hills that rolled all around us. Sometimes I thought I could feel the ghosts of my ancestors at my side, and I would imagine I was betrothed to a dashing Border Reiver who was away rustling cattle in Northumberland while I waited anxiously for his return.

As I grew older, I began to read about the history of my family through the folklore and ballads which had been written about them at the time, and instead of ghosts, they began to take form as real living people. But to a part of me, they would always be characters in my imagination, and I would weave my stories around them.

When I first read *Waverley* by Sir Walter Scott, I was dumbfounded. Here was a man who had lived just down the road, and who had ridden the same hills of my childhood, and he had written the first ever historical novel. All the tales of intrigue, feuding, murder and romance which had bound me in my youth, are to be found in his writing.

It was this that led to us setting up The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, so that contemporary authors who also weave magic from the past, could, for the first time in the UK, receive the admiration and respect their varied work deserves.

My vision for the Young Walter Scott Prize comes from those memories from my younger days. I am always curious about what real people felt at any given time in history, and I am always learning new things from the memories of my father and mother, and those I shared with my grandparents. It still surprises me that so much that is happening today has echoes of past events.

In setting up the Young Walter Scott Prize I want to let young people all over the country set their imaginations free and be ever more curious about the past and our place in it, and to write their stories down for others to enjoy.

Our two winners – Joe Bradley and Rosi Byard-Jones - have exceeded my expectations, and all my congratulations go to them, the runners up, Iseabail Duncan and Alexander Leggatt, and all of you who entered the YWSP this year. Thank you.

ELIZABETH BUCCLEUCH

*June 2016*

## ABOUT THE YOUNG WALTER SCOTT PRIZE

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### *When in the World?*

The Young Walter Scott Prize is organised in two sections. The first is a competition for young writers who enjoy writing stories set in the past, any time before they were born, a time recognisably different from the present. We welcome entries from writers aged from 11 to 19 years who are resident in the UK. This book contains the winning entries from the inaugural year of the Young Walter Scott Prize. They were selected by a panel of judges, chaired by the award-winning novelist Elizabeth Laird. All the information you need in order to submit your historical story can be found on our website – [www.ywsp.co.uk](http://www.ywsp.co.uk)

The second area of work is a series of **Imagining History** workshops designed to help fire the imagination, held in sites of historic interest throughout the UK, run by the Director, Alan Caig Wilson with professional writers, storytellers and experts in creative exploration. These take place throughout the year – previous **Imagining History** workshops have been held in Abbotsford, the Borders home of Sir Walter Scott, Blickling Hall in Norfolk and Trinity House in Leith. Details of the programme and how to book your place are on our website.

The Young Walter Scott Prize is named for Sir Walter Scott who, as a young man, was inspired by the stories, hills and people of the Scottish Borders. Among many achievements in his remarkable life, Scott is credited with having invented historical fiction and he wrote what can only be described as the blockbusters of his age. His books continue to be read throughout the world.

The Young Walter Scott Prize is linked to The Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction, presented every year at The Borders Book Festival in Melrose. Past winners have included Hilary Mantel for *Wolf Hall*, Andrea Levy for *The Long Song*, Sebastian Barry for *On Canaan's Side*, Tan Twan Eng for *The Garden of Evening Mists*, Robert Harris for *An Officer and a Spy* and John Spurling for *Ten Thousand Things*.

Perhaps one day, one of the entrants for the Young Walter Scott Prize will be a winner of the Walter Scott Prize too.

The Walter Scott Prize and the Young Walter Scott Prize are supported by the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust.



## JOE BRADLEY

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*Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize  
11-15 age group*

*My grandfather was clearing out the attic of the old family home in Dover last year, when he came across a number of tin trunks. Inside these was a treasure trove from China, dating back to the early 1900s. They belonged to my great great grandparents who were missionaries during the Boxer Rebellion. They contained a huge range of possessions: personal letters, photographs, religious pamphlets, ink drawings, silk banners and scrolls, intricately embroidered clothing and even a bloodied club.*

*As a family we have been piecing together the Bonseys' story. Last May, I travelled to Hankow Province with my father and grandparents to visit the places that related to their lives and to return items of historical interest to the local university there.*

*I have been inspired to write about their story through the eyes of their youngest child, Olive Bonsey.*

## A MOST UNUSUAL CHILDHOOD

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*Joe Bradley*

I don't remember much from when I was small except for this scene. I was crying. Not just weeping but wailing in Mother's arms, limbs flailing and all. She was trying to soothe me. I couldn't catch her face, all I saw was the grimy hammock in the corner of the room swaying to and fro. The heat was suffocating. It felt as if I was drowning in my own sweat. A putrid scent lingered in the air, arising from the murky waters around us. Yet this wasn't the worst of it. Horrifying human bellows and shrieks reached my ears from far off, each making me more frantic. They were growing in intensity. I hated all this but most of all I hated the sickening rocking of the whole scene; the disconcerting tilting that muddled my infant thoughts to the point of fury.

I was born on 12th January 1898 into a Protestant missionary family in Hankow on the Yangtze River. I was the fourth child of Arthur and Marianne Bonsey, yet I wasn't to meet my siblings until I was ten.

To many people, Father was an energetic, eccentric evangelist. He committed his life to God when he was merely eighteen and has had the will of a bull ever since. Early in his career he wrote to the London Missionary Society stating, 'I wish to reiterate that myself and Miss Ford (my mother) are willing to spend and be spent and if need be to die for the cause of Christ among the heathen'.

I remember him surrounded by his colleagues, absorbed in heated debate. Dressed all in white, to my childish eyes they looked like portly snowmen, my father being the roundest. His face was framed with thick, curly brown mutton chops that tickled when he carried me. He wore horn-rimmed glasses perched on his nose which nestled in his stylish moustache. He had the energy of a blaze of New Year dragons. He taught himself fluent Mandarin and in time became Principal of Hankow Theological College, writing hymns, conducting the brass band, leading the scout troop... and preaching.

Mother shared Father's religious zeal and keen intelligence. However her determination was tempered by her family, she missed her children terribly, all banished to England apart from me. Her features portrayed this; although starting as a strong-willed young woman with a rigid jaw-line and eager face, as time passed, her demeanour softened. There was a hint of sadness in her grey eyes.

My first memory relates to the year I spent on a British gun ship on the Yangtze River at the age of three: I have loathed water-based travel ever since. Mother and I were forced to take refuge here because a violent rebellion had broken out known as The Boxer Uprising. Chinese rebels were fighting to eradicate Western ideas and influence and missionaries, like my parents, were the enemy. Our lives were in danger. Only once the rebellion was quelled did we dare to return to our home and to Father in Hankow.

Central to our lives was the church, Father always said that delivering a sermon every morning staved off illness. I have vivid memories of him preaching interminable sermons to blank-faced congregations. I see myself, stifling in my itchy Sunday best, a fuchsia frock that my mother had dug out of her cupboard. We must have looked a strange trio as we walked to church: a dog-collared, white-suited man, his sad, slender wife and their petite plum of a daughter. We valiantly sang British hymns but no one else knew the words, the congregation just hummed along awkwardly. Afterwards, I was prevented from running home by Mother's stern hand on my shoulder, so we crawled along at an infuriating pace. One day we were confronted by three stocky Chinese men with mean faces, their long hair plaited in queues down their backs. Father had quickened his step and we passed them but I could hear them shouting and spitting behind us and I was frightened. As we were entering the safe haven of home, the tallest brute shouted in surprising English, 'You are an insult, you are an insult to all China!' I shuddered despite the humid conditions. We didn't even know those men and yet they had tracked us down and waited to harass us on God's Sabbath!

The next day one of Father's missionary colleagues came to visit, a Reverend Sparham. He and Father spoke in hushed tones in the drawing room. I was curled up on Mother's lap while she flicked through a novel. I could just hear Father explaining that he had experienced this kind of behaviour out in the villages but they had never targeted the

family before. Sparham agreed gravely. He was a gentle widower. His wife had died of typhoid the year before. Their talk turned to water-borne germs and the pitiful state of the local hospitals and I tuned out of the conversation. The last summer had been particularly hot, with outbreaks of malaria and cholera. These diseases threatened to cause havoc this summer: I wasn't looking forward to the new season at all.

Some weeks later in early summer I ran into the hall and stumbled over a large tin trunk that stood in the middle of the room. We were going on holiday.

Despite my protests, we started our journey by steam boat on the Yangtze. After several days we reached a mountain covered in mist, rising out of the rice paddies. I couldn't see any signs of life other than a group of men with sedan chairs on their shoulders. Father settled himself in a chair but I was scared of the men and didn't want to go near them. Mother picked me up and I clung to her as we were carried up the mountain. And so we ascended the rickety stairs that lead into the cloud, the famous 'thousand steps', the only way to climb Mount Lushan. As we reached the summit, high enough to give me vertigo, I looked around anxiously to gauge what kind of summer I would be having. I was not disappointed.

It was cool. Such a contrast to the sticky heat at home. The cloud had not quite cleared and it took a moment for me to realise that I was standing on the shore of a lake. Trickling water harmonised with birds twittering timidly out of sight. The water was a magnificent glass mirror, reflecting the surrounding pine trees and ghostly fog. I smelt the sweet fragrance of lush jasmine as I followed my father down a winding path. From time to time we would walk past small villas; white-washed, often with balconies and red iron roofs. Some even had children in the garden. I knew from the moment I set foot in Kuling that I'd love it here.

I spent the whole summer playing and making new friends. It was paradise and I was happy. We would often paddle in the lake or visit a nearby waterfall, and gaze at the tiny people in the fields far below. As the cloud enveloped Kuling in the evenings, small lights would twinkle under red roofs, beckoning us home.

It was on one such evening that Father abruptly asked me to pack. We were to leave the next day. My young heart cracked. Tears flooded

my eyes, I couldn't sleep. The following morning, Father led me into our courtyard. He looked at me sternly and took something out of his pocket. Three seeds. He whispered to me that we would return each summer and watch as the seeds gradually grew into trees. As I grew, so would they. And then one day, perhaps a hundred years from now, my great grandchild would come and wonder at the beauty of nature in this courtyard. This story somehow quenched my tears and I was silent as we planted the seeds.

I spent the journey home worrying about the sick, violent steaming hell I was returning to. When we finally got back my heart sank to see a torn poster clinging to our front door, with a translation in English scrawled under the bold Chinese characters. It read 'By law of the Chinese Government, it is requested that you not harm any missionary in any way, especially by stoning'.

This hideous welcome upset me greatly but, instead of comforting me, Mother sent me immediately to my room. I cried there, wondering what I had done wrong, when I heard a commotion downstairs. Mother's shrill voice screamed, 'They hate us and want us gone. There's a good chance you'll die! What will we do then?' Silence followed. Gentle sobbing reached my ears and it wasn't my own.

Father took to travelling from village to village to preach. He carried a pair of forceps and made himself popular by extracting painful teeth. On one occasion he told us he'd been thrown into a pit and was going to be buried alive, but managed to tell a joke in the local dialect and won a reprieve. By now I would dread saying goodbye every morning and every evening I would stay up, anxious he might not return.

Weeks elapsed: I felt I was always on fire with the tropical heat and worry. Then one day a bundle of letters arrived in the post. They were from my absent siblings and I realised how much I missed them even though we'd never actually met, so far away, so alone. I read the letters over and over, putting on voices to hear what they might sound like, imagining their personalities, their looks, their likes and dislikes. I eventually gave the letters to Mother. She must have spent the whole night crying; the letters were damp with her tears.

By this point I had learnt how bad the Rebellion was, mostly through Rev Sparham who visited regularly. My parents stubbornly refused to talk about it. I remember being sent to bed by Mother one

night. Father had not yet come home. I must have woken in the dead of night to check if he had returned; Mother was still sitting alone, waiting. It was late morning when he appeared. He was holding a club and it was red with blood.

I only discovered what happened years later. Sparham had been beaten to death in front of Father's eyes. Father wrestled the weapon off the attacker but it was too late. The Rebellion had just got very real, very fast.

The following night my parents had a row. Mother was screaming, begging to return to England, saying it was our only chance. Father had never raised his voice before. This was the only time I had ever heard him shout. 'YOU PROMISED ME, you promised me you would die if need be for Christ's cause. There is no time to back down.' The bellowing stopped. I could feel the air quivering with a slight echo. This place I called home had just become a prison. Danger was knocking at the door.

We didn't visit Kuling that summer, Mother wasn't well enough. Soon after their argument, both my parents caught cholera. They had high fevers for over a week. I felt very alone. Father eventually recovered and we both stayed by Mother's bedside for days on end. I watched her cheeks getting hollower, her body getting more and more fragile. My heart hurt but my mind couldn't comprehend what was happening so I didn't feel scared. It wasn't until the day Father woke me to tell me she was dead that I collapsed.

I remember sitting perfectly still, feeling crushed by grief. Days passed unnoticed as I ignored what was going on around me. Her funeral took place in the church in Hankow and she was buried in a cemetery there. I was considered too young to attend. I thanked God. I didn't want to go. Weeks went by and I was numb. I only awoke from this nightmare trance when I was greeted by the familiar sight of a tin trunk in the hall.

Father, Rev Arthur Bonsey, remained in China for another twenty years. I was sent to England to boarding school at the age of ten. I have never returned. I am now married with four children and live in Dover. My children know nothing of my childhood in China and the story of my extraordinary childhood. I doubt they ever will.





## ROSI BYARD-JONES

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### *Winner of the Young Walter Scott Prize 16-19 age group*

*In the early 1960s Indonesia was still under the presidency of Soekarno, who had led the country to independence from the Dutch in the 1945-49 revolution. However the country was in political turmoil with coalition after coalition failing to form a lasting government. Corruption was rife and the armed forces increasingly impatient with Soekarno's administration. To counterbalance the power of the armed forces, Soekarno allowed the Indonesian communist party to grow until it was the world's third largest (after the Soviet Union and China). Soekarno himself termed this 'the year of living dangerously'.*

*By 1965, a group of generals and nationalist politicians were ready to move against Soekarno. With the secret backing of Britain and the USA, the generals staged a fake coup as an excuse to move against the communists and seize power from Soekarno. In the ensuing violence, around 600,000 people were killed on the excuse of saving Indonesia from communism, while more were sent to prison camps on very flimsy evidence.*

*Among the victims were many of the Chinese business community, on the grounds that China was communist, therefore all ethnic Chinese must be communist sympathisers (as small businessmen, most were not). There followed a dangerous time when people who owed Chinese businessmen money could safely clear their debts by denouncing the lenders as communists.*

*The leading general, Soeharto, became President in 1966, starting a 32-year rule for his New Order regime. The events of 1965-66 remained Indonesia's 'dirty secret' for a generation.*

*The arts of Wayang (shadow puppetry) and Gamelan (a complete orchestra formed mainly of gongs and other loud bronze percussion instruments) are among the leading classical arts of Java, Indonesia's most important island. Both communists and nationalists had their own arts organisations to harness the appeal of the arts for political purposes; the conscription of musicians to drown the noise of the killings took place in Yogya in 1965.*

## IN A TIME OF SHADOWS

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*Rosi Byard-Jones*

It was the first clear day of the monsoon season and the parting of the clouds hailed Wahyu's return. What lay unmarred in the perfect kingdom he'd left behind? Nothing had persuaded him to remain. The 'city fit to prosper' was barren; the shadows which had lured him in the first place only obscured reality. And Semarang, always Semarang, was his life's beating heart: the city he saw as home. Walking down the forgotten streets he had left so hastily, he searched not for the chime of bronze within the heat or the dance of puppets in the distance. Through the haze of mist and dust, the destination of his old neighbourhood emerged before him, within it would be his reason for going and for staying, leaving before retracing his steps, the girl he had found and then lost once more. At least, so he had hoped.

Instead of the majestic mansion he sought was an empty shell, the colonial windows smashed, graffiti bleeding across the walls. Every trace of the girl who'd lived within was decaying, crumbling away like the ruined plaster. Realisation and anger dawning, his longing to find her seemed as far-fetched as returning through time. Only now did he remember the part of the Ramayana – his favourite out of all the ancient tales – which made the story worth telling. It was only when the brave prince had left his love, with the aim of winning her heart's desire that she was stolen away.

He'd departed Semarang as '65 ended. His parents took it badly, but Wahyu always obeyed his deity willingly – just like Rama succumbed to Sienta's wishes in that old Ramayana. Without her, he'd have been a layabout forever like so many Javanese youths, sleeping till noon and rising to play Gamelan wherever he could. The musical tradition which sang of the Javanese condition, Gamelan was an endless wave of intertwining sounds and resonances, raw yet refined, ear-consuming, yet always distant. Although it disappointed her, she knew that Gamelan was all he breathed – it had been her idea to send him to Yogya, the perfect kingdom. At least, it was the only province

which fit the classical definition of one: it overlooked the ocean, fell back on the mountains and was flanked by a river each side. It was the last Sultanate in Java, home to the glorious palace of the Kraton and the world's finest Gamelan. Furthermore it was home to world class Wayang, the Javanese art of shadow puppetry. It was through Wayang plays that the children of Java heard the legends of the past; the Ramayana was one such play. Once he had learned every note of its sister craft, Gamelan, Wahyu's dream had been to become a Delang – a master puppeteer beyond compare. That fantasy was only tangible with his muse within sight, his Dewi Sienta personified. Without her, his happiness was as untouchable as shadows.

She had called herself Melati, but she was no native. Her birth name was Mei Li and she came from a Chinese family – self-made business moguls who were as good as lords in the Chinese community. Her father had even financed Soekarno during his rise as President. In days gone by, Soekarno had been Indonesia's hero, a golden revolutionary who had claimed independence from the Dutch leeches. But the flawed leader was losing his generals' favour. Blood was being spilt in the capital – perhaps the slaughter would sweep Java, a silent demon in the night. A new order was on the horizon; the nation's foes were cut at the knees. A purge was taking place and the chief target was obvious. There was no greater offence than Communism, and if the propaganda was true, all Chinese were Communists under the skin.

Sinking to his knees, hindsight and regret crippled Wahyu's body; his tears soaked the ground beneath him in place of rain. He and Li had grown up within a stone's throw of each other – her presence in his life was as inevitable as the moon at night or the sun at day. Yes, there had always been a slim crevasse between their peoples. Boy and girl could brush finger tips at the farthest reach, but the gulf of disapproval was immovable. Even if he had made something of himself like she had asked, did it matter when she was gone? They had been so sure she would be safe – both the old and the new orders wouldn't overlook the family's wealth. In that very place beside the gate they had embraced for the final and only time, breaking custom and courtesy with the certainty of their reunion. Drinking in her presence for the last time before he left her, Wahyu had thought how the sun rays broke behind her like the light casting a puppet's shadow. She truly was a puppet Sienta personified, a woman of virtue and beauty above comparison.

Yet he had not learned then of the malignancy of shadows, or the ascent of a new Dalang who could manipulate more than stories. One who was capable of morphing and waning at a shift in the light, and who could twist life and death for the sake of power. This was the Dalang who would have the tale of bloodshed and killing performed at his command – and Wahyu would just be a puppet in the telling of it all.

The purge had been a thing of nightmare to Wahyu. Although it took place under cover of night, it was no stuff of the imagination. One night he had been a part of it himself, and by the next morning he scorned his lifelong passion for good. For the previous months he had been in paradise, learning the ways of every master musician in Yogya – he even dabbled in puppetry at the Kraton. But then, the puppets of that different Dalang appeared at his lodgings: heavy boots, skin taut over iron skulls, these men *were* the new order. And they had wanted one thing alone.

‘Do you play Gamelan?’

If he had lied what would have befallen him? Wahyu would never know, for he found himself on a trailer with a fine set of Gamelan in front of him. To his right, left and centre, he saw men who he was friends with and taught by, yet all sat in silence with shaking beaters in their hands. Wahyu tried to call out to a teacher of his but the elder quickly shook his head, one false move could trigger a gun. Without another word the ensemble was commanded to play, deafeningly loud so that Yogya would hear nothing else. Driving through the city, their cacophony was brought to all corners of the kingdom, often to neighbourhoods that Wahyu had never seen and would never see again; and with the music they brought the killing. Far too late did Wahyu understand the purpose of the Gamelan: to put its listeners into oblivion as well as joy, to conceal what should not have been, to drown out the sound of bodies dropping in the darkness. Close range shots, swift dismembering or the slash of a Samurai sword – anyone who had fallen from grace lay lifeless, and there were Chinese among them. Wahyu witnessed everything, yet the only power he had was the music he no longer controlled.

He would never forgive himself. The sound of the Gamelan made him sick; the spell of Wayang held no sorcery. Now, kneeling before the ruins of the recent past, he knew he was not worthy to face her

– to his kind, her disappearance was his punishment, fate’s cruelty twisting its knife to the last. If she were to appear in front of him, what would he tell her? That he no longer played Gamelan, or would ever be a Dalang? That he expected her to love him still, regardless of their circumstances? That he wanted her to accept him, when he had helped to kill her people? Gradually, Wahyu staggered to his feet as the monsoon rains beat down on him again.

If the atrocities had been bad in Yogya, he could not comprehend their effect on Semarang – the Chinese population rivalled that of the capital. He would discover what happened to Li and her family, from her lips or another’s...

‘*Mas?*’

Responding to the honorific, Wahyu turned to find woman staring at him a few feet away, her hair hanging loose in damp tendrils to her waist and her face wrapped in disbelief. She looked about thirty or older, but the Javanese were never good with years – what struck Wahyu was the poor state of her clothes, which were designed to be revealing, and her blistered skin which had once been smooth and pale – paler than the average Javanese. With disgust he thought she was a prostitute, but the way her wounded eyes dominated her haggard face stirred a vague memory in Wahyu; it was something he could not place, but which evoked his pity. With a deft movement he shrugged off his jacket and placed it gingerly around her, careful to avoid her gaze. None of this was her fault.

‘Keep it,’ he said, his voice cracked and hoarse from weeping. Without another glance, he turned to walk away and find news of his love – yet to his shock, he felt her hand catch on his arm.

‘Stay, *mas*,’ she urged. ‘You’re the only man to show me kindness.’

For a moment, Wahyu regretted his gesture – he had no patience for her talk and he was desperate to find word of Li. ‘I won’t,’ he barked harshly, ‘I’m looking for the family who lived in this house – you wouldn’t know.’

‘They’re dead, *mas*. All but one.’

Wahyu halted in his tracks, and his coursing blood froze too. The broken melody of her voice convinced him entirely; he felt what she

said was true in his guts. When he turned to face her, he saw the tears in her eyes; perhaps she simply looked old for her years.

‘You know what happened?’ he cried, grabbing her by the shoulders. ‘All except one is dead? Which one?’

‘The army came for them.’ The girl shivered. ‘They were branded PKI. The parents were taken, the children abandoned.’

Each word struck Wahyu’s ears like thunder. He remembered the families he’d seen that night, dragged into darkness, decapitated on their doorsteps... He could not allow himself to imagine the scene, for then Melati’s suffering would destroy him. ‘But you said that one still lived. Which... who... was it?’

The woman turned her face from him, gazing at the mansion as a dreamer might. Though she stood in Wahyu’s grasp, her mind was farther away.

‘That I don’t know,’ she whispered, barely audible over the rain. ‘But I doubt they’d appear as they were before.’

The more Wahyu listened, the more he felt that he had known her before – but the desire for more information overcame him and he knew of other means to find knowledge.

‘Thank you,’ he replied, releasing his grasp. ‘Go and find shelter, or you’ll catch your death out here.’

‘Perhaps I’ve already caught my death,’ she croaked through the downpour, ‘since you do not know me, Wahyu...’

The rain did not cease, nor did the scars of error and wrongdoing cease to ache – yet the sunlight broke around her frail form, finding its way through the cloud somehow. No matter which way he gazed at her, no matter which way she turned, she was the Sienta of his memories reborn. Regardless of what had passed, how had he not known her? Cradling her sorely aged face in his hands, his feverish eyes begged forgiveness – she gave it willingly and sobbed in his arms. Her virtue would remain untouched, her beauty unmarred. To the minds of the poets, the perfect kingdom was just as holy in its darkest days, and she was no different to her Rama.





## ISEABAIL DUNCAN

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*Runner-up for the Young Walter Scott Prize  
11-15 age group*

*This story was inspired by the woollen hats displayed in the Rijks Museum, Amsterdam.*

*The explanatory plaque beside them reads:*

‘In 1980 archaeologists investigated the graves of 185 Dutchmen – whale hunters and workmen of the train oil refineries – who had died on or near Spitsbergen during the 17th Century. The skeletons were still wearing their knitted woollen caps. Each cap was individualised; the men recognized one another only by the pattern of stripes on the caps. The men were bundled up so tightly against the fierce cold that only their eyes were visible.’

*I found this especially inspiring because of how the identities of these men, with lives just as detailed as every one of us, were stripped down to mere patterned hats.*

## WHALES DON'T CARE

---

*Iseabail Duncan*

I was awakened for the last time by the hands of my fellow sailor, and put to sleep by the fingers of the sea.

Dark.

I'd retired to the cabin hours ago, unable to sleep for the rocking ship and screeching boom. There'd been no wind to move us that day, just the unwieldy wooden paddles that creaked in the oar-holes. Perhaps it was this unwarranted herald of our ship which scared the whales away. The chafe of wood on wood. Or perhaps it was the stench of death that hung from the rigging. I wouldn't have been able to tell – the boat was like myself, a mess of murder and regret, clinging together with bolts of hope. No braces for binding. Just a harpoon, for bloody decks and fulfilled quotas and another night upon the sea; a harpoon, to shoot ahead and ensnare the future for our families.

I rose to the sound of my quartermaster's voice. It was rough, like calloused hands, creaking oars. The stench of blood spread, thick in the air, but even the sight of our stained, slippery decks wouldn't be enough to justify return. Two whales. The quota called for four, and time was slipping away.

I lit the lamp hanging precariously from the roof of the aft-house, struggling with frostbitten fingers and hungry flame. The very air was frozen, shards of ice puncturing my heaving lungs. *Our* heaving lungs. The crew were suffocating on my command, but we needed more. Two more whales to tide us over until spring, when blossoms bloomed and hearts would thaw. Perhaps I would've danced again, with unfrost-bitten feet, spun my wife under the sun. To see her laughing face again... I'd toiled hard all winter, fruitlessly determined. Spent too much time looking to the future, ignoring the snarling present.

I regarded the sailor with my salt-crusted eyes. Lashes stuck together, I rubbed the crystals away and reached for the woollen hat on the bed table. Its rigid fibres offered little warmth, but that was

of no significance. Our brains worked like clockwork on the sea; mechanical, un-oiled, rusty, unable to recall anything but the concepts of whaling and home. Hats served as identities, dull patterns the only individuality we clung to on this vast ocean. The sole reminder of the people who knit them for us, our families languishing back home. Each stitch purred with hope and belief, patterns interwoven with memories. Through the thickly bundled clothes of my partner, I couldn't even see his eyes. Cruel indeed. But does water understand forenames and aft? Do whales care?

'*Kapitein.*' Captain. 'We're nearing Spitsbergen. We need only turn around and we can avoid the storm.'

His face was earnest, but I wanted to scream – couldn't resist. 'Can't you see?' I spat. 'The weather may be brewing but our families are too. We need to catch two more whales, lest we starve. Two more! How can we do that if we leave Spitebergen's waters?' The cap slipped down over my ears.

He recoiled but didn't give up. 'If we turn back now, our families have two whales. If we don't, they'll have nought but a pile of bodies. Surely one bad winter is bearable if more fruitful seasons are yet to come?'

'*Imbeciel.* No, we must move forward!'

I could feel the life in my hands, both the crew, and our families. Whale oil, to sell for money, power the trains. Money, to buy goods off the very trains we powered. A vicious circle, but not as vicious as the cold fangs of reality; murder put our society on the railway line. Where the train took us, I could not say. But the boat was taking us to Spitsbergen storm or not. I was the *kapitein*. I decided the rules.

One thing I couldn't determine, however, was our fate.

It was already sleeting as I burst out, onto the deck. The crew heaved with the boat, colourful hats dulled by weeks of wear. Their faces, lit with hope of home, snuffed out the moment I appeared; they didn't need to ask, just return to the oars. I grabbed the wheel and began to guide us through the treacherous waters – sounds of wood, on rock and ice, rang in my ears. The island loomed out of freezing rain ahead, reclining enticingly in the water. The waves were choppier now, battering the sides of our little ship; a spiteful wind now filled the

sails. *Onveilig*, unsafe – we slewed drunkenly, glancing off rocks with mere splinters to spare. We'd stay the night in Spitsbergen, I decided. Just one more now – we'd land and wait out the storm, let the ocean vent its fury on some other whaling ship. As waves struck the bow, I muttered a quick prayer to every god I knew – the count amounted to only one. I knew the water as impatient, not cruel. Ha. Perhaps it was that very prayer, the thing that irked the sea god. Perhaps gods don't exist, but I know the sea does.

As the cry of 'Whale!' came from the crow's nest, the rock came from below.

A mere scratch. Runs the width of the ship's belly. Nowhere near deep enough to sink us, I convinced myself. And a whale! Our key to Spitsbergen, a successful winter. Nearby! Bundling my thoughts of capsizing away, I wrenched the rudder in the direction the lookout was pointing. His muffled face sagged but his eyes were alight with imminent capture; in that moment I realised that his life was in my hands. A life with family and friends, with a thousand unacknowledged thoughts running through an overflowing brain, with as many tiny incidents and reactions as my own. There ought to be a word for the realisation. There is – *'sonder'* – for when you find out you're not the only one living. Beautiful. But what I talked about was the devastating realisation that if you slip up, those emotions, those feelings, those hopes and ambitions are sinking right to the bottom of the ocean. And you, more likely than not, are going with them.

'Off the starboard bow! It's breaching. Ready the harpoons!'

Before all frozen hell broke loose, I heard a roaring whoosh. As our target exhaled, took a breath, I felt the inner turmoil ripple and calm. My mind was blank, and in that moment I was a thousand miles above us, weightless as a boat on water. I wondered if that's what death felt like. The irony.

The stench of exhaled squall smacked me, woke me from my stupor. I grabbed the quartermaster, gave him the wheel, rushed away to the harpoons. Lethally pointed, sharp enough to bite through marrow, bone; I didn't want to consider the consequences of carelessness. But was *I* misusing it? It was mind-blowing, staggering, to even consider the concept of animal equality. I shook the harpoon free and the thoughts from my kind. Our society was hand-to-mouth. Creatures

didn't have feelings if they could feed you – and now wasn't the time to be questioning it. The fates and filled bellies of my crew and our village were my responsibilities. I readied the weapons, eyeing our victim.

Beautiful. Under the scarce moonlight – as yet un-wreathed by ominous clouds – she glowed a milky white, her puckered skin glazed by whirling water. A tail the width of the boat slapped the water, rocked the ship. Whale song floated in the air.

She was too big.

But we were desperate.

Desperate I must have looked as I drove the harpoon into the milky mottled skin.

Desperate as my be-hatted crew members followed suit, and the rope was wrenched from my hands.

Desperate as the whale thrashed in agony and the ocean whipped into cresting frenzies, as the crew stabbed and rowed and strived. I stood defenceless on the deck, then sank to its bloodied timbers, a mess of broken morals.

The whale's last attempt at freedom struck and the tail cleaved our weakened whaler right in two.

Screaching, our prize pulled free. A cacophony of wood crashed around me, splinters the size of my arm ripping the ship, crew members shrieking, bubbling, drowning. Blood washed the deck and I didn't know if it was from the whale's broken brethren or my own. I didn't know what to hope for, and as I slipped under the last thing I saw was a hat floating by. A woollen hat, an identity. *Ha*. How could I question the whale's significance as a being, when I didn't even know our own?

Drowning is a slow process, I can tell you that first-hand. There's the realisation that you're sinking, and your body spasms, fights out against the weight of the water. The cold, the suffocating numbness – it's enclosing me, squeezing my heart, sinking icy fangs into still veins. Fish flicker.

That's the description of fireside tales, romantic pretence. Part of the heritage I know I'll never hear again.

It's fantasy. No fish dance around me now. I'm not fighting the

*water*, I'm fighting the responsibility.

Murder.

I'll never be sure whose. The whales? The humans? Water is soaking the scent of blood from my hat, sluicing off the memories of nameless men. The cold stoppers my breath, heart, lungs, once-coherent thoughts swimming in a waterlogged mess. No currents. The storm is clearing; no bullets pepper the surface now. I can see a blur of the moon.

The moon. The moon of an uncaring world, a vicious ocean, a drowned ship with sunken crew. So much more significant than the woollen caps on their heads, but somehow not significant at all.

Somewhere, a whale cavorts in freedom, unaware of crushing realisations, of inevitable death. Of enlightenment, identity; of me.

Because – hats? Names?

Whales don't care.





ALEXANDER LEGGATT

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*Runner-up for the Young Walter Scott Prize  
16-19 age group*

## THE OAK TREE

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*Alexander Leggatt*

*Age has wearied it, crumpling bark and withering leaves, yet it remains stoically resolute, overseeing all. The man underneath marvels at the view, exhaling a thick mist of warm breath, drawing his jacket closer into him. His phone ringing interrupts his thoughts. He switches it off and breathes in deeply, his frown fading. He watches as a gust of wind blows the remaining leaves of the Wilberforce oak, dancing.*

He was looking at me with his expectant boyish face, clearly expecting me to agree with his propositions, yet I was still to be fully convinced. I was worried about him, his head of prematurely grey hair and dark shadows that had begun to form underneath his deep brown eyes, evidencing his unfaltering dedication. Our conversation wandered onto the familiar topic of parliamentary affairs.

‘The King’s mental health has deteriorated again,’ I said. ‘Some advisors say he has become unstable.’

He replied almost instantaneously with wishes of good health, but returned immediately to his proposition, so I questioned his sincerity, considering his desire to pass his new acts through parliament. Wilberforce’s recent revelation, the ensuing conversion and devotion to ‘God’ had perturbed me. What was the reason for such a drastic commitment?

My fine china lay across our table, embellished in the royal gold, however I could not appreciate it, for my mind was astray, distracted. Everything that surrounded me was possible due to slavery. If I fought for this cause, surely the abolishment would cause my country’s imperial economy to collapse?

Wilberforce helped himself to the sugar cubes in front of him, dropping them generously into his tea.

‘Contemplate the slaves that have laboured over items such as this,’ I challenged my friend, gesturing to the container of sugar. ‘It is an

integral part of the economy, Wilberforce, and without it the entire country will inevitably collapse.'

'I can hardly imagine how many,' he replied, 'but how can you compare material possession to human life? Something must be done.'

Wilberforce had managed to plant a seed in my mind, though it had yet to form roots; an eradication on such a scale would require significantly more convincing on his part. My conscience knew that this oppression was wrong, but I had to secure my position in Parliament to make this change. How am I to do this if the entire country will oppose me for this view? Can I risk the lives of my people in order to save these foreigners? My fear of the overwhelming opposition I would surely encounter clouded my judgement.

We took a leisurely stroll through the orchard, casting my mind back to our time at St John's, a joyous time. Wilberforce had always been popular at University, a witty charmer.

'Takes me back, this does,' I reminisce, taking a moment to consider how distant those memories seem.

'Certainly does, old friend,' he responded, as a smile came across his face, a smile of selfless generosity, and I was struck with sudden apprehension. My friend was facing an entire lifetime of harassment and degradation for his beliefs. Should I allow this burden to consume him? I had a moral obligation to stop him, and let another take the fall.

Wilberforce continued to press me for an answer. 'What will it take to convince you that this must be done?'

My expression didn't waiver. However I made it clear from my stoic stance and fixed gaze that the idea of eradicating the worldwide oppression did not sit well with my duty to the people. Many people had profited from the money made from trading human life as a commodity. Who was I to challenge such an established hierarchy?

'Through my explorations I have come to realise the monumental struggle that is ahead of us, so I can understand your apprehension.' He turned to me and thrust his unquestioning arm around my shoulders, leading me out of the gates.

I stopped him there, unable to drive his conviction any further. 'William, I do not believe it can happen.'

Wilberforce met me on the bench underneath the old oak overlooking the vale of Keston a few nights later, as dusk had begun to fall. I had hoped that my abrupt ending to our conversation would have dissuaded him against his ambitions, yet it had been to no avail. He approached me with a subdued smile and raised an outstretched arm; the rejection seemed to have motivated him further. He surveyed the landscape, drinking in the air, contemplatively. He began solemnly. ‘Last week a family transported to the Isle of Man were lynched. The week before hundreds of slaves were lost at sea on the middle passage across the Atlantic. These are lives you could have saved, Pitt.’

I could sense his agitation at the senseless loss of life, but I was unable to detect whether it was anger or sadness welling inside him.

His breathing shortened and he got up and paced along the path in front of us. His tone changed, increasing in volume, almost shouting, ‘If your family were torn apart, and sent overseas, never to be seen again, would you fight against it?’

I stared at Wilberforce in admiration, at what he had become: a driven man, able to convince my conscience to follow his vision. My gaze averted to the steadfast oak behind him, a pillar of strength, with the ability to bring about change, used for oppression and victory. The timber used to carry slaves across from Africa to the colonies, yet the same material used to create the Mary Rose, the ruler of the waves. Wilberforce stood strong against the oak, a symbol of strength and determination and able to bring about a change for the better.

I ushered him to sit beside me. ‘William, I want to give you notice of a motion on the subject of the slave trade.’



For further information about any aspect of the work of  
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