

A Ghost Visits Cromarty  
By Graham White

The day didn't start well for any of them. Calum had a lively discussion with his mother about the state of his football boots. They were caked in mud and she had to clean them herself. Miss Carmichael had woken up very stiff after spending a fine Sunday in the hills. Sir Thomas Urquhart thought the day started well, with pastries and coffee in a Paris cafe, but soon he was dead.

This surprised him but there was no doubt about it. Everything was cold and grey, like standing on the shore in a thick harr but without the sound of the sea or the feel of the wind in his hair. In fact he realised he didn't have hair or anything else – just his thoughts. He was wondering how long it would go on, and hoping it wouldn't be forever, when a voice chipped in.

“Hey, Tom, how's it going pal?” it said, and didn't wait for him to answer. “Bit of a shock, eh? You'll get over it. They all do – no' much choice is there? So I'm gonnae show you the ropes. There's a few clearing up jobs to be done and then you can be on your way. To a better place, they say, but you won't catch me there, no way. I'm like yourself Tom, I like a bit of fun, a bit of excitement, if y' ken what I mean?”

Sir Thomas began to get a very bad feeling about this uncouth noise in his head, or what felt like his head. “Your name, Sir?” he said, apprehensively. “And our destination?”

“Oh, come on, you'll only get your knickers in a twist if we start giving names to things. Just go with the flow, Tom. It's no' so bad as they say – no' for you anyway. Just a few people to square. There's a few men want to talk to you about money, and a few ladies want to speak to you. Quite a few in fact.” The voice sounded impressed but Sir Thomas felt even colder than before and tried to shiver. He found he couldn't. He was really beginning to miss his body.

“I've got one great piece of news for you, by the way,” the voice said. “You're a lucky man, Thomas Urquhart.”

Sir Thomas didn't feel in the least lucky at that moment. He'd been looking forward to many years of comfortable living, writing books which would make his name in history. Instead here was a coarse devil with unwelcome news.

“So, you being a great writer an' that, you get a special treat: you can go and see how they remember you. Choose your time and your place and you get three hours, max. If you want: you don't have to. Some people can't cope. So it's up to yourself. What do y'reckon? Are you up for it?”

Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromartie, writer, philosopher and soldier, didn't take long to decide. “Aye,” he said. “I'll do it. Cromartie, at the next Millennium. Take me there.”

An instant later he found himself standing outside the Courthouse, fully equipped with a working body (he shook a leg to make sure) and dressed in his finest clothes. But the voice in his head hadn't quite done.

“Three hours, mind. I'll meet you by the East Church. They're expecting you at the school. We overshot, by the way. It's 2011 and you're 400. Enjoy, Tom.” And after that came blessed silence.

In fact the place was very quiet indeed. He'd been in Paris for 20 years (avoiding those money men) but he remembered the village clearly. The smell of fish, the peat smoke, and the people. Working at their nets, or at the forge, or standing outside their hovels, or just walking from place to place. The sight and sound of them, and the smell of them. Where were the people in 2011?

Miss Carmichael promised the class a treat if they would first get on with some maths, quietly. Then a visitor from the past would arrive. She was sure they'd enjoy talking to him. She nipped out for more coffee while they worked out how long it would take two people to paint a wall 15 metres long and 3 metres high.

Sir Thomas arrived at 2 o'clock, just as Miss Carmichael's letter from the Eden Court Theatre had said he would, though he seemed less confident than she expected. He was already in full costume.

“You didn't come on the bus then,” she joked. “I'm afraid they didn't tell me your name.”

“Sir Thomas Urquhart, madam, and good day to you.”

Miss Carmichael laughed. She liked people who took their work seriously and it would add to the drama for the children. “Oh yes, Sir Thomas, how silly of me. Welcome to Cromarty Primary School. The children are ready to meet you.”

Sir Thomas looked around. There were so many unfamiliar things, but what could he expect, four centuries into the future? As he walked to the school, guided by some hidden hand, it had been a relief to hear the same old sound of children playing. He’d walked past a tavern and someone had shouted “Johnny Depp!”, whoever that was. A great lord, perhaps. They said he’d got the hair, and the breeches and stockings, which was good - he liked to be fashionable. But the roads were hard and clean, not thick with filth and mud. He wouldn’t have recognised the place except for the Soutars and that hard East wind.

“I would prefer to wait for the Master, madam. I am not used to children but I remember their ways.” He smiled, a little embarrassed. “In my days with the army I learnt to wait for the strongest regiments before advancing. Not that I lack courage, you understand.”

“Of course, Sir Thomas. Many people find groups of children a little threatening. But fear not! I will protect you!” She opened the door to the classroom and turned back to him. “I am their teacher, you see,” she said and marched in feeling very pleased with herself, though she knew he’d only been winding her up.

Miss Carmichael said the class could ask questions to find out more about Sir Thomas. At first there was silence. Some children craned their heads round the people in front to get a better view of him. Caitlin Ross got out of her seat and knelt down in front of him, looking closely at the shiny buckles on his shoes.

Sir Thomas edged backwards. “Madam,” he said, “There are girls here. Why?”

Miss Carmichael saw an opportunity. She asked the children to answer Sir Thomas’s question themselves. Calum Mackay gave the straightest answer: to learn, he said. Donald MacIver gave the cheekiest answer: because they couldn’t be trusted in the house on their own, he said (the girls rolled their eyes and stuck their tongues out at him). Alice Mount gave the best answer: why not? she said. Miss Carmichael turned to Sir Thomas, eyebrows raised, inviting him to respond.

He gathered himself like a man preparing to do battle and stood boldly in front of them. He told them to change seats so the girls sat on one side and the boys on the other. Then he spoke to the boys. “Schooling is not easy. I remember my first days at the College in Aberdeen, at about your age. I longed for my home at the Castle in Cromartie. The lessons were hard and the Masters were harsh. They beat lessons into us. And they tried to beat the child out of us, unsuccessfully in my case, perhaps. But I learnt to love books. Two thousand years of writing. Without it I would know nothing. I would be no-one.” He turned away, surprised by his own words, and sat down.

“And the girls?” Miss Carmichael reminded him.

“The girls, ma’am, need to learn to sew and play music and run the household. Which they can do quite well from their mothers without the expense and distress of sending them away to school.” The girls looked at one another, puzzled. Miss Carmichael thought it was time to move on.

“Were you distressed at going away to school, Sir Thomas?”

“I was very young and it was several days journey from Cromartie. The learning was narrow – Greek, Latin, Mathematics and the Bible. When I became a man I found I needed it, but learning it was hard. Very hard.”

“What did you need it for, like?” asked Donald, who couldn’t wait to turn 16 and join his father’s plumbing business.

Sir Thomas eyed him sternly. “To speak respectfully to my elders; to converse with strangers in their own language; to write; to read the works of great thinkers. That’s what I learnt, though the learning was badly managed.”

“My Grandpa says you’re the second most famous writer in Cromarty,” said Caitlin.

“Second? And who pray is the first?”

“A stonemason who discovered the history of the earth,” Caitlin replied.

Sir Thomas snorted. "Stonemason!" He folded his arms and looked longingly out of the window. These children were becoming tiresome.

"Perhaps, Sir Thomas," began Miss Carmichael, "you could tell us something about your books."

He shrugged. "They are so numerous. There is hardly time." He looked away again.

"Your universal language?"

"An enormous project madam. I could only lay out the foundations. A simple, easily understood language that would allow everyone in the world to speak to one another. I hope it was carried on after my time?" She shook her head. He groaned.

"So much was lost after the battle," he went on, and several boys began to pay attention. He caught their eyes. "Oh yes, it was a bitter blow. We fought well but the English army was too strong. It was a blow for the rightful King's men to be beaten by the upstart Parliament. And it was a blow to me to lose my writing and spend so long in the Tower of London."

"But you were freed, eventually," said Miss Carmichael.

"Once I'd provided my family tree, from the time of Adam and Eve until my own birth," he said grandly, then winked at Donald.

"And next you did your greatest work." He looked blankly at her. "The translation." He didn't respond. She decided to put this part-time actor on the spot. "The story about the two giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel. How would you describe it?"

Sir Thomas looked at her in astonishment. "A book for gentlemen and scholars, madam. A great book, but not for ladies or children. What do you know of it?"

"The whole world knows of your translation. And there is something about schooling in it, isn't there?" She wondered how well the actor had prepared his role and was pleasantly surprised. Sir Thomas smiled broadly and turned to the class.

"It is a humorous work by the Frenchman, Rabelais. But beneath the surface it is full of important ideas. For example, one of the giants is brought up as I was, to memorise and recite, but not to think." Sir Thomas began to get more excited. He laughed.

"The effect on him is not good at all. In one great scene the giant climbs to the top of the Cathedral, with a crowd watching him below, and he behaves very badly."

Sir Thomas beamed at the boys, stood up to his full height with legs apart, leaning back slightly with one hand on his hip and one hand held in front of him.

"Boys!" he said loudly, "He p-." He stopped suddenly and looked across at the girls. He straightened up and held his arm aloft. "He floods them away," he said weakly, and sat down. Some of the children giggled. Others looked blank, trying to work out the story.

"But does his schooling improve?" Miss Carmichael asked.

"Indeed, madam, it does. He falls under a new master and learns to ask questions, to study science and music and athletics, and to better himself. Of course, being a giant, he asks too many questions, but it is progress nonetheless."

"And has our school made progress compared with your own?" said Miss Carmichael, thinking it was time to get on with rest of the day's activities.

Sir Thomas looked around the class. He shook his head slowly and quietly. "So many changes, so many. Very interesting children, if rude. Perhaps more intelligent than in my day; perhaps happier. Certainly cleaner."

He stood up and bowed to the class and teacher. "I thank you for showing me the future. But it is difficult to take in and very tiring. I must bid you farewell."

The children had begun to like this strange and difficult man and they called out their thanks as he left. Miss Carmichael saw him out and began to arrange the next session.

Calum asked to use the toilet but instead sneaked out of the school behind Sir Thomas. He ran across the empty road and dived down the slope above the links. Sir Thomas was oblivious, walking swiftly along towards the High Street. The sharp sea breeze whipped his hair out behind him and he

folded his shoulders forward with his hands under his armpits. He strode across the road without looking and Calum followed, more carefully. Past the Courthouse, on to the East Church where a figure in a dark frock-coat suddenly appeared beside Sir Thomas. The newcomer put his arm familiarly round his shoulder. "So, how was it, pal?" he said.

Sir Thomas shied away. "Why here, of all places?" he said, but his companion drew him back.

"Ah, but my favourite place. Are you done, Tom?"

"Aye, done. Take me away."

"You're not forgotten, here, though?"

"No. But not properly remembered either."

"Well we've got some who remember you well, Tom, so let's hit the road."

They stopped at a gap and the dark one looked out over the dusky firth, studded with the lights of oil platforms.

"Maybe heaven, maybe hell, eh, Tom?"

"Hell," he replied and his companion laughed.

"Let's go and see the real thing, then. But I can't put you up for long, you're only a wee sinner. I've got 400 years of great big yins to deal with."

They walked on and at the corner the companion looked back. Calum flattened himself against the wall but two red eyes sought him out and made him gasp. One eye winked and in the next instant both men were out of sight. Calum's curiosity overcame his fear and he raced after them. He briefly heard a roar of crashing and shouting as though someone had opened the door on a wild party in a shipyard. But when he got there the next street was quiet and empty, apart from a slight whiff of burning sulphur. It blew past him on the breeze and was gone in seconds, leaving only muddled memories.