



AEFA MULHOLLAND Q&A

Why did you write *The Scottish Ambassador*?

The shorter answer:

I was living in Oregon, twenty years after I first left Glasgow. A 'How Scottish Are You?' quiz landed in my inbox... and I only scored 86%. I wondered where had the other 14% gone? Had I misplaced them over the 20 years I'd been away? Was I less Scottish now because I'd been away so long? Worried that I was losing my Scottishness because I'd been away so long, I decided that to get my Scottish score back up to 100%, it was time to learn how to do all the clichéd Scottish things so often expected of Scots overseas, but that I'd never done. Like so many Scots, the all-tartan, postcard-perfect, Old Country version of Scotland wasn't the one I grew up in. I grew up in Glasgow and before I started *The Scottish Ambassador* I'd never played golf or the bagpipes, spoken Gaelic, patted a Scottie dog or worn a kilt or feather bonnet. Now I needed to do all those things, but I was in the US, so had to find people to teach me how to become Scottish over here.

During the course of the book - and with the help of many very perplexed Americans - I played golf for the first time on a rattlesnake-infested sand course in a trailer park in Arizona, attempted Scottish country dancing in Honolulu, slogged through bagpipe lessons in New Orleans, struggled through a Scottish Gaelic immersion weekend on a ranch full of cats in Texas during a heatwave and had all sorts of other Scottish-American adventures across the States. Meeting the kind, kooky and compelling characters that inhabit Scottish-America really made me think differently about what it means to be Scottish, what it means to be Scottish-American and what it means to be at home so far away from home.

The long answer: When I first moved from Scotland to the US, aged 19, I'd never been to a Highland Games. Or played golf, discovered the delights of Scotch whisky or worn a kilt or feather bonnet. Or spoken Gaelic, patted a Highland Terrier, gone Nessie-spotting or played the bagpipes. Or done any of the clichéd things so often expected of Scots overseas. I had done plenty of entertaining things growing up in Glasgow, but my antics and outfits tended not to feature tartan or to make it onto postcards sent overseas. My Scotland was grittier. It was down-to-earth. It threw pizzas into deep-fat fryers and ate pakora by the poke. It was a Scotland that didn't make it onto tourist brochures or itineraries and I'd never felt it lacking... until two decades later, in Oregon, when I scored only 86% on a 'How Scottish Are You?' quiz. Where had all my other per cents gone?

Spurred into action by the realisation that I was on the brink of losing my cultural identity, I knew I needed to regain this missing 14% of myself. And fast. Who knew how much more of myself would disappear if I didn't do something about it soon. But I wasn't in Scotland, I was in America. How could I ever become a fully rounded 100% Scot again, from so far away from home? Where could I go to work on this tartan transformation? Where could I find people to teach me how to be a better Scot?

As I began to despair of ever again being complete, I looked around me... and slowly realised that all over America there were people fiercely committed to maintaining Scottish skills—people playing bagpipes and golf, walking Scottie dogs and gossiping away in Gaelic, whirling about doing Scottish country dances and donning the precise shades of tartan that 18th-century Highland etiquette dictated. There were plenty of people out there who could help me find myself.

Over the following year, I faced my fear of bagpipes and my dread of organised social dancing as I travelled from Florida to Washington State and New York to Hawaii, meeting the kind, the compelling and the kooky characters that inhabit Scottish-America and every other ethnicity of America. I struggled through a Scottish Gaelic immersion weekend on a ranch full of cats in Texas during a heatwave, played golf for the first time on a rattlesnake-infested, desert sand course in a trailer park in Arizona and was perplexed by the proliferation of cloaks and dragon puppets at my first ever Highland Games in Oregon. I visited Chicago's Scottish Retirement Home to learn the secrets of 'The Scottish Way,' had tea with Hawaii's freshly elected Scot of the Year on the windward side of Oahu and was as confused as the passing New Yorkers by New York's paltry Tartan Day parade. I sought out Scottish bars and shops across the country, caught caber tosses, whisky tastings and sheepdog demonstrations from the Pacific to the Mississippi, tried to claim Elvis for the Scots and found myself deep in backwoods Georgia with a hundred Scottie dogs. In every corner of the country I was met with warmth and kindness and by perplexed

Americans, confused as to why a Scottish-born Scot couldn't recognise her clan colours or manage more than a mediocre, mangled attempt at a simple Strathspey.

From the early days of my quest in Portland, Oregon through till my final steps in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, I explored what it means to be Scottish, what it means to be Scottish-American and what it means to be at home so far away from home.

Have you written or been published before?

I've been a journalist and travel writer for the last twenty years, writing for everything from *The Miami Herald* and *The Irish Times* to *The Advocate* and The Travel Channel. I've mostly covered travel and food, but I started as a music journalist, spent three years as an education columnist for a Sunday broadsheet and put in two years as editor of *Private Islands Magazine*, a publication that has a far bigger readership than you might suspect. P+H Books published a short, "micro-memoir" of mine in July 2015 called *Chicken & Hen*, the story of when my family adopted my lovely, daft, wee brother Brian when I was ten.

If *The Scottish Ambassador* was on display at a bookstore, which similar books would be alongside?

I'd be proud to see *The Scottish Ambassador* alongside Pete McCarthy's *McCarthy's Bar*, his odyssey around Ireland to see if he belongs, Tony Hawks' hilarious, lunatic quest, *Round Ireland With A Fridge*, or beside any of Bill Bryson's funny travel memoirs. Readers have often told me they'd lump *The Scottish Ambassador* in with David Sedaris's self-effacing tales from his life, which is about the highest compliment possible, as far as I'm concerned.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on two new travel memoirs at the moment. In *The 49th Best Small Town in America*, I visit towns, states and countries with dubious tourism slogans or grand claims about their appeal and see if the tagline fits or if I can come up with a better one. In Lincoln, Oregon, officially "A Great Place To Try New Things," I try new things, like wake boarding, speaking Arabic and crocheting. And I go to Prince Edward Island ("Once You Get here, You'll Understand"), armed with a list of things that have always baffled me, like algebra and the appeal of cheese strings. In *The Cat Palace*, I take on house- and pet-sits around the world that no sane person should sign up for. In the first chapter I spend a month on an island off the coast of Morocco, looking after 20 mostly white, mostly blue-eyed cats for an aging, eccentric former supermodel in a vast crumbling villa on the flanks of a volcano. And it gets weirder from there.

Where were you born/brought up? Where have you lived?

I was born and brought up in Glasgow and still spend about half my time there. I spend most of the rest of the year, when I'm not off on assignment or working on a book, in Toronto with my partner and 3.5 cats (the wee former stray comes and goes). I've also lived in Mallaig in the Scottish Highlands and I spent a decade in Dublin, a year on Martha's Vineyard, a year in Sydney, five years based in Vancouver, BC and Portland, Oregon, and a year in Berlin.

What/where did you study?

I'm a graduate of the now defunct Scottish Hotel School at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, where I learned a lot about wine and the art of napkin folding, and of the Creative Non-Fiction programme at Humber School for Writers in Ontario. I also, randomly, have a diploma in sound engineering and a certificate in music business management.

What are you reading just now?

I'm usually in the middle of a few books. This week I'm re-reading the hilarious, irreverent Jenny Lawson's *Let's Pretend This Never Happened*, and am also reading Shirley Jackson's bright, funny, thinly veiled memoir of family life in 1952, *Life Among The Savages*, and—at the other end of the scale, the raw, shocking and heartbreaking *In My Home There Is No More Sorrow*, by Rick Bass.

Who are your favourite authors?

Martin Millar (particularly *The Good Fairies of New York*), Douglas Kennedy (particularly *The Big Picture*) and David Sedaris.

What was the best book you read this year?

Matt Haig's *The Humans*. I loved its humour and... well, its humanity. It made me want to (a) believe in aliens and (b) lap up everything else he's ever written. Pleasingly, he's been reasonably prolific.