

# SCOTLAND: BACK TO MY ROOTS

## A Search for the Elusive Kate MacLeod

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Hunting for Kate in The ScotlandsPeople Centre in Edinburgh - Photo by Burt Fine

As a teenager growing up in Maine, my favorite summer job was to chauffeur my grandmother to Nova Scotia. I loved this annual trek up North to visit our relatives because it meant spending some quality time with my grandmother. She was a real character who always had fascinating stories to tell. But I was also a typical teenager, meaning I was also too busy trying to be cool to pay much attention to her stories about our family's Scottish roots.

So while I recall those long summer drives in her big Buick (she got a new one every summer) with fond nostalgia, I really can't remember much of anything concrete about our Nova Scotia relatives: not the town in which they lived, not even their Christian names. My only rock-solid memory is that most of them had been born in Scotland, and they all shared the same surname: MacLeod.

Just recently (many decades after those summers - many more than I care to count) I came across the amazing statistics that 11 million Americans have Scottish ancestors; and that one of every five visitors who travels to Scotland comes in search of their family history. Right then, I was hooked; I knew I had to go "home to Scotland" to try to track down my own family within the clan MacLeod.

### JIGSAW PUZZLE WITHOUT EDGES

While doing some research before embarking on this adventure I was lucky enough to connect with David D, Roseburgh, a genealogy expert who is based in the Borders region of Scotland. <http://www.scottishgenealogyresearch.com> He immediately launched the preliminary research necessary to track down my own MacLeods.

David's company performs these searches for visitors like me who come hoping to connect with unknown branches of their family tree. "It was like sitting around a cozy fire, hearing the lineage of the ones who came before me," mused Nancy Lynn Schwiesow one of David's American clients. Summing up her search for family roots, she added, "He made me feel as though he were a relative of mine - just as interested and excited in finding my Scottish heritage as I was." Even though he's very soft-spoken and courtly in person, David is a stickler for hard facts when it comes to genealogy. "I can't accept

family stories and legends as facts," he cautioned me early on. "There are just too many mistakes and misconceptions, because family "lore" tends to get more and more embellished through each generation. We have to be sure the facts are absolutely correct." No big surprise, then, that his personal definition of genealogy is: "the linking of individuals by documentary evidence."

Sadly for me, it was the lack of that all-important "documentary evidence" that eventually scuttled my project. I wasn't able to provide David with sufficient information to trace my roots. My information ends abruptly with Kate MacLeod, my paternal great-grandmother who was born in Nova Scotia in 1854. Her census records show that her parents were born in Scotland. But that's the sum total of the information available about them. No other details - no crucial facts such as their Christian names, or the date they sailed from Scotland. Or the city or region where they lived in Scotland. Or from which port they sailed, or on which ship, heading to which port in Nova Scotia. Without at least one of these vital stats, my search came screeching to a halt with the appearance of Kate. "Don't despair," David consoled me. "The way I see it, genealogy's like a jigsaw puzzle without edges - and you never know when just the right piece will turn up."

### **TAKING THE RIGHT STEPS**

Because my personal search was on hold, perhaps temporarily, perhaps forever, David kindly offered to walk us (my husband, Burt, and me) through the steps typically involved in a successful search. First: the all-important trip to "[The Scotland's People Centre](#)" Edinburgh's extraordinary genealogical storehouse of birth, marriage and death certificates, census returns from 1801, old parochial records, and ship manifests. Within this vast and book-lined space were rows upon rows of tables crowded with researchers busily delving into old records in search of someone's ancient roots.

After a few unsuccessful hours of trying to pin down Kate's family in these records, we sought solace in tea and scones at the Elephant House Café, a place now wildly popular because it is where the then-unknown writer, J.K. Rowling, hung out drinking endless cups of tea while penning her first Harry Potter novel.

Later we wandered through the old [Glenholme Cemetery](#) trying to decipher the legends chiseled on the moss-covered headstones of generations of Alexanders (ancestors of another of David's successful American clients). We also learned that these surprisingly-lengthy family headstone legends are routinely printed into "Memorial Inscriptions Books," which are sold locally.

David later put me in touch with another client whose search had a happy ending. Australian Gayll Sommers was able not only to trace her Scottish roots but, during the process, she discovered an American cousin (through her grandmother's sister) she never knew she had. The cousins' subsequent "reunion" in Florida was extraordinarily moving for both of them. Gayll told me she also gained an unanticipated perk resulting from her search for family roots. "The big surprise is that genealogy has given me the opportunity to travel," she enthused. "I've achieved more in the last eight years than in all the previous 58 years, and all because of my desire to know (my roots)."

### **EXPLORING SCOTLAND'S BORDERS REGION**

However, with no search of our own to occupy our days, we decided to move on and explore as much of Scotland as we could fit into our remaining time there.

It was springtime, so our drive through the moors and pastures of Scotland's Borders was like threading through a vast pastoral patchwork quilt. Dazzlingly yellow swaths of flowering rapeseed cozied up to mustard-y fields of gorse interspersed with dark patches where the normally lavender heather has been burned to encourage green grass for the multitudes of sheep to feast on.

Medleys of birdsongs floated through the open car windows on breezes heavy with the promise of rain. A new friend, Michael, a Borders resident, gestured towards the distant Cheviot mountains and delivered the local weather forecast: "If you can see the hills, it means it's going to rain. If you can't see 'em," he deadpanned, "it is!"

True enough. In fact, we found exploring anywhere in Scotland to be an exercise in the unexpected. Showers would suddenly evaporate into bright sunshine. One minute we'd be driving through dark heavily-wooded forest only to emerge, blinking, into a sunsplashed panorama of a tree-less plains painted with swirling patterns of heather that carpet the ground as close as a boot camp crew-cut.

We whirled through Scotland hitting the highlights, as well as some less-famous sites. We lingered at The [Glenlivet distillery](#) long enough for a tour and a wee dram or two; and at the [Glencoe Nature Information Center](#) to experience its rip-roaring re-enactments of Scottish battles and lore and natural history. Enchanted by the arty-trendy City of Glasgow, we became instant fans of local architect and artist/celebrity extraordinaire, [Charles Rennie Mackintosh](#). We tramped through several castles that were awesomely impressive, And Queen Victoria's beloved [Balmoral Castle](#), which we found disappointingly inaccessible, as well as being just about the only visitor-unfriendly places we

encountered in the entire country. We drifted into the time-warp of the charmingly old-world hamlet of Luss village where the beloved Scottish TV soap "Take the High Road" is filmed.

And, at dinner in a riverside restaurant one night, we feasted on briny oysters fresh from Loch Fyne, a name, which, despite the difference in spelling, we felt, heralded a good omen for searching Burt's side of the family tree.

Perhaps assuming any sort of link between "Fyne" and "Fine" is too big a stretch. But I console myself with believing that, with all those MacLeods living in Scotland, there must be some way to track down the elusive Kate and her parents. Believe me, we're still working on it.



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Freelance writer Brenda Blair Burns Fine is proud to be one of the 11 million Americans with Scottish roots.

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#### **WANT TO SEARCH YOUR OWN ROOTS?**

##### **READ DAVID'S TIPS**

- (1) Write down everything you know, no matter how trivial it may seem at the moment.
- (2) Talk to every relative or family friend who might have information. And, of course, search all the vital sources on the internet (such as [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) in the library, old newspapers, etc.
- (3) Start now recording your own personal experiences for future generations. We tend to think our daily lives are not interesting. But think how much we treasure even the tiniest details of our ancestors' lives.
- (4) Peg your telling of personal history to specific events such as: where you were when JFK was shot, or during September 11, 2001, or at midnight on December 31, 1999.
- (5) Be sure to let your insights and sense of humor shine through; our lives are more than bland progressions of dates and statistics.
- (6) Remember all the changes we've seen in our lifetimes. Just think of all the changes that occurred during our grandparents' lives.