

## **University of New South Wales**

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### **A bit Scottish**

#### Abstract:

There is very little scholarly research on the effects of their parents' overseas work on the children of missionaries. These children may spend many years living in challenging cross cultural settings, and most move home frequently (Pollock & Van Reken 2009). Some have multiple separations from parents, siblings and extended family, while a number are caught up in violent civil wars or experience other trauma such as regular exposure to the effects of extreme poverty. 'Home' can be a slippery construct. This creative piece, part of a life-writing research project, examines how memories are constructed and maintained and the ways in which memory-triggers, in particular photographs and landscapes, can contribute to self-understanding.

#### Biography:

Linda Devereux spent her early childhood years in Africa where her parents were medical missionaries in an isolated Baptist Missionary Society hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Caught up in post-colonial violence, the family returned to Scotland before moving to Australia where Linda currently lives and works.

Linda is the head of the Academic Language and Learning Unit at UNSW Canberra. Her doctoral work, a creative non-fiction text and exegesis, is an examination of transcultural childhood memory. This work has resulted in a number of publications and is the focus of current creative writing projects including a memoir.

#### Key words:

Missionary childhood – memory objects – photographs – loss – nostalgia

Filmed moments and landscapes, snippets spliced together capture flickering and voiceless memories of my childhood. Faded images, digitised versions of my father's home movie collection, play on my computer screen. They have been joined – it seems – randomly. Mum is holding her third baby before the images of her big-bellied with two small children. And our home in Congo comes ahead of the scenes of my parents as young lovers before they became medical missionaries in 1950s Africa.

Between 1958 and 1964, when I was a young child, I lived on and off in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo where my parents were medical missionaries; on and off because my family was caught up in post-independence and post-colonial violence. I was evacuated from Congo twice during those years and sent back to my passport country of Scotland.

I am particularly drawn to my dad's home movies of Scotland. Watching the films creates emotional and sensory tangles. My father, as a young man in these films, looks like my son, Douglas, does now. They share facial expressions, size and shape, and bodily movements. Dad of the movies would be around thirty, the age Douglas is as I write. Envisioning my father as young, like my son, puts us in a new relationship. Released from familiar, patterned father and daughter roles, I sense his youthfulness, and a vulnerability that I have not acknowledged before. I am caught between the present and the past and the words that lurch out onto the page are in a muddle of tenses.

In the Scottish movies are images of my grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles. I sense other fleeting family resemblances to the living in the dead. A smile, hand gestures, playful flirting with the camera; the people I write about confront me with transitory glances. They suggest aspects of themselves that I can never know, and cannot capture with my words.

I recall that Saint Augustine suggests the human condition is - like Christ on the cross - hung between hope and despair. The Saint argues that gaining wisdom with age comes at the expense of youthful innocence and hope. These images on my computer screen are so light-hearted, I can't help feeling that impending doom prowls nearby.

Our re-entry to family life in Scotland after our first escape from Congo was not entirely unproblematic. In 1960 the missionary women and their children were rescued and sent 'home' while the men – including my father – were left behind to work. Colin was unhappy to have a father he did not remember compete for our mother's affections. When he woke the morning after Dad arrived miraculously in Scotland after three-quarters of a year without us in Africa and found a stranger in our mother's bed, Colin squeezed in between them and put his feet in Dad's back.

"My mummy!" he declared, pushing with three-year-old certainty and stubbornness.

We'd had a bit of a semi-detached family life, and we also had no permanent home. Mum packed up and moved a dozen times in less than a year and just before Christmas we moved into another vacant Baptist Church manse; this time in Glasgow.

Dad filmed that Christmas.

What I love about his movie is how it vividly celebrates family. The film begins with an image of Mum's homemade Christmas fruitcake covered in marzipan and icing sugar snow and a caption in plastic letters – Christmas 1961. The next scene is of Colin and me ambling

down the stairs towards the Christmas tree. This must have been staged, because there is no rush to the Christmas stockings. We saunter slowly down each step smiling into the camera dressed in our pyjamas and woollen dressing gowns; angelic, like Christopher Robin as I imagine him in the AA Milne song about prayers. Colin is particularly gorgeous, his chubby toddler hands grasping each banister railing, his head not even as high as the hand rail.

Although it is a charming Christmas film, living in the Glasgow manse was not. Old homes in Scotland, even those solid and grand in appearance, smell of the earth they were created from. It takes months of unrelenting heating and airing to coax the damp from deep within their stone walls, while in the meantime they suck warmth from even the most warmly dressed body. But soon after Christmas, we flitted again; flitted – the Scottish word which captures transience so well. This time, we moved to a cottage in the Stirlingshire village of Kippen. A widow, Mrs Nielson, had built a modern new bungalow in her grounds, and having heard about the missionary family in need, lent us her old home.

By the time we moved to the house in Kippen I was five, an age where memories are more reliably mine, rather than the earlier glimpses and imaginings supplemented by family stories, photographs and the movies.

Memories also cling with landscape.

I lived in Kippen again for two weeks as an adult, in a white-painted converted barn just down the road from that cottage Mrs Nielson lent our family in 1962. In 2008, I visited Kippen with the specific intention of coaxing out memories of the past. I revelled in nostalgia. I ate Scottish slow-ripened berries, oatcakes and scones with creamy Scottish butter, and haggis and black pudding, and, I was just a short walk from where I had lived for a while when I was a girl of five.

Driving back to the rented cottage one afternoon in 2008, on a hill just outside Kippen, I suddenly ordered my startled husband to stop the car. As we drove past a small grouping of trees, I remembered playing at that exact location as a child. I opened the door and stepped out of the car and strode through the bracken gazing at Ben Ledi in the distance.

I wanted the experience for that moment, and to share its beauty with my Australian husband. And I wanted that link between the child and the adult parts of me. I wanted to make the connection to the other people who had been with me there in Kippen before. Thoughts of Grandpa connect strongly with that moment, and a picnic, a Trossachs day-trip with a tartan rug.

It felt springy underfoot in 2008 Kippen as it had at the picnic with heather padding under our rug in 1961 when we'd had tea from my grandparents' large thermos flask with evaporated milk from a can. The can was opened with one of those simple lever openers that bites a triangle-shaped hole in the edge of the lid. It was Grandpa's job to open the milk and he cut two holes opposite each other in the top of the can, but the milk, thick and unshaken, would not come out.

"Blow," my dad suggested at our 1960s picnic.

Grandpa blew. Nothing. He blew again, and was showered by a milky spray blown out through the other hole in the lid. His face white, eyelashes dripping, he looked like a silent movie actor who'd come off second best in a pie fight. Everyone laughed, sharing the

moment, and the joy of being there, together, on a fine safe day in Scotland.

The months in Kippen in 1962 were productive. Dad did a course to be better prepared to return to his medical work in Congo. Mum learned to drive and passed her test. Colin and I played in the garden of Mrs Nielson's cottage. I was stung by a bee behind the shed, and Mum pulled out the sting with her teeth and held my hand under cold tap water to wash away the pain. Graham's first birthday party was held on the back lawn.

I think that party was also our farewell.

I have one photograph of the day we left Scotland. Grandma took it and on the back of the image she has written, 'Ready to return to Congo with mini-bus'. It is dated 1962. The date is in different ink to the rest of the caption. It seems that this photograph was looked at, and annotated, on more than one occasion.

The picture is of our grey Bedford van parked in front of the row of houses in Roughlands Drive where my grandparents lived. The van is partly cut off at the left hand edge of the image. On top of its front cabin sits a dark metal roof rack onto which is roped a child's tricycle, a folding pram, a large suitcase and spare wheels for the van.

The family stands beside the passenger door, Mum holding Graham on her hip; Dad next to her, his right arm protecting her back. Colin and I stand in the front, each holding a new toy. We are very out of focus. Perhaps we were moving, reluctant to cooperate in the moment of leaving. Maybe Grandma moved the camera as she took the picture, or perhaps she had it on the wrong setting. Using a magnifying glass, I can see that Colin has his arm held firmly across his face.

The snapshot Grandma took of our last day in Scotland, blurry, grey and out of focus, is the kind of photograph most people would have thrown out, but she kept it. Now, the hazy image lies in my battered leather folder of newspaper clippings, letters and telegrams, an imperfect reminder of a brief childhood in Scotland.

## **Research statement**

### ***Research background***

Little research has been conducted on how the children of missionaries represent their early lives through life writing, and there is even less scholarship on how their parents' missionary work affects these children. This short story is a non-traditional research output produced as part of a research project using creative writing to examine a missionary childhood. It explores how memories are constructed and maintained and the ways in which memory-triggers such as photographs and landscapes can contribute to self-understanding.

### ***Research contribution***

This short story explores how memory contributes to the sense of self and belonging for 'third culture kids' who spend a significant part of their childhoods living outside their passport country (Pollock & Van Reken: 2009). Through the self-conscious use of nostalgia, the text explores themes of loss, memory and childhood trauma. It exemplifies the non-linear aspects of emotional time (Green and Troup, 2016), the way trauma can fragment memory (Stern 2010) and suggests ambiguities remain about remembering and forgetting.

### ***Research significance***

This creative text seeks to challenge notions of memory and nostalgia through a thematic rather than chronological narrative structure. I examine memories and my sense of self reflexively through interactions with home movies, landscapes and photographs in a two-way process where objects and landscapes influence memories and where memory gives meaning to things and places from the past. This creative text is part of an ongoing research project some of which is documented already in papers published in *Visual Studies* and *Axon*.

## **List of works cited**

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